



NIAS Area Studies EUROPE MONITOR

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Cover Story

Europe in 2021



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SPECIAL FOCUS

Germany's external relations, migration policies, Indo-Pacific...
Interviews with a visiting German delegation

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Global Politics is a primary focus of the NIAS Programme on Science, Technology and International Relations (STIR). The primary focus is on contemporary world affairs. The Programme publishes *The World This Week*, and *NIAS Fortnightly on Science Technology and International Relations*.

About NIAS Europe Studies

As a part of pursuing global politics, the programme has started area studies. Europe is a part of the NIAS area studies initiative. With an aim to nurture a pool of scholars working on issues related to Europe, the scope of the studies would range from regional/sub-regional cooperation to new technology and innovations and include gender studies, migration issues, and climate change.

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

About Europe Monitor

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

The Monthly is an integral part of NIAS Europe Studies. It includes focused commentaries on Europe, short notes, and daily updates on contemporary Europe.

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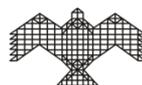
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National Institute of
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About NIAS

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

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



About KAS India Office

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a political foundation. Established in 1955 as "Society for Christian-Democratic Civic Education", in 1964, the Foundation proudly took on the name of Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany.

With 16 regional offices in Germany and over 120 offices abroad, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation is committed to achieving and maintaining peace, freedom and justice through political education. KAS promotes and preserves free democracy, social market economy, and the development and consolidation of the value consensus. KAS also focus on consolidating democracy, the unification of Europe and the strengthening of transatlantic relations, as well as on development cooperation.

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Germany's external relations, migration policies, Indo-Pacific...

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Harini Madhusudan, Joeana Cera Matthews, Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan and Padmashree Anandhan

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BELARUS

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MALTA

NORTHERN IRELAND

NORTH MACEDONIA

POLAND

PORTUGAL

RUSSIA

SPAIN

THE NETHERLANDS

THE UNITED KINGDOM

UKRAINE

REGIONAL

BREXIT

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SPECIAL FOCUS

Interviews with a visiting German delegation

Germany's external relations, migration policies, Indo-Pacific...

By Harini Madhusudan, Joeana Cera Matthews, Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan and Padmashree Anandhan



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Germany: External and Internal Policies

Interview with Prof Dr Carlo Masala, Bundeswehr University Munich

By Joeana Cera Matthews

"German power is always a good scapegoat for others"



Be it the Poland-Belarus migrant crisis or the Russia-Ukraine border standoff, we saw Germany being the only country that tried to intervene. Can this be attributed to Merkel and her relationship with Putin or does it have to do something beyond this? Adding to

that, we saw Olaf Scholz blaming and threatening Alexander Lukashenko while Merkel took to negotiations and talks. Is there a polarization within Germany in seeing these crises?

I do not think there is polarization. I think among European leaders, Merkel has the best relationship with Putin and before calling Lukashenko, she called Putin. This reflected the reality that whatever was happening in Belarus was at least tolerated by Moscow, if not orchestrated. Putin asked Merkel to talk with Lukashenko. There is

not much of a difference between Merkel and incoming Chancellor Scholz. However, he had labelled Lukashenko as a “brutal dictator”; he can say this since he is not in power. With respect to the reaction, I think, Europe is united. Since 2015, it has harshly reacted to migration. Most people forget that when Turks sent thousands of Syrian refugees from the camps to the Greek border, the European reaction was exactly the same as it is now. The experience of 2015 changed the way European leaders, even those who are extremely sympathetic to asylum seekers and refugees, look at migration issues. The present reaction is more or less, even from the German side, of taking a hard stance and supporting the countries at the forefront like Greece a couple of years ago and now, Poland. Basically, Europe does not allow anyone to blackmail them with migrants. Therefore, I do not feel there is a polarization regarding the issue of migration. There is polarization; all the European leaders are afraid of the rise of right-wing populism and if they would choose another strategy. Thus, 10,000 unarmed people scare us to an extent of death that we support building walls and fences at European borders.

Can we perceive such interventions as Germany trying to take a role out of the EU in a bilateral way?

This has always been the case. I mean, EU foreign policy is always a mix between bilateral initiatives and EU initiatives. Countries try to do something on a bilateral basis and once an agreement is required, they get back to the EU and the necessary deal is drafted within the EU framework. This is not special. I would not look at this as an exceptional case, wherein Germany took the lead. Do not play it out. The French do this all the time.

In reference to the last point of fortification, how far do you think this is realistic, given the bloc's ethos and the principles it is built on?

It violates EU principles but no one cares about it. We just had elections in Germany and luckily, the right-wing went down. There is an upcoming election in France where two right-wingers are running for

the presidency. France has a huge problem in its public opinion regarding the issue of migrants. Eastern Europeans, however, are very clear: no migrants at all or only Christian migrants. Therefore, the point is, the fear of right-wing populism is what drives the EU's migration policy. Consider France; what are we going to do if one of the most important countries ends up having a right-wing president? Although the possibility of this is minimal, Le Pen or Eric Zemmour being the French president is a scenario which would blow Europe apart.

Returning to Merkel; there is a change coming or bound to happen in Germany after 16 long years. How do you perceive this change and in what regards is this change going to happen?

This is difficult to say. There is the talk of all the people who are forming the government during the election campaign and there is the coalition treaty. If the treaty is read correctly, there is more continuity than change to be expected. The biggest issue is probably going to be Russia and China; the new Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock wants to take a tougher stance on them, at least on a rhetorical level. However, in my opinion, the question with respect to China that has not been answered, either during the election campaign or now is what kind of price Germany is ready to pay if it gets tougher on China? After Merkel came to power in 2005, she invited the Dalai Lama in a semi-official way in 2007. It was not an official visit at the Chancellery but it was at the guest house. The Chinese immediately went ballistic and sanctioned Germany for four months, if I remember rightly. This was a turning point in Merkel's attitude towards human rights and China, so on and so forth. She became more careful with public statements. This, I think will happen with Baerbock too. If China is to smack us, we will step back as long as we are dependent on the Chinese market as we are right now. This is what I would expect the Greens to do, despite my belief in their attitude to put human rights at the forefront of foreign policy. If you look at the election manifesto of the Greens and the Liberals, the foreign policy section has human rights very much at the forefront, unlike the Social Democrats. I would say, the Democrats have

a more realpolitik approach in their manifesto. If Olaf Scholz takes it up as boss, I would not expect any change. So, there might even occur infighting between the foreign minister and the chancellor.

Further on the Poland crisis, there is a clear difference between how the EU looks at the Baltic states and how Poland is being viewed by the bloc. How far do you think Poland challenging the bloc's rule of law played into the migration crisis as the former has denied EU help while Lithuania and Latvia have effectively deterred migrant inflow after taking the aid?

Yes, definitely. Poland is basically celebrating itself for being at the forefront of saving Christian Europe. If they succeed, the Polish government has a much bigger chance in the EU to say: "Listen. When the crisis came, we saved Europe from being overrun by thousands or millions of migrants. Now let's renegotiate part of the EU rule of law."

On Nord Stream, I would like to ask, why did Germany take the stance it did? Merkel made the initial decision and went ahead with it despite the backlash. However, there is a lag in the activation of the pipeline. Is this backtracking? With Merkel stepping down, is a further delay to be expected?

No. Nord Stream 2 was in the grand coalition and it was supported even by the Social Democrats. Even if you go to the SPD leader, he heavily favoured the pipeline. There is not going to be any change. The delay is purely a technical thing that should not be read as a political signal of imminent change. However, the question I have not been able to answer yet is why we even started this endeavour and why we stick to it even when all of Europe is telling us: "This is a bad idea". I have no idea since I am not familiar with these policies. There are two scenarios - our need for energy, of course. Second, this project allows us to have cooperative relations with Russia while ties in all other areas are increasingly breaking down. But I am not an expert to tell you why we stick to this till the very last moment although everyone is against it. Their argument, however, really angers me.

CDU and SPD politicians reiterate that this is a "purely economic issue". Even though the issue is beyond my academic expertise, even I know that energy has never been "only an economic issue"; energy is always a political issue.

Previously, the eastern European countries felt threatened only by Russia and the possibility of Moscow stopping gas transits as it did to the Baltics and Ukraine. With Nord Stream in place, do you think the CEECs feel threatened by Germany too given they overrode EU counsel and decided to depend on Russia for gas?

No. They do not feel threatened by Germany; they feel irritated by German behaviour concerning Nord Stream 2. However, this cannot be labelled a threat perception they have from Germany. I do not think they see Germany as a threat. You will always see Hungarian and Polish politicians portraying Germany as the fourth Reich, but this is for political reasons. This does not rive Polish or Hungarian foreign policy to Germany. This is exaggerated mainly for domestic reasons.

German power is always a good scapegoat for others. In International Relations there is a theory called the two-level game by Robert Putnam. Leaders can go to the EU and they can reach a certain deal. If they are criticized, they can finger point about the governance and they can pinpoint Germany because we were so strong and pushy. If things go wrong, we are a pretty good scapegoat for everyone in Europe. Sometimes we behaved in a semi-hegemonic way. I would say we did it during the financial crisis and the 2015 migration crisis, we behaved like regional great powers. If it serves our interest we move unilaterally and try to twist the others in our direction. There are always limits in the EU because at a certain point there exist counterbalancing forces. It is similar to the idea of France signing treaties with Italy to create an alternative within Europe, essentially counterbalancing German strengths. We do portray ourselves as a kind of a perfect European country which we definitely are not. We are the strongest European power. Full stop. Economically,

we use that leverage if it serves our national interest.

Thank you, Sir, for those intriguing insights and precise responses.

Joeana Cera Matthews is a Visiting Research Scholar with the School of Conflict and Security Studies, NIAS

Economic implications behind Germany's migration policy

Interview with Prof Dr Heribert Dieter, Senior Associate, SWP

By Padmashree Anandhan

“Large number of migrants who come to Germany, unskilled all the way down to illiteracy, we have permitted them to come to the country on so-called humanitarian reasons. They are a cost factor. They are, by the way, contributing to the rather comprehensive welfare state which has significant costs for taxpayers.”



Big tech companies such as Microsoft, Adobe, Google, IBM, and Twitter are all run by the immigrant's driving growth in the US. Why do you think Germany is shirking of it?

The answer is very simple. Germany does not have a selection process when it comes to the immigration. Of course, I would like to have one and we have been trying to attract skilled migrants, but there are several problems. The first is that, Germany is not paying competitive salaries. That may surprise you, but software engineers are a global “commodity” and they look for the best options and the US is simply offering much better options when it comes to software engineers. I will give you an example. I wrote an article on that for a Swiss newspaper and I got a response from a German guy who works for Microsoft and he said, I earn three times the amount of money I would have earned in Germany and the taxes are significantly lower. So, the package is outrageously better in the United States. Germans do not acknowledge that because we continue to assume that our salaries are good. It is not relevant, whether they are morally good or bad. It matters

what the competition pays and we are not very good. So, this is one reason. The other reason is that the large number of migrants who come to Germany, unskilled all the way down to illiteracy, we have permitted them to come to the country on so-called humanitarian reasons. They are a cost factor. They are, by the way, contributing to the rather comprehensive welfare state which has significant costs for taxpayers. So, the US simply has the better package and you look at countries like Australia, they select software engineers and they get software engineers. Germany is not in a position to attract the best migrants. We attract the most migrants but not the west. Germany that kept up the mantra for such a long time: ‘we are not an immigrant country.’ So, all of them come in for simple reasons. A key problem is that there is no point system or some other selection system.

There is a lot of talent pool where migrants are given jobs in the big corporate companies, but it is doing good only for the giant corporations. What is the justification or the economic impact on the working class in Germany?

Conventionally speaking, you would expect that if you increase the labour force, if you increase the number of unskilled people, this increases the competition in that area in that segment of the labour market, and wages will shrink. That does not happen. Wages are not coming down but what it

means is that there is a competition for jobs in the unskilled segment. And some native Germans are missing out. They are not having too many opportunities. And so, there is increased competition, but it does not result in shrinking wages, it results in people being pushed out of the labour market and pushed into welfare. We know that this is not very good for people because being on welfare in the long run has negative effects on your self-respect and so on. So, it is not an economic issue. Those people who are not starting are not pushed into starvation but they are pushed into social neglect and that is in the long run. This is a big issue. We are not addressing it. It is a problem.

On the next question, what are the economic challenges faced by Germany in integrating the refugees into the society or the labour markets?

It is like in any society that has migrants, you want to make sure that they work because work is the ultimate avenue to integrate them into society. And we have had a booming labour market before the pandemic. It still is quite kind of okay, and some regions, in particular Bavaria, they managed quite well to integrate refugees as long as those refugees spoke German and had an interest in improving their skill level. That is possible. Other parts of the country are not that good. Berlin for instance, is not as good as Bavaria when it comes to integrating refugees into the German labour market and consequently into German society. If you meet people at work, you become a citizen of the country. If you sit on welfare somewhere in your apartment far away from German society this creates separate communities. There is a lack of integration and we have that in some corners of the country and other corners of the country, we are performing better. It is an unresolved problem that will keep us, that will continue to cause some headaches in the decades to come.

Apart from putting them to work. Are there any other challenges seen?

It is of course a challenge that some refugees are coming from societies with

different value systems to put that into plain English. The respect for women is sometimes underdeveloped, if I may call it that. I had just had a student of mine who complained bitterly that a refugee would refuse to be taught by her because she is a woman. I mean, we cannot accept that kind of behaviour. But the question is, what do you do? I mean, how do you turn around the expectations of a person, an adult, who firmly rejects the idea that men and women should be treated equally? It is difficult. These are, of course, not the majority of migrants and not the majority of refugees either, but there are some people who can cause a lot of headaches. So, this is a challenge. And this is an assessment that a former constitutional judge has said: "We are living in a society that is based on foundations, which we are struggling with to create to put in plain English. The government cannot force people to have a democratic and liberal mindset." Yet if we do not have that our societies have a challenge and this is where we are right now. So, it may have been a mistake to assume that it may also be a reflection of German romantic thinking; we have assumed that as long as we treat people nicely, they will all become liberal democrats – that has turned out to be an illusion. And what do you do now?

The Syrian refugee crisis was something similar to what you talked about; it marked the beginning of the end of Angela Merkel. So, will the new coalition government address migration as a cover or take a more cautious or restrictive approach in letting in the migrants?

The new government which is addressing migration in the kind of letter of agreement has serious issues with migration, because both the Social Democrats and the Greens have in the past been supporters of very open migration policy. They have suggested that the more migrants we have, the better. They have suggested that it is both illegitimate and unconstitutional to limit the number of people that are permitted to claim asylum in Germany, which is of course a mathematical problem at some stage. If you know the words a little bit, then you

realize that the number of people that could potentially come to Germany is rather large, diplomatically speaking. So, they have that issue. The Greens, in particular, have a group of supporters that would walk away and that would be really challenged if the Green Party would indeed participate in a tighter immigration policy. Very difficult for them, the least difficulties the Free Democrats will have because they have a rather pragmatic attitude to many things. The problem that the Social Democrats and the Chancellor Olaf Scholz will face is the following. In Europe, Social Democrats, who wanted to stay in power, have revised their policies on migration. We have the example of Scandinavian countries, Denmark in particular, but also Sweden, where the Social Democrats have combined two policies. On the one hand, they have closed the door for migration. Denmark has closed the door for migration, but on the other hand, they become very left-leaning when it comes to welfare policies.

Classical socialism is based on a sort of communitarianism instead of cosmopolitanism. That has worked apparently very well for the Danish Social Democrats. Sweden now has a new prime minister, the first female prime minister, if I am correct, and she has also embraced that kind of policy. Social Democrats in Europe that have failed to address the migration issue with a more restrictive approach, such as the Social Democrats in the Netherlands, are out of the political game. Social Democrats in the Netherlands, I think they're down to six per cent of the votes. And they were a very strong force previously.

Olaf Scholz knows that he as Chancellor has to take care of the interests and considers their interests of its voters and has to consider their interests. He may realize that unrestricted migration is particularly bad for the poor because they are facing competition as I said in the labour market, but they are also facing competition when it comes to housing. The more affluent people benefit from immigration because they are ones that employ cleaning staff in their homes. The middle class benefits from migrant communities, and they do not

compete with migrants for apartments, the poorer people in Germany do. So, this is what Olaf Scholz knows that how he is going to address it is unknown yet but it is a significant issue. And if unchecked, it is not implausible to expect Germany to be going down "a French Avenue," the French society being characterized by very antagonistic political camps. The French system is characterized by an increasing polarization. And next year, we have elections, presidential elections in France, and some of the country's candidates are very right wing.

So, this is the risk and I am quite sure that the new government is aware of those risks if they do not implement a more restrictive migration policy and if they do also. They have written that down in their articles of agreement, or in their letter of agreement that if they do not send people home that are not qualifying as political asylum seekers, people lose confidence in the political system. If there is a blatant abuse of the system it undermines the confidence in a democratic political system. If some people are permitted to abuse it, how do you expect the rest of society to obey the rules?

The last question is, is there any particular group of migrants that you see like a pattern where they are contributing more towards the economic GDP of Germany?

Well, you could claim that one of the most remarkable migrants has been the owner couple of BioNTech. They have invented that vaccine, BioNTech, the vaccine which is making life easier, of course, not easy, but what would we do without those vaccines? So, we have some outstanding success stories, some from the Turkish community.

We have some outstanding people from the Middle East who have performed well, we also have a significant number of migrants that have not done all that well. It is not impossible, but in contrast to a country like Australia, which has the label of being a country of immigration, we have never developed instruments to cheer people up that are coming to the country. In Australia, they have numerous methods of praising migrants. They have Migrant of the Year,

Young Migrant of the Year, Young Entrepreneur Migrant of the Year and they all celebrate. Then, they have a bit of an Oscar ceremony for migrants and they praise the contribution of migrants to society and they also force migrants to be productive. Sometimes, you need it; you need to be nudged a little bit. When you come as a migrant to Australia in the first two years you are not eligible for welfare payments, you work; whereas in Germany,

you are eligible for welfare payments from day one. Sometimes, this discourages people. We ought to encourage migrants and praise their contribution to German economic development.

Thank you very much, Sir.

Padmashree Anandhan is a Research Assistant at the School of Conflict and Security Studies, NIAS.

Growing importance of India and Germany in the Indo-Pacific

Interview with Dr Gudrun Wacker, Senior Fellow, SWP

By Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan

“Indo-Pacific is becoming firstly, an economic centre, secondly, a geo-strategic centre and thirdly, a geopolitical centre of the world.”



Why is there growing importance for German cooperation in the Indo-Pacific? Is it trade? Is it a country's self-interest? What is this sudden interest of Germany in the region?

Regarding Germany, it is very clear from the assessment that the Indo-Pacific is becoming firstly, an economic centre, secondly, a geo-strategic centre and thirdly, a geopolitical centre of the world. Germany has clearly stated this in the guidelines about the Indo-Pacific since Germany is not in the same position as France. France considers itself a resident in the Indo-Pacific because it has overseas territories there. Germany and the Netherlands have two major arguments on why the Indo-Pacific is becoming more and more critical to their interests.

The first interest is that they are trading nations. So, they both depend on open

markets and open sea lanes of communication. Statistically, a very large portion of the global transport of energy and goods passes through the Indo-Pacific, and thus this is a vital interest to Germany and the Netherlands. This is similar to the EU's strategy. The second argument is that Germany has a critical interest in maintaining the rules-based international order. Berlin wants to contribute more towards peace and stability.

Germany will deepen partnerships with countries in the region, but it is also clear that economic interests exist, and that the relationships are not altruistic. The German Indo-Pacific guidelines do have an inclusive approach and mention China as a partner for this policy. However, it is also clear that the Indo-Pacific policy aims at diversifying Germany's relations and lowering the dependency on China. India is one of the essential partners in the Indian Ocean and the region as a whole. The Americans are not heavily present militarily in the Indian Ocean and their main interests lie in the Pacific. However, India as a partner is not easy to deal with for several reasons.

There is a debate in Germany (and in the UK as well): What is the best way forward?

Should Germany go for more burden-sharing and division of labour with the United States in Europe? Militarily, Germany will not make a big difference in the Indo-Pacific, so why doesn't Germany show more responsibility in Europe and its neighbourhood where Russia remains the major security threat. This is an ongoing debate, since it will not be possible to fulfill commitments in the North Atlantic region if military forces are overstretched.

What are the strategies the EU is applying in the region with regard to your article on "[From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific](#)," can you please elaborate on it?

This paper was a comparative one. At the time it was written, the interest was to look at the already existing Indo-Pacific strategies. And at that time, it was only the US and Japan as well as Australia and India who had come up with their respective concepts. ASEAN had also published its Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, but there was nothing in Europe with the exception of France. So there is a small chapter on France in the report addressing France's particular situation and position. The French also pushed the Indo-Pacific at the European level, but at first, they did not find support.

If one looks at the German guidelines, they were published before the elections in the US took place. Thus, it was not clear whether Biden would win the election or Trump would win another term. This means that the Europeans had to deal with an uncertain and dynamic situation, and the German guidelines did therefore not mention cooperation with the US. Moreover, the EU wants to develop its own profile, and does not want to be seen as simply ganging up with the United States, although there is a lot of dialogue and cooperation going on with the US. There is a passage in the EU strategy paper on the Indo-Pacific that was published in September 2021 on possible collaboration and cooperation with the QUAD on specific topics. The QUAD had widened their agenda in 2021 to health and other issues of interests to the EU.

The study my colleague and I wrote focused on the existing Indo-Pacific concepts, and at the end, it analyzed three possible responses of the European Union and Germany: alignment with one of the existing concepts, equidistance and autonomy. Our argument in the study was that in any case, Germany should not go it alone, but embed any Indo-Pacific policy in the European Union. And when you look at the German guidelines and the Dutch paper, they both explicitly say that they are to be understood as building blocks for a European positioning in the Indo-Pacific. And some of the issues mentioned in the guidelines, for example, free trade agreements, no member state of the EU can negotiate that. This falls under the authority of the European Union.

The question of equidistance was a debate in Germany due to the poisoned atmosphere in transatlantic relations during the Trump administration. Donald Trump sometimes accused Germany of being just as bad as China, due to Germany's huge trade surplus. The problems in transatlantic relations during his presidency sometimes overshadowed the debate in Germany about China and necessary changes in our China policy. A few people in Germany argued for equidistance, but in the end, Germany and the German people know where they stand if they have to make a choice. Ultimately, Germany is much closer to the United States than to China.

Then the question is about the third option, i.e. European strategic autonomy. France is in favour of this goal, but it would require significant changes in the EU and will be very hard to achieve. China welcomes the talk about European strategic autonomy because keeping the West divided is in China's interest. This is also why in my opinion the announcement of AUKUS was unfortunate. It gave the impression that post-Brexit UK sees its relations with the EU in terms of a zero-sum game. But the EU and UK do share a lot of interests, and so they should continue to cooperate very closely, including in the Indo-Pacific.

In what areas can India and Germany cooperate to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific?

Fields like education have a lot of potential for cooperation between Germany and India. More cooperation is also possible in the Indo-Pacific region. India has to also become more proactive beyond its own region. There are policies in place, such as Look East and Act East, but India has to shoulder additional responsibilities in the region and get more involved.

Another area where more cooperation and coordination is possible is the UN working groups on standard setting. This is an area where there could be more coordination, since it could add more weight to the European voice. Europeans are good at standard-setting and making rules and regulations. But at the international level, there needs to be more and broader support.

Another important topic to discuss is the West and its role in international organizations. If we talk about the West, we usually speak about the US, Europe and Japan. But the West keeps dividing leading positions in international organizations among themselves—for example, the head of the World Bank is always an American, the head of the Asian Development Bank is always a Japanese, and the head of the peacekeeping UN peacekeeping

organization is always a French. We need to bring in more countries from the South to make these international organizations more inclusive. It is a mistake to only look at the world in terms of East-West, which makes no sense any more, with the West always ignoring the north-south dimension. The north-south dimension only comes in when we discuss Africa. Countries from the South need to have a say and an opportunity to fill these positions and act responsibly.

India has a mixed image in Germany and Europe. It is still perceived as a hub of call centres. France is an exception as Paris has continuously closely operated with India, and Delhi is always a focus of France's foreign policy. But in Germany, the media focus on human rights violations and the shrinking space for civil society. The modern side of India is not really reflected in the German perception of India. So, what is essential for India is to reach out to Germany also through cultural diplomacy and more systematically use its soft power. By the way, Bollywood movies are very popular in Germany.

Thank you, Ma'am, for this insightful discussion.

Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan is a Research Assistant at the School of Conflict and Security Studies, NIAS

India-Germany Relations and Diplomacy after the Pandemic

Interview with Mr Peter Rimmele, India-Office KAS.

By Harini Madhusudan

Despite the trying situations, diplomacy will go on. In cases of the pandemic, and largely in the changing political climate, it might intensify- because the interests of Germany and India are more in common now than they used to be 20 years ago.



What are the priority sectors for India and Germany in future engagements? Would it be in the case of new technology relations, R&D, trade, people-to-people engagement, climate, green economy; how do we situate India and Germany relations in this context?

India and Germany have had a long and good relationship but with always space for some improvement, and as representatives, it is a situation that both sides are working on. I do not think that COVID or after COVID makes such a big difference, because the idea of working with India and improving relations with India has always been there from both sides, mainly driven by economic interests, but also increasingly with a more assertive China. Additionally with the Indo Pacific, and the dangers of a new bipolar world developing, one can see closer cooperation between India, and not only Germany but for Europe, there are increased engagements with the European Union, which was not prominent years ago.

Hence, there is some improvement in relations. Economically, the European Union is on the one side, India's largest market, and among those, Germany is the largest trading partner of India. German companies have invested a lot in India, specifically here in Bangalore, in the technical sector. And the primary expectation from India is to expand exchanges in the modern technology sectors and to develop more jobs that require funding and insurance. As far as funding is concerned, we just had the end of the Indo-German government consultations in late November, it is believed that

Germany has agreed to invest almost 1.5 billion in the next phase of relations between India and Germany. These things show the levels of cooperation that have increased within days, just by the mere figures involved.

In the case of climate change, it is addressed to India to be able to manage the climate change problem in a reasonable way. And we hope that with the impact of a large number of people with climate consciousness and the creativity amongst the young population, there must be solutions for collective efforts. Here is another sector where Germany puts a new focus. These efforts are not new, but it is being enlarged, again so that the cooperation between Germany and India could help achieve great things in green initiatives. Let us say, 'green driven economy,' instead of the term 'green economy'. These efforts are not going to show results in a few weeks, but rest assured, there are efforts being made in the right direction. Most often different combinations or different instruments are used to address one particular sector or a small field, after noting the progress at the micro-level, that progress can be taken into the rest of the world.

Specifically, in the climate change efforts, China would have to be some kind of partner in the field. This is because China is currently one of the largest polluters. Although they often keep away from collective efforts by saying 'we are outside of everything,' the global climate crisis does not know borders. For example, you cannot regulate the clouds, and control whether they are going across from Pakistan to India or vice versa. So, borders are non-existent for the problem of nature, hence, we need to address it together and India, Germany, Europe as a whole will hopefully go into an advanced partnership on those topics.

So, if we expand this question, and then we look at how India and Germany relations can work in the situation where the US and China rivalry is playing out, how do we situate our relations in that case?

These are some strategic elements of what is developing in the Indo Pacific. Looking at the unfortunate development of a bipolar world, at least in this area, it is not the same with say, South America, but definitely here India has valid concerns. Then, of course, one has to take conclusion before it is too late. There have been some very senior officials who suggest the possibility of going back to the non-alignment movement with India's leadership. However, this is coming from the ideas of the older times but truly, does not carry a sense of the reality of how the world has changed. The India we have known has always stayed neutral and chose not to be on any side.

Given today's conditions, if there is a development of a bipolar in its true sense, or at least partially, we can observe India is already leaning towards one side. India has finally given up the resistance from the NAM kind of institutionalized system. For good reasons, we see that India is looking more towards its own security and for the future in its own developments. NSA has been partnering closely with the US and Europe, including Germany. And this change or development is expressed by not just diplomatic nodes, but also in the geostrategic sector. These signs are observed in the way they hold common military exercises, even if it remains just as symbolic acts. Beyond that maybe one can observe in those small actions where Germany is sending one of its battleships to Bombay, one of their famous ones; these are not mere symbolic acts. They stand as an important symbol to show, "Hey! we are also part of that problem you have there. And we try to support you in solving it." That is also the message behind Chevron.

And otherwise, we may not see too much cooperation in the military technology, and especially not with the new government in Germany, because our new government was always driven by some of the pacifistic principles. Germany has a rule where it is

not allowed to send weapons to places or regions which have crises, and definitely, India was one with its ongoing issues with Pakistan or now, with China. It does not exclude that the Research Corporation, the German think tank would probably not be built in India and licensed, however, there are many other things where, of course, the cooperation is possible, but keeping in mind the common goal to strengthen security. This is a specific German thing.

How has diplomacy or engaging with leaders or people changed after the pandemic began? The diplomacy during the pandemic...

Diplomacy has never been stopped neither by wars nor by pandemics. Certainly, the means have changed. The German government consultations took place virtually, which was unthinkable before that definitely has been changed by the pandemic. But this is the only way to do it. It does not change the fact that two countries are engaging, looking at shared interests, or finding ways where something can be done together, or what areas it is impossible to work together. And no matter the circumstances, diplomacy has to go on, and that is truly the purpose of diplomacy – try to avoid divergences while making consistent efforts to beef up relations and investment exchanges.

Like the model of Make in India, Germany has even added Make in India in Germany, into its interactions and is a campaign run by the Indian Embassy. This has been supported by diplomacy, with a clear aim to attract investors to come to India. India is sometimes considered to be difficult, because of its large bureaucratic setup and sometimes they see Germany as an employment program for the bureaucrats but many times not for serving a real purpose and this can be addressed in ways where the students and prospective investors would have easier access and in the long run, could make life easier.

Also, if you look worldwide, it is also a competition of other countries for investments. So, India would probably have to face this competitive environment and diplomacy plays a huge role there.

Pandemic diplomacy has also done good things in the case of investments for climate-related industries. Very often diplomatic efforts keep happening in the background where we do not announce all specific successes, but in the broader background, they are paving the way for industries and other initiatives on smart investments in the place for governments. Parallely, a certain number of investments and engagements are done by private companies. But they can do it if the conditions are inclusive and there are not many hindrances on the political fronts. To come to the conclusion, diplomacy will go on. In cases of the pandemic, and largely in the changing political climate, it might intensify because the interests of Germany and India are more in common now than they used to be 20 years ago which has been made possible by consistent efforts of exchange and finding out 'what are the specific interests,' 'where could we cooperate' or 'where we simply cannot'. Additionally, diplomacy will govern the means. So, there have been changes now where people might not fly up and down on return but just have a meeting online and solve the same problems. Diplomacy is a means; it is not the purpose by itself.

Have the means of diplomacy slowed down during the pandemic? Were there a lot of expectations from the diplomatic circles during the shutdowns/lockdowns?

The diplomats may not have had many expectations, but often it is the governments who have these expectations of the diplomats and they work on transferring those expectations through the diplomatic channels hoping for some kind of expected or desired result. So, again, I don't see a change in diplomacy, the means may change. Many times, where you have

the success with diplomacy, it is not published due to the possibility of sensitive security issues. But if then there is good cooperation, those are publicized. Therefore, many things will not go to the public, but will still be known to a significant population on the platform. Diplomacy is more like the science of cooperation and the arts and not necessarily for the public limelight.

I was wondering if there is any, like security field, security aspects that are the same every time or space or cybersecurity; which ones that would be a common challenge for India and Germany?

In maritime, we have the German strategy for the Indo Pacific now, which is an expression of at least recognized interests in this region where India is definitely part of the security architecture in some way or the other. That doesn't mean that you have big marine cooperation or there are other means. But I would say that of course security plays a role again, with the increasingly assertive China, one would look for like-minded partners, or at common interests. In these shared interests, for example, we have to say that: 'We cannot stop China, we're going to be in our country from a German perspective can help India to maybe be stronger on that.' This does not always mean more military but other aspects as well. Secure security architecture on the other side, the common interest is that we do not want China to become more powerful in the regions.

Thank you.

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COVER STORY¹

Europe in 2021

India and Russia: Modi and Putin attempt to rekindle bilateral relations

By Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan, 12 December 2021

What happened?

On 06 December, India and Russia held their first 2+2 dialogue format in New Delhi. The bilateral meeting involved foreign and defence ministers discussing bilateral, regional and international issues. Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh held discussions with their Russian counterparts, Sergey Lavrov and Sergey Shoigu, a few hours before heads of the two countries met.

Russian President Vladimir Putin met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi. Putin visited Delhi on a short visit for the 21st annual summit between India and Russia. The discussion is the first in-person meet between the two leaders since they met on the side-lines of the BRICS summit in November 2019.

Prime Minister Modi, during the meet said: "Despite the challenges posed by Covid, the pace of relations between India and Russia has not changed". At the same time, Putin mentioned India as a "great power and a time-tested friend," as the two countries signed 28 agreements during their discussions.

What is the background?

First, the seesaw relations. The bilateral relations between the two countries have witnessed closeness and also growing uneasiness. The primary cause of discontentment for the Russians was India joining the Quad. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke about the West

influencing India by "trying to engage India in anti-China games by promoting Indo-Pacific strategies". Nevertheless, the two countries have shared good relations historically. In recent years, India extended a billion-dollar line of credit to invest in Russia's Far-East. Russian direct investment was used to manufacture the Sputnik-V vaccine in India.

Second, the primacy of defence, in bilateral relations. Russia is said to deliver the S-400 missile defence systems to India, giving Delhi a strategic deterrence to counter China and Pakistan. Russia is India's top defence partner, with defence contracts to USD 9-10 billion. Russia has also participated in the make in India program, transferring defence technologies and investments only to Indian sectors to generate employment. Russian cooperation on the defence investments created and expanded the Brahmos missile system, which is the world's fastest anti-ship cruise missile in operation.

Third, shared concerns on Afghanistan. Both countries have concerns about the future of Afghanistan and the potential use of its soil for terrorism which could impact their countries. Over a telephone call in August 2021, Modi and Putin discussed the formation of an inclusive government in Kabul and reiterated their support for a peaceful, stable and secure Afghanistan. Russia also participated in the National Security Advisers Conference on Afghanistan hosted by India in November 2021. In addition, the countries previously discussed the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and pledged immediate support for the Afghan populace; India had offered to send 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat via Pakistan.

¹ The cover story on Europe in 2021 is a compendium of short notes published by the NIAS scholars during 2021, as a part of two weeklies – *The World This Week*, and *Conflict Weekly*.

Fourth, the China-Russia-India triangle. India-China relations have been tense lately, with the recent clashes. China and US ties have been deteriorating, which has led to Beijing and Moscow moving closer. However, India's trade with China is about USD 100 billion as Indian corporates focus on China and America. At the same time, Russia needs India's help to gain influence in Eurasia.

What does this mean?

First, India and Russia have historically shared close ties since India's independence. Even with strains, the relationship is likely to continue and grow. Second, India and Russia are currently working on Brahmos Mark II, and with the deliveries of the S-400 missile defence systems, the defence relations will thrive. Third, the countries have decided to extend support to Afghanistan and have a joint view for its future. Fourth, the China-Russia-India triangle will continue as the countries are intertwined in border issues, trade and mutual self-interests.

Europe: France-UK tensions over a migrant disaster across the English Channel

By Padmashree Anandhan, 28 November 2021

What happened?

On 24 November, an inflatable yacht capsized on the beach of Calais in northern France; 27 people drowned while they were attempting to cross the English Channel to enter the UK. The Prime Minister of the UK Boris Johnson said: "We've had difficulties persuading some of our partners - particularly the French - to do things in a way in which we think the situation deserves. This is a problem we have to fix together." In response, French President Emmanuel Macron said: "France will not let the Channel become a Graveyard." He mentioned that France expects the UK to cooperate fully and abstains from instrumentalizing a tragic situation for political purposes.

On 26 November, a diplomatic rift developed between Johnson and Macron after France denied the Calais meeting with the Home Secretary Priti Patel. Macron blamed Johnson for "not being serious" and asking France to take back migrants.

On 27 November, a Kurdish woman from northern Iraq was identified as the first victim of the mass drowning. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said: "the Agency was deeply shocked and saddened by the unprecedented tragedy that unfolded in the English Channel. In the absence of safer alternatives, people will continue to resort to such perilous journeys, and their desperation and vulnerabilities will continue to be preyed upon and exploited by ruthless smugglers."

What is the background?

First, increase in the number of crossings. The number of migrants went from 1,835 to 26,560 in the last three years, with a majority of the crossings taking place in 2021. The French government is blamed for evacuating the migrants from the camps in the name of relocating them to shelters, thereby invoking many to move into the UK through the Channel.

Second, the UK as an attractive option for migrants. The origins of these migrants are from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Albania, and other North African countries. According to the survey taken by the researchers from International Health Journal from 402 migrants in Calais Jungle camp, only 12 per cent wanted to remain in France, and the other 82 per cent opted to go to the UK. Apart from seeking better living conditions or escaping the hostile situation, there are more significant reasons for the migrants to migrate to the UK. The first influencing factor is the treatment and recognition. The UK's approval of refugee status is much more flexible and beneficial in the long term. Upon crossing the Channel, the migrants can enter the UK and claim asylum, post which they have to prove the condition of non-return. At that point, they will be granted refugee status that lasts for five years, and later this becomes the base for them to settle in the UK. The second factor is connecting back with their families,

thereby re-establishing ties with their culture, traditional practices, and languages.

Third, the inability of France and the UK to find an answer. Regarding the state response, both the UK and French leaders have not come forward to take in the migrants. The leaders continue to debate and clash over who will host the migrants and push them back to their homelands. While France has been a regular defaulter in allowing the migrants to flee, the UK has deployed patrol ships to send back the migrant vessels before they reach the shores. Additionally, the tensions have brimmed with France not agreeing to meet with the UK Home Secretary to resolve the situation. These actions do not reflect the responsibility of the state nor its leaders' will to resolve the issue.

What does this mean?

First, the EU negligence. With the rapid increase in migration, the absence of the involvement of regional heads to address the situation in France showcases how serious they are about the looming humanitarian crisis in the region. Second, the will of the migrants. The risks taken by the migrants to move into the UK shows the intensity and willingness of the migrants to endanger their lives and find a place for a peaceful living.

Russia: The Anti-Satellite test

By Harini Madhusudan, 21 November 2021

What happened?

On 15 November, a missile from the earth was launched to target and destroy a Russian satellite in low-earth orbit, also known as a Direct-Ascent Anti-Satellite (DA-ASAT). The target was a defunct satellite from the Soviet-era called Tselina-D or Cosmos-1408. Following the test, instructions were given to the crew at the International Space Station, consisting of two Russian astronauts, four US astronauts, and one German, to take shelter in their capsules for two hours as a precaution.

The Russian test has come when there has been an increase in the activities and actors in Outer Space. "Russia has demonstrated a deliberate disregard for the security, safety, stability, and long-term sustainability of the space domain for all nations," US Space Command Commander James Dickinson said in a statement. Antony Blinken condemned the test as "reckless and irresponsible." The US State Department, NASA, and the officials from the Pentagon raised alarms about the impact of the debris generated by the test. The Russian military responded by calling the US 'hypocritical' as the resulting fragments from this test are unlikely to pose a threat to space activities or assets.

What is the background?

First, Russian activities in Outer Space and the recent ASAT test. The Russian direct-ascent anti-satellite missile targeted and destroyed a defunct Soviet signals intelligence satellite. Russia has repeatedly spoken about the plans of the US, France, and NATO as a whole of placing weapons in Outer Space. During the year, Russia had issues with its capsules launched to the ISS, and a crew from Russia launched a private mission to Outer Space to shoot a movie. On 16 November, Russia called on the US air force's testing of their X-37 spacecraft to indicate the country developing space weapons.

Second, a profile of ASAT tests in the past. The US, Russia, China, and India have previously conducted ASAT tests by shooting their satellites. India has been the latest entrant to the successful display of ASAT capabilities. China tested an Anti-Satellite in 2007, which became one of the early factors of the growing mistrust among countries. In 2008, as a response to China, the US tested its anti-satellite weapon. In 2015, Russia conducted its first successful ASAT test, and in 2019, India conducted its ASAT test called 'Mission Shakti.'

Third, the importance of ASAT capability. The anti-satellite is an effective tool to use against an adversary's space-based weapons or nuclear weapons. It can be considered as a countermeasure against an

adversary's anti-ballistic missile defense or simply a force multiplier for a nuclear first strike. The need for an anti-satellite comes from the nuclear defense preparedness and holds the ability to disrupt the normal functioning of the Lower-Earth Orbit.

Fourth, criticisms of ASAT over debris and the threat to space assets. The immediate output of an ASAT test is the space debris that it generates. Every test releases thousands of particles of various sizes that pose a threat to the assets in outer space. For example, the test by Russia created almost 1,500 measurable pieces of debris and many more pieces of smaller particles. Compared to the statistics from early November, there are about 20,000 objects that are traceable pieces of debris. The Russian test is expected to add another 10 percent to the same in the lower earth orbit. The Outer Space Treaty restricts the testing of weapons of mass destruction in Outer Space. The display of ASAT capability would technically be a violation of International Law. Since the countries have shot down their satellites, the threat of a weaponized space takes a back seat over the debris in all the tests.

What does it mean?

The Russian officials have revealed that the present ASAT test responded to the US announcement of a Space Force. There has been a sizeable growth in the space industry in terms of innovation, investments, and cost management, which directly influences the need for ASAT capability. The Secure World Foundation has called for a formal halt among all countries to stop ASAT testing, which sounds similar to the NPT model of nuclear energy. However, the more effective response would be to work towards robotic management and efficient safety protocols that ensure the safety of technology and crew. Additionally, the outcomes of an ASAT test need not be seen as a Space Debris problem, as it is not the primary outcome of the test.

Belarus: The migrant crisis and the state of political affairs

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 14 November 2021

What happened?

On 9 November, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki accused the Kremlin of orchestrating the migrant crisis at the border. He said: "This is the latest attack of Lukashenko, who is an executor, but has an enabler, and this enabler is in Moscow, this enabler is President Putin."

On 11 November, in an emergency meeting with top ministers, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko extended a threat, saying: "We heat Europe, and they are still threatening us that they'll shut the borders. And what if we cut off (the transit of) natural gas to them? So I would recommend that the leadership of Poland, Lithuanian and other brainless people to think before they speak." On 13 November, Russian President Vladimir Putin disapproved of the threat. He said: "This would be a violation of our transit contract and I hope it will not come to that."

What is the background?

First, Poland's complaints and threats. Poland, taking a strong stand, declared a state of emergency along its borders with Belarus. This enables them to push back migrants, ignore asylum requests, as well as deny access to NGOs and journalists. They believe militarizing the borders will force Belarus to stop the migrant inflow. The government intends to single-handedly manage the crisis and has repeatedly refused the EU's assistance. Although eclipsed by the ongoing crisis, the bloc's internal differences with Poland on the rule of law can be attributed to this refusal. Second, the EU's options and strategies. The EU regards the border standoff as a 'hybrid attack'. Refuting assumptions of Belarus not being affected by sanctions, the European Commission spokesperson Peter Stano claimed Lukashenko had retorted to "(behaving) like a gangster regime," as sanctions were "biting". Economic sanctions remain the primary retaliatory measure under consideration. An 'extended

sanctions regime', building on the earlier four rounds, is predicted to affect 30 individuals and entities along with Belarus' national carrier Belavia. Besides, third-country airlines and those beyond the regime may also be targeted.

Third, Belarus' threat and counterthreat. Lukashenko, as a retaliatory measure to the sanctions, had warned of "drowning" the bloc in "migrants and drugs". The latest threat of cutting gas transit to the EU, though empty-sounding, has fallen right into the laps of all the Nord Stream 2 critics. Belarus continues washing its hands off the blame and accuses the EU and Poland of being the real culprits since they refuse to aid the asylum-seekers. The crisis also created a diversion by overshadowing Belarus' growing human rights violations.

Fourth, the Russia factor. Alleging Russian involvement, Morawiecki accused the Kremlin of "rebuilding the Russian empire" by using "a new kind of war" whose "ammunition is civilians". Against this backdrop, German Chancellor Angela Merkel conversed with Russian President Vladimir Putin via telephone, asking him to resolve the ongoing conflict. However, Putin strategically refused this request and suggested such negotiations to be done directly with Minsk. If the EU heeds to this, it would imply legitimizing Lukashenko's illegitimate regime. Notwithstanding the allegations, Russia does not seem to have manoeuvred the crisis, although it has definitely capitalized on it.

Fifth, the humanitarian crisis. The political crises apart, the humanitarian one is of the utmost consequence. With winter approaching, migrants are struggling; nine deaths have been reported so far. Betraying their trust by giving them false hope of a 'promised land' and leaving them to die, all to prove a point, is simply cruel. To be used and abused for political gain will scar the already uncertain migrant lives.

What does this mean?

First, a shrewd Belarus. Cashing in on the bloc's evidently vulnerable migrant policy, Belarus has created absolute chaos.

Lukashenko has managed to play it nasty and sly at the cost of innocent migrant lives.

Second, the EU at an impasse. The EU is at a crossroads where both action and inaction seem troublesome. Considering further sanctions when the genesis of the present crisis was rooted in them, might prove detrimental for the EU, especially when it still lacks an efficient migrant policy. This may be a war that cannot be won, yet the EU cannot afford to lose.

Russia: The Afghan summit

By Harini Madhusudan, 24 October 2021

What happened?

On 20 October, Russia hosted the "Moscow format" talks with delegates from ten countries and the Taliban. The joint statement formalized the position and demands of the member countries to the Taliban. In order to obtain recognition, the Taliban is expected to create a state management system and form "a truly inclusive government that adequately reflects the interests of all major ethnopolitical forces in the country," as a prerequisite to completing the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan, said the joint statement.

To address the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, the statement proposed that the Taliban adopt a moderate and wise internal and foreign policy that would help "achieve the shared goals of durable peace, security, safety and long-term prosperity and respect the rights of ethnic groups, women and children. Last week, Vladimir Putin noted that there has been no rush to officially recognize the Taliban but there was a need to engage in talks with them.

What is the background?

First, the history of the Moscow format. Russia has established the Moscow Format talks since 2017 to address the issues related to Afghanistan. This is the third meeting and the first one since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The talks are significant because it aims to consolidate

the international community's efforts in preventing a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Importantly, it includes representatives of China, Pakistan, Iran, India, and the former Soviet nations of Central Asia, along with representatives of the Taliban and other Afghan factions. All participants of the Moscow format are close to the region and have substantial stakes in the crisis in Afghanistan.

Second, the Russian interests in Afghanistan. Moscow has been engaging with the Taliban during the recent period. Despite being on Russia's list of banned groups, representatives of the Taliban have visited Russia for talks regularly since 2018. The Russian approach can be seen in two aspects; one, they are embracing closer ties with the Taliban after the US withdrawal, and to ensure stability in the surrounding Central Asia. Russia would want to avoid getting its military involved in any way. Unlike many countries, Russia has not evacuated its embassy from Kabul, and the Russian Ambassador is known to have maintained regular contacts with the Taliban since they took over Kabul.

Third, the participants of the Moscow format. The following took part in the summit: Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Iran, Pakistan, China, Turkmenistan, India, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. They called on the Taliban to pursue a moderate and wise internal and foreign policy, be friendly to the neighbouring states, and achieve the shared goals of "durable peace, security, safety, long term prosperity, and respect the rights of ethnic groups, women, and children.

Fourth, the Taliban's interest in the Moscow format. The Taliban used this opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to preventing the use of Afghanistan territory against its neighbours and other states. One of the primary interests was to receive official recognition.

What does it mean?

The Moscow format is one of the many attempts at balancing power with the new realities in Afghanistan. It is significant

because of the presence of Russia, China, and Pakistan along with the Taliban, in the absence of the US. There has been a softer approach in the rhetoric from the Russian side; for example, the state news agency, which is mandated to use certain terms, was seen replacing the word 'terrorist' with 'radical' in their reports of the Taliban. Though a joint statement was released, there is no sign of officially recognizing the Taliban government until they observe promising actions from their side. The timely role taken by Russia, by organizing the Moscow format summit, and also making a statement by skipping participation in the G20 attempt of the same, indicates a difference in approach to the issue at hand.

The EU: Poland continues to defy the EU

by Joeana Cera Matthews, 24 October 2021

What happened?

On 12 October, a Polish Constitutional Tribunal ruling that declared the primacy of Polish law over the EU law came into force. On 19 October, at the European Parliament plenary held at Strasbourg in France, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said: "If you want to make Europe into a nationless superstate, first gain the consent of all European countries and societies. The supreme law of the Republic of Poland is the constitution."

The Commission President Ursula von der Leyen responded: "It is a direct challenge to the unity of the European legal order. This is the first time ever that a court of a member state finds that the EU Treaties are incompatible with the national constitution."

On 21 October, at the European Council summit held at Brussels, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said: "If you want to be part of a club and have the advantages of a club, you must play by the rules."

What is the background?

First, the trigger. Poland and the EU have had a long-standing feud challenging the rule of law and the supremacy of the European Court of Justice (ECJ). It is in this backdrop, the highly-criticized Constitutional Tribunal passed the ruling. Allegedly influenced by Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS), the Tribunal is condemned for its illegitimate and biased undertakings. The PiS largely backed the ruling as it would facilitate in ridding judicial independence, letting them control the judiciary. Despite the MEPs' decision to not discuss Poland in-depth — fearing the length of such a discussion — this is exactly what happened. Overshadowing the Council summit's agenda, Poland challenging EU supremacy stole the show.

Second, the critics and supporters. Opponents to the Polish stance maintained that it could not "choose" to apply laws it had formerly ratified. The declining state of Europe's democratic values was another concern. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who is also at odds with the EU, was Poland's primary advocate. He questioned the need for imposing sanctions on "one of the best European countries," referring to Poland. Germany's Angela Merkel warned the EU against isolating Poland and called for measures that would unite the bloc instead of dividing it. Several EU leaders also requested that Poland change its stance.

Third, the Polish response to the retaliatory measures. Poland's pandemic recovery funds, which accounts for EUR 24 billion, are yet to be approved by the EU. At the plenary meeting, Morawiecki blamed the EU for singling out Poland by unjustly discriminating against them. He said that Poland would not "back down" in the face of "bullying and threats.

Fourth, no 'Polexit'. Similar to Brexit, 'Polexit' as a term has been coined to refer to Poland's potential exit from the bloc. However, Morawiecki has repeatedly denied the possibility of the same. He said: "We are here, we belong here and we are not going anywhere." Unlike Brexit, which

received popular support prior to the exit, Polish citizens repel the thought of leaving the bloc. Staunch supporters of the EU, Poles are too accustomed to the benefits of being an EU insider.

What does this mean?

The reality of the situation is that it is an unwinnable one and both parties are aware of this painful truth. The EU lacks the mechanisms to punish Poland such that it would revert its stance, while Poland's challenge against the EU will remain just that. An event wherein the EU budes on Poland's request is when the bloc will see its end; the supremacy of the rule of law is the bloc's foundation. If the EU were to emerge victorious by some fortuitous series of events, it would imply risking its own agenda — every major policy decision requires the bloc's unanimous vote; upsetting Poland will not help. Thus, the EU cannot afford to go into battle with one of its own.

Europe: The energy crisis

By Vaishnavi Iyer, 10 October 2021

What happened?

On 06 October, European gas prices saw a record increase. The Spanish Prime Minister Sanchez said: "We are facing an unprecedented crisis that requires extraordinary, innovative, serious measures from the EU in order to control this price hike." Addressing the EU Slovenia Summit, he called for the European Council and the European Commission to help resolve the crisis.

The EU Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson said: "the bloc should provide targeted support to citizens and small businesses that were hardest hit." She called for a shift in taxation which is facilitated under EU directives. With the economic nature of the crisis, Simson notes no quick fixes could help the situation.

An energy expert, Thierry Bros said: "You're finding yourself in an area where demand has rebounded and on the other side, supply is more constrained. On 7 October, Russia pledged to increase its gas supplies

to Europe. Dmitry Peskov said: "existing gas transit routes allow for bolstering supplies before the new Nord Stream 2 pipeline that is intended to bring Russian gas to Germany begins operating. It all depends on demand, contractual obligations and commercial agreements." Russia's deputy Prime Minister Novak promoted launching Nord Stream 2 to facilitate easier gas transit.

What is the background?

First, an unplanned clean fuel transition. In an attempt to attain carbon neutrality, the large-scale transition from coal to cleaner fuel has already begun impacting Europe negatively. Europe began decreasing its coal dependency by phasing out its renewables sector. The Netherlands, Europe's largest producer of natural gas, phased out its Groningen gas field in 2018. The current working gas storage remains at 75 per cent as compared to 94 per cent last year. Wind power produced menial outputs this year owing to a dry weather spell. The consequent dependency of Europe on natural gas rich counterparts like Norway and Russia worsened the crisis when Russia terminated its gas exports.

Second, consumer behaviour. In a colder winter last year, citizens used more coal to heat their homes, leading to a hike in prices. Moreover, the UK's fuel crisis worsened with lower availability of truck drivers owing to Brexit. In an event of delayed gas supplies, consumers emptied most gas stations in the UK.

Third, gas "peakers". The pandemic led to a surge in the demand of electricity across Europe. As a system dependent on renewables, European grids experienced surges owing to weather changes. In a normal scenario, companies would fill such surges using gas peakers. However, the pandemic promoted a mismanaged use of these gas peakers by companies to generate more profits. Gas producers like Equinor and Gazprom hold the market tight till 2025, creating increasing price hikes.

What does this mean?

First, the global hike in gas prices. This not limited to Europe. A primary reason for the supply shortage has been the pandemic

along with colder winters this year. Industrialists and suppliers have profited from limiting gas supplies causing a consequent hike in prices. Government intervention seems to be the most favourable solution. France and other few countries began price capping and scheduled a planned increase in electricity tariffs for its consumers. The EU has also begun the process of changing its taxation mechanisms to facilitate a smoother winter.

Second, promotion of Nord Stream 2. Russia has intervened in the EU natural gas crisis. It has assured the EU of a consistent supply of natural gas, but there remains an undercurrent of pressure to start formal preparations for Nord Stream 2. The EU may have to hasten the approval of Nord Stream 2 for continued cooperation. Given the economic nature of the problem, there is no quick fix.

Russia: General Elections 2021 underlines Putin's political hold

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 26 September 2021

What happened?

On 17 September, Russia began polling for its three-day general elections both online and offline. The parliamentary election, which ended on 19 September, elected 450 deputies to the State Duma for five years. Despite an easy win of 49.82 per cent votes, the United Russia party lost significant ground compared to their 2016 election win of 54 per cent votes. Contributions by other parties included the Communist party with 18.93 per cent of the vote, while the LDPR party and the Fair Russia party garnered 7.5 per cent individually. Overall, the elections saw an official voter turnout of 51.7 per cent.

On 20 September, jailed critic Alexei Navalny's aide Lyubov Sobol said: "With such a colossal number of violations, the results of the State Duma elections cannot be recognized as clean, honest or legitimate."

On 24 September, after announcing the final results, Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairperson Ella Pamfilova said: "We did everything we could, based on our understanding of honour and conscience, everything we could, and it's up to you to judge."

What is the background?

First, the pre-election controversies. Before the elections, Kremlin critics were barred from participation while others were implicated with legal suits or unexplained arrests. The Smart voting app promoted by jailed Alexei Navalny's supporters was banned. The subsequent crackdown on civil society, media, and other NGOs also raised concerns about attempts to silence the Opposition. During the elections, criticisms ranged from accusations of voter fraud to requests of annulling the results. Ballot box stuffing, pens with disappearing ink, and threats against observers were other alleged violations.

Second, the Opposition's role. The opposition parties that participated in the elections provided a pretence of pluralism, as critics were carefully excluded. This lack of real electoral competition implied the results were a foregone conclusion. Over the years, this has been the case with Russian elections. Since the beginning of Putin's regime, all of his elections have been termed fraudulent, and every time, these allegations have been strategically silenced. Alexei Navalny, the prominent Kremlin-rival, had managed to garner an efficient opposition. The idea of Navalny – Opposition to the Kremlin became quite popular despite the Kremlin crackdown. Once Navalny's organization was termed 'extremist', and he was jailed, the vocality of the Opposition was lost.

Third, fairness of the election. Russia's 'managed/guided' form of democracy was evident via this election. The 'opposition' was Kremlin-approved since critics were effortlessly silenced or taken off the arena. According to the Interior Ministry, none of the 750 complaints on voting violations received was severe enough to affect the results. For the first time since 2007, the

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), didn't send in election observers due to limitations set by Moscow. It seems only fair that this year's elections were dubbed 'a transition from a flawed democracy to a fully-fledged authoritarian state'.

Fourth, the backlash. Internal criticisms included a coalition of defeated candidates claiming foul-play over the online voting system; they also asked for annulling the results. However, these claims were not taken into consideration by the Russian CEC. There was also an international backlash. From the US State Department spokesperson Ned Price to the EU Foreign Affairs spokesperson Peter Sano, the elections were termed undemocratic and staged. Other European countries also called out Moscow's growing authoritarianism.

What does it mean?

First, questions over democracy in Russia. The opinion polls had predicted United Russia's popularity accounting for less than 30 per cent; however, the Kremlin achieved a supermajority despite a low turnout. In light of this, questions arise regarding Moscow's larger democratic process and whether the concept of Russian democracy is a sham. It also indicates that a return to full-fledged democracy is not in the cards for Russia.

Second, Putin's hold over Russia. Despite the widespread violations by his administration, Putin's popularity in terms of votes was unaffected. Kremlin's justification of the crackdown prosecuting those deviants of the law rather than one with political motives shows how effortlessly critics are silenced in Russia.

Europe: The Annual State of the EU address 2021 by President Ursula von der Leyen

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 19 September 2021

What happened?

On 15 September, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen addressed the European Parliament on the State of the Union in Strasbourg, France. A large portion of her annual State of the European Union (SOTEU) speech dedicated itself to climate change, the importance of European youth, and the larger issues affecting the bloc. She said: "But as I look back on this past year, if I look at the state of the Union today, I see a strong soul in everything that we do... We did that together as Commission, as Parliament, as 27 Member States. As one Europe. And we can be proud of it."

What is the background?

First, the primary issues of the speech. In her second SOTEU speech, von der Leyen primarily focused on two issues impacting Europe – climate change and the pandemic. Recalling the recent European summer - the Belgian and German floods, the wildfires from Greece to France, and placing this alongside the latest IPCC report implied tackling climate change held utmost priority. Calling the Union to resemble the present generation as it was one with a conscience, she stressed the importance of the European youth in bringing about climate awareness. Along with commending the European Green Deal and related schemes, an additional EUR four billion was proposed to finance poorer countries fighting climate change. She also urged speeding up the global vaccination rates to avoid a case of the 'pandemic of the unvaccinated'.

Acknowledging the supply disparity between rich and poor countries, an additional 200 million doses were also pledged to low-income countries fighting the pandemic.

Second, other issues covered. A range of other issues like defense, security, freedom, migration, etc was covered. Citing the sudden fall of Kabul to the Taliban, calls for women's rights and the importance of regional security was emphasized. An Afghan support package will be unveiled in the coming weeks alongside EU's jointly financed humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan being furthered another EUR 100 million.

Third, proposed plans. One of the primary proposals was HERA – Europe's health crisis body to increase preparedness and future response measures to pandemics. A European Chips Act, which would boost Europe's microchip industry to rival the US and China was another major proposal. A unified approach wherein member states wouldn't compete within the bloc but build together to create a 'state of the art ecosystem' of microchip companies. This decision comes after Europe suffered a chips shortage due to global supply chain disruptions. Von der Leyen maintained that it was not just a matter of competitiveness but of 'tech sovereignty'. The much deliberated-upon "Global Gateway" project was also promised by the EC Chief as she stated her intention to 'create links and not dependencies', hinting at Europe participating in China's BRI.

Fourth, reprimands in the SOTEU address. The EC President sharply criticized Belarus' instrumentalization of migrants and said that the move was not appreciated. Further, she vowed that no concessions over democratic standards would be made regarding battles with Poland and Hungary. In fact, they were threatened with more legal action and blocking of funds.

Fifth, China as a priority. Though Beijing's climate goals were praised, she enquired on how it intended to achieve them. Europe's 'Global Gateway' scheme and the new EU-Indo Pacific strategy, are both seen as a counter to China. A move to ban Chinese goods produced by forced labour was also announced. The rise of China seemed to be a primary focus of her speech as Xi Jinping's name found a mention in her speech over USA's Biden.

What does it mean?

Von der Leyen's concluding note maintained that the EU would undergo a test of character next year as well. Her prioritization of climate and the pandemic showed what the EU will be focused on. Without sounding complacent, she commended the actions taken by the bloc while reprimanding undemocratic moves within. The rising China and efforts to balance this will be another EU focus.

France: Trial begins for the 2015 terrorist attack

By Sourina Bej, 12 September 2021

What happened?

On 9 September, the trial began against those accused in the 2015 terrorist attacks that had left 130 people dead and 350 injured in central Paris and Saint-Denis. The court is going to weigh on the pleas of the 20 accused, including Salah Abdeslam, the mastermind behind the attack. While 14 of the accused face trials in person, six more are being tried in absentia.

What is the background?

First, six years since the terror attack. In 2015 attackers killed 130 people and wounded hundreds more in coordinated shootings and suicide bombings at the Bataclan concert hall, a sports stadium, and bars and restaurants across the French capital. In the six years prior to the trial, France has witnessed more such terror attacks which have marked a shift in the collective consciousness of the society. The Nice truck attack of 2016 was equally lethal with 86 killed. The January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks to the beheading of Samuel Paty in 2020, these attacks have only reminded France that anyone and anybody could come under a terror attack.

Second, trial as a symbolic gesture of collective memorialisation and healing. Symbolically the trial is the moment where facts could be examined, the ferocity of the act is acknowledged and the victims get justice if not compensation for the loss. One of the primary virtues of a trial is to situate

the facts in order to understand exactly what happened. The trial comes in the backdrop of similar hearings of those accused in the Charlie Hebdo terror attack and the Christchurch attack in New Zealand. It is an important step towards the beginning of memorialization of the event at the individual as well as at the societal level. In this the role of the Judiciary as an institution to identify and open pathways for healings is significant.

Third, the profile of the accused or the attackers. The attacks in 2015 were planned in Syria and carried out by Europeans who had joined ISIS and were able to travel back and forth undetected with the flow of migrants. The attackers were mostly French and Belgian citizens, born in Europe to immigrants from North Africa. Similar has been the ethnic background (that is second to third-generation immigrants) of the attackers who killed Samuel Paty, bombed the office of Charlie Hebo, or wielded the knife in Nice.

Fourth, France's own war on terror at home. In the past year, the state institutions have not only responded heavily in cracking down the financial routes of the small franchisee-terrorist groups but have also passed new anti-terrorism legislation that gives police extended powers to search homes and make house arrests without prior judicial approval. Religious sites deemed radical can now be closed down. And a social questioning or puritan screening has begun on who is a French in France? The French model of identity is steeped in civic nationalism over recognizing the diverse ethnolinguistic identity thereby making the minorities invisible in the French society.

What does it mean?

The trial will add to the existing social caveats of divisions within the migrant groups. The intra and inter-group cohesion in French society have never been simplistic. And the trial puts a check on what it means to practice violent radical attacks but how much will it facilitate a social dialogue on why Islamic extremism could become a trend in France is still in

doubt. On the other side of the spectrum where lensing and seeing the act of one Muslim man as the burden of a whole ethnoreligious community is also painfully problematic and marks the beginning of a social perception bordering on social exclusion.

Europe: EU's climate package amidst the rains and floods

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 18 July 2021

What happened?

On 15 July, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated on the flood situation in Germany: "... there is a dramatic increase in such unusual weather phenomena and we have to contend with this." On 16 July, she said: "My thoughts are with you, ... will do everything under the most difficult conditions to save lives, alleviate dangers and to relieve distress." The torrential rains and floods have hit Germany and Belgium the hardest. Over the past week, it has claimed at least 143 lives in Germany and 27 in Belgium, while hundreds remain missing. It has been attributed to be Germany's worst natural disaster in half a century as power and communications remain cut in several regions across the country. Showing the direness of the situation, France's national weather service said that two months of average rain had fallen in two days. The Netherlands also remains on alert, taking precautionary measures against potential floods.

On 14 July, the European Commission announced its 'Fit for 55' package as Europe experiences scorching temperatures and floods over the past few weeks. The European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: "It is our generational task... [to secure] the wellbeing of not only our generation, but of our children and grandchildren. Europe is ready to lead the way."

What is the background?

First, the recent weather anomaly. Prior to the floods, parts of the US and Canada had experienced a blazing heatwave that killed

hundreds. Scientists claim that this extreme heat was triggered by climate change which supposedly increased Europe's chances of flooding. The record-breaking temperatures in the Arctic and its subsequent melting have also raised concerns of the global community. Climate scientists remain baffled by the speed at which the change is occurring.

Second, the EU package - 'Fit for 55'. Aimed at achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 as part of the European Green Deal, the ambitious package comprises 12 legislative proposals. Its name is derived from the bloc's 2030 goal of reducing emissions by 55 per cent from 1990 levels. The package includes various proposals, from taxing aviation fuel to further tightening emission limits. One of the key proposals is a carbon border tariff – the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), that will increase the import costs for non-EU manufacturers. A EUR 72.2 billion Social Climate Fund is suggested to fund the entire package from 2025 to 2032. However, the proposals are yet to be approved by the EU member states and the EU Parliament. Given its nature, these negotiations could take years to complete.

Third, the divide in the response. Negotiations are expected to be prolonged since the bloc is internally divided. The bloc sees both regional as well as a national divide. Poland and other central and eastern European countries that rely heavily on fossil fuels are likely to lead the resistance. They remain wary of the social and economic costs of the deal. Critics opine that Brussels risks a backlash from low- and middle-income earners, and should avoid repeating anti-establishment protests like the yellow vests of France. There also exists an East-West divide, given the increased support from the western countries contrasting the critical approach of the east. Internationally, CBAM has become controversial in the US, China and Russia. Environmentalists have also criticized the proposals saying they are not enough. Greenpeace, an NGO, mocked the announcements as "a fireworks display over a rubbish dump".

Fourth, the necessity of action. According to climate scientists and activists, inaction is not an option. While critics fear increasing costs, they appear ignorant of the already large costs being paid via climate change-triggered events. The effects are becoming more evident, rapid, and disruptive.

Aggressive policies to prevent or reduce the rates of climate change are necessary to avoid the extremes. The EU seems to be taking the global leadership in climate action. It shows how willing the bloc is to stake its domestic and international benefits to fulfil its climate goals. However, criticisms pertaining to the package remain.

What does it mean?

Europe seems to have taken the first step in a long road. The proposed climate package is nothing short of transformational, given its scale and impact range. However, questions on the practicality of the package and its ability to curb the adverse effects of climate change loom large.

Europe: The EU Council summit discussions on migration, LGBTQ, and COVID-19

By Keerthana Nambiar, 27 June 2021

What happened?

On 26 June, following the two-day meeting of the EU Council, President Charles Michel observed the following: "First, mobility. How is it possible to coordinate, to cooperate, especially when we face new variants. Second topic: international solidarity. We had the opportunity in the past to reaffirm our commitments to demonstrate our effective international solidarity... A quick word on the issue of migration. The debate was not very long on this subject in the room because the debate had been prepared by our teams, by the ambassadors who worked. We were able to quickly agree on operational conclusions... There was a discussion again about Russia. This was the opportunity, after a high-quality debate a month ago, to

take a step forward and clarify the way in which we want to envisage the implementation of the five principles which, in our opinion, are the basis of the relationship with Russia."

What is the background?

First, the issue of migration. The European Union discussed migration and the measures taken in recent years to tone down the irregular flows of migrants. The EU and its member states agreed on 'mutually beneficial partnerships' and 'cooperation with countries of origin and transit' to prevent loss of human lives on the European borders. Since 2015, irregular arrivals have heightened. In 2018, the council codified the integrated political crisis response (IPCR) into a legal act. The IPCR supports decision making related to major crises and disasters that creates a surge in migration. The European Union leaders plan to aid Turkey with EUR three billion (USD 3.6 billion) over the next few years for assisting the Syrian refugees on its territory and to help in border controls.

Second, the tug of war with Russia. The European leaders discussed its strained ties with Russia and expect a "more constructive engagement and political commitment" from the Russian leadership towards the council. The EU has placed economic sanctions on Russian financial, energy, arms sectors and individual sanctions on human rights abuses and usage of banned chemical weapons. The council adopted a strong stance after Baltic countries and Poland rejected the Franco-German plan to resume dialogue with Putin at a summit. "In my opinion, we as the European Union must also seek direct contact with Russia and the Russian president," stated Angela Merkel. The proposal follows Joe Biden's summit with Vladimir Putin in Geneva to repair the ties. Russia being the EU's biggest natural gas supplier, influences international conflicts and issues. The last EU-Russia summit was in January 2014, shortly before the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula.

Third, progress on COVID-19 vaccination. The council acknowledged the EU's

improvement in handling the pandemic and the necessity to continue with the vaccination efforts. The leaders addressed the importance of the agreements on the EU digital COVID certificate and recommendations on travel within the EU and non-essential travel into the EU.

Fourth, EU leaders defend LGBT rights. The European Union leaders had a heated discussion over the new legislation in Hungary that bans content about LGBTQ issues to children.

Fifth, the EU Next-generation economic recovery plan. The EU approved the Greek-recovery plan of EUR 30.5 billion which will 'supercharge investment, reform, and growth throughout the country.' The investments are being aimed at green and digital transitions, health care sectors which will expectedly deeply transform the European economy.

What does it mean?

The European Union stresses the need to integrate and intensify the cooperation in political, economic, and human rights domains. The motive is to increase the flexibility within the partners and also cornering countries like Poland and Hungary that hollows the democracy in Europe.

The focus on LGBTQ rights indicates that this was not just a regular council meeting failing to meet the expectations rather an honest effort for a true democratic recovery.

EU: The Merkel-Macron proposal on an EU-Russia summit, and its opposition

By D. Suba Chandran, 27 June 2021

What happened?

On 25 June, the Conclusions adopted by the European Council meeting during 24-25 June, on Russia observed: "The European Council expects the Russian leadership to demonstrate a more constructive engagement and political commitment and stop actions against the EU and its Member

States, as well as against third countries." It also asked "Russia to fully assume its responsibility in ensuring the full implementation of the Minsk agreements as the key condition for any substantial change in the EU's stance." However, it also observed: "The European Council reiterates the European Union's openness to a selective engagement with Russia in areas of EU interest."

On 25 June 2021, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, after the meeting with the rest of the European Union leaders, referring to a possible European summit with Russia said: "It was a very comprehensive discussion and not an easy one...There was no agreement today on an immediate leaders' meeting."

What is the background?

First, the EU-Russia relations since the Minsk agreements in 2014. Ever since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, there have been tensions between the EU and Moscow. The Minsk agreements signed in 2015 on Ukraine has become one of the basis for the EU's Russia approach. Since 1997, the EU and Russia have been holding regular summits, but they came to an end in 2014. Ever since, the EU has repeatedly been emphasising on "five guiding principles" that include the following: "full implementation of the Minsk agreements; closer ties with Russia's former Soviet neighbours; strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats; selective engagement with Russia on certain issues such as counter-terrorism; and support for people-to-people contacts."

Sanctions on Russia remained one of the primary EU strategies. However, the sanctions strategy of the EU have not yielded much results to what Europe wanted Russia to do. Instead, sanctions only reduced Europe's leverage.

Second, the idea of selective engagement with Russia. Irrespective of what the EU wants, there were selective engagements of European countries, for example, Germany with Russia over the gas pipelines. Despite objections from most of Europe, Germany has pushed its Nord Stream II plans with Russia. Merkel also had a meeting with Putin in 2020. Now, Germany, along with

France, is floating the idea of engaging with Russia. According to President Macron, Europe needs dialogue to defend its interests and is necessary for the stability of the European continent. There seems to be an understanding to discuss with Russia on issues relating to climate, health, JCPOA, Syria and Libya.

Third, the fallout of the recent US-Russia summit in Geneva. As a part of his Europe tour, US President Biden had an exclusive summit with Putin in Geneva. Though there were no major breakthroughs in the Geneva summit, it has established a process. Perhaps, France and Germany are looking at the larger picture vis-à-vis Russia.

Fourth, the opposition to Europe-Russia engagement, especially from the Baltic states. While Germany and France are floating the idea of an engagement, the Baltic states – Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are apprehensive, given the immediate geography with Russia and the long history.

What does it mean?

While the Baltic States are opposed to the idea of a direct dialogue with Russia, the idea of talking directly with Kremlin is finding roots in Europe. While there is likely to be an initial opposition, the debate is likely to expand and reach a common minimum programme within Europe.

Europe: Russia's responses

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 27 June 2021

What happened?

On 23 June, the Russian ambassador to the EU Vladimir Chizhov said: (EU should) get its act together and define what it really wants from its relations with Russia."

On 25 June, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova commented: "On our part, we reiterate our readiness for the continuation of an equal dialogue with the European Union... contrary to the hopes some the EU capitals are cherishing, cannot be based on preliminary conditions. The more so, on threats of unilateral and illegal sanctions

against our country, which will inevitably be followed by a proportionate response, and Brussels is well aware of that." Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said: "In general, President Putin was and remains interested in improving working relations between Moscow and Brussels... The European position is fragmented, not always consistent, and sometimes unclear."

What is the background?

First, the Russian response to the EU sanctions. Following the 2014 Ukraine invasion and Crimean annexation, the EU sanctioned Russia on its energy, financial, and arms sectors and imposed individual sanctions on those Russians accused of human rights abuses. The latest EU summit saw the possibility of further sanctions with EU diplomats saying that it could target Russian money laundering or powerful oligarchs suspected of corruption abroad. Most EU countries are concerned that the Kremlin does not take the bloc seriously, given its dramatic expulsion of EU diplomats in February. On the other hand, Moscow has repeatedly warned the EU not to meddle in its internal affairs. Russia believes that the bilateral relations have been severely undermined by the unilateral sanctions that affect the economic interests of both sides for the sake of promoting 'dubious' geopolitical schemes. The confrontational stereotypes that characterized the Cold War period continuing to linger in the minds of the EU members doesn't help Russia's case.

Second, Putin's Europe strategy. Russia has clear goals and tactics regarding Europe – to undermine democracy, undermine the trans-Atlantic unity, and restore Russian primacy. The Kremlin aims to achieve this by establishing an energy reliance (the Nord Stream 1 and 2), engaging in strategic corruption, and vicious disinformation campaigns. During the EU summit, Germany with France's backing proposed a summit with Putin which was disagreed upon as it caused major division within the bloc.

Third, the China factor in the Russian response. An Estonian member of the European Parliament stated: "We should not overlook the deepening relations of two

authoritarian states – Russia and China – as this also influences Europe." This just goes on to prove how worried Europe is about the Chinese factor in Euro-Russian relations. Russia has always had an identity crisis of belonging, and considering the increasing camaraderie between Xi Jinping and Putin, the EU cannot but think the worst. Russia and China seem to have reached an accommodative situation wherein Moscow provides security while Beijing provides development, enabling both to stay out of each other's way. But it is not just the EU that is concerned over this budding relationship. The Biden-Putin summit also saw this as an ulterior motive – to divide and conquer.

What does it mean?

Under no circumstances will Russia give up on its core interests and pushing them to the edge will further strain bilateral relations. The growing Sino-Russian bond will also provide a boost to Putin's confidence in defying the world order and attaining its strategic goals.

The G7 Summit 2021: Focus on pandemic recovery, climate action, and global economy

By Joana Cera Matthews, 13 June 2021

What happened?

The 47th G7 summit took place at Carbis Bay in Cornwall, England. Along with its members, the summit also witnessed Australia, India, South Korea, and South Africa as guest countries.

On 10 June, US President Joe Biden announced: "...the United States will donate half a billion new Pfizer vaccines to 92 low and lower-middle-income countries."

On 12 June, the UK PM and G7 President tweeted: "The #CarbisBayDeclaration marks a proud and historic moment ... the world's leading democracies will commit to preventing a global pandemic from ever happening again."

What is the background?

First, the focus on pandemic recovery. This year's summit assumes significance as it is the first in-person meet between G7 leaders since the pandemic began. The 'return of face-to-face diplomacy' is a welcome change to the 'zoom diplomacy' that affected leaders during the pandemic. The theme of the meeting, 'Build Back Better' coincides with the global effort to rebuild economies from COVID-19. As the UK hosts the summit, four focus areas have been laid out: the pandemic recovery and prevention of future health crises, tackling climate change, free and fair trade, and strengthening shared values. Though each leader of the summit has their own agendas, the pandemic and climate action are likely to dominate the meeting.

Second, Biden's first foreign trip and summit as President. During his tenure, former President Donald Trump managed to antagonize the US allies. One of Biden's major goals through this tour is to undo Trump's damage as well as to reclaim the US' global leadership role. Europe regards Biden as a 'reliable ally' and is relieved that Biden represents the US at G7. They appreciate that he does not cosy up with Russia's Putin and call the EU a foe, unlike Trump.

Third, the discussion on vaccines. The G7 finance ministers discussed a USD 50 billion vaccine distribution plan for poor nations collaborating with the IMF, WHO, and WTO. Before his arrival at the summit, Biden pledged the US would buy 500 million doses of the vaccine for distribution to developing countries. The UK has pledged 100 million doses, and the G7 is expected to make commitments that total to one billion by the end of the year. Johnson has sought a commitment to vaccinate the adult population of major economies by the end of 2022. The signing of the Carbis Bay Declaration aimed at taking steps to prevent another health emergency is also key. Aid experts opine that the G7 has failed to understand the urgency of the situation as their distribution goals only account for a tenth of the number required. Support for the discussion on patent waivers is also in view.

Fourth, talks on Russia and China. The G7's initiative of a global pandemic program is a geopolitical move as it is a humanitarian one. Countering China's vaccine diplomacy, strengthening the Clean Green Initiative rivalling Beijing's BRI, and taking joint action against the human rights abuses in Xinjiang are also key talking points. A call for Russia to tackle groups carrying out cybercrimes from home is also considered. Discussions would also include the ongoing discontent over Russia's destabilizing actions and the prospect of more sanctions on the country. However, Merkel's support for China stating the impossibility of containing the pandemic without cooperating with China complicates things.

What does it mean?

If the G7 remains just as a talking shop that never gets anything realized, it will further global spiralling. A deadline of 2022 is undoubtedly a stretched goal given the inadequate doses. If the doses for distribution are increased and effective implementation undertaken, a substantial difference can be brought about. It is the time for brave global leadership; half measures won't help in achieving this goal – delivery is all. A united front will be key to bringing change.

Europe in Africa: France and Germany take responsibility for the past in Rwanda and Namibia

By Anu Maria, 30 May 2021

What happened?

On 27 May, French President Macron asked for "the gift of forgiveness" from the people of Rwanda in his speech at Kigali Genocide Memorial while he was visiting Rwanda. He said France bears an "overwhelming responsibility" over the 1994 Rwanda genocide, though it had never been an accomplice. He also said: "France failed to heed the warnings and overestimated its ability to stop something that was underway". Rwandan President Paul Kagame responded: "his (Macron's) words

were something valuable than an apology, they were the truth." He called it an "act of tremendous courage".

On 28 May, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas officially recognized the mass killings in Namibia (then German South-West Africa) during 1904-08 as 'Genocide'. He said: "We will now officially call these events what they were from today's perspective: a genocide." Also, Germany has pledged to provide USD 1.3 billion for the reconstruction and development of the communities to recognize the suffering caused. He said: "In the light of the historical and moral responsibility of Germany, we will ask forgiveness from Namibia and the victims."

The Namibian government officials referred to the recognition as a "first step" towards reconciliation. But on the same day, Herero Paramount's chief, Yekuii Rukoro, replied: "This is a sellout job by the Namibian government. The government has betrayed the cause of people". He also said reparations should be collectively given to descendants of victims rather than as financial programs. Sima Luiper, one among Nama people, said: "Germany must come to Nama people, and Herero people, and ask for forgiveness, and it's up to us to decide if that apology is genuine or not".

What is the background?

First, the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. In Rwanda, the minority Tutsi community were targeted by the Hutus after the assassination of Hutu President Habriamana in 1994; the violence resulted in the killing of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus. France supported the Hutu led government and its policies that suppressed the RPF (Rwandon Patriotic Front) led by the Tutsis. It failed to recognize the warnings of an impending genocide. Operation Turquoise, the French-led military intervention backed by the UN in July 1994, failed to act, giving numerous Hutu perpetrators a chance to escape legal prosecution.

Second, the genocide in Namibia during 1904-08. Over 100,000 Hereros and 10,000

Namas people were killed as a part of an 'extermination order' in the then German South-West Africa, during the German colonial rule for rebelling. People were driven to the Omaheke desert and abandoned; many died of dehydration and hunger. Thousands were poisoned, persecuted, imprisoned in concentration camps and died of diseases and abuses.

Third, the post-genocide bilateral relations. The RPF government, led by Paul Kagame in 1994, deteriorated the relationship between France and Rwanda. The French President Emmanuel Macron assigned a Commission of French Historians led by Vincent Duclert in 2019 to investigate France's involvement. The report concluded the "overwhelming responsibility" of France on the genocide caused by the policies adopted by President Francois Mitterrand. On 7 April, Macron announced plans to make the Duclert Report public. On 19 May, he spoke at the Paris Summit on Financing Africa, where he announced his decision to visit Rwanda to re-establish the relationship.

Germany, since 2015 has been negotiating with Namibia. The objective was to "find a common path to genuine reconciliation in memory of the victims". However, Namibia rejected the compensation for using the term 'financial aid' instead of 'reparations.' In 2018, Germany returned skulls and other remains of the Namibians, which were taken for scientific racial experiments. Now Germany has officially issued an apology. The government of Namibia has officially accepted the apology, but the descendants of the Herero and Nama people demand direct reparations. They rejected the offer as they say it would not be enough to replace the land and culture once they lost.

What does it mean?

First, the apology and visit from France and Germany. It signals an effort to correct the past and also a sincere effort to re-establish the relations. This should be welcome. Second, the response from Rwanda and Namibia. Since Rwandan President Paul Kagame has accepted the apology, it would mean an end to the controversies and a turn

for new beginnings. But for Germany, even though the Namibian government has accepted the apology, demand for direct reparations from the Nama and the Herero community means more work needs to be done for reconciliation. Since France and Germany have taken the first crucial steps, they should stay the course.

Belarus: While the West impose bans, Putin supports "Europe's Last Dictator"

By Harini Madhusudan, 30 May 2021

What happened?

On 28 May, President Putin hosted Alexander Lukashenko at a resort in Sochi amid the global outcry over the forced diversion of Ryanair's plane and the arrest of a Belarusian journalist, an outspoken critic of the Lukashenko regime. Putin was seen praising Russia's closer ties with Belarus. He said: "We've been building the Union State" and added, "we are confidently moving in that direction, that work is already bringing concrete results to our citizens." Lukashenko stated the West was "seeking to stir up unrest in Belarus."

During the week, the EU and the US announced sanctions against the forced landing of the plane. On 27 May, the Foreign Ministers of the G7 countries and EU released a joint statement, calling for an "immediate and unconditional release" of the detained Belarusian journalist, Roman Protasevich. His Russian girlfriend was also detained; she admits to being the editor of the social media channel that revealed the personal information of the law enforcement personnel of Belarus. 24 May also marks one year since the protests against his decision to run for the 2020 Presidential Elections.

What is the background?

First, Belarus-Russia bonhomie and Moscow's interests. Russia has been steadily increasing its influence over Belarus. However, the two leaders are described as 'uncomfortable allies,' one that

is born out of necessity. Russia has backed Lukashenko's leadership for 27 years and remains Belarus' most powerful political and economic partner. For Russia, Minsk, geographically wedged between the NATO allies and Russia, would be one less neighbour who is influenced by the West. Russian and Belarusian air defence systems are known to be deeply integrated. Though the Kremlin has denied its involvement in the diversion of the plane, the UK Foreign Secretary claimed that it was "very difficult to believe that this kind of action could have been taken without at least the acquiescence of the authorities in Moscow."

Second, the Western pressure on Belarus through sanctions and beyond. On 28 May, the Biden administration reimposed sanctions against nine state-owned enterprises and is developing additional penalties to further target officials in the Belarusian administration. The EU on the same day pledged a financial package of USD 3.7 billion if Belarus starts a 'peaceful democratic transition.' Previously, on 24 May, the European Union urged all EU-based carriers to avoid flying over Belarus airspace, announced sanctions against all officials linked to the diverted flight, and asked the Civil Aviation Organisation to start an investigation into the forced landing of a passenger plane and demanded the release of the arrested journalist. Third, Lukashenko's firm response despite international criticisms. The EU, since the beginning, has refused to accept Lukashenko's victory in the 2020 elections. It has called for new elections, condemned the repression and the violence against the protesters since August 2020. However, Lukashenko has stood his ground and has consistently defended his position. On 26 May, he claimed that he had acted legally and per international norms in the case of the diversion of the passenger plane and stated, "ill-wishers from outside and inside the country have changed their methods to attack the state."

What does it mean?

As someone who has used all means to suppress dissent within the country, the Lukashenko government's decision to

divert a plane and arrest two young activists does not come as a surprise. Second, sanctions have failed to impact the government's actions, and it seems like the two sides, the West and Belarus-Russia, have decided to expand their influence and use other tools to engage with each other. The question is, how far would Russia be willing to go to defend Lukashenko?

EU-China: European Union Parliament freezes Comprehensive Agreement on Investments with China

By Dincy Adlakha, 23 May 2021

What happened?

On 20 May, the European Union Parliament passed a resolution to freeze the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China. It cites the crackdown on democratic opposition in Hong Kong, forced labour and other conditions of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang as major reasons for the freeze. The Parliament halted any discussion or consideration of ratifying the deal because of the sanctions imposed by China. The resolution "demands that China lift the sanctions before the Parliament can deal with the CAI". The Parliament also calls "to use the debate around the CAI as leverage to improve the protection of human rights and support for civil society in China." It has cleared that the Hong Kong situation will be accounted for while considering any discussion on CAI.

The resolution also called on the EU to "increase coordination and cooperation with the US within the framework of a Transatlantic Dialogue on China" and that "other trade and investment agreements with regional partners, including Taiwan, should not be held hostage to the suspension of the CAI ratification."

What is the background?

First, the EU-China economic dialogue. The economic partnership between the EU and China was established after China entered

the World Trade Organization in 2003. Over the years, the dialogue has seen major shifting trends. The High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue, started in 2008, focused on better market access, reduction of trade barriers, and boosting custom policies in sectors like innovation, technology, intellectual property rights, energy and climate change. Launched in 2012, the negotiations on CAI increased the economic ambitions. However, it has seen multiple disagreements arising out of political issues such as the Dalai Lama visit to France and weak dispute management mechanism. The EU and China are their largest trading partners. Nevertheless, the differences in ideological values have led to the freezing of the CAI.

Second, the issue of investment. The Chinese foreign direct investment in the EU has increased exponentially over the years, but the lack of reciprocity plagues the investment ties. The EU firms have been unable to enter the Chinese market due to an unbalanced playing field, domestic security laws, technology protection laws and other discriminatory regulations. The CAI aimed to provide a legal framework to increase the EU investment in China; however, even after seven years of negotiations, the gap between the two entities continues to widen. Recent efforts at inviting foreign firms by the passing of Foreign Investment Law (2019) in China did not appease the EU as they demand free-market conditions that Chinese firms have access to.

Third, points of EU-China contention. In March 2021, the EU imposed sanctions on four top Chinese officials; China retaliated with hefty sanctions on EU representatives. The EU opposes the following Chinese actions: the crackdown of democracy in Hong Kong, human rights violation of ethnic minorities, assertiveness in the South China Sea, and the disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. China's record of violating the international labour organization's regulations have made the EU apprehensive of ratifying the deal. These contentions are influenced by other global factors to some extent and are deeply

rooted in the liberal values that the EU proudly holds.

Fourth, the divergence of opinion within the EU member states. The massive majority of the resolution does not speak for all member states. The CAI was "spearheaded" by Germany and has received ample support from France. Many eastern European countries have been benefitting from Beijing and the potential interconnectedness in the region. However, the persisting issue of technology sharing has left the EU internally divided.

What does it mean?

First, China needs to open its economy, which is mainly restrictive and requires the CAI more than the EU does. The EU has witnessed Chinese discrimination and is apprehensive of investing in a certified complication.

Second, these gaps in trust are not merely bilateral problems but have global roots lying in other links such as US-China, US-EU, and the Chinese perplexity with western democracies.

UK: The BBC apology for the 1995 Diana interview highlights the good and bad sides of the UK media

By Vishnu Prasad, 23 May 2021

What happened?

On 14 May, an inquiry found that the BBC acted in an unethical and deceitful manner to obtain a 1995 interview with Princess Diana. The inquiry, conducted by retired judge Lord Dyson, found that journalist Martin Bashir had "deceived and induced" Diana's brother Earl Spencer to arrange an interview with her by falsifying bank documents. Dyson report said: "Without justification, the BBC fell short of the high standards of integrity and transparency which are its hallmark by covering up in its press logs such facts as it had been able to establish about how Mr Bashir secured the interview too and failing to mention Mr

Bashir's activities or the BBC investigations of them on any news programme."

The BBC subsequently apologized to both Earl Spencer and Diana's son Prince William, but the latter hit out against the media outlet nevertheless. Prince William said: "The interview was a major contribution to making my parents' relationship worse and has since hurt countless others."

What is the background?

First, the importance of the integrity of big media houses. With terms like alternative truth and fake news dominating the discourse over the last few years, premier news outlets like the BBC must retain their credibility that has been the hallmark for over a century. While the blame, in this case, falls largely on the shoulders of Bashir, the report has blamed BBC for a "woefully ineffective" investigation into the affair in 1996.

Second, the unethical practices of media houses and individual reporters. The scandal once again brings to attention the unethical practices that journalists often resort to for a breaking story or a scoop. Ten years ago, a phone-hacking scandal, where it emerged that reporters had hacked the phones of hundreds of people, including members of the royal family, had caused the closure of the 'News of the World' newspaper.

Third, the market for tabloid journalism. While the blame does lie solely on Bashir's and BBC's shoulders, the fact remains that such sensationalist content attracts a significant number of viewers. A case in point is the recent interview that Prince Harry and his wife Meghan Markle had held with Oprah Winfrey, which attracted 17.1 million viewers. It can be argued that ultimately the media is giving the public what they want the most and the unethical practices that go hand-in-hand with the nature of the content.

Fourth, the obsession that UK media have with their royalty. The lengths to which Bashir went to get the interview, and the

frenzy with which it was received, exemplifies the hype that surrounds the British royal family, something that often ends up having negative consequences. Two decades later, the sensationalist coverage of Prince Harry's split with the family shows that nothing has changed.

What does it mean?

While the incident and its handling is a blot on BBC's credibility, the fact that they have owned up to their mistakes and apologized for them is a good sign. On 7 May, the Guardian had apologized for the errors in judgment that it had made during its 200 years of existence. These are indeed good precedents for media companies to follow when accountability has been sacrificed for a short-term gain.

Vaccine patent waiver: The new debate stands divided

By Joeana Cera Matthews, 9 May 2021

What happened?

On 5 May, Katherine Tai, the United States Trade Representative, announced the Biden administration's position on the proposal that India and South Africa submitted at the WTO: "The administration believes strongly in intellectual property protections, but in service of ending this pandemic, supports the waiver of those protections for Covid-19 vaccines."

On 6 May, Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission President, said she was considering the proposal. She said: "The European Union is also ready to discuss any proposal that addresses the crisis in an effective and pragmatic manner... ready to discuss how the US proposal for a waiver on intellectual property protection for COVID-19 vaccines could help achieve that objective."

On 7 May, Albert Bourla, Pfizer's CEO, warned that the move "threatens to disrupt the flow of raw materials... will unleash a scramble for the critical inputs we require in order to make a safe and effective vaccine."

What is the background?

First, the demand-supply imbalance. Advocates of the waiver believe there is a widespread imbalance in the demand for and supply of vaccines. Only a few companies have exclusive rights to manufacture vaccines. AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson had promised global manufacturing of vaccines but remain suspended. The Serum Institute of India, a key supplier for Asia, Africa, and South America stands prohibited from exporting by India. Huge global supply gaps mean many people in the developing world are not expected to receive vaccines until 2023.

Second, the emerging debate on the relaxation of vaccine patents. The primary argument for the waiver is on the demand numbers; it emphasizes the ability to provide vaccines by increasing production in the poorer parts of the world lagging behind in their inoculation drives. The critics, however, argue that waiving patents will not increase production. Since countries would face hurdles with raw material access, distribution, and safety standards, they argue, it would eventually lead to the quality and efficacy of the vaccines being questioned. They also refer to the risk of imminent counterfeit doses.

Third, the different positions of the US and the EU. The US strongly believes in intellectual property (IP) rights, but ending the pandemic is a greater need. The US has kept most doses produced domestically while exporting a portion to Mexico and Canada. This raises questions about the intent behind the sudden US support for the waiver. The EU thinks that the IP rights waiver can wait and suggest countries follow the bloc's example to permit ample export of doses. The US is backed by Australia and New Zealand while the EU by the UK, Japan, and Switzerland.

Fourth, the stance of the pharmaceutical industry. The industry is worried that the waiver would cut into their profits. To eliminate the need for a waiver, the companies consider alternate solutions like deals that increase vaccine supply to countries facing shortages – via donation or selling them on a non-profit basis. The drug

industry now has strong motivation to shift the debate to that of a 'global equity problem' and is taking pragmatic steps towards solving this imbalance.

What does this mean?

The crisis is enormous. The focus should be on steps making an immediate difference to the demand-supply imbalance countries face. As the immediate measures to meet vaccine requirements need to be prioritized. This needs to be addressed with the argument, that the waiver would disincentivize anyone from taking big risks in the face of future global health threats. A via-media is required.

UK and France: BREXIT pangs deepen as a new rule restricts fishing rights

By Sourina Bej, 9 May 2021

What happened?

On 6 May, France dispatched two naval policing boats as French fishermen, angry over the loss of access to fishing off their coast, protested off the English Channel Island Jersey. The French fishermen have steamed into Jersey waters to demonstrate against new rules requiring them to submit their past fishing activities in order to receive a license to continue fishing in the island's waters. On 5 May, Britain directed two Royal Navy vessels, HMS Severn and HMS Tamar, to patrol the waters around the Jersey port, which is a self-governing British Crown Dependency near northern France.

What is the background?

First, the new restriction by Jersey. The Jersey port has become the flashpoint over access to fishing rights as post-BREXIT regulations are implemented. According to the rules, which came into force this month, 41 permits have been issued based on fishing history between 2017 and 2020 to French fishing vessels to operate in Jersey's waters. France responded, saying no such consultation about any new conditions affecting all boats has been agreed during Brexit transition talks. Jersey's role in the dispute gets complicated as it is not part of the UK or as part of the EU. This Crown

dependency island means freedom from Westminster and the power to exercise day-to-day control over its fishing waters. However, the UK government is ultimately responsible for its international relationships. That is why access to fishing waters around the Channel Islands is dealt with specifically in the new UK-EU trade agreement.

Second, conflict over fishing rights a post-BREXIT reality. When the UK left the EU in January 2020 – the talks during the transition period left the common fisheries policy that has peacefully divided up the spoils of Europe's waters since the 1970s. The Brexit talks also ended the Bay of Granville agreement between Britain and the Channel Islands government, which had established a pattern of rights for French boats up to three miles from the islands' coasts. Within the Brexit trade and cooperation agreement struck there is a new EU-UK fisheries agreement that offers French fishers the continuation of the status quo in a zone between six and 12 miles from the UK's shores up to 2026 if they can prove that they had previously been operating in those waters. With the end of several common rules, the fishermen would be without livelihoods, a reality post-BREXIT Europe begins to face.

Third, unheard demands by fishermen communities. From Ireland to Jersey, the fishermen's voice has been largely missing while signing any agreement over access to fishing rights. In addition, when the Jersey government adds two conservation measures, dealing with dredging and nesting areas, it means the creation of restricted zones, and limit the kind of fishing equipment which can be used. Many of the local boats could be put out of business, and smaller boats would also be affected.

Fourth, domestic issues pushing the nationalist narrative around fishing rights. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been seen escalating the crisis and using the fishing spat as an "Election Day stunt." Choking and scramble to gain access to the English Channel has been a historical precedent

since the Cold War. Even though Jersey is economically insignificant, it is culturally important, and fishing was the thorniest issue during the UK-EU divorce talks. Similarly, the fishing rights issue is also a central issue for the 2022 French presidential election. Amid this, Jersey's rule gets embroiled in the larger expression of domestic issues in the regional relations.

What does it mean?_

Both the UK and EU are stuck with wider disputes for the long haul. From Northern Ireland to Jersey island, the EU-UK relation will have to accommodate the deeper nuances and economic needs of those impacted in the divorce. The French fishers ended their protest, but the row remains unresolved. The workable solution would be to form a consultation body with various fishermen communities and chart a policy accommodating the grassroots voices.

Russia: Putin draws redlines against the West, but withdraws troops from the Ukraine border

By Harini Madhusudan, 25 April 2021

What happened?

On 21 April, during his state-of-the-nation address, President Vladimir Putin issued a warning regarding Russia's "swift" and "severe" response to hostile foreign actions. He told both houses of Parliament: "We want good relations...and really don't want to burn bridges." While referring to the West, he said: "I hope that nobody would decide to cross the so-called red line in relations with Russia, and we will define those [red lines] on our own in every individual case." He also discussed the issues of Covid in Russia, protests in favour of Navalny, and domestic economic hardships.

On 22 April, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced the withdrawal of its military forces from the Ukrainian border. The announcement comes after weeks of military buildup at the Russia-

Ukraine border, causing concerns of renewed conditions for a clash between Ukraine and Russia. The announcement states that the troops will withdraw from the region between 23 April and 1 May.

What is the background?

First, Putin's Redlines. While referring to the US, NATO and the EU, he said: "like a kind of sport, they have developed a 'highly unseemly habit' of picking on Russia for any reason, and most often for no reason at all." In recent weeks, there was a series of threats between the West and Russia, which Putin says targets their "core security interests." However, there is no mention of what the 'red lines' actually mean. Analysts like Sam Greene, the director of Russia Institute at King's College, called it an intentional policy paralysis, a deliberate move by Putin to keep everyone guessing what the redlines would mean.

Second, the growing international concerns about Russia and the US sanctions. First should be the recent legislation allowing Putin to contest till 2036. He is also seen preparing for the parliamentary elections in September 2021. A recent provocation also is the assassination attempt against the Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko. Russia's border tensions with Ukraine is another issue. Two sets of sanctions have been placed on Russia, one for the jailed opposition leader Navalny and the other over the solar-winds cyber-attacks, since Biden took office in January. Biden, while stating that the Russians were involved in the 2020 US elections, has threatened to place more sanctions. Domestically, people took to the streets in demand of medical care and protested against the treatment of Alexy Navalny in jail. There is also a sense of dissatisfaction among the people over stagnant incomes and the rising inflation.

Third, the withdrawal of troops from the Ukraine border. During the recent weeks, despite fears of escalation, Russia maintained that the movement of troops in the borders was only part of their military exercises. Russian military blocked flights and closed navigation in the Black Sea and parts of Crimea for 'winter period control checks' throughout April. The withdrawal

announcement could be unrelated. Or, it could indicate political balancing after a strong statement earlier by Putin to ensure the tensions do not escalate beyond control.

What does it mean?

During the recent weeks, there is international pressure on Putin. The redline statement by Putin is an effort to respond. Both Biden and Putin seem to be testing waters and see who blinks first.

With the Parliamentary elections in Russia six months away, Putin's statement could be catering to a local audience. Though the redline statement can be a political grandstanding, it was timely and carefully balanced with troops' removal from the borders.

Ukraine: Escalation of tensions with Russia

By Chetna Vinay Bhora, 11 April 2021

What happened?

On 10 April, Ukraine's defence minister warned against Eastern Ukraine's Donbas region's Russian exacerbation as a provocation. Kyiv has raised the alarm over Russian troops' build-up along the border that separates Ukraine and Russia in Donbas. The Kremlin rebuffed accusations of the troops being a threat.

On 9 April, Russia admonished that in the event of an attack on the Russian population in the Eastern part of the country, Moscow might intervene to protect and aid the Russian speaking residents. Ukraine argued that two of its soldiers were killed due to the shooting by the pro-Russian separatists. According to the open-source intelligence reports, the satellite images showcase an increased presence of tanks, artilleries and short-range ballistic missiles transported to just 150 miles from Ukraine. The Ukrainian President has implored NATO to set up a membership path for Ukraine to join the military alliance to stop the confrontations with Russia.

What is the background?

First, the conflict since 2014. The Russian intrusion in the region set in a significant rift with the West, propelling the European Union and the US to impose sanctions on Russia. The situation in Ukraine intensified into an international crisis, with the US-EU deadlock against Russia after a Malaysian Airplane was shot down at Ukrainian airspace, killing all passengers on board. In 2015, France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine undertook the mantle to broker a ceasefire through the Minsk Accords.

Second, NATO's entry. In 2016, NATO disclosed that the alliance would set up four battalions in Eastern Europe to avert possible future Russian aggravation, particularly in the Baltics. However, efforts to reach a diplomatic compensation and assuaging resolution have been unsuccessful.

Third, an increased focus of the US, under Biden. In April 2021, Biden's administration pointed out that the latest US-Russia friction is due to the military build-up in the region, disputes over arms control and human rights issues. Biden had extended "unwavering support" to the Ukrainian President in his confrontation with Russia. Subsequently, on a call, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany urged that Russian President Vladimir Putin to pull his troops back to mitigate the situation.

What does it mean?

Russia has been building its military presence in the region, causing instability. One of the objectives is to ensure that Ukraine does not side away with the EU or NATO and drain the Russian earnings from the region. Ukraine has also been an important location for the former USSR and now Russia in the post-cold war period.

The intervention is also meant to support the pro-Russian rebels in Eastern Ukraine. Putin has been backing the rebels to maintain a perpetual separatist crisis, maintain clout over the Ukrainian government, and encroach the region as he did in Crimea.

The recent developments do not clarify the Russian move; it could just be an intimidation tactic or a prelude to a major escalation. However, the massive troop movements and the antagonistic attitude have caused a ripple in Kyiv and the other Western capitals. The US and NATO will be obligated by Article 5 of the NATO treaty to retaliate. This could escalate into a war between Russia and the United States, and its NATO allies.

UK: Defence and Foreign policy review indicates an expansion in strategy

By Harini Madhusudan, 21 March 2021

What happened?

On 16 March, the government released an Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy. The document is seen as the UK's biggest strategic shake-up since the Cold War era. The highlights of the document include: threats facing the UK, a tilt toward the Indo-Pacific, increasing the nuclear stockpile, and plans to send troops across longer distances for more extended periods. There is a greater emphasis on science and technology, especially in the aftermath of the COVID crisis. This is the first document that shows the UK's step forward outside of the EU.

On 15 March, news reports revealed that Trident plans to massively expand its nuclear weapons arsenal from 180 to 260 warheads.

What is the background?

First, the emphasis on trade and S&T. Emphasizing trade and making it central in the review is a conceptual shift. Trade is seen as a tool playing a vital role in fulfilling the foreign policy agenda alongside development. The report also highlights science, technology, and digital as main areas of focus and promises bold new investments into research and development.

Second, the Indo-Pacific focus. There are obvious reasons for the UK to look away from their immediate neighbourhood after

the Brexit. There is a strong focus on the Indo-Pacific in the review, which is an area of interest for the new Biden administration as well. The tilt would be beyond the defence and security context, which would include the increasing involvement of the UK in trade through the CPTPP. They also hope to support climate change action, promote British values, reinvigorate relationships with India, and pursue their request for partner status at ASEAN. This would essentially broaden their presence across the world.

Third, defining terrorism, Russia, and China as the main threats. The report recommends a new Counter-Terrorism Operations Centre to bring together police and spies in a "state-of-the-art facility". It names the threat of nuclear attack by a terrorist/ non-state imminent by 2030 as a pretext to increasing the nuclear stockpile. Besides, the report names Russia as a strategic rival and looks at China's growth as a systemic challenge.

Fourth, military spending. The main focus of defence spending is the new frontiers of space and cyber-warfare. There is an announcement of a £24 billion increase in defence spending. Significant cuts in troops, weaponry, and fighting vehicles have been announced, some of which may be replaced by drones. However, for security and deterrence from terrorists, the troops would train, exercise, and operate alongside allies and partners across all priority regions and build the capacity to fight in faraway places and for longer periods.

What does it mean?

The document tries to portray a strategy with a careful blend of trade, defence, security, and diplomacy. There has been an immediate backlash to some of the plans that have been put forth. However, it seems like the UK is trying to tackle structural challenges while also hoping to retain a leadership status in the world. Though the long-term strategy caution against China, the UK's immediate challenge would be to remain balanced to ensure the trade relations do not clash with the security interests. The report places the UK's strategy on a promising pedestal, leaving

behind the popular narrative of being a retreating power.

The UK: The post- Brexit fallout with the EU over Northern Ireland

By Harini Madhusudan, 7 March 2021

What happened?_

On 3 March, the EU announced that the 'unilateral decision' of the United Kingdom on Trade Rules is a breach of international law and threatened legal action. During Westminster's annual budget, the UK announced its decision to unilaterally extend the grace period on the checks for goods moving between Britain and Northern Ireland, which is a violation of the Northern Ireland Protocol.

On 2 March, Michel Barnier stepped down as the EU's chief Brexit negotiator and his specialist team of eurocrats have been disbanded. Barnier warned that there remain "many challenges ahead" for the EU and UK.

What is the background?

First, the unilateral decision by the UK and the apparent breach of international law over the Northern Ireland Protocol. As the tensions between the two sides escalated, the European Commission Vice President said that the British decision to take unilateral action on trade rules relating to Northern Ireland marks the second time it has declared its intention to breaching international law. The UK had previously asked for the deadline to be extended until 2023, but the EU had not agreed to it. The UK government's decision indicates that it will waive customs paperwork on food entering Northern Ireland until October. This is beyond the 1 April deadline it had previously agreed with the EU. In September 2020, the UK had considered breaking the terms of the Brexit divorce agreement relating to Northern Ireland, only to back down. Both cases give the EU leverage to start legal proceedings through the terms of the protocol.

Second, new issues vis-a-vis Northern Ireland. With the decision to keep the land borders free of checkpoints, they hoped to

prevent additional troubles between the UK and Northern Ireland. This came with a price; that is, the goods arriving from the rest of the UK would be subject to checks and extra paperwork as they cross the Irish Sea. Many members of PM Johnson's party and Unionist politicians in Northern Ireland believe that the deal treats the region differently from the rest of the UK. On 2 March, Ireland Democratic Unionist Party's agriculture minister ordered officials to halt work on permanent border control posts. In January 2021, the EU triggered an override clause in the Northern Ireland Agreement, to secure vaccine supplies. This unilateral decision was taken without consulting in London or Dublin.

Third, emerging EU-UK complexities from the two months of the new arrangements. When the deal was signed in December 2020, many issues were given a grace period to ensure the proper measures are in place. For example, the immediate impact was felt with the fisheries sector and the lorry workers who would transport goods across the borders. Both complained of longer paperwork and processing time. Late January also witnessed the EU taking export control measures to deal with the imbalance in the vaccine procurement and administering strategy of the UK. Following this, new issues relating to the banking and financial sectors have emerged. This way, political and legal obligations have propped up many times during the past months.

What does it mean?

Though the EU and UK were expected to face short-term losses and logistical challenges, Northern Ireland seems to face the substantial brunt of the post-Brexit trade deal.

Second, the new trade deal disputes over border protocols have wreaked havoc among the already fragile arrangements that exist between them. The unilateral decision would necessarily ease the impact of the Brexit on the businesses in Northern Ireland but comes in the way of "the proper implementation," of the Brexit deal.

Munich Security Conference: Biden's commitment, Discussion on withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Russia threat and NATO in 2030

By Sourina Bej, 21 February 2021

What happened?

On 17 February, the NATO defence ministers met to address NATO's missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, review progress for a fairer burden-sharing, and discuss the NATO 2030 initiative in their two-day virtual conference. The ministers also met with their NATO partners Finland, Sweden, and the European Union to address the shared security challenges. The important outcome from the conference has been US President Joe Biden's reaffirmation to NATO.

On 19 February, Biden told at the online session of the Munich Security Conference: "The United States is fully committed to our NATO alliance, and I welcome your growing investment in the military capabilities that enable our shared defenses." "An attack on one is an attack on all. That is our unshakeable vow." This was Biden's first speech on the international platform after winning the election.

On 17 February, the NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said: "This is our first meeting with the new Biden administration and an opportunity to prepare the NATO summit in Brussels later this year."

What is the background?

First, Biden's restores the US commitment to the Atlantic alliance. Since the Trump administration, there has been a trust deficit and a strained partnership with the European leaders. Trump had publicly hammered and sought to shame, Germany and other NATO members for not meeting a target of spending 2 per cent of their gross domestic output on defence. But Biden's speech sort to signal a different approach. He reversed Trump's decision to withdraw

troops from the US bases in Germany and also outlined a vision of international engagement that will put West-led multilateralism at the core of the security agenda of NATO.

Second, the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and Iraq. The issue of withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and Iraq has been a challenge discussed at the conference. The Doha Agreement formalized the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan by 1 May, however, neither the conditions are palpable or mature for it. Before the meeting, the Taliban said, "Our message to the upcoming NATO ministerial meeting is that the continuation of occupation and war is neither in your interest nor in the interest of your and our people." Contrastingly, on 15 February, Stoltenberg said the presence of the alliance's troops in Afghanistan is "conditions-based." In Iraq, NATO has a training and advisory mission, which Biden welcomed in his speech. Thus, the ministerial meeting, that builds the groundwork for the larger NATO summit in Brussels later in the year, will face withdrawal question solemnly.

Third, a curtain-raiser for NATO's Brussel's summit. The Defense Ministers meeting has been a modest affair, unlike in the past, with representation only from the major Western powers. Later in 2021, the conference in all likelihood will see participation from top officials from China and Russia. The defense meeting took stock of the threat posed by Russia in the backdrop of the diplomatic crisis over Navalny's arrest. "The Kremlin attacks our democracies and weaponizes corruption to try to undermine our system of governance," said Biden.

What does it mean?

The meeting charts the course for a probable future relationship between the European leaders and the US within the alliance. Though Biden made a passing reference to NATO budgetary contributions, the issue of sharing burdens and defence spending is not likely to outrightly smoothen a wrinkled relationship. Biden has made it clear for the NATO members

that China along with Russia should be on any future agenda for NATO. Thus, one could anticipate a strategic blueprint for NATO in maintaining its relation with China.

The alliance may not simply return to an old-world order while the transition for NATO will be an important marker to watch for in 2021.

Russia: New tension with Europe, Moscow expels European diplomats

By Sourina Bej, 7 February 2021

What happened?

On 5 February, Russia expelled diplomats from Germany, Sweden, and Poland for joining the protests in support of opposition activist Alexei Navalny, who was jailed earlier last week. In its statement, the Russian foreign ministry said the diplomats had taken part in "illegal demonstrations" held on 23 January and "such actions do not correspond to their diplomatic status. Russia expects that in the future, the diplomatic missions of Sweden, Poland and Germany and their personnel will strictly follow international law norms."

The diplomats' home countries have condemned the expulsions along with the UK, France and the EU. German Foreign Minister Heiko Mass denounced the expulsion as being "in no way justified." Sweden said the claim was unfounded and said it reserved the right to an appropriate response. Poland reiterated that the expulsion could lead to the "further deepening of the crisis in bilateral relations." EU's foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell, who is currently in Russia, on behalf of the EU, said he "strongly condemned this decision and rejected the allegations that they conducted activities incompatible with their status as foreign diplomats."

What is the background?

First, a new low in EU-Russia relation. The expulsions were announced in the immediate context of Borrell's meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Borrell is the first senior EU official to travel to Russia since 2017 and had sought to extend an olive branch to Moscow when he called for the EU to approve the Sputnik vaccine. However, the expulsions are timely messages to the West on Moscow's brazenness. Since the claims of Russia's support to Belarus to the poisoning of its strongest critic Alexei Navalny in Berlin, the relation between EU and Russia has remained stiff. In 2018, similar was the response from the UK and the US in expelling Russian diplomats over the poisoning of a former Russian spy in the UK. Relations between the two had also soured over energy issues when on 21 January, the European Parliament members called on the EU to immediately stop work on the Nord Stream 2 as it "violates the EU's common energy security policy."

Second, dipping human rights record and culture of impunity in Russia. Navalny's arrest and subsequent imprisonment for his campaign against corruption is not the first act of human rights violation in Russia. On 12 June 2019, the Russian police detained over 200 people at a protest march in Moscow demanding the release of the investigative journalist IvGolunov. Russia ranks 149th out of 180 countries for press freedom, according to an annual index published by international media watchdog Reporters Without Borders.

Third, the slow return of the Transatlantic condemnation of Russia. Along with Germany, Poland and Sweden, France and the US has joined in condemning Russia's decision to expel the diplomats. This collective condemnation had been seemingly absent during Trump's tenure which was marred with his bonhomie for Putin despite alleged Russian involvement in the 2016 US election. The US President Joe Biden said there would be no "rolling over" to the Kremlin any more under his watch.

What does it mean?

First, despite tensions, the EU has not engaged in constructive criticism of Russia. Instead, they have come together to negotiate on the Iran nuclear deal or the

Paris climate agreement. The EU is still Moscow's most significant trade and investment partner, and Merkel on 6 February has said Berlin's stance on the Nord Stream 2 remains "unaffected". Thus, it is difficult to foresee any untoward pushback from the EU yet. Second, international pressure didn't alter Russia's defiance on human rights and freedom in 2014. It probably will not now as the hallmarks of Moscow's preparation to handle the "Navalny issue" is the same as it did with the Crimean crises.

European Union: New challenges in addressing delay in vaccine supplies, new variants and anti-lockdown protests

By Harini Madhusudan, 30 January 2021

What happened?

On 29 January, the European Union, amid a row with the vaccine manufacturers for delivery shortfalls, announced introducing export controls on the vaccines made in the bloc. "The protection and safety of our citizens is a priority and the challenges we now face left us with no choice but to act," the European Commission said.

AstraZeneca, BioNTech, and Pfizer have their production units in the European Union. Under the new rule, vaccine firms will have to seek permission before supplying doses beyond the EU. The EU member states will be able to vet those export applications. Vaccine deliveries from two of the EU's biggest suppliers, AstraZeneca and Pfizer, have been falling short of promised numbers by up to 60 per cent.

What is the background?

First, the delay and supply in vaccine manufacturing. The EU's public dispute with the vaccine-maker AstraZeneca began when it was revealed that the bloc is set to receive only a quarter of the 100 million doses that were to be delivered to the EU by the end of March. Both AstraZeneca and Pfizer have communicated their inability to

deliver to issues of production and management. With the new export controls, the EU has said that it would allow exemptions that would include vaccine donations to Covax, and the exports to Switzerland, countries in the western Balkans, Norway and North Africa. But the UK will not be exempted.

Second, coronavirus and the new variant in the region. As of 28 January, 18,849,065 cases and 449,395 deaths have been reported in the EU/EEA region. France, Spain, Italy, Germany and Poland have the top five highest number of cases. In December 2020, a new contagious variant of the virus spread across Europe, prompting the governments to introduce harsh new lockdowns and curfews. This saw some resistance in some countries in the region, inversely adding to the increase in the number of cases.

Third, the EU's logic and complaint. The dwindling supplies have caused many countries to redesign their vaccination schedules. Hungary has gone ahead and announced that it would acquire the Sputnik V vaccine for its population. Other member countries too, have begun to express their discontent with the situation with many countries announcing the desire to start procuring

vaccines in their individual capacities. The problem of transparency in the deal that has been signed between the EU and the vaccine companies seems to be causing issues in the early months of delivery processes which is not a good sign for the bloc as a whole that is hoping to vaccinate a large chunk of its population in the first half of 2021.

What does it mean?

The EU hoped to project its vaccine procurement scheme to reflect the EU's solidarity and strength. However, when the new variant of the virus emerged, all countries in the region closed off their borders to each other with a stark contrast to the region's approach to 'vaccine nationalism' in the world. The capitalist business models have a history of overpromising and under-delivering. The promises made in the early days of vaccine announcement were clearly overestimated, considering AstraZeneca had to undergo an additional round of testing. The export control measures placed now may be targeted specifically towards manufacturing in the UK. Nevertheless, the process of vaccine manufacturing is expected to take more time than earlier estimated, and the decision taken by the EU to ensure export controls seem timely.

Europe in December 2021



Image Source: AP Photo/Liu Heung Shing, Reuters/Johanna Geron, AP Photo/Michel, Reuters/ Piroshka van de Wouw, Reuters/ Fabrizio Bensch, Stefan Puchner/dpa via AP, European Commission/Press release, Adam Schultz/The White House via AP, Russian Foreign Ministry/Handout via Reuters

FRANCE

Eric Zemmour and the launch of his presidential campaign

By Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan

Zemmour launches his Presidential campaign.

On 08 December, the incumbent French President Emmanuel Macron warned against the "manipulation" regarding the history of Vichy in France. His remarks came after the French far-right candidate Eric Zemmour repeatedly said that Vichy protected the French Jews instead of collaborating with the Nazis as historians claimed. Zemmour spoke on the radio: "It's my combat against repentance and guilt. The French people are permanently being made to feel guilty." Macron's trip to Vichy is the first for a French president since 1978.

On 05 December, Zemmour's presidential campaign in Villepinte, a suburb of Paris, was joined by thousands of flag-waving

supporters. However, the campaign escalated to chaos as fights broke out between the supporters and the anti-racism campaigners who stood up on chairs to protest. Aline Kremer, an SOS Racisme protest group member, said: "We wanted to do a non-violent protest... People jumped on them and started hitting them."

On 30 November, Zemmour announced his candidacy for President, where he promised to save France from corruption and minorities that "oppress the majority." Zemmour is a former journalist convicted for inciting racial hatred; who has always taken a robust anti-immigrant stance. However, his advancement as a radical right leader undoubtedly shows the rise of the far-right in France. He is also a top contender to the established far-right National Rally candidate Marine Le Pen.

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The rise of Zemmour in France

Zemmour's comments highlight the recent trend of the rising far-right in France acquiring more prominence. His quick advancement to political candidacy indicated that the French public had moved further right in a country where policies like social welfare and labour protections have dominated society's backbone. He even named his party "Reconquest," which referred to the period of Reconquista where Christian forces drove out the Muslim rulers of the Iberian Peninsula. He mentioned: "If I win this election, it won't be another rotation of power but a reconquest of the greatest country in the world."

Zemmour's campaign rhetoric of zero immigration policy and anti-muslim comments represent France's non-pro-immigration population. Jacques Ohana, a 65-year-old Paris surgeon, said: "Whether he's elected or not, he's already won the campaign." Zemmour also accused Macron of failing to deliver on his promise of change. Nevertheless, people feel aligned to his policies as he has brought back the "glory days" of post-war France.

On 06 December, *POLITICO* reported an Ipsos poll that stated 64 percent of the French felt there were too many migrants in France, leading to France's decline as a nation. In comparison, just 25 percent said that France was not in decline. The poll likewise showed that 79 percent of the French wanted a strong leader to reestablish the order. However, only 24 percent of the French population think that Zemmour has the attributes to be the head of state.

The upcoming 2022 elections

On 08 December, Macron's visit to Vichy and his comments on Zemmour's manipulation of history shows how the current government is stepping up against the far-right leaders. Moreover, according to *The Guardian*, "the polls currently show Macron as favourite to win," indicating "the outcome of the upcoming elections". Macron has gradually changed his stance on asylum seekers, increased the budget of law enforcement, and expulsions of illegal migrants back to North Africa that has

preserved his support from the center-right. A possibility lies in a political alliance between Le Pen and Zemmour as the latter walked beside National Rally senator Stéphane Ravier on 08 December, discussing the need to build "a broad union". Zemmour further conceded that a "big union was needed to beat Macron". Furthermore, a possible deal between Le Pen and Zemmour could be achieved, but uncertainties still lie.

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RUSSIA

Marking 30 years since the dissolution of the USSR

By Joeana Cera Matthews

On 25 December 1991, thirty years ago, the President of the USSR Mikhail Gorbachev resigned. The Soviet empire which had lasted for nearly 70 years, covering 11 time zones, came to an end. It was one of those rare events in history when the world witnessed one of the two global superpowers falling apart. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was consequently created and 15 republics have emerged since. The very event, however, came as a shock to many. In *France24's* 'The Debate', a researcher at Vilnius 'Vytautas Magnus University' Tatsiana Chulitskaya, stated that although the event was not an unexpected one, as it was the logical development to everything

that was taking place, the exact moment of the collapse would have come as a surprise.

What led to the dissolution?

First, the political reasons. Internally, Chulitskaya states that Gorbachev's policies of 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' created ground for the systematic collapse of the USSR". The Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster showed the political incompetence of the ruling empire – non-disclosure policies on publicly important information were causing problems. The case vividly demonstrated to the Soviet people that they needed the government to provide more information. The glasnost policy, thus, was the adequate answer to the people's demands and expectations. Another popular theory, states the emotional and cultural component of the USSR, such as music, to have played quite a large part in the collapse. Externally, the oil crisis faced by the bloc led to dire economic issues. The war in Afghanistan, where the Red Army suffered setbacks was also a very important contributor to the Soviet fall.

Second, the Almaty Protocol and the 1991 coup. On 08 December 1991, the leaders of three republics – Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus – met at Almaty along with almost every other Soviet republic. They decided to dissolve the USSR and created the CIS. The three-day-long coup of August 1991, led by then-President Boris Yeltsin, saw tanks in the streets of Moscow. The resistance was soon "thwarted".

Third, the Gorbachev factor. The US journalist Craig Copetas believes that if it were not for Gorbachev, the entire Soviet system would have continued to crumble for a lot longer. He maintains that Gorbachev was "a democratic politician, of course with the nuances of the Soviet time". The Geneva summit between US President Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev in November 1985 was a radical moment in the history of the USSR, says Gorbachev's former spokesperson Andrei Grachev. "A new leader coming from the icy capital of the Soviet empire," did turn heads. Although Gorbachev intended to remove the mistrust

that reigned over bilateral relations, his image seemed to do more harm than good – a new, young, and vibrant leader did not garner immediate acceptance from the West; fresh blood implied vigour to a decaying empire, and this was dangerous for the West. However, Copetas said that the camaraderie between Gorbachev and Reagan worried the public since they were not used to cordial bilateral relations.

Thirty Years Since

First, Gorbachev's regret. In 2007, via an interview with *France24*, Gorbachev said: "No one sent me into retirement. I didn't officially resign. The biggest mistake was in the collapse of the Soviet Union. It didn't happen because of the West. That's rubbish. But you said that Gorbachev resigned. No, when I saw what had been agreed in Almaty, I went on television and I said: "I am ceasing my activities as President." I couldn't help but stop. I could have started turning it around. I could have convened the Old Congress of People's Deputies, convened the High Soviet. I could have called in the Army. But I saw there would have been a split. It was obvious, despite what people voted for in March, that the union could have been saved." Grachev commented on this regret stating that the three basic instruments of keeping the state alive – the KGB, the party, and the army – had betrayed Gorbachev. All that was left to do was to address the nation and let them know of the disintegration.

Second, a renewed opportunity. Chulitskaya stated that for states like Belarus and other ex-Soviet members, the collapse indicated an opportunity to become a new state and start afresh. However, she says, what followed in many of these states is unfortunate. According to Kyiv Mohyla University Professor Olexiy Haran, many of these states that gained independence are now striving to really free themselves from the Russian grip.

Third, the Putin factor. Grachev termed Putin's religion, if any, to be power. Putin believes that the "greatest tragedy of the 20th century" to be the USSR's collapse – not the Second World War or the Holocaust.

A former KGB agent and FSB chief, Putin does not hide his nostalgia for the Soviet era; however, unlike his Soviet predecessors, he was wise enough to stabilize present-day Russia by tapping into Russian nationalism. Even then, the country is still “plagued” by the same issues that the USSR faced. Russia has not yet dissolved, but it is definitely in crisis. As Clara Ferreira Marques states in *Bloomberg*: “The only question is what awaits at the other end, and how violent the transition period will be.” Putin has learnt his lessons well and today Russia continues to be a market economy that is more resilient and efficient than the Soviet one.

Fourth, the question of invasion in Russia and Ukraine. Since its independence, Ukraine has been attempting a balancing act between the east and the west. This, however, stopped with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Many of the Ukrainians believe decommunization to be key to the country’s emancipation. Grachev and Copetas agreed on the belief that Russia would not invade Ukraine. Grachev added: “He will, however, show that he is capable of it and get from the West as much as he wishes. But he is too pragmatic to destroy the foundation of his power.”

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Supreme Court Orders the closure of the International Memorial Human Rights Group

By Harini Madhusudan

On 28 December, the Russian Supreme Court ordered for the closure of Memorial International, which stood as a chronicle of the Stalin-era purges and symbolized the post-Soviet democratization. Following the ruling to close the rights group and its regional branches, supporters of these organizations were seen shouting “Disgrace! Disgrace!” in the court. The prosecutors have accused the organization of not marking their publications with the “foreign agent” label. This is in the context of the Russian foreign agents’ law which mandates the groups and organizations to be labelled as “foreign agents,” when they receive funds from overseas.

During the hearing on 28 December, the prosecutors claimed that the Memorial International organization had denigrated the memory of the Soviet Union and its victories while rehabilitating the “Nazi Criminals”. They added that the Memorial “creates a false image of the USSR as a terrorist state and denigrates the memory of World War II.” As a response, the Memorial made a statement on the same evening saying they would appeal and find legal ways to continue their activities. The statement said: “Memorial is not an organisation, it is not even a social movement. It is a need of the citizens of Russia to know the truth about its tragic past.”

The Memorial International founded in the late 1980s is an amalgamation of locally registered organizations, that maintain a network, extensive archives in Moscow, and coordinate its work. The group has spent decades cataloguing the atrocities committed in the Soviet Union, specifically in the network of prison camps, the Gulag. The Memorial’s founders have denied the accusations of serious violations and revealed that only an insignificant number of documents may have missed the “foreign agent” tag. The decision would close the “Memorial International Historical,

Educational, Charitable, and Human Rights Society, its regional branches and other structural units.”

Supporters believe that the move by the supreme court signals an end to the Russian post-Soviet democratization process that began in the same month, thirty years ago. In a separate statement, Navalny’s team said the authorities had detained the heads of their dismantled offices in the Siberian regions of Tomsk and Irkutsk. Anton Orekh, a political analyst said, the closure of the Memorial was akin to the “public justification of Stalin purge.” The Auschwitz Memorial released their views on Twitter and said: “A power that is afraid of memory will never be able to achieve democratic maturity.”

Prior to the ruling, the Memorial’s leadership had hoped to receive broad public support that would stop it from its closure. They submitted more than 127,000 signatures in support of their cause. Parallely, on 27 December, a court increased the 13-year prison sentence for the head of the Memorial Yuri Dmitriyev by two years. This purge against the independent organizations and the opposition in Russia is set to bring a lot of instability within the relations in Europe. It is believed that the Memorial would approach the European Human Rights system for its appeal.

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Moscow: Putin’s Annual Press Conference

By Joeana Cera Matthews

On 23 December, Russian President Vladimir Putin while addressing the annual press conference stated: “This is our

(preferred) choice, we do not want this (conflict with Ukraine) ... We have to think about ensuring our security prospects not just for today and next week but for the near future.” He further stated: “They keep telling us: war, war, war. There is an impression that, maybe, they are preparing for the third military operation (in Ukraine) and give us a fair warning: do not intervene, do not protect these people but if you do intervene and protect them, there will be new sanctions. Perhaps, we should prepare for that.” The four-hour-long conference also saw Putin commenting on various other issues such as Russia’s escalating inflation rate which he termed “a serious challenge”; other subjects covered included that of the surging COVID-19 cases. There was even a mention of Kremlin-critic Alexei Navalny.

Commenting on the response to recent security proposals given to the US and NATO, Putin said: “Our actions will not depend upon the negotiations, they will depend on the unconditional compliance with Russian security demands... We have so far seen a positive reaction. US partners told us that they are ready to begin this discussion, these talks, at the very start of next year.” Putin further claimed NATO to have “cheated” Russia by expanding eastwards. He said: “We just directly posed the question that there should be no further NATO movement to the east. The ball is in their court, they should answer us with something.” Responding to his allegations, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg denied retaliatory military actions during Christmas and said: “It’s a significant military buildup and there are no signs this is stopping or slowing down.”

Putin, however, blames the West for escalating tensions. He said: “Is it us who are putting missiles near the US borders? No, it’s the US who came to our home with their missiles. They are already on the threshold of our home. Is it some excessive demand not to place any offensive systems near our home?” However, the Kremlin head expressed hope in the talks scheduled for 2022 in Geneva. He said: “American partners tell us that they are ready to

launch this discussion, these talks in Geneva at the very beginning of next year. Both sides' representatives have been appointed. I hope that the situation will unfold exactly under this scenario." A Kremlin official also commented on the January talks, saying: "I expect we will have our substantive response in those (January) talks... clearly there are some things that have been proposed that we'll never agree to. I think the Russians probably know that on some level. I think there are other areas where we may be able to explore what's possible."

Concerns also arose from regional actors, with Lithuanian Defense Chief Lieutenant General Valdemaras Rupsys warning: "It's possible that in case of escalation (in Ukraine), or, if we see that Belarus could be finally occupied (by Russia), extra NATO troops could be deployed in Lithuania."

Putin concluded the conference on a strong yet thoughtful note. He stated: "I remind you of what our adversaries have been saying for centuries: 'Russia cannot be defeated, it can only be destroyed from within'."

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UKRAINE

The Ukrainian History: Relations with Russia and the EU

By Joeana Cera Matthews

Russia - An Unsatisfied Aggravator

Historically, Russia issues ultimatums that it itself would fail to abide by not maintaining the status quo. Commenting on this trend, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in an article for *Foreign Affairs* writes: "History shows that pledges of neutrality by Ukraine or any other country in the region do nothing to abate Putin's appetite; rather, they feed it. The best way to respond to such ultimatums is to ignore them altogether." Russian aggression in Ukraine is termed to have created the 'greatest security crisis in Europe since the Cold War.'

Following the Euromaidan protests, Russia's intention behind opposing Ukrainian accession both into the EU and NATO was quite evident. After the pro-Putin President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich was ousted by Ukrainian citizens via the Euromaidan protests, Putin was left without a player in the country. As Kuleba explains: "With his client out of power and no way to change Ukraine's orientation from within, the Russian president resorted to violence."

In early 2014, Russia invaded Ukraine, occupied Crimea, and launched a deadly war in the Donbas." Noticing the strategic change in the Ukrainians, the Kremlin, as a last resort now maintains that it is in the best interests of all actors that Ukraine remains neutral and not accede into either the EU or NATO. This was the stance maintained earlier by Ukraine; however, it never deterred the 2014 Crimean annexation by Russia; Moscow, thus, seems unjustified in its demands of Ukrainian neutrality.

Despite the protraction of crises, Russia seems to be playing a game it does not lose. Looking past the opposition that Moscow has against the expansion of NATO, the same implies an opportunity for the Kremlin to veto Ukrainian foreign policy decisions; if NATO denies the accession, Russia would be provided with a fresh chance to better the Ukrainian status quo. Kuleba further adds the unsuccessful attempts at appeasing Russia would be lesson enough to begin considering deterring its aggression. He writes: "The West shouldn't appease Russia by agreeing

to negotiate over NATO, nor should it give Russia the satisfaction of rejecting its ultimatums. Rather, the West should simply ignore them, continuing to hold further rounds of talks while refusing to bow to Putin's ultimatums on Ukraine and NATO."

The Ukrainian resolve

Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, has cultural, economic, and political bonds with Russia. During the Cold War period, Ukraine was the US' 'archrival'. Second to only Russia, Ukraine was the most influential of the 15 Soviet republics. The familial ties held by Ukraine and Russia are quite strong with Kyiv sometimes being termed "the mother of Russian cities". Thus, it is not easy for Ukraine to walk away or release itself from the historical relation that it shares with Russia. Losing Ukraine, especially to the West, will inevitably affect the superpower image Russia attempts to hold on to.

While Yanukovich was the President, the idea was for Ukraine to be aligned into Russia. After his ousting, the country has seen a significant backing for the accession into the EU and NATO from civilians and other domestic actors. The resolve portrayed by the Ukrainian public, finally led to the goals of EU and NATO membership being included into the Ukrainian constitution in 2018.

Is the West to blame?

In 2008, NATO agreed to the US' demands to accept and protect Kyiv and Tbilisi, despite the opposition posed by France and Germany at the Bucharest Summit. The West can be accused for its inability to include Ukraine and Georgia into NATO which eventually led to the increased Russian aggression along with the protraction of the crisis. The disappointing factor in the whole ordeal was that neither Russia's interests were upheld nor those of Ukraine and Georgia. Since then, Russia has been on its guard against NATO forces as the disregard reflected via their 2008 decision concerned the Kremlin. This also led to Tbilisi and Kyiv being vulnerable to the attacks of Moscow, more often than not

being "protected" or "aided" by the Western forces.

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REGIONAL

The EU's "taxonomy for sustainable activities"

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 09 December, the EU member states passed the EU Taxonomy delegated act. As per the act: "(the act) establishes the general framework for determining whether an economic activity qualifies as environmentally sustainable for the purposes of establishing the degree to which an investment is environmentally sustainable." It aims to include an environment standard to the investments in the area of renewable energy, shipping, car manufacturing and buildings. According to the EU Financial Services Chief Mairead McGuinness: "This will help channel sustainable finance towards projects and businesses to help reach our climate targets." So far, France, Poland, Finland, and Hungary along with many other countries have objected to the regulation; however, this was not enough to rule it out.

What is the EU taxonomy?

The EU taxonomy is a classification system to list down the activities that are environmentally sustainable and economic in nature. It is significant for the EU as it will boost its sustainable investments and help achieve the European Green deal. Through the taxonomy regulation, the company investors and policymakers can identify the activities that are considered as environmentally sustainable. Apart from identifying, this also implies redirection of investor companies towards more climate-friendly methods. The core objectives of this regulation include climate change

mitigation, climate change adaptation, the sustainable use and protection of water and marine resources, the transition to a circular economy, pollution prevention and control, protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems.

The purpose of the act

The passing of the taxonomy regulation is to meet various climate goals of Europe such as the European Green deal and its energy targets. Pandemic and post-pandemic recovery periods seem to be redirecting the investments into sustainability and this Act is timely to define what goes under sustainability. Through clear definition and a common language of sustainability, the redirected investments can be increased towards economies, businesses and societies, specifically in health, against climate and environmental distress. To make it happen, an action plan on financing sustainable growth is needed, which the Act serves. The regulation not only restricts the economic activities to be climate-friendly, but it also prevents companies from earning unproven environmental claims.

The way forward

A potential problem ahead for the EU's sustainable agenda is whether to include gas and nuclear energy as part of the EU taxonomy. When it comes to nuclear, the vision of the member states differs. This divide has been the reason behind the one-year delay between the drafting and passing of the regulation. While France is just stepping into building nuclear reactors, countries like Germany and Belgium are shutting down their age-old reactors fearing the accumulation of nuclear waste.

The European Sustainable Investment Forum (Eurosif), which is a leading European membership association with a mission to develop sustainability through European financial markets, says natural gas and nuclear energy should not be included in the EU taxonomy. The reason is, it will change the nature of the EU taxonomy from sustainable activities to transitional activities. There are few sectors in the EU that are in need of a secure energy supply on a short-term basis and these

sectors will slow down in achieving the energy targets of the EU.

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100 years of the Anglo-Irish Treaty

By Padmashree Anandhan

06 December 2021, marked 100 years of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, signed at 10 Downing Street. The treaty was signed after six riotous years of the 1916 Easter Rising by the British government and representatives of Sinn Fein. It led to creating an Independent Irish State with King George V as the head of state. The agreement allowed partition of the Island of Ireland and gave Northern Ireland a choice whether to remain in existence or not. This treaty stirred the breakout of civil war between the supporters and opposers. According to Cambridge University historian Dr Niamh Gallagher, "The treaty did not overturn the partition of Ireland but instead made provision for a boundary commission to review the border. In the end, the border was unchanged."

What is the article of the Treaty?

The first clause of the treaty provides about the constitutional status Ireland would get as an Irish Free State similar to other countries in the British empire. For example, countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa were seen as dominions but were comparatively far from independence, in contrast to today. According to the treaty, "the Free State's parliament would have powers to make laws for the peace, order and good government of Ireland and an executive responsible to that parliament." However,

Northern Ireland, which came into existence in May 1921, opted out of this new state.

Under Articles 11 to 15 which cover Northern Island. The said provision was to be kept on hold for Northern Island until it joins the rest of the Free State or separates from the United Kingdom. If Northern Ireland opt not to be part of the UK means stepping in of the Boundary Commission to fix boundary, accounting, economic and geographical factors. Lastly, articles from 16 to 18 allow for the ratification of the treaty by the UK and Irish parliaments and the administration of "Southern Ireland" until the Treaty took effect.

Impact of the Good Friday Agreement 1997

The treaty's impact continues to the present day. In the process of creating an independent island, but led to partition in the island. Competition between the two parties affected the Irish party system. Even after 100 years of the foundation of the state, the divide between the pro-treaty forces and anti-treaty forces exists. But the role of the US in bringing out the Good Friday Agreement in 1997 was seen as the biggest achievement as it brought the communal conflicts in Northern Island to an end and made the British remove its arms from the border. Thereby, it installed peace in the borders, made it safe for people to cross the border and carry out their daily activities.

Post-Brexit

The post-Brexit period resulted in destabilizing the island of Ireland. One, the consequences and relevant costs from Britain's exit were unveiled by the EU. Two, border checks became a mandate. The checks were to be carried out either between the land area of two Irish states or between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Three, continued negotiations between the UK and the EU to strike a deal after 100 years of treaty showcases its legacy. But in terms of establishing the relations between the neighbouring islands seem uncertain.

The probable way for a united Ireland could be another Good Friday Agreement, where both the UK and the EU find a way to handle the consequences arising at the border in Ireland. With both parties open for talks, arriving at a common solution does seem plausible.

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Putin's Agenda in Ukraine

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 04 December, US intelligence revealed a probable multi-front offensive early next year by the Kremlin using 175,000 troops. The troops are said to be accumulating on the border of Ukraine with a demand to guarantee that Ukraine will not become part of NATO and that the alliance will abstain from military activities in and around the Ukrainian territory. Russia denied stating that the mobilization was a measure to help modernize the Russian armed forces. While the meeting between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin is scheduled to happen in the coming days, tensions have already been built due to the Ukraine issue. Therefore, it is important to know why Putin is pushing towards Ukraine, the approaches taken towards Ukraine, and analyze his larger vision.

The Issue

Russia assembling its military at the Ukrainian border has created frictions at the regional and international levels. But Ukraine has been preparing for a potential invasion of Russia by expanding its defense capacity. The takeover of Crimea was an easier task for Russia as it had the support of people, as they were Russian-speaking or had a historical connection to the land. This is not in the case of Ukraine which is

inclined towards the West and Europe. NATO on one side has been supporting by sending its military arms into Ukraine to prepare for an attack from Russia. On the other side, the US along with the EU have imposed a series of sanctions to deter the border conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

Part of its economic strategy, Russia established the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to cut down the gas and oil transit revenues of Ukraine. As a counter, the US has been levying sanctions on the Russian shell companies to curb the influence of Russia but has so far not been impactful. With recent developments between the US and Russia, the problem of Ukraine has escalated into a clash of superpowers.

Factors influencing Putin's decision

First, to regain imperial control. Since the 1991 dissolution of the USSR, the area starting from Central Europe to Central Asia has been labelled as the "post-Soviet space." It is the primary factor for Putin, who considers the dissolution a disaster and intends to undo it.

Second, maintaining power. Russia's stronger stance over Ukraine is not limited to regaining imperial control but also enables Putin to stay in power. To stay in power and uphold his reputation inside Russia, Putin has to fulfil the wishes of the Russian elites. To achieve this, maintaining the geopolitical power of Russia is more than vital.

Third, preserving the status quo. Annexing Ukraine is a resourceful opportunity for Putin to establish the status quo in the region. Through which Russia can be showcased as a superpower in terms of political, social, and military at the region and international levels.

Fourth, expanding Russia's influence. This factor coincides with the imperial control dream of Putin. To counter the Western influence in the EU, Putin needs to strike influence in Eastern Europe to prevent the future threat of power struggle.

What are the approaches?

The approaches of the Russian President in dealing with the issue of Ukraine can be divided into hard power and soft power.

First, approach through hard power. The Russian leader has deployed various methods such as coercive diplomacy, strategic bombardment and limited offensive. Under coercive diplomacy, Russia by lining its military at the border of Ukraine is not only threatening Ukraine but also sending a message to the western powers. In strategic bombardment, Russia plans to exploit the gaps in Ukraine's air defense and electronic warfare capabilities. Through limited offensive techniques it destabilizes and disrupts the inside situation of Ukraine.

Second, use of soft power. Russia has been trying to pursue Finlandization and altering the Minsk agreement in Ukraine to influence its politics and take control. Using Finlandization, Russia will be able to make Ukraine endure its foreign policy rules in exchange for a nominal independence, allowing Ukraine to have its own political system. Russia's recent threat against the EU to stop gas supply is also one of its soft power means to keep Germany and the US away from involvement in the Ukrainian issue. Along with these methods, the promise of security guarantees could also be a probable approach of the Russian leader, on which the US might agree. This is because the US, which is already tied in countering China's rise, will agree to settle down for a security guarantee from Russia to settle the Ukraine issue.

The vision of Putin in Ukraine

The purpose of Putin in annexing Ukraine with Russia has many aspects. First, views on Ukrainian history. According to Putin, he does not see Ukraine and Russia as separate countries but as "one nation." Ukraine is one of the firsts in Putin's long-term goal in uniting all former Soviet Union countries. But for the countries which detached from the USSR, it was liberation. The end goal for Putin remains to merge Ukraine with Russia.

Second, to weaken Ukraine. The various approaches taken by the Russian President mean to weaken Ukraine both militarily and economically and thereby to take control of the politics.

Third, power projection. When it came to deciding on deploying military forces at the Ukrainian border, redrafting the Minsk agreement or conditioning of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Putin always ensured Russia had the upper hand. The main agenda of Putin as the leader is to prove the powerful position Russia held on the international front. _

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Ukraine: Emanating military confrontations and escalating tensions with Russia

By Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan

Intensifying tensions

On 26 November, President Joe Biden stated that he was concerned about a possible Pro-Russian coup plot in Ukraine. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky claimed that the coup plot was to take place in the first week of December, as per the reports he received from the Ukrainian Intelligence. His remarks came after receiving an audio recording of the coup that included voices of Russians. He alleged that the Ukrainian billionaire Rinat Akhmetov is funding the coup with Russian and Ukrainian accomplices. With these developments, Biden said he was "In all probability" open to speaking with Putin as he wanted to defuse the tensions in the

region. Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary-General of NATO said that the "Military build-up was unprovoked and unexplained, which would lead to raised tensions and risks of miscalculation".

On 30 November, a day after the Russians violated their ceasefire violations according to the Minsk agreements. The US secretary of state, Antony Blinken at the NATO foreign ministers' summit in Latvia said that "any aggression in Ukraine would trigger serious consequences". The statement came after there was an unusual increase of movements near Ukraine's eastern borders. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko came forward to say that Belarus would ask Russia to provide them with nuclear weapons if NATO supplied them to Poland. Britain's foreign secretary, moving on the tensions, called on the allies to rally together if Russia moves towards Ukraine.

NATO's warning of "Serious consequences"

On 1 December, NATO nations took note of the significant Russian build-up and increasing troops in and around Ukraine. They discussed and drew parallels between the current tensions and scenarios back in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. Stoltenberg mentioned how Russia has been occupying parts of Ukraine and that if Russia does attack Ukraine again, "it would have to pay a high price with serious consequences". These developments hinted at the fact that NATO would impose sanctions on Russia through the EU, the US, the UK, and Canada.

On the next day of the meeting Eva-Maria Liimets, the minister of foreign affairs said that NATO was ready to welcome Ukraine and Georgia and that no other country in the region had any right to influence the decision. Ukraine was already a part of NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence and NATO and reiterated that they were open to Ukraine joining as a member.

Developments in the OSCE summit meeting

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov

met yesterday in the background of the OSCE summit. Blinken addressed the build-up of troops and military movements near Ukraine's borders and called out Russia to pull back forces and maintain a status quo. While Lavrov "stressed that Russia did not want any conflicts with NATO". But, concerning Ukraine, Lavrov said "Russia maintains the right to choose ways to ensure its legitimate security interests" which furthers the speculations of Putin trying to grab a sizeable land in Ukraine to build a land bridge between Russia and Crimea. Putin mentioned that an immediate de-escalation of troops is not possible as he alleged that Ukraine had a troop build-up in the Donbas region.

This escalation of tensions has brought the proposal of a new European security pact by Russia that would deter NATO from expanding further east.

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CLIMATE CHANGE

Protests against lithium mining projects in Serbia

By Harini Madhusudan

On 11 December, environmental groups and protesters in Serbia blocked the roads

and highways for a third consecutive weekend in opposition to the plan of lithium mining. The crowds halted the movement across Belgrade, other cities and towns in the cold and raining weather. The protests began when the government adopted two new laws that would lower Serbia's referendum threshold and allow the state to acquire more private property through expropriation.

As a response, Serbia is witnessing some of the largest anti-government protests, standing as a challenge to Aleksandr Vučić's government ahead of the Presidential elections in April 2022. A mining project was announced following the change in the laws. An Anglo-Australian company called Rio Tinto planned to start a new lithium mine in Western Serbia called the Jadar lithium project.

During the week before 11 December, Vučić agreed to withdraw and amend the controversial laws. In an address to the nation, he said: "We have to see if we want that mine or not, and there should be a public debate about it... I want to calm people down and tell them that we are on your side and we will not make any decisions without you." Civilian groups and environmental groups are seen working together during the protests. For example, an activist Savo Manojlović tweeted in support of Eko Straža and tweeted: "Protests for all. Leftists bothered by right-wingers can put up a blockade at a different location. ... Divide yourselves later."

Though the country is not new to protests, the latest wave of demonstrations has united a wide spectrum of citizen groups and strong opposition, which threatens the regime. The protesters want the government to remove all possibility of companies attempting to initiate mining projects in the region and argued that the extraction process of lithium causes huge damage to the mined areas. Serbia's populist government has tried to defuse the demonstrations by announcing their agreement to the key demands of the protesters.

Lithium Resources

There is a scramble by governments and companies to tap into the lithium market worldwide; which is also called the 'White Gold Rush.' Lithium is a crucial component in the technology market around the world. It is essential for energy storage in renewable energy technologies and electric vehicles. In recent years, lithium projects have multiplied across Europe, Australia, the US and Latin America.

All the communities that live closer to these proposed mining zones remain their primary opponents. Australia is the main producer of lithium and it is mined from a type of hard rock called 'spodumene.' South America has the largest deposits of the same, and lithium is extracted from brines underneath salt flats. And despite the fact that these mines are relatively new operations, complex and adverse environmental and social impacts have already been observed.

Taking the example of Chile, where lithium has been mined since the 1980s, one can observe significant alterations in the traditional livelihoods. The mining has interfered with the local economy and labour practices, cultural practices, and the overall lives of the local indigenous communities. In the case of Serbia, the Jadar lithium project has been planned for 387 hectares, and despite its promise of a one percent contribution to the Serbian GDP, the environmental costs are very high. An environment impact study, which was commissioned by Rio Tinto, concluded that the project would cause irreversible damage and recommended it should not go ahead. Additionally, the communities surrounding the region of the proposed mine have expressed strong opposition.

Collaterals for clean energy

A spokesperson from Rio Tinto in September 2021, announced that it has been working through the project requirements for up to 20 years with a team of 100 domestic experts studying the cumulative impacts in accordance with Serbian law. Very often, corporations also engage in a consultation period where they

allow for concerns to be raised against their projects. In the case of Serbia, the government seems to have backtracked on its promises of holding a referendum and made legislative changes.

With the region in a rush for decarbonization with fast timelines, these situations would simply add to the delay in approvals causing regulatory governance instability. The Serbian government seems to be in the middle of this and will have to make a choice between the project (which is expected to begin in 2022) or the voices of their citizens (who are relatively important too, because of the upcoming elections).

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COVID-19

Europe sees continued protests against vaccine mandates and lockdowns

By Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan

The recent protests in Vienna and Luxembourg City

On 11 December, around 44,000 protestors gathered on the streets of Vienna, Austria's capital, against the government restrictions for COVID-19. The protests were against mandatory vaccines and home confinement orders for unvaccinated citizens.

Vaccination in Austria is now mandatory for all above the age of 14 from February 2022. The protestors said: "I'm not a neo-Nazi or a hooligan," while another demonstrator said, "I'm fighting for freedom and against the vaccine". Furthermore, the government will impose fines for the unvaccinated from EUR 300 to EUR 3,600 depending on the people's income and financial obligations.

The Austrian government announced a fourth national lockdown three weeks ago to curb the spread of the new COVID variant Omicron. The Minister for Constitutional Affairs Karoline Edtstadler said: "We do not want to punish people who are not vaccinated. We want to win them over and convince them to get vaccinated." About 1,200 police officers were deployed to handle the protestors; they used pepper spray to control demonstrators who had fireworks, as a few attacked the officers with snowballs and ice.

On 12 December, the protests in Luxembourg City escalated to the extent that the government had to use water cannons against demonstrators. In addition, protestors stormed the Christmas market as it was closed for anyone who was not vaccinated. The recent protests in Vienna, Klagenfurt and Linz shed light on the peoples' apprehension on government regulations and restrictions against COVID-19.

Demography of the protestors

The demography of protestors in Luxembourg City, as mentioned by Luxembourg University's Professor Dr Anja Leist said: "The people we saw on the streets are once again a non-representative small group of those who are hesitant to vaccinate and who, according to the German studies, come from different political orientations." The protestors were not from a specific political school of thought but constituted a tiny minority of the population, as 66.2 percent of the population in Luxembourg is vaccinated.

While the anti-vaxxers in Europe, as reported by *Deutsche Welle*, were said to be a mix of "the politically disenchanting, those who are anti-state, others who are esoteric and or anti-vaxxers". Leuven University's Political Science Professor Marc Hooghe said there was a "combination of very different social groups which all have their own motivations". Hooghe on the German public broadcaster ZDF compared the protests in Belgium to France's yellow vest movement.

Siegen University's Sociologist Johannes Kiess talked about the role of far-right

groups in the recent protests mentioning "What we have seen everywhere is that actors from the political right are at the helm, organizing and mobilizing." For example, in Vienna, members of the far-right group called the Identitarian Movement were promoting rallies on their website. The far-right and even a part of the ultra-conservative Catholic community supported the demonstrations.

Driving factors of the recent protests

The protests were not restricted to COVID-19 and government regulations. They resounded more significant issues progressing in the background of the regions. The Austrians marched with signs saying, "I will decide for myself", "Make Austria Great Again", and "New Elections". As Austria had seen three Chancellors change in the last two months, this has been causing political turmoil in Austria. In France, it was about Macron's style of politics, and in the Netherlands, it was linked to the shortcomings of the government's social policies. While in Saxony, it was about trust issues with the politicians and disenchantment from democracy.

Kiess mentioned that the situation could get even worse, leading to "...more action against illegal demonstrations early on, by fining people more consistently and also dispersing the crowds for example". While German Interior Ministers Conference Chairman Thomas Strobl said: "mandatory vaccination would intensify the aggressive attitude of the protest movement." Thus, more regulations and mandatory inoculations could lead to increasing protests with diversifying reasons for mobilization.

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Omicron - The New Virus Taking over Europe

By Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan

Europe's immediate reaction to the new variant

On 30 November, countries in Europe scrambled to impose travel restrictions and regulations to stop the spread of the new COVID-19 variant called Omicron. Cases of the new variant continued to be reported from all across Europe leading to an immediate halt of flights to and from South Africa, with a few countries issuing travel bans. Since the new variant had undergone a high number of mutations, there were speculations of the variant being more transmissible and deadly.

This new variant has increased risks to global economic growth and inflation. These have come to the forefront as countries started restricting travel to other countries, discouraging tourism. Governments like the UK had re-imposed restrictions on compulsory wearing of masks in public, mandatory PCR tests to enter the country, and suspected cases of Omicron were to self-isolate for 10 days. In other countries, existing restrictions to curb the spread of the Delta variant would momentarily be continued and expanded to control the spread of Omicron.

Effects of the variant on state regulations and economies of the countries

On 30 November, the economic impact of the variant led to a sudden fall in global stocks. The euro fell 0.3 percent against the dollar, while investors used the volatility to buy big; the variant brought more risks and volatility. The economic impact on the emerging markets has differed as the

emergence of the new variant has stretched the already stretched supply chains and raised inflation to a higher level. Travel within Europe and to Southern African countries had been restricted with the strict imposition of a 14-day quarantine for fliers from the region, regardless of whether they test negative or positive. Austria extended its lockdown by ten days bringing the total duration of the lockdown to 20 days.

On 02 December, the European Commission Chief Ursula von der Leyen urged the member countries to consider making the vaccines mandatory to curb the rising cases of Omicron in the region; this led to protests in Brussels against the European Union institutions. Austria would make vaccination compulsory from February, while Greece stated mandatory vaccination for people aged 60 and above. Germany decided to bar all the unvaccinated people from non-essential businesses and were only allowed to work in essential jobs at grocery stores and pharmacies.

On 03 December, Ireland moved to tighten the restrictions, closed nightclubs, and reintroduced social distancing in restaurants. Norway introduced strict measures over Oslo and its surrounding regions with work from home and limited attendance at events.

Recent Developments regarding the virus

On 07 December, the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated that the new variant is more transmissible than the delta variant as cases were doubling every two days. While the EU discussed easing travel curbs on South Africa as the new variant "was possibly mild" the hopeful updates motivated the European stocks to climb uphill, bringing confidence to European investors. But as the WHO suggested, it was too early to decide if the new variant is possibly mild or more aggressive. Europe had over 400 confirmed cases over the week, which led to an immediate meeting of the health ministers to evaluate the situation. They discussed measures to control the spread of the new variant by reinforcing the use of masks and other social distancing measures as they realized

that vaccination jabs were not enough. Europe should not panic but prepare for a possible spread of the new variant.

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GENDER

The Pope's comments on Gender Violence

By Ashwin Dhanabalan

Pope Francis on domestic violence

On 19 December, Pope Francis commented on the rising violence against women and named those who perpetuated it as "...almost satanic because it is taking advantage of a person who cannot defend herself". The Pope's recent remarks strongly expressed his concerns about the increasing violence against women. He mentioned these statements on an Italian broadcast called *Canale 5*. The show was called 'Francis and the Invisibles', showcasing diverse individuals struggling in life.

The Pope engaged with the participants on the show; one of them, named Giovanna, was a survivor of domestic abuse. The Pope encouraged her by saying: "I see dignity in you because if you didn't have dignity, you wouldn't be here." He added: "Look at the Blessed Mother and stay with that image of courage." His meeting with Giovanna was an unexpectedly pleasant experience for her as she mentioned: "I knew he put people at ease, but I wasn't expecting this."

On 01 February, the Pope in his "February prayers", denounced domestic violence and dedicated his devotion to female victims of violence. He further said: "The various

forms of ill-treatment that many women suffer are acts of cowardice and a degradation of all humanity. Of men and of all humanity." Pope Francis called on the people to support "...women who have suffered domestic violence during these months of lockdown".

The Pope further brought attention to the problem, stating that domestic violence had many manifestations such as "psychological violence, verbal violence, physical violence, sexual violence". Pope Francis praised women who broke their silence and sought help; he also said that the Church could not look away and had to play an essential role in dealing with such issues. Pope Francis, in January 2021, had also spoken on femicide and violence against women in St. Peter's square.

Rising issues of gender violence in Europe

According to *Reuters*: "Police figures released last month showed that there are about 90 episodes of violence against women in Italy every day and that 62 percent were cases of domestic violence." The European Institute for Gender Equality mentioned in their report that in 2015, 13.6 percent of women in Italy "have been victims of physical or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime", out of which only 12.3 percent of the women contacted the police and sought help.

Pandemic restrictions, a cause of increasing gender violence

Since the advent of the pandemic, cases of gender violence have rapidly increased as many women have been stuck at home with their potential abusers due to lockdowns and pandemic-related restrictions. The Pope, who has been speaking against gender violence for the last two years, stated: "The number of women who are beaten, abused in their homes, even by their husbands, is very, very high."

In addition, UN reports stated that due to the pandemic, domestic violence intensified and, as indicated by *The New York Times*: " (the pandemic) also made women feel more vulnerable to abuse, sexual harassment and violence, impacting their emotional and mental health." The Pope has been actively

propagating issues of gender violence in his speeches, prayers and video calls as he empathized with many victims like Giovanna. He has been requesting the larger society to safeguard vulnerable women at risk and has raised prayers for victims of violence. Apart from Giovanna, the Pope met Maria, Pedro and Maristella, and talked about their issues.

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MIGRATION

Greece: Pope Francis' visit focuses on democracy, migration and Christian unity

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 04 December, Pope Francis from Rome visited Greece as part of his eastern Mediterranean tour. The tour aimed to create awareness on the migrant suffering. A key part of the papacy is to humanize migrants and refugees. Upon visiting a camp on the island of Lesbos, the Pope said: "... because of Europe's moves to deter and block migrants, the Mediterranean Sea, cradle of so many civilizations, now looks like a mirror of death." On his previous visit to the island, the Pope took a few migrants on the plane with him while returning to Rome. The migrant crisis faced by the island of Lesbos only adds to the larger European migration problem. Largely ignored by the EU, the papal visit was seen as an effort to bring back the attention of the bloc to the Island.

The visit

Pope Francis covered various aspects during his visit, from Christian unity to migration, and democracy.

First, Christian unity. Pope John Paul II was the first to visit Athens after the Great

Schism between the Catholic minority and Orthodox Majority in 1054. The primary cause of the Schism was a dispute over papal authority between the eastern church and the Roman Catholic church. After the split, Constantinople was sacked in the fourth crusade of 1204. These events created an anti-papal feeling amongst the hardliners in Greece. Through his visit, Pope Francis asked forgiveness for the mistakes of the Roman Catholic Church and called for Christian unity in the country.

Second, migration. On the second day of his visit to the Island, Pope Francis conducted an open-air mass. He met dozens of migrants who were held as refugees in Cyprus and offered 50 of them a chance to move into Italy. According to EU statistics, in 2020, Cyprus received the highest number of asylum applications than any EU state, primarily due to the Syrian civil war.

Third, democracy. In his speech, the Pope warned that the easy answers of populism and authoritarianism are a threat to European democracy and called for "fresh dedication" to promote the common good over national interests. He suggested that robust multilateralism is a way to address the current issues and protect the environment from pandemic and poverty. He said: "Politics needs this, in order to put common needs ahead of private interests, yet we cannot avoid noting with concern how today, and not only in Europe, we are witnessing a retreat from democracy."

Internal reaction

The open-air mass witnessed thousands of migrants who were mostly Filipinos working as housekeepers in Cyprus. But in one of the meetings in Athens, the Pope was interrupted by a Greek Orthodox priest who called him a heretic thrice. The Island of Cyprus witnessed minor protests against the Pope by those identifying as Christian Orthodox following this incident.

What does it mean for Europe?

First, the visit of the Pope has brought a spotlight on migrants and refugees in Cyprus. Every year thousands of migrants reach the Island of Lesbos in search of a

better life. But it has never got the focus like Belarus and the English Channel did. The Pope highlighted the division in acknowledging the migrant situation in Cyprus emphasizes the EU's need to step up and bring reforms for the same.

Second, the intensity of the divide between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Catholic has reduced. The previous visit of John Paul II sparked protests across various parts of Greece objecting to the visit. When Pope Francis visited for the first time, he helped a few migrants gain asylum in Rome. This gave hope and confidence amongst the migrant community and, to some extent, even in the minds of Orthodox Christians. This led to reduced protests and opposition in the second visit.

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ENERGY

Germany's nuclear waste problem

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 30 December, Germany announced that it will shut down three out of its last six nuclear power stations as part of the shift from nuclear power to renewables. It had begun closing down its nuclear plants following the Fukushima reactor meltdown that took place in Japan in 2011. It is said that the last remaining reactors Isar 2, Emsland and Neckarwestheim II have been scheduled to be shut down by 2022. According to the energy industry association Bundesverband der Energie- und Wasserwirtschaft (BDEW) head Kerstin

Andreae: "For the energy industry in Germany, the nuclear phase-out is final."

What are the issues?

The phasing out of nuclear energy began when former German Chancellor Angela Merkel launched safety assessments of all nuclear power plants in 2011. Since then, many countries have started switching to other forms of energy production considering the problem of nuclear waste and safety.

Nuclear energy and coal have been a vital source for Germany contributing 57 percent of electricity. This increased from 12.9 percent to 14.2 percent in the last quarter of 2021. With the shutdown of nuclear plants, there is scope for the emergence of various issues. One, more dependency on coal which is not a climate-friendly option as it fuels pollution. Two, safety. It remains a threat both for people and the environment to live around a closed nuclear facility. Three, disposal of nuclear waste. Germany is yet to strategize a mechanism to clear the dump from the dismantling of nuclear reactors and it has already run out of space to securely store the radioactive material. So far, the government has marked 2031 to finalize permanent storage for nuclear waste. Four, due to the closing of the nuclear facilities, job loss is likely. Five, for Europe it's a larger problem for its climate goals and energy crisis.

What does this mean for Germany?

First, the climate problem. Germany, which is shifting from nuclear energy to coal, needs to rethink whether it is a viable option for its high-end climate goals. The amount of pollution emitted from the use of coal and the parallel issue of handling the disposal of nuclear waste is a red flag for Germany's environment.

Second, a possible site for nuclear disposal. With the Gorleben mine not qualifying the standards for holding the nuclear dump. Germany needs to act quickly to plan repositories that will hold good and prevent radioactive waves from affecting its people. Third, a tricky challenge for the new government. The new coalition government will have to deal with the problem tactically

before the patience amongst the public turns into protests.

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Nord Stream 2 and Europe’s Energy Supplies

By Harini Madhusudan

On 30 November, Britain’s Foreign Secretary joined a last-minute push and urged the NATO allies towards blocking the Nord-Stream 2 pipeline, claiming that Moscow would exploit its position as the primary supplier of energy to European countries. The UK, along with Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic States have been at the forefront of questioning the wisdom of the pipeline. Nord Stream 2 is designed to directly deliver Russian natural gas directly to Germany, which is vital for the energy shortages in Europe.

On 28 November, the German Foreign Ministry stated that it was continuing to work closely with the US on the implementation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline deal. The ministry said that it was working towards a joint declaration for the USD 11 billion pipelines which run under the Baltic Sea and carries gas from Russia to Germany. The US and some European countries oppose the pipeline because it bypasses Ukraine. Though the Biden administration, in July 2021, waived the sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and made a deal with Germany. However, on 22 November, the US imposed additional sanctions targeting Russia-linked Transadria Ltd and its vessel.

Though the project is economy/energy-based, many in Europe and the US have made it a political one. They believe that the

pipeline will undermine the European Union and NATO security, while giving Moscow a new weapon in its ongoing struggle with the West, additionally isolating Ukraine. The Nord Stream 1 & 2 have been supported by the former German chancellor, the second of which was completed in September 2021 and is expected to begin operations in early 2022. In November 2021, the project suffered a major setback when the regulators delayed the approval demanding the pipeline be compliant with German Law, which is expected to delay the start of the operations by several months. Additionally, the European Commission is also required to sign off on the pipeline before the transportation begins.

The model of the pipeline by Gazprom is designed to divert away from the traditional supply routes that pass through Ukraine. This deprives Ukraine of billions of dollars as transit costs, which is seen as an existential threat to Ukrainian national security. The delay of operations, on the other hand, would deprive the European region of their gas supplies which would likely worsen the energy crisis in Europe. The Russian argument says it is “purely a commercial project,” and called the unilateral decision of restrictions “without reason.”

The new three-party coalition in Germany has indicated their opposition to the pipeline. All three parties in the coalition have various reasons to oppose the approval of Nord Stream 2. With the NATO pressure and the green energy agenda of Europe, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is likely to be a factor of divisions within the EU member states and fuel the existing geopolitical crisis between EU and Russia, while leaving the immediate energy access undecided.

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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Regulations for Artificial Intelligence and the Council of Europe (CAHAI)

By Harini Madhusudan

On 14 December 2021, an ad hoc committee of the Council of Europe released a publication titled 'towards regulation of AI systems' after examining the potential elements and feasibility of Artificial Intelligence on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. It is considered the first legal framework that is prepared on the basis of a broad multi-stakeholder consultations and prepares a document for the development, application, and design of artificial intelligence for the Council of Europe's Standards.

In the early weeks of December, the CAHAI completed its recommendations for a legally binding treaty. The treaty will now have to be ratified by the Council of Europe's 47 member countries and include Russia and Turkey. Additionally, the US, Canada, Japan, and Mexico have also been involved in the AI initiative. The CAHAI recommends that the treaty could include risk clarifications, impact assessments, and principles for AI development. In the case of AI in healthcare, education, and granting social benefits, the committee believes that it would be better addressed through sectoral rules.

The CAHAI has called for a complete or partial moratorium on applications that stand as an "unacceptable" risk to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Features such as facial/emotion recognition, and social scoring would be a threat in this case. Barring a few exceptions, the treaty effectively targets the growing concentration of economic power and of big

data. The CAHAI recommendations would be discussed among the ministers of member countries in February 2022, and the negotiations are expected to begin by May. A new committee named the Committee of Artificial Intelligence (CAI) would be formed to negotiate the text. It is estimated that the negotiations would wrap before November 2023, and would be ratified by 2024, if all goes according to the schedule.

Online platforms have not positively welcomed the proposal. The regulations are part of the larger set of directives to regulate online platforms and their activities. The regulations on AI would lay emphasis on the platforms to oversee the impact of their automated services and would ensure a human review of significant outcomes, thereby setting a code of conduct and placing the burden of proof on the online platforms.

For several years, the Council of Europe has been anticipating increasing challenges from and assessing the impact of digital technologies. They have worked towards developing relevant legal strategies and internet governance instruments. The initial responses by the civil society groups said that the treaty has been massacred by member countries with exceptions that are similar to the European Union's AI act. The biggest concern raised is that the treaty excludes military AI, which would necessarily allow the member countries to include dual-use technologies if they needed to.

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INTERNATIONAL

Russia's draft treaty with the US and NATO*By Ashwin Dhanabalan*

On 15 December, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs handed over a draft treaty to the US and proposed a draft agreement with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in an effort to de-escalate tensions in Europe. The crisis in Ukraine has taken center stage in Europe due to the troop build-ups on both sides of the border. A US senior administration official said that Washington was prepared to discuss the proposals but mentioned: "That said, there are some things in those documents that the Russians know are unacceptable."

Russia's eight-point draft treaty with the US

The draft mentioned both the US and Russia as parties and stated that the document was guided by the principles contained in the Charter of the United Nations. The draft treaty had eight articles dealing with multiple issues from de-escalating tensions and cooperation to security and deterring military escalation. However, the US did not like the proposal and the White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said: "We will not compromise the key principles on which European security is built, including that all countries have the right to decide their own future and foreign policy, free from outside interference." The treaty also mentioned that the US and Russia would not place nuclear weapons outside their own sovereign territories. This would contradict the US 'nuclear-sharing arrangements with the European members of NATO.

Russia's draft agreement with NATO member states

The draft agreement between the Russian Federation and NATO member states reaffirmed "... their aspiration to improve relations and deepen mutual understanding". The agreement had nine articles based on "reaffirming their commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations" and were drawn up in English, French and Russian. NATO head Jens Stoltenberg ruled out any possible agreements that would

deny Ukraine the right to join the alliance; he reiterated that it would be Ukraine's decision to be a part of the military alliance. A report by *France24* highlighted the drawbacks of a few articles in the draft agreement. One of the articles mentioned: "not to deploy additional troops and weapons outside the countries where they were in May 1997 - before the accession to NATO of any of the former communist states in East Europe that for decades were dominated by Moscow." This would mean that NATO would have to abandon any military activities in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia if they agreed to the proposed draft agreement.

The outcome of the proposals

The draft agreement and the treaty outline were proposed to reaffirm trust, security and to introduce confidence-building measures. Yet, the recommendations did not seem hopeful to de-escalate tensions between the parties. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said that Moscow was ready to negotiate "without delays and without stalling" with both parties. However, the responses of the US and NATO members have not been positive as they did not find the treaty as a means of de-escalating tensions. Apart from the unacceptable provisions in the agreement and the treaty, Russia still has a 100,000-troop build-up on its side of the border.

Moreover, NATO and the US are unlikely to compromise on the 1975 Helsinki final act. States have a right to decide on their foreign policy, leaving Ukraine space to decide if it wants to join NATO. Polish Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lukasz Jasina added: "Russia is not a member of NATO and doesn't decide on matters related to NATO." As reported by *The Guardian*, all parties would have to "come to the table prepared to address the other's legitimate security concerns. Agreeing on the meaning of "legitimate" will consume long hours".

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Russia and Ukraine: Options for NATO, the EU, and the US

By Joeana Cera Matthews

Russia in Ukraine

The alleged 100,000 Russian troops amassed along the Ukrainian borders has raised concerns of the West – especially that of the EU, the US, and NATO. In the face of Russian aggression, what are the options available for these actors?

Options for the US

The US-Russia relations have been on the downslide since the Crimean annexation. The bilateral ties only worsened with accusations being hurled over at Moscow for various reasons including interference in the 2020 US elections. The US has always been antagonistic about Russian interests in the eastern European region. On 20 November, while visiting Africa, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed this concern, saying: "We know the playbook of trying to cite some illusory provocation from Ukraine or any other country and using that as an excuse for what Russia plans to do all along." On 01 December, visiting Riga in Latvia, Blinken warned of the imposition of sanctions on Russia that would be heavier than any imposed till date. Blinken stated: "Should Russia follow the path of confrontation, when it comes to Ukraine, we've made clear that we will respond resolutely, including with a range of high impact economic measures that we have refrained from pursuing in the past." Later, holding a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, he warned of "serious

consequences" if the Kremlin attempted to destabilize the already fragile status quo in Ukraine.

However, the US is not as concerned about Europe, in particular eastern Europe, as it used to be. The recent trends point towards Washington redirecting its attention to deal with the problem of a rising China. They do not intend to be dragged down by the distracting commitments the region holds. On 07 December, holding a meeting with Putin, the US President Joe Biden was reported to have denied the possibility of Ukraine being provided with troops. Nonetheless, this does not by any means imply that Ukraine is being left unattended for Russian forces to devour it.

Options for the EU

The EU has primarily stuck to indirect dialogue, in the form of threats and harsh comments, attempting to scare Russia into staying out of Ukraine. The options in front of the EU include defining the sanctions the bloc intends to impose on Russia if Ukraine is attacked. Individual countries from within the bloc could also deal with the crisis. In the case of Germany, newly elected German Chancellor Olaf Scholz leveraged the Nord Stream 2 that is yet to be authorized, to warn Russia of the possible "consequences" the pipeline would face if Russian aggression escalated. France has also been vocal with regard to its stance on opposing and warning Moscow of the repercussions of such an aggression. Provision of a market space, financial assistance, and backing on progressive institution building could be other areas via which Brussels could contribute to realistically supporting Ukraine to deter Russia. Indulging pro-European Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova should also be among top priorities for the EU.

Collective action: Options for NATO

Other than the individual options available, collective action can be undertaken via NATO. The Ukrainian military can be backed by NATO forces, essentially strengthening both the military as well as the society to withstand Russian aggression. Provision of training, supply equipment along with intelligence sharing can also be

considered. Such a cooperation would enable Ukraine to resist and counter threats in the form of hybrid attacks. Patrols along the Black Sea, avoiding provocation, should be continued. NATO can act as an advisory or counsel for Ukraine, effectively reminding the country to maintain the status quo. Russia has always demanded NATO to stay away from Ukraine in order to avert unnecessary provocations that could lead to regional destabilization. In fact, Russian President Vladimir Putin talked about red lines, saying: “We’re constantly voicing our concerns about this, talking about red lines, but we understand our partners – how shall I put it mildly – have a very superficial attitude to all our warnings and talk of red lines.”

The Impact

In 2016, when Crimea was captured by Russian forces, the only action undertaken by both NATO, the US and other Western forces was that of imposing sanctions. However, there exists a questionability on the impact of sanctions on Russia. The country has reduced its dependence on foreign markets via holding large currency and gold reserves since the Crimean invasion.

This independence allows the Kremlin a breathing space even in the face of sanctions. There was no effort at providing military backing to the Ukrainian forces by NATO. As Paul Taylor states in an article on *POLITICO*: “The lesson was clear: Neither the US nor European allies are prepared to risk war with Russia over Ukraine or Georgia. To acknowledge this is not appeasement but realism. To pretend otherwise is a cruel deception.”

For those who claim that NATO or EU accession is the key to deterrence and end to the conflict, it is a dream too far away in the future to be converted into a reality. Also, Russia will not watch idly as Ukraine is taken away from them. The prospect of accession either into the EU or NATO are costly risks, the consequences of which need to be calculated at length. Nonetheless, intaking countries which fail to have complete sovereignty over their territories

is detrimental when considering the ability of securing the North Atlantic region.

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Lithuania, Taiwan, and China

By Joeana Cera Matthews

What happened?

On 21 November, China retaliated to Taiwan opening its representative office in Vilnius by downgrading diplomatic relations with the country to the “charge d'affaires” level. According to a statement via China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “The Chinese government had to lower diplomatic relations between the two countries... in order to safeguard its sovereignty and the basic norms of international relations... The Lithuanian government must bear all consequences that arise from this... (their actions) created a bad precedent in the international arena.”

However, Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte responded to the escalation of tensions by saying: “Our government's programme says Lithuania wants a more intense economic, cultural and scientific relationship with Taiwan... (But) I want to emphasise that this step

does not mean any conflict or disagreement with the 'One China policy.'

On 18 November, Taiwan opened its de facto embassy at Vilnius in Lithuania called the 'Taiwanese Representative Office'. Back in July, the announcement of the decision to move ahead with the same had angered China. A multi-fold retaliation followed. China demanded Lithuania to recall its ambassador to Beijing after withdrawing its own; freight trains to the Baltic state were stopped along with the issuing of food export permits.

What is the background?

First, the impact on the economy. The Lithuanian vice minister of foreign affairs Arnoldas Pranckevicius commented on the tensions impacting their economy: "I think it is a wake-up call in many ways... China is trying to make an example out of us - a negative example, so that other countries don't necessarily follow that path, and therefore it is a matter of principle how the Western community, the United States, and European Union reacts." In response to the economic consequences faced by the country, the US agreed to financially support the country; Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabriellus Landsbergis requested similar support from the EU.

Second, a historical resemblance. The Eastern European countries might also be reminded of the horrors of their past when dealing with China. The similarity of the 'authoritarian giant' with the USSR during the Cold War certainly does not sit well with them. In line with this sentiment, the speaker of the Czech Senate Milos Vystrcil said: "We know very well from our own history what it's like to live with a big brother behind your back... And this is why we support Taiwan because they live with a big brother behind their back, the People's Republic of China."

In response to this, the Taiwan Foreign Ministry released a statement that said: "Like Taiwan, countries in Central and Eastern Europe have gone through the shackles of authoritarian regimes and uphold the shared values of democracy,

freedom, human rights, and the rule of law."

Third, the perception of China. According to a 2020 opinion poll by Palacky University Olomouc (the Czech Republic) and the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (Slovakia), China is the most negatively perceived, following North Korea and Russia. This affects the Chinese ambitions for the region in the fields of trade and investments, especially in the backdrop of the failure of the 17+1 grouping. Even the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which created a huge furore in its wake is being viewed with scepticism by the region.

Fourth, the Chinese territory of Taiwan. China claims Taiwan to be its own territory and, in this backdrop, requires that the territory be called 'Chinese Taipei'. However, Taiwan considers itself to be independent and sovereign. China's website even had a statement from the foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin stating: "We urge the Lithuanian government to abide by the solemn political commitments made when establishing diplomatic relations with China and not to make irreversible wrong decisions... The European side should adopt a correct position and prevent interference with the healthy development of China-EU relations."

Another Chinese statement read: "Taiwan is never a country. No matter how (much) 'Taiwan independence' forces try to misrepresent facts and confound black and white, the historical fact that the mainland and Taiwan belong to one and same China cannot be changed."

Inferences

First, Eastern Europe's growing relations with Taiwan. Eastern Europe is cozying up to Taiwan despite the threats forwarded by China. Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu visited Slovakia and the Czech Republic during the last week of October. Poland and Slovakia donated COVID-19 vaccines to Taiwan. While western Europe faces difficulties with respect to maintaining ties with China, eastern Europe reflects this via

getting closer to Taiwan in the face of an enraged China.

Second, the unlikely possibility of complete cancellation of ties. China cutting off all ties with Lithuania is unlikely since such a move would encourage the Baltic state to turn to Taiwan.

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Modi-Putin, reinvigorating bilateral ties and defence relations

By Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan

Reviving the strained bilateral ties

On 06 December, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited India for the 21st annual summit, where he met his Indian counterpart Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The visit was preceded by a 2+2 dialogue involving the Foreign and Defense ministers of both countries discussing bilateral, regional and international issues while emphasizing defense relations. The

discussion between the Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Defense Minister Rajnath Singh with their Russian counterparts, Sergey Lavrov and Sergey Shoigu, occurred a few hours before the two countries' leaders met.

During the discussion, Prime Minister Modi said: "Despite the challenges posed by Covid, the pace of relations between India and Russia has not changed." The summit was to be held in 2020 but was postponed to 2021 due to COVID-19. Putin called India a "great power" and "a time-tested friend". The leaders shared their views to revive the wrinkled bilateral ties as they further discussed defense contacts. After the summit, India and Russia signed 28 agreements and released a 99-point joint statement.

Readjusting the balance in India-Russia ties through defense deals

The two countries were undergoing a period of oscillation, with uncertainties growing as India joined the Quad and Russia expanded its proximity to China as a close strategic partner. Trade between the two countries was an important aspect of discussion as the bilateral trade was stagnant at USD 10 billion, similar to the trade between India and Bangladesh. India's trade with China and the US is at USD 100 billion, while Russia's trade with China is a little over USD 100 billion. Thus, both countries pledged to boost annual trade to USD 30 billion by 2025.

India-US ties had deteriorated during the Trump administration as the President offered to only mediate between China and India after the Galwan valley skirmish. Moreover, the US did not hold the PLA accountable for its actions, creating apprehension about the US' support to India during such situations. India bought the S-400 missile systems from Russia even though the US threatened to impose sanctions under the CAATSA.

Russia and India signed a deal of 600,000 Ak-203 assault rifles made by Kalashnikov, a Russian weapon maker. In addition, India started receiving the S-400 defense systems

that are vital for India's strategic deterrence to counter Pakistan and China in the region. It is one of the most sophisticated surface-to-air defense systems globally, with a range of 400 kilometres, and can shoot down 80 targets simultaneously. India is Russia's largest arms importer even though its arms import had dropped from 70 percent to 49 percent during 2011-2020. Thus, defense ties between Moscow and Delhi have become a priority for the two countries.

India and Russia reworking their way ahead

Russia has invariably grown close to China and will inevitably grow closer, while India may continue to retain a strategic autonomy, balancing both the US and Russia. Nevertheless, India would grow closer to Russia in the defense sector in the coming years due to their recent defense deals. According to a Stimson Center paper released in 2020, about 86 percent of Indian military equipment systems were of Russian or Soviet origin. Moreover, the joint statements released after the discussions hint at expanding cooperation between the two countries. One of the combined statements released after the talks said the countries "reiterated their intention to strengthen defense cooperation, including in the joint development of production of military equipment".

India and Russia have invested in the joint development of BrahMos Mark II, which is a hypersonic version of BrahMos. India recently invested USD one billion in credit in the far-east region of Russia, while Russia has invested in manufacturing the Sputnik-V vaccine in India. The countries also discussed a Chennai-Vladivostok maritime corridor to open business frontiers.

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The G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' Summit

By Joeana Cera Matthews

On 11 and 12 December, the G7 Foreign and Development ministers met at Liverpool. The meeting was coordinated along with the foreign ministers from Australia, and the Republic of Korea. In a first ever occurrence, the Association of South East Nations (ASEAN) also attended the meeting. After the summit, a statement was released by the G7 Chair and the UK's Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs Elizabeth Truss. Germany will be assuming the G7 presidency for 2022.

Omicron and COVID-19

A major subject of concern during the meeting was the latest COVID-19 variant of Omicron. Restating the 29 November statement released by the G7 Health Ministers, the ministers reiterated their pledge to provide vaccination to low-and middle-income countries in need. Since the June Leaders 'Summit, the G7 has supplied 657 million vaccine doses. Meanwhile, Africa was commended on its 'exemplary work 'in identifying the new variant and warning the world of its existence. The ministers further validated their support for the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Vaccination Strategy along with the Access to COVID Tools (ACT)-Accelerator. The Global Health Summit Rome Declaration was also upheld by the ministers.

Other efforts at increasing vaccination rates included maintaining open supply chains, growing regional vaccine production and regulatory capacities, strengthening health systems, while being able to deliver fair, timely and transparent roll-out of quality vaccines and other health products. In line with these efforts, the UK is set to host a Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness

Innovations replenishment in March 2022 while the US will host the Seventh Replenishment Conference of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in 2022.

Eastern Europe

The statement also reinstated the group's position on the Russian escalation of tensions along the Ukrainian border. Truss stated: "We've been clear that any incursion by Russia into Ukraine would have massive consequences for which there would be a severe cost."

The Belarusian regime was condemned for 'orchestrating a migration crisis' and its 'repression of citizens' rights'. The Western Balkans were asked to maintain their stability and security through a European perspective. Divisive attempts in Bosnia and Herzegovina were condemned with calls for unity and talks on 'constructive agendas'. Normalization of relations was requested between Kosovo and Serbia through a dialogue mediated by the EU.

On 13 December, Truss met with the Western Balkans Six (WB6) foreign ministers. The meeting also saw EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajcak and US Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar participating in the same.

Other issues discussed

Various other global issues were also discussed. The climate goals were reinstated with the ministers embracing the Glasgow Climate Pact ratified during COP26. Reaffirmation of commitments to maintain the 1.5 degrees goal until COP27 was also stated. Issues pertaining to gender equality, infrastructure investment and development finance were other topics discussed. Commitments to 'defend open societies' and uphold democracy internationally was also considered as a follow-up to the US Summit for Democracy.

China was another point of discussion. The human rights violations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong along with the tensions witnessed in the East and South China Seas were debated on and the necessity of

maintaining peace across the Taiwan Strait was reiterated. The Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK) was condemned for its 'provocative actions' and asked to 'abandon' all its unlawful weapons of mass destruction (WMD) according to the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

While the continuation of talks in Vienna bringing back the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was commended, Iran was reprimanded for its nuclear ambitions. Afghanistan's 'worsening humanitarian crisis' was another matter of major concern given the liquidity challenges faced by the country primarily via the UN and NGOs.

The G7 stated the points they would consider when engaging with the Taliban such as 'respecting human rights, in particular those of women, girls and minorities, countering terrorism and enabling safe passage for those who wish to leave Afghanistan'. The statement further saw a harsh stance on Taliban where "(they) will continue to judge the Taliban by their actions, not by their words".

Support was extended for democratic elections in Libya, peaceful negotiations in Ethiopia, humanitarian aid to Sudan, while the 25 October Sudanese military takeover and the 'destabilizing activities' of the Wagner group were strongly denounced. Nonetheless, efforts of the G5 Sahel countries were lauded. The Indo-Pacific was extensively discussed given the need for it to be kept open and inclusive adhering to the rule of law. Promising further cooperation in the region, support was extended in the maritime domain. Expressing concern over the situation in Myanmar, the ministers endorsed ASEAN's Five Point Consensus to stabilize the region.

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The Meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs: Key Takeaways

By Joeana Cera Matthews

What happened?

On 30 November, Latvia hosted the two-day summit for the Meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs at Riga. Conducting a summit for the first time at Riga, the Alliance intended to send a larger political message regarding the essentiality of the Baltics to the Alliance. According to the NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, the meeting focused on three issues: “Russia’s military build-up in and around Ukraine, the actions by the regime in Belarus, and NATO’s leading role in arms control.”

On 01 December, the Alliance also met with Ukrainian and Georgian officials to discuss the crisis escalation.

Russia and Ukraine

NATO-Russia relations lie on shaky ground since the Kremlin’s decision to cut off ties with the Alliance. During the meeting, the NATO ministers reiterated their intent to stay united in efforts to deter Russia from taking further actions that would lead to escalation of tensions. Moscow was called on to be more “transparent, de-escalate and reduce tensions”. This was followed by a threat from Stoltenberg who warned: “Any future aggression against Ukraine would come at a high price. And have serious political and economic consequences for Russia.”

The organization has promised to observe and assess the fragile situation along the borders and promised its readiness to counter any Russian aggression. Ukraine was also commended on its “measured response” to a provocative Russia.

Adding to his comments on Russia, Stoltenberg stated the organization’s commitment to defend itself while

simultaneously deterring Russian military aggression. The organization noted the significance and necessity of dialogue during these tense times, and regretted the Russian decision to alienate itself from NATO. He hoped that the Kremlin would soon reverse their decision and “re-engage in the NATO-Russia Council for the benefit of peace and security.”

Responding to a question on the delay pertaining to the Ukrainian accession into NATO and Russia’s role in the same, Stoltenberg elaborated: “To become a member of NATO, you have to meet NATO standards, and there has to be a decision by 30 Allies. We need consensus in the Alliance to enlarge and to invite a new country to join our Alliance... So it is up to Ukraine and 30 Allies to decide when Ukraine is ready to join the Alliance. (Russia) has no veto, no right to interfere in that process.”

The Cynical Belarusian Regime

Stoltenberg condemned the Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s “cynical and inhumane” attempt at pressurizing Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia via a “hybrid campaign”. He said: “Lukashenko should stop using vulnerable people as pawns in a political game against other countries.” On 25 November, Polish President Andrzej Duda had called on NATO, pointing out the need for the deployment of additional forces on its eastern borders. At the joint press conference with Stoltenberg, Duda said: “Caution and vigilance from NATO, which is responsible for the military security of the allies, is necessary.”

Arms Control

Stated to be a “priority for NATO”, discussions included talks on arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation. The NATO allies affirmed their aim of supporting a “world without nuclear weapons” but expressed their concern over the “worrying” nature of the global nuclear trends. References were made regarding the growing arsenals of Russia and China, the backing out from treaties, and other disruptive technologies that were essentially altering the nature of the conflict. Stoltenberg assured: “NATO Allies are determined to lead a renewed effort to

strengthen arms control. Because in a more dangerous world, we need more predictability and more transparency.”

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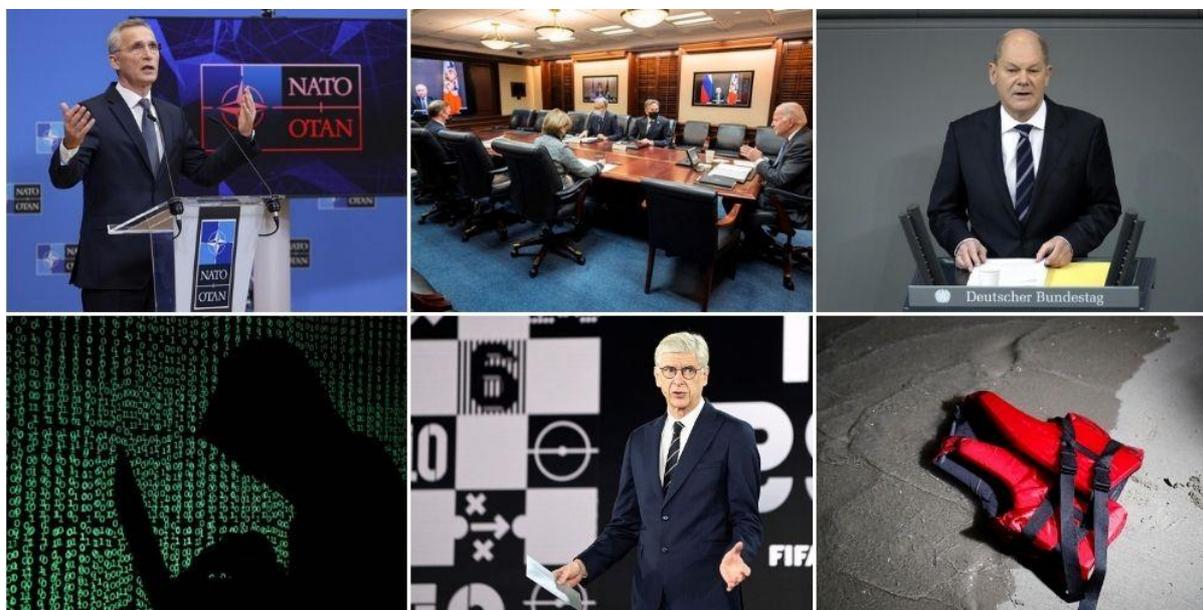
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Europe in December 2021

by Joeana Cera Matthews, Padmashree Anandhan and Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan



Source: AP Photo/Olivier Matthys, White House/Handout via Reuters, AP Photo/Michael Sohn, Reuters, Reuters/Valeriano Di Domenico, Reuters/Stephane

AUSTRIA

Austria sees third Chancellor in two months with Nehammer's swearing-in

On 06 December, Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen swore in Karl Nehammer as the country's Chancellor at Vienna's Hofburg Palace. The new chancellor took to Twitter, tweeting: "There is much to do! The pandemic is not over and it is straining our people... It must be our goal to drive back the division in our country and to fight together against the real enemy of our freedom and thus regain the trust of the people." The third leader in two months and the sixth in five years, Nehammer is now burdened with setting the government on a non-scandalous path along with curbing the pandemic's surge. The previous chancellor Alexander Schallenberg is expected to return to his post of foreign minister. The shift in power followed the resignation of former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, who stepped

down from politics to spend more time with his family. Nehammer, the Interior minister since January 2020, is also a Kurz-supporter who backs a hardline anti-immigration stance. Before he was officially sworn in, the new chancellor had reshuffled the Cabinet.

("Austria: Karl Nehammer sworn in as new chancellor," *Deutsche Welle*, 06 December 2021; Laurenze Gehrke, "New Austrian chancellor vows to 'drive back division' in the country," *POLITICO*, 06 December 2021)

Interior Minister Karl Nehammer set to become the new chancellor

On 03 December, Interior Minister Karl Nehammer was picked as the new head of the ruling People's Party (ÖVP) following the resignation of former party head Sebastian Kurz. He is also set to be the next chancellor since Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg followed suit with Kurz and resigned as well. As a formality,

³ EM Short Notes are notes published along with Daily Focus on Europe, every evening by the NIAS Europe Monitor team. The short notes give a brief overview of the latest developments in Europe, and also provide sources from which they are compiled. Visit <https://globalpolitics.in/europe/> to read them everyday.

Nehammer's nomination needs to be accepted by the Austrian president. Nehammer had become the interior minister in 2020. Following the appointment, the former interior minister chose to reshuffle the Cabinet. In this move, Gernot Blumel was replaced by Magnus Brunner to be the next finance minister. Schallenberg is expected to return to his previous post of being the foreign minister for the country. ("[Austria: Karl Nehammer set to become new chancellor](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 03 December 2021)

Schallenberg resigns following Kurz resignation

On 02 December, former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz declared his decision to resign from politics. Kurz, who recently donned the role of a father, maintained that his departure was an effort at prioritizing his family. Later in the day, Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg, who was the obvious nomination for party head, stated that he would not be running for the same and would soon resign as head of the government. He stated: "I firmly believe that both positions – head of government and leader of the Austrian party with the most votes – should soon once again be held by the same person... I am therefore making my post as chancellor available as soon as the relevant course has been set within the party." Kurz had stepped down as chancellor after corruption allegations were directed at him. He included a reference to the same in his resignation statement, saying how the "accusations" hampered his ability to work well. ("[Austrian chancellor resigns after Sebastian Kurz withdraws from politics](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 02 December 2021)

BELARUS

Anti-government protestors receive long jail terms

On 22 December, a court in Belarus sentenced four anti-government protestors to 18-20 years in prison. The four protestors were sentenced for 'terrorism' and 'arms trafficking' offenses while accusing them to be members of an anarchist group. The individuals were found with weapons and explosives, and during

the protests, they had set several police cars on fire and thrown Molotov cocktails at an administrative building. In October 2020, while crossing the Belarusian-Ukrainian border, they were caught and charged with arson. The incident and ruling have brought to light President Alexander Lukashenko's use of courts and police for his political advantage. This comes amidst the West continuing to not acknowledge Lukashenko as Belarus' legitimate leader and placing several sanctions on his regime. ("[Belarus: Lengthy prison terms for anti-government protesters](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 22 December 2021)

Lukashenko dissident Siarhei Tsikhanouski sentenced to 18 years in prison

On 14 December, the video blogger turned Lukashenko challenger Siarhei Tsikhanouski was sentenced to 18 years in prison by a Belarusian court. He has been charged on counts of organizing mass unrest and inciting social hatred. Siarhei, who is the husband of self-exiled Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, was arrested in 2020 for his election campaign against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. Following the verdict, Tsikhanouskaya tweeted on the trial conducted behind closed doors; she said: "The dictator publicly takes revenge on his strongest opponents. While hiding the political prisoners in closed trials, he hopes to continue repressions in silence. But the whole world watches. We won't stop." Five others went to trial with Tsikhanouski and were given sentences between 14 and 16 years. The US and Germany have, however, 'denounced' the verdicts calling them "scandalous" and "part of the ongoing brutal and systemic repression". (Andrew Roth, "[Belarus jails opposition leader's husband for 18 years](#)," *The Guardian*, 14 December 2021; "[Belarus jails Lukashenko opponent Siarhei Tsikhanouski](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 14 December 2021; "[Belarus opposition leader Tikhanovsky jailed for 18 years](#)," *France24*, 14 December 2021)

BULGARIA

Kiril Petkov assumes position as Bulgarian Prime Minister

On 13 December, the Bulgarian parliament voted in Harvard graduate and head of the We Continue the Change (PP) party Kiril Petkov as the Prime Minister of the country. The ruling coalition headed by Petkov includes his own party along with the leftist Socialists, anti-establishment ITN party, and the centre-right Democratic Bulgaria. Being the EU's poorest country, the new government will work under the motto of "zero tolerance to corruption". Commenting on the same, Petkov said: "I will insist that corruption from the lowest to the highest level be exposed." Petkov's newly formed government is burdened with reforming the economy and building up the health of the society. Speaking on the same, he said: "My first task will be to keep the electricity costs for consumers at bay and boost the level of vaccinations at least to the average level in the EU." (Tsvetelia Tsoleva, "[Harvard-educated Petkov elected as Bulgaria's prime minister](#)," *Reuters*, 13 December 2021)

Kiril Petkov seals coalition agreement with Radev's approval

On 11 December, Prime Minister-designate Kiril Petkov sealed a coalition government, consisting of four political parties. The draft government document was handed over to President Rumen Radev by the We Continue the Change (PP) party. Petkov commented: "Zero tolerance for corruption will be the motto of our coalition." The country's parliament is set to vote the government into power on 13 December. Radev advised the new coalition partners: "You and the coalition partners have a responsibility to reform the vicious power model inherited from 12 years of authoritarian rule, to tackle corruption and lawlessness, the inequalities and poverty they create." Responding to the same, Petkov said: "It is time, after 32 years, that Bulgarians saw power-holders who care for them; it is time young Bulgarians abroad saw Bulgaria as a promising place to return to, and our parents saw Bulgaria as a place where they can have a worthy pension and live their old age with dignity." ("[Bulgaria: Anti-corruption party leader asked to form government](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 11 December 2021)

DENMARK

Minister Stojberg voted out for violating human rights laws

On 21 December, former Danish Immigration Minister and current Parliament member Inger Stojberg was voted out by her fellow lawmakers. She had recently been given a 60-day prison sentence for separating underage couples while they were seeking asylum in the country. Social Democratic party spokesperson Jeppe Bruus said: "The conclusion in the case must be, that Mrs Inger Stojberg's conviction at the impeachment court is incompatible with being a member of parliament." Danish and human rights laws are in line while assessing cases of refugee couples, married or in a relationship. These cases were to be evaluated individually, and no blanket law was to be followed. Under Stojberg's tenure, 23 underage couples were separated. After the ousting, Stojberg said: "I would rather be voted out by my colleagues here in parliament because I have tried to protect some girls than getting voted out by the Danish people because I have turned a blind eye." ("[Denmark: Former immigration minister facing jail voted out of parliament](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 21 December 2021; Nikolaj Skydsgaard and Angus MacSwan, "[Danish ex-minister ousted from parliament after impeachment](#)," *Reuters*, 21 December 2021)

FINLAND

UN names Finland as the happiest country in the world

Recently the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network named Finland as the happiest country in the world. Prime Minister of Finland Sanna Marin who became the youngest world leader in 2019 during an interview said: "Equality, a well-funded education system and a strong welfare state are the secret to the success of the world's happiest nation." During the pandemic, Marin gained popularity for managing the crisis but the five-party coalition has begun to show the gaps within. On a question posed to her on her thoughts if future governments would continue to push for equality, she said: "I think so. Because it's work that's ongoing. We have always worked for equality in Finland, and I

think it's also important in the future, and not only the equality of men and women, or the genders, but also the equality of minority groups in society. We have to make sure that structures don't act as barriers to people. So, there are many things to do." (Alexandra Topping, "Finland is the world's happiest nation – and I want to keep it that way, says prime minister," *The Guardian*, 05 December 2021)

Finland's first case of suspected far-right terrorism

On 04 December, Finland arrested five men suspected to have planned a bombing and a gun attack. The men belonged to the Southwestern municipality of Kankaanpää and were under surveillance for two years as some of them had previous convictions. The suspects participated in far-right ideologies of 'accelerationism' which, is a white supremacist ideological tendency that foments racial division. This ideology has been at the forefront of US mass shootings. The Police reported that they do not belong to a specific extremist organization but work as small groups. The group was found to possess arms and ammunition with homemade explosives for a possible attack. ("Finland arrests 5 over far-right terror plot," *Deutsche Welle*, 04 December 2021)

FRANCE

Paris: Taxi firm G7 bans usage of Tesla cars

On 15 December, G7, the largest taxi company in Paris, banned the use of Model 3 cars of Tesla after a deadly incident. As per the news report, many were injured and one was killed as the Tesla car of Model 3 went out of control. The Prosecutors of Paris have filed an investigation under charges of manslaughter and unintentional injury. According to France's Transport Minister Jean-Baptiste Djebbari, no evidence has been proven that the accident occurred due to a technical problem. In response, Tesla's Europe chief executive said that the company had not faced any safety alerts so far in the particular model. The system of Tesla cars has been criticized by its users for its "Autopilot" feature, which gives the car unattended control. Similar to France, the US is also investigating the

Autopilot system, after facing a series of Tesla crashes. ("Tesla Model 3: Paris' largest taxi firm suspends cars after a fatal crash," *BBC*, 15 December 2021)

Macron reveals priority agenda for upcoming EU Presidency

On 09 December, French President Emmanuel Macron revealed the priorities of Paris for the upcoming presidency of the 27-nation bloc. The agenda covered six aspects: reforming the Schengen, defending Europe's social model, reconciling climate ambitions and economic development, digital transformation, the rule of law, and the French presidential race. Towards reforming the Schengen, Macron said that he wanted Europe to control its borders and will introduce a reform of the Schengen free-movement area. He said: "....we must absolutely find a Europe that knows how to protect its borders and find a political organisation that puts us in a position to defend its values, which is why we will initiate, under this presidency, a reform of the Schengen area." Another highlight of the schedule is the plan to introduce the EU's new border carbon tax. This plan aims to implement the carbon tax at the borders of Europe, which will enable transition in industries and promote competition. Macron said: "move towards a European tool to fight deforestation." Apart from these, France's priorities also include transforming Europe into a digital power. ("Six takeaways as Macron unveils priorities of French EU presidency," *Euronews*, 09 December 2021)

GERMANY

Germany's new coalition to formulate arms export policy

On 26 December, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said that the new coalition government would be introducing laws to constrict the exports of arms. The announcement comes as Germany sees a high record of weapons exports of EUR five billion to Egypt and Singapore. Exports shot up, specifically before former Chancellor Angela Merkel's exit. Germany was exporting EUR 8.02 billion worth of arms before COVID-19, contributing 5.5 percent to the global arms exports in 2020. It has in

2021, scaled up to exports worth EUR 9.04. Although the existing government has denied claims of outdoing the legal framework, Baerbock stated that they were reviewing the arms export policy. The government is set to formulate a new export control law for regulating clearer criteria for the approval of arms exports. (Nik Martin, "[Germany: Baerbock vows new law to curb weapons exports](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 26 December 2021)

Olaf Scholz delivers his first formal government briefing

On 15 December, Germany's new Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered his inaugural address to the Bundestag. *Deutsche Welle* reported that he spoke on nine topics ranging from "calls to get vaccinated" to "China, defense and relationship with the US". Scholz outlined his government's new policy agendas after his three-party coalition government was formally sworn in last week. His comments on migration and citizenship were about Germany accepting itself as a country of immigration and assured to make it easier to become citizens of the country. He said: "We are going to make multiple citizenship possible, in keeping with the reality of many people in this country." Scholz also expressed his "solidarity with Poland, given the situation at its border with Belarus" while speaking about European unity. At the same time, he emphasized the rule of law to deal with political extremism and financial issues. Furthermore, he presented the government's policies on mobility, affordable housing, energy transition and climate neutrality. Scholz even thanked his predecessor Angela Merkel for a smooth transition as *Deutsche Welle* reported: "The civility of the transfer from the former to the current government was admired worldwide, and earned the respect of many across the globe." (Alistair Walsh, "[Germany's new Chancellor Olaf Scholz briefs Bundestag for the first time](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 16 December 2021)

Olaf Scholz: New Chancellor of Germany

On 08 December, the three-party coalition elected Olaf Scholz as German Chancellor following the term of the long-serving chancellor Angela Merkel. Wishing the new

chancellor, Merkel said: "I know from personal experience what a moving moment it is to be elected to this office." Previously in September, the Social Democrats became the largest party in the election, which later pursued the Greens and the business-focused Free Democratic Party (FDP) to join. At the regional level, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and French President Emmanuel Macron expressed their wish to work with Scholz in the future. With a new chancellor in place, the new cabinet will comprise 16 ministers, seven from the SPD, five from the Greens, and Four from the FDP. Being a former finance minister, Scholz has signed few economic policies on short-time working schemes and short-term allowances. But the plans are yet to materialize. ("[Olaf Scholz formally sworn in as German chancellor](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 08 December 2021; Faisal Islam, "[What Olaf Scholz means for the world economy](#)," *BBC*, 09 December 2021)

Baerbock set to kick off duties with a trip to Paris

On 09 December, the newly appointed German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock set out on her first official trip. She visited Paris and Brussels and is expected to visit Poland on 10 December. Speaking on the importance of curbing climate change, she said: "I'm going to give international climate policies the space they deserve on the diplomatic agenda from day one... The most important task in diplomacy is preventing, containing and preferably solving crises... And no crisis is a greater threat to the future of humanity than the climate crisis." Meeting with French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, she commented on their discussions regarding 'shared goals' along with issues such as the Poland-Belarus border crisis and the tensions along the Ukrainian borders. The possibility of diplomatically boycotting the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics was also considered. At Brussels, Baerbock met with EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell and the NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg. When asked about the idea behind the trip, she said: "The most important thing for me during this inaugural visit is to listen to our closest

partners. We won't pursue our own ideas and interests over the heads of our neighbours, and definitely not at their cost." (["Germany's new foreign minister puts climate 'high up' on diplomatic agenda," Deutsche Welle, 09 December 2021](#))

Olaf Scholz becomes German Chancellor

On 08 December, the Bundestag voted in Social Democrat Olaf Scholz as the German Chancellor. Scholz, who was the finance minister in the previous government, is Germany's ninth post war chancellor. The parliamentary vote saw the new Chancellor winning a majority of 395 of 736 members' ballots. He will head a coalition government called the "traffic light" which consists of the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Free Democrats (FDP). President Frank-Walter Steinmeier is expected to officially appoint Scholz as Chancellor. He replaced Angela Merkel who had been Chancellor for 16 long years. (Philip Oltermann, "[Olaf Scholz elected to succeed Angela Merkel as German chancellor," The Guardian, 08 December 2021](#); Laurenze Gehrke, "[Olaf Scholz elected German Chancellor," POLITICO, 08 December 2021](#))

ITALY

Pope Francis addresses COVID-19, conflict during Christmas prayer

On 25 December, Pope Francis warned about the worsening pandemic situation and called for a dialogue. Praying on Christmas, he also urged for peace on the conflicts and tensions in the Middle East, North Africa regions and Myanmar. He said: "We continue to witness a great number of conflicts, crises and disagreements, we have become so used to them (conflicts) that immense tragedies are now being passed over in silence; we risk not hearing the cry of pain and distress of so many of our brothers and sisters." The Pope's prayer was received by more than 2,000 public members and 200 religious figures. Other highlights from the Pope's prayer were issues of gender violence and rising tensions between Ukraine and Russia. (["Pope prays for end to pandemic, world conflicts in Christmas address," Deutsche Welle, 24 December 2021](#))

Suspected gas explosion in Sicily

On 13 December, a suspected gas explosion in the Sicilian town of Ravanusa induced the collapse of four buildings, killing seven people. Authorities stated that the houses had immediately collapsed, with three also being damaged by the blast. A resident in the adjacent building said: "It was as if a plane had crashed into our building." Firefighters and volunteers removed rubble with their bare hands to prevent further collapses. The blast was speculated to have been caused by a gas leak, and an investigation for manslaughter is underway. Residents said there was a strong gas smell for several days, but the gas operator Italgas responded that they did not receive any leak reports. (["Italy: Seven dead as rescuers find bodies in Sicily blast," BBC, 13 December 2021](#); "[Seven dead in Sicily after gas explosion causes building collapse," Euronews, 13 December 2021](#))

THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Storm Arwen's devastation to be followed by Storm Barra

On 06 December, *The Guardian* reported the Republic of Ireland to have issued a red alert while the UK issued yellow warnings in anticipation of the storm named 'Barra'. Barra follows in the footsteps of the Storm Arwen that 'wreaked havoc' in Ireland and the UK. Warnings include those of dangerous coastal waves, atrocious driving conditions, travel delays, flooding and infrastructural damage. The Met Office meteorologist Annie Shuttleworth said: "That means that we'll have especially large waves so there is a potential risk to life in these areas... likely to cause quite widespread travel disruption and potential road closures, delays to rail and ferries and so on, There is a chance of damage to buildings too." The 80 mph forecasted gusts are predicted to make landfall by 07 and 08 December. (Mark Brown, "[Storm Barra: multiple warnings issued for Ireland and UK," The Guardian, 06 December 2021](#))

MALTA

Possession and cultivation of cannabis to be legalized

On 13 December, *The Guardian* reported that Malta would be the first European country to legalize the possession and cultivation of cannabis for personal use, beating Luxembourg. The law will come into effect over the weekend after a vote favouring the legislation is held on 14 December. According to the new law, seven grams of cannabis can be possessed by those 18 years and above; four plants of the drug can be grown while up to 50 grams of the dried product can be stocked up. The Maltese Minister for Research, Innovation and the Coordination of the Post-COVID-19 Strategy Owen Bonnici stated: "There is a wave of understanding now that the hard-fist approach against cannabis users was disproportionate, unjust and it was rendering a lot of suffering to people who are leading exemplary lives. But the fact that they make use on a personal basis of cannabis is putting them in the jaws of criminality... I'm very glad that Malta will be the first country which will put words in statute in a comprehensive manner with a regulatory authority." (Daniel Boffey, "[Malta to legalize cannabis for personal use in European first](#)," *The Guardian*, 13 December 2021)

NORTHERN IRELAND

Storm Barra ascends in Northern Ireland

On 07 December, Storm Barra hit Northern Ireland with heavy snow and strong winds. As a result, a yellow warning was issued in Northern Ireland, while a red warning was in place in the South-west of the Republic of Ireland. The storm prompted schools to remain closed as the country was still recovering from Storm Arwen that hit just 10 days ago. Winds recorded 122 kilometers per hour at Orlock, County Down, with sleet and snow covering the west of Northern Ireland. The Irish Farmers' Association urged its members to take utmost precaution while the Irish Police advised its people to avoid travel in the red and orange zones of warning. About 1,000 homes in Northern Ireland have been without power since the evening of 07 December. The power outage has raised people's concerns regarding the

government's vulnerable policy and management of storms, as they are not uncommon to the region. ("[Storm Barra brings strong winds, heavy rain and snow to NI](#)," *BBC*, 08 December 2021; Mark Brown, "[Storm Barra: multiple warnings issued for Ireland and UK](#)," *The Guardian*, 06 December 2021)

NORTH MACEDONIA

Socialists' head Dimitar Kovacevski becomes prime minister-designate

On 28 December, the new leader of the ruling Socialists (SDSM) Dimitar Kovacevski announced that the party had approved him as North Macedonia's prime minister-designate. The announcement came post-ex-Prime Minister Zoran Zaev's resignation in the week prior to 28 December. Kovacevski stated: "As the SDSM president and new prime minister-designate, I will be led exclusively by principles of unity, responsibility, dedication and efficiency." Kovacevski is set to lead a government that will have to deal with issues ranging from the pandemic to the energy crisis. On 29 December, President Stevo Pendarovski formally appointed Kovacevski to the position. The new leader is expected to form a new cabinet within 20 days. Reuters cited local media reporting that Parliamentary Speaker Talat Xhaferi stated the vote for the same was predicted for 15 or 16 January 2022. ("[New leader of North Macedonia's Socialists becomes PM-designate](#)," *Reuters*, 28 December 2021)

POLAND

President Duda vetoes controversial media law

On 27 December, President Andrzej Duda vetoed a law that was speculated to silence a channel in Poland called TVN24. Duda said: "I am vetoing it." His remarks followed the critical response by the EU and the US to the law. TVN24 was a US-owned news channel, and its board members reacted to the statement saying they accepted the veto "with appreciation and joy". As reported by *The Guardian*: "Law would have prevented companies outside the EEA from holding a controlling stake in Polish media companies." Duda mentioned that the law was vetoed as it could have violated an economic treaty with the US. Poland has

been having issues with press freedom since the country's ruling party Law and Justice (PiS), was elected. According to Reporters Without Borders, since 2015, Poland has reached the 64th rank on the World Press Freedom Index, indicating a decrease in the country's press freedom. ("[Polish president vetoes media law criticised by US and EU](#)," *The Guardian*, 27 December 2021; "[Polish president vetoes controversial media law criticised by US and EU](#)," *France24*, 28 December 2021)

Kaczynski condemns German efforts of changing EU into "fourth reich"

On 24 December, the Law and Justice party (PiS) leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski condemned German efforts at converting the EU into a "German fourth reich", while speaking to the Polish newspaper *GPC*. He said: "(some countries) are not enthusiastic at the prospect of a German fourth reich being built on the basis of the EU... If we Poles agreed with this kind of modern-day submission we would be degraded in different ways." Poland, has earlier, accused the EU of "bureaucratic centralism" and stated that the European Court of Justice (ECJ) was "instrumentalized" for forwarding its "federalist ideas". ("[Polish deputy PM says Germany wants to turn EU into 'fourth reich'](#)," *The Guardian*, 24 December 2021)

Protests erupt post demands to veto media law

On 19 December, Poland saw protests erupting across major cities as Polish President Andrzej Duda was called on to veto a controversial media law. Around thousands of demonstrators even gathered outside the presidential palace. One of the protestors commented on the bill, stating: "We need free speech. I would like the president not to sign it." According to critics, the new law is a coercive effort at selling US-owned TVN24. The lower house of the Polish parliament, called the Sejm, reconsidered the legislation without notice during the closing session for 2021. The bill had been previously voted down by the Senate which is the upper house. The protests come amid concerns of increased repression of media freedom in Poland. Civic Platform member and Senator Bogdan

Klich commented on the bill, saying: "At this moment we are talking about TVN, but it is not just about TVN. It's about the future of free speech in Poland, about the future of our democracy." The US State Department spokesperson Ned Price released a statement on the legislation. He said: "The United States is deeply troubled by the passage in Poland today of a law that would undermine freedom of expression, weaken media freedom and erode foreign investors' confidence in their property rights and the sanctity of contracts in Poland." The European Commission Vice President Vera Jourova also responded to the bill: "Once this bill becomes a law, the commission will not hesitate to take action in case of non-compliance with EU law." ("[Poland: Protesters urge president to veto media law](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 December 2021; "['We need free speech': protests erupt across Poland over controversial media bill](#)," *The Guardian*, 20 December 2021)

Parliament votes in Media Reform bill targeting TVN

On 17 December, the Polish parliament ratified a media reform bill aimed at the Discovery-owned TVN. The bill is intended to reduce the media companies being foreignly owned. However, critics claim that the bill is directed at TVN which openly criticizes the Polish government. This bill has been a source of tension in Poland-US relations. Polish President Andrzej Duda is expected to sign the bill for it to come into effect. Duda's ratification would mean the bill becomes a law implying foreign firms would no longer have a say in Polish television and radio. The ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has upheld the bill stating the ban would allow for less foreign influence over public opinion. ("[Poland: Parliament approves controversial media reform bill](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 17 December 2021)

PORTUGAL

Portugal's Interior minister Eduardo Cabrita resigns

On 04 December, Portugal's Interior Minister Eduardo Cabrita, resigned after his car was involved in a crash that killed a road worker. He had been repeatedly urged

to resign, but he refused responsibility, as he was in the backseat while his driver was driving. The government recently was not able to pass a state budget bill and with the snap elections coming up next month, he decided to step down. In his tenure as interior minister, he was accused of scandals, a custodial death by officers, and the mismanagement of the wildfires in central Portugal that killed hundreds of Portuguese. He also faced heat as he had given protective bandanas to the country's firefighters that were flammable. The Portuguese Prime Minister accepted his resignation after thanking him for his service and informed the President. ("Portugal's interior minister resigns after car crash that killed road worker," *The Guardian*, 04 December 2021)

RUSSIA

Tolokonnikova, another dissenting figure to be labelled "foreign agent"

On 30 December, Pussy Riot punk group member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova was labelled as a "foreign agent" by the Russian authorities. This decision came after the court ordered the NGO Memorial to shut down for failing to mark its foreign-funded publications as "foreign agent". Tolokonnikova has been an art collector, a famous satirist and a prominent figure of dissent in Russia. As reported by *Deutsche Welle*: "she took part in a 2012 protest inside Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral. She spent nearly two years in prison." The authorities in the Kremlin have justified their actions by stating it to be in the country's interest as foreign agents are interfering in Russian affairs through NGOs, journalists and certain people in the country. ("Russia labels Pussy Riot member, others as 'foreign agents,'" *Deutsche Welle*, 31 December 2021; "Russia declares Pussy Riot member, art collector and satirist 'foreign agents,'" *France24*, 30 December 2021)

Memorial International ordered to close

On 28 December, Russia's Supreme Court ordered the closure of the country's most prominent human rights group called Memorial International. The prosecutors accused Memorial saying it: "creates a false image of the USSR as a terrorist state and

denigrates the memory of World War II." The judge ruled for closure for the group as it failed to label its foreign-funded publications as "foreign agent". The foreign agent tag is a law in Russia that activists and human rights organizations have criticized since it was introduced. The Memorial International was founded in the 1980s and has reported on the human rights issue since then. As written by *France24*, the Center also worked on "the rights of political prisoners, migrants and other marginalized groups, and highlighted abuses, especially in the turbulent North Caucasus region that includes Chechnya". Memorial said that it would appeal the verdict and the NGO's lawyer said: "We are positive that this motion is unlawful. Yet, this is a political decision." ("Top Russian court orders shutdown of human rights group Memorial," *POLITICO*, 28 December 2021; "Russia's Supreme Court orders closure of top human rights group Memorial," *France24*, 28 December 2021)

Foreigners to be tested every three months for diseases and drugs

On 19 December, The Russian parliament implemented an amendment that was passed in June 2021 regarding a law that requires foreigners working in the country to undergo medical check-ups. According to *Deutsche Welle*, the law would require foreign professionals and their family members to be tested every three months for "syphilis, HIV, leprosy, tuberculosis, and COVID-19". The rules even apply to children over the age of six, and if any foreigner tests positive for the diseases above mentioned, their visa would either be declined or revoked. German Russian Chamber of Commerce spokesperson Thorsten Gutmann said: "Originally, people were going to be required to take the tests every time they entered the country, but now they will have to do them every three months." Germany has been trying to get the new regulations dropped but have been met with minimal success. Ten foreign business associations such as the Association of European Businesses and the American Chamber of Commerce have appealed to Russia regarding the new rules. The new rules would cause severe impediments to

Russia's economic development and foreign investments. (Sergei Guscha, "[Foreigners in Russia outraged by new medical checks](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 December 2021)

Russian Olympic Uniform not to bear the country flag for Beijing Olympics

On 10 December, Russia unveiled the national uniform for the upcoming Beijing Winter Olympics 2022 without the country's tricolour flag. Zsport, couturier for the Russian Olympic Team has revealed the uniforms of red, white, blue and grey. These uniforms were designed with the logo of the Russian Olympic Committee instead of the national flag of Russia. The change in uniforms come due to sanction levied by World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) against Russia for disclosing the doctored laboratory data to international anti-doping authorities that could have aided to recognize drug cheats. ("[Russia presents flagless uniforms for Beijing Games](#)," *Reuters*, 11 December 2021)

Putin's comments on Donbas

On 09 December, Russian President Vladimir Putin said: "We see and know what is happening in Donbas," referring to the conflict zone; "It certainly looks like genocide." His comments highlighted the issue of discrimination against Russian speakers living in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. Furthermore, Putin commented, "I have to say that Russophobia is a first step towards genocide." Vladimir Putin spoke about these issues and concerns as US President Joe Biden was scheduled to meet the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. In the background, more than 90,000 Russian troops have been speculated to be stationed near Ukraine's borders, and tensions are at an all-time high. Biden spoke with Putin two days ago regarding the escalating tensions over a video call, and the leaders discussed the security concerns around Ukraine. ("[Russia Ukraine: Putin compares Donbas war zone to genocide](#)," *BBC*, 10 December 2021; "[Putin says conflict in eastern Ukraine looks like genocide](#)," *France24*, 09 December 2021)

SPAIN

Canary Islands: La Palma volcano eruption ends

On 25 December, Spanish officials on the island of La Palma announced the volcanic eruption to have ended. The declaration came after the Cumbre Vieja volcano on La Palma, one of the Canary Islands, showed reduced activity for 10 continuous days. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez expressed his relief on the same and commented: "We will continue working together, all the institutions, to relaunch the wonderful island of La Palma and repair the damage caused." He also termed the announcement "the best Christmas present". The Spanish government has promised to fund EUR 225 million in recovery efforts. The Canaries' Volcanic Emergency Committee Director Julio Perez said: "It's not joy or satisfaction – how we can define what we feel? it 's an emotional relief. And hope. Because now, we can apply ourselves and focus completely on the rebuilding work." The eruption began on 19 September 2021 and has till date caused property damage worth EUR 900 million. No casualties have been reported so far. ("[Spain declares end to La Palma volcano eruption](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 25 December 2021)

Storm Barra's effects in the country

On 10 December, a person in Spain was killed when the river Argal burst out of its banks and engulfed part of Spain's Navarre region. The river's overflowing caused landslides that killed the individual who was a resident in the village of Sunbilla. People in the area are kayaking their way around the regional capital of Pamplona as the waters are at waist-deep depth. Storm Barra brought torrential rains in the low-lying regions with thawed snow in the higher altitudes. The storm rains and snow were the cause of the river's overflow. The government in the area had declared a level two flood warning as they predicted the weather to be the same till Saturday. ("[Spanish floods claim first victim as towns are engulfed](#)," *BBC*, 10 December 2021; Vincent West, "[Severe flooding kills one as Storm Barra drenches northern Spain](#)," *Reuters*, 10 December 2021)

THE NETHERLANDS

Mark Rutte to get a fourth term

On 13 December, political parties agreed to form a coalition government that would give the incumbent Prime Minister Mark Rutte a fourth term in office. The four political parties of Rutte's center-right VVD, the progressive D66, the center-right CDA and the conservative ChristenUnie agreed on the deal before the Parliament meeting on 15 December. Rutte remained in a caretaker capacity as the third cabinet resigned in mid-January over the scandal where thousands of parents were wrongly accused. The country has run without a government for nine months now, the lengthiest in the country's history. Rutte was dubbed the "Teflon prime minister" as he skillfully dodged the scandals. He will be the longest-serving head of a government in Europe after Hungary's Viktor Orban. ("Dutch parties seal coalition deal a record nine months after vote," *France24*, 13 December 2021; "Netherlands: Dutch parties to form government 9 months after vote," *Deutsche Welle*, 13 December 2021)

THE UNITED KINGDOM

The UK government reveals a proposal to reform the Human Rights Act

On 14 December, the UK government proposed new legislation to attain a balance between individual rights, personal responsibility, and larger public interest. The rule aims to restore confidence in the legal system of the European convention, which means parliament's role as a decision-maker is definitive. According to Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Justice Dominic Raab: "Our plans for a Bill of Rights will strengthen typically British rights like freedom of speech and trial by jury, while preventing abuses of the system and adding a healthy dose of common sense." The critics have warned that the final measure to the Human Rights Act might be confusing. (Dominic Raab, "Plan to reform Human Rights Act," *Ministry of Justice*, 14 December 2021; "Human Rights Act: UK government unveils reform proposals," *BBC*, 14 December 2021)

UKRAINE

National Bureau of Investigation condemns former President of "treason"

On 20 December, Ukraine's National Bureau of Investigation accused former President Petro Poroshenko of "committing treason" and backing "terrorist organizations". The accusations suspect him of having supported the separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk during 2014-2015 to sell coal worth EUR 48.7 million. Poroshenko, who was president from 2014 to 2019, is widely regarded as pro-Russian. Following the condemnations, Poroshenko was reported to have left Ukraine and is expected to return only after the New Year holidays. ("Ukraine ex-leader Petro Poroshenko accused of 'treason'," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 December 2021)

REGIONAL

Turkish Defense Minister Akar comments on the Bosnian crisis

On 28 December, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said: "If desired, Turkey can work as a mediator in Bosnia and Herzegovina." He further mentioned to the CNN Turk broadcaster: "We view Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole. We have done all we can for its unity and stability, and we will continue to do so." Turkey has maintained close ties with Bosnia and has often praised Bosnia's wartime leader Alija Izetbegovic; Ankara has also maintained close relations with Bosnia's tripartite inter-ethnic presidency. As reported by Reuters, the recent tensions arose after "Serb lawmakers earlier this month voted to start pulling their autonomous Serb Republic out of Bosnia's armed forces, tax system, and judiciary". Turkey stated that the vote was "wrong, dangerous" as it could threaten the region's stability and called on the EU to intervene in the situation. ("Turkey offers to mediate in Bosnian crisis 'to ensure stability'," *Reuters*, 29 December 2021)

Russian troops along the Ukrainian border return to permanent bases

On 25 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported the Russian Defense Ministry to have released a statement that said: "the operations for the Southern Military District forces had taken place across a stream of southern regions, including Rostov, Krasnodar and Crimea." Around 10,000 troops are said to have left the border –

returning to permanent bases – after completing military drills which lasted for a month. This de-escalation comes amid hopes of talks between the US and Russia along with NATO which is scheduled for the beginning of January 2022. On 24 December, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov commented on the same, saying: “to discuss de-escalation, we expect our opponents in Washington to provide specific answers to our proposals in January.” He also maintained that it was up to Russia how it dealt with its troops. He added: “Whatever Russia does with its troops, it does that on its own territory and we can’t allow anyone to challenge that sovereign right... Russia takes certain action to move and redeploy its armed forces on its territory in view of unfriendly moves by our opponents from Nato, the US and some European countries that have made unambiguous manoeuvres near our borders, conducted reconnaissance flights and deployed warships.” There also exist possibilities of talks under the Normandy Format. (“[Thousands of Russian troops leave Ukraine border](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 26 December 2021; “[Ukraine: Russian consulate in Lviv hit by molotov cocktail](#),” *The Guardian*, 24 December 2021)

Claims of Russian mercenaries deployed in eastern Ukraine raise concerns

On 23 December, *Reuters* reported four sources to have claimed the presence of Russian mercenaries in separatist-controlled eastern Ukraine. One of the sources was cited saying: “There is a full house. They are gathering everybody with combat experience.” Responding to the claims, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said: “It’s the first we’ve heard of this and we don’t know how reliable these assertions are.” Two of the four sources stated that the deployment was for “defensive purposes”. Ex-Prime Minister of Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and head of the Union of Donbas Volunteers Alexander Borodai said: “If and when it’s needed, we’ll call people - but there has been no call for now.” Borodai is also a lawmaker for Russia’s ruling United Russia. (Maria Tsvetkova and Anton Zverev, “[Russian mercenaries deploy to eastern](#)

[Ukraine - sources](#),” *Reuters*, 23 December 2021)

European Commission initiates infringement procedure against Poland over rule of law violations

On 22 December, the European Commission declared the initiation of an infringement procedure against Poland for violating EU law via its Constitutional Tribunal. A “letter of formal notice” has been sent to Poland; financial penalties are set to follow if the latter fails to meet EU requirements and reply within two months. Poland’s Constitutional Tribunal had earlier stated that state law took precedence over EU law. This made the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled against the Tribunal, with the European Commission stating it “has serious doubts on the independence and impartiality” of the Polish court. The Commission further stated: “(The Tribunal ruling was) in breach of the general principles of autonomy, primacy, effectiveness and uniform application of Union law and the binding effect of ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ).” Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki responded to the move on national television, saying: “... a trend for... bureaucratic centralism is unfortunately progressing in Brussels but it has to be stopped.” Meanwhile, Polish Deputy Justice Minister Sebastian Kaleta tweeted: “The EC (European Commission) is initiating proceedings and wants to subordinate the Constitutional Tribunal in Poland to EU law... This is an attack on the Polish constitution and our sovereignty.” (“[EU starts new legal action against Poland over rule of law](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 22 December 2021; Jennifer Rankin, “[Brussels launches legal action over Polish rulings against EU law](#),” *The Guardian*, 22 December 2021)

Germany and France call for a renewed ceasefire in eastern Ukraine

On 23 December, Germany and France called on Ukraine and pro-Russian separatist forces to respect the ceasefire pledge in eastern Ukraine. Germany and France gave a joint statement saying: “We urge the sides to respect the ceasefire and to continue discussions on further steps in

the humanitarian field, e.g. the opening of crossing points and the exchange of detainees." Ukraine claimed pro-Russian separatists had violated the peace three times and the escalating situation urged Germany and France to de-escalate tensions. Furthermore, Berlin and Paris reminded the separatists of the 2019 Paris summit's conclusions and urged the parties to abide by it. (Sarah Marsh and Maria Sheahan, "[Germany, France urge all sides to respect eastern Ukraine ceasefire](#)," *Reuters*, 23 December 2021; "[Germany and France urge pro-Russian forces and Ukraine to stick to ceasefire](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 21 December 2021)

Two German diplomats were expelled in retaliation to Berlin

On 20 December, Moscow expelled two German diplomats in a tit-for-tat move to Berlin. On 16 December, Berlin had sent back two Russian diplomats after a German court ruled a life-imprisonment sentence for a Russian national as he was speculated to be an FSB agent. The Russian Foreign Ministry said: "The German ambassador was informed that two diplomatic employees of the German embassy in Russia were declared 'persona non grata' as a symmetrical response." The German government criticized the move as it aggravated tensions between the two countries. Germany's Foreign Ministry said: "This move comes as no surprise, but it is completely unwarranted from the federal government's perspective." The retaliatory behaviour owed to a ruling by the Berlin court where a Russian national called Vadim Krasikov had shot and killed an ethnic Chechen of Georgian nationality. The Berlin court mentioned that the act was in "retaliation" as the victim was an opponent of the Russians. ("[Russia expels 2 German diplomats over Berlin park assassination](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 December 2021; "[Russia Expels 2 German Diplomats in Tit-for-Tat Move](#)," *The Moscow Times*, 20 December 2021)

Lithuania: German Defense Minister visits troops; condemns Russian actions

On 19 December, German Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht visited German troops stationed in Lithuania and stated that NATO

is set to consider Russia's proposals regarding the alliance's "military affairs on its eastern borders". However, she maintained that Russia would not be allowed to "dictate" the alliance's actions. On 17 December, Russia had given a list of military demands it required NATO and the US to fulfil. Lambrecht stated: "We have to talk to each other, which means discussing the proposals that Russia has put forward. But it cannot be that Russia dictates to NATO partners how they position themselves... We need to solve the current tensions on the diplomatic level but just as well by putting up a credible deterrence." Lithuanian Defence Minister Arvydas Anusauskas, also present alongside Lambrecht, commented: "We need to support Ukraine with all means, which includes the delivery of lethal weapons." ("[German defense minister: Russia will not 'dictate' to NATO](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 December 2021)

Fear rises amongst the Baltic states as Russian troops align on the Ukraine border

On 19 December, Sonya Ciesnik in an analysis in *France24* examined the situation of Baltic states facing the threat of Russia on the Ukrainian border. Lithuania along with Estonia and Latvia published a wish list of security guarantees over the concern of the recent line-up of 100,000 Russian troops on the border of Ukraine. According to Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis: "I believe Russia is really gearing up for war and is doing it seriously, I still have the feeling that we are not taking this seriously enough, including what's going on in Lithuania as well." The fear amongst the Baltic states is due to two reasons. One, experience as a former Soviet Union member, and two, being unnervingly close with NATO. The anticipated area under threat is said to be the Suwalki gap; this patch of land which is around 90 kilometers lies at the center of the Baltic states. As per an associate analyst: "If Russia gained control of the corridor, they would cut off the connection between the Baltic states and the other NATO allies. It would be a nightmare situation." He also added that to secure the region, the first objective of NATO must be to increase the number of the US armed forces along the shared

eastern borders. The second objective must be to lay a path for both Ukraine and Georgia to initiate the membership process into NATO. (Sonya Ciesnik, "[Amid Russia tensions, Lithuania advocates for more robust Western response](#)," *France24*, 19 December 2021)

EU meets with eastern counterparts, discusses Ukraine-Russia tension

On 15 December, EU leaders met with leaders from Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan as part of the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative. The primary topic of discussion was the escalating tensions at the Russian-Ukrainian border. On the sidelines of this meet, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy gathered with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron in an effort to call for the Normandy format of talks to de-escalate tensions at the border. European Council President Charles Michel also joined the discussion. A statement released by Macron's office read: "The three leaders reaffirmed their commitment to... negotiations in order to find a lasting solution for the conflict and to preserve Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity." Commenting on the sanctions promised by the West, Zelenskyy said: "For us, it is important to have sanctions applied before, rather than after, the conflict would happen, because if they were applied after the conflict would happen, this would basically make them meaningless." ("[EU talks with former-Soviet republics with eye on Russia](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 15 December 2021)

Serbia moves closer to EU membership

On 14 December, Serbia opened a series of talks with the European Union on environmental policies. The steps taken by Serbia helped it to move closer to joining the European Union; as the EU's Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi said: "Serbia is taking another very important step forward in joining the European Union." Belgrade discussed energy, transport, trans-European infrastructure networks, and climate change. But, the only impediment Serbia would face soon was concerning its

relations with Kosovo. Slovenian Foreign Minister Gasper Dovzan said: "Serbia's progress on the rule of law and the normalization of relations with Kosovo remains essential and will continue to determine the overall pace of the negotiations." All countries who want to join the EU have to conform to its standards. Serbia had refused to recognize Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. After a conflict between ethnic Albanian separatists and Serbian forces, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia. ("[Serbia a step closer to EU membership but Kosovo relations remain key](#)," *Euronews*, 14 December 2021.

Russia-Ukraine border standoff: Wagner group targeted by EU sanctions

On 13 December, the EU targeted Russian-based private military contractor Wagner Group after condemning its activities on behalf of the Kremlin. The EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell stated: "They represent a threat and create instability in a number of countries around the world." Along with Wagner, eight individuals and three energy companies based in Syria were also targeted as part of the sanctions which include asset bans and travel freezes. In the bloc's official journal, a statement reads: "The Wagner Group is responsible for serious human rights abuses in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, Sudan and Mozambique... (they) are involved in serious human rights abuses, including torture and extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and killings, or in destabilizing activities in some of the countries they operate in." ("[EU sanctions target Russian 'Wagner' mercenary group](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 13 December 2021; "[EU imposes sanctions on Russian mercenary group Wagner over human rights abuses](#)," *France24*, 13 December 2021)

Putin warns Johnson over Ukraine tension

On 14 December, Russian President Vladimir Putin held a telephonic conversation with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. According to a statement released by the Kremlin, Putin was said to have given a detailed picture of the situation at the

borders, thus, demanding the UK to negotiate for talks with NATO to understand its ambitions for the future, particularly regarding Ukraine. He further called for talks that would assure that NATO would not advance eastwards. However, a statement from Downing Street saw Johnson warning Russia, as he “emphasised the UK’s commitment to Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, and warned that any destabilising action would be a strategic mistake that would have significant consequences”. Commenting on the possibility of launching nuclear missiles, Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said: “Lack of progress towards a political and diplomatic solution to this problem will lead to our response being of a military and technical military nature.” (Patrick Wintour and Julian Borger, “[Putin tells Boris Johnson urgent talks needed over Nato’s plans for Ukraine](#),” *The Guardian*, 14 December 2021; “[Putin tells UK’s Johnson: NATO members are threatening Russia from Ukraine](#),” *Reuters*, 13 December 2021)

Macron visits Orban as part of East European leaders' summit

On 14 December, French President Emmanuel Macron visited Budapest and met with Hungarian President Viktor Orban. He was in the city for a summit for East European leaders. Setting the stage for France taking over the EU rotating presidency in January, Macron stated that despite the “well known political disagreements” with Orban, the two countries would “work together for Europe”. In response, Orban stated: “Hungary’s relation towards President Macron is that of respect... France is the home of encyclopedists, they are the best when it comes to definitions, so we accept their definitions: what we heard lately from Mr President is that we are political opponents and at the same time European partners.” France and Hungary differ over their views on LGBT rights, the rule of law and democratic standards. (“[Macron seeks common ground with Orban on EU security during Hungary visit](#),” *France24*, 13 December 2021; Krisztina Than and Michel Rose, “[France and Hungary set conciliatory tone as Macron visits Budapest](#),” *Reuters*, 13 December 2021)

EU considering fresh sanctions against Russia

On 13 December, as EU foreign ministers meet at Brussels, there is a possibility of a fresh set of economic sanctions to be considered against Russia. Options before the EU include ‘travel bans and the freezing of assets for members of Russia’s political elite’. Plans also consider sanctioning the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. After attending the G7 meeting, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock confirmed the same, warning: “In the event of further escalation this gas pipeline could not come into service.” These measures are being considered as deterrence while the ‘strongest of measures’ will be imposed if Russia invades Ukraine. The EU’s Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell said: “We are in deterrent mode... In any case, we will send a clear signal that any aggression against Ukraine will have a high cost for Russia.” The new round of sanctions is most likely to be coordinated with the UK, and the US. On 12 December, the G7 foreign ministers who had arrived at Liverpool for talks commented on the same, saying: “Russia should be in no doubt that further military aggression against Ukraine would have massive consequences and severe cost in response.” (“[EU foreign ministers mull Russia sanctions](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 13 December 2021; Hans von der Burchard, “[G7 warns Russia of ‘massive consequences’ if it attacks Ukraine](#),” *POLITICO*, 12 December)

Scholz received by Morawiecki on the inaugural visit

On 12 December, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Poland’s Warsaw as part of his inaugural visit. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki received the Chancellor with military honours. The talks focused on the Poland-Belarus migrant crisis, where Scholz condemned Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko for his “inhumane and we have a common task to repudiate such acts”. Morawiecki responded to Scholz’s comment: “I described to the Chancellor the changed tactics that the Lukashenko regime is now using in this artificially triggered migration crisis, the use of people as living shields, as weapons.” Speaking on the Russia-Ukraine

border standoff, Scholz commented: "It is important that Europe makes clear together that we will not accept this and that we do not agree with what is happening there... We will not accept a violation of those orders." Confirming the commitment to providing Ukraine with gas transits after Nord Stream 2 becomes functional, he said: "We continue to feel responsible for ensuring that Ukraine's gas transit business remains successful." The meeting between the heads coincided with the 30-year anniversary of the Treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Cooperation between the two countries. Scholz's visit to Warsaw followed his trips to Paris and Brussels. ("Germany's Olaf Scholz visits Poland amid growing differences," *Deutsche Welle*, 13 December 2021)

Europol reports the Pandora Papers to reveal the secret offshore accounts of world leaders

The European Union Law enforcement agency Europol has recently reported that it inspected millions of leaked documents of money laundering by using the Pandora Papers. The investigation executed by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) revealed many secret offshore accounts of former world leaders, politicians, and public officials. The list includes Jordan's King Abdullah II, former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, and the leaders of Ukraine, Chile, and Kenya. The Europol's report said: "This is particularly worrying as the Pandora Papers reveal that many of those hiding assets in offshore locations are political decision-makers." ("Europol identifying leads to target organized crime after Pandora Papers leaks," *Deutsche Welle*, 08 December 2021)

The EU to reduce support funds for Wine producers.

On 03 December, the EU unveiled plans to limit alcohol intake by introducing a report to fight against cancer. The report considers any alcohol consumption to be harmful and does not distinguish between high-alcohol beverages and wine. The European Parliament's Special Committee on Beating Cancer has been scheduled to take a vote on

06 December, the vote would state that there is no safe limit of alcohol consumption to prevent cancer. This would discourage the Greek wine producers as the EU would likely reduce support funds for this sector, the report if voted on, will be approved by 2022. (Tania Georgiopolou, "Wine producers fear loss of funding due to EU policy," *eKathimerini*, 03 December 2021)

Ukraine reveals concerns over Russian military build-up

On 03 December, Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov addressed the parliament and stated that Russia had amassed 94,000 troops along the border. Backed by intelligence reports, he said: "Our intelligence services analyze all scenarios, including the worst ones. It notes that a probability of a large-scale escalation on the part of Russia exists. The most probable time when (Russia) will be ready for the escalation is the end of January." Although no provocation would arise from the Ukrainian end, they are prepared to respond to any Russian attack. In the meantime, Russia has denied the allegations raised against them. Russian lawmaker Konstantin Kosachev addressed the state television *Russia-24*, saying: "We don't have any plans to attack Ukraine. We don't have any heightened military activity near Ukraine's borders. There is no preparation underway for an offensive." ("Ukraine warns of possible Russian 'escalation' in January," *Deutsche Welle*, 03 December 2021)

ECJ top lawyer advises 'dismissal' of the rule-of-law challenge posed by Hungary and Poland

On 02 December, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) advocate general Manuel Campos Sanchez-Bordona asked the court to 'dismiss' the challenge brought forth by Poland and Hungary against the rule-of-law mechanism. Although such advice is non-binding, the court usually takes such opinions into consideration. Responding to this, Poland's deputy justice minister Sebastian Kaleta took to *Twitter*: "It was a naivety to trust EU institutions would be capable of self-restraint. This is an assault on the rule of law." The creation of the EU's

rule-of-law mechanism, in December 2020, was a reply to those deviants who failed to abide by the rules of the bloc. Primarily, the economy of the member state would be affected since funds designated for these members would be withheld. Hungary and Poland have argued the lack of a legal ground for the mechanism's application. The EU has not used the mechanism to date since they await the ECJ's review on the matter. (["European Court of Justice likely to dismiss Poland, Hungary 'rule-of-law challenge,'" Deutsche Welle](#), 02 December 2021)

The EU's Global Gateway to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative.

On 01 December, Brussels announced investment plans to raise EUR 300 billion for the European enterprise named 'Global Gateway'. This is a part of Europe's strategy to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) infrastructural projects. The Global Gateway is an alternative that would have high standards, good governance, and high levels of transparency keeping participant countries in an equal partnership. The EU through the Global Gateway would be able to provide a way to advance its strategic interests beyond its borders and offset Beijing's control. The discussion about the Global Gateway itself has affected China so much that Chinese President Xi Jinping began mentioning "about quality projects, and about sustainability". The European enterprise will be tested when the EU and African Union hold a joint summit. A German MEP, Reinhard Bütikofer stated: "the initiative will open a new chapter in Europe's role in international relations." (["EU plans to raise €300 billion to counter China's infrastructure spending," Euronews](#), 01 December 2021)

BREXIT

Foreign secretary Truss takes over as new Brexit minister

On 19 December, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss was appointed as the new Brexit minister to handle the UK's relationship with the EU and Northern Ireland. As previous Brexit Minister David Frost handed over his resignation papers to the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, he expressed his "concerns about the current

direction of travel" due to COVID-19. He stated the need for a more low-tax, lightly regulated, entrepreneurial economy that would benefit the people. According to *The Guardian*, France called on the Johnson government to use this new opportunity to "rebuild trust" with the EU and clear the new year's uncertainties in their relations. The new minister's handling of the situation is closely being monitored, as she would have to decide on either resetting the strained relations with the EU or continuing with the former minister's approach to Northern Ireland. (["UK foreign secretary Truss to take over Brexit talks with EU after Frost exit," France24](#), 19 December 2021; Daniel Boffey and Lisa O 'Carroll, ["France urges Johnson to use Frost's exit to rebuild trust with EU," The Guardian](#), 19 December 2021; Lisa O 'Carroll, ["Liz Truss to take on Brexit brief after David Frost resignation," The Guardian](#), 19 December 2021)

Amendment to the Nationality and Border Bill stirs outrage in the UK

On 14 December, Rob Mudge in an opinion in *Deutsche Welle* analyzed the furore over the recent amendment introduced by the UK in the Nationality and Border Bill. Termed Clause 9, the amendment has evoked outrage, especially amongst the ethnic minority Britons as it gives leverage to the government to take away British citizenship without notice. According to the statement released by the UK's Home Office: "British citizenship is a privilege, not a right. Deprivation of citizenship on conducive grounds is rightly reserved for those who pose a threat to the UK or whose conduct involves very high harm. The nationality and borders bill will amend the law so citizenship can be deprived where it is not practicable to give notice, for example if there is no way of communicating with the person." Apart from the public, the bill contradicts human rights groups, the UN Refugee Convention, and the European Convention on Human Rights. The bill is expected to be debated by the upper house in the parliament on 05 January to look into its effects on the refugees. (Rob Mudge, ["UK's nationality bill could strip millions of Britons of their citizenship," Deutsche Welle](#), 14 December 2021)

Travel clearance for non-Irish EU citizens

On 09 December, a Nationality and Borders bill was passed in the House of Commons. The Bill stipulates Non-Irish EU citizens or non-British citizens from other countries to require a pre-travel clearance for crossing the Irish border. The Bill is similar to the system US-Canada has for inter-country travel. The House of Lords is yet to vote on the Bill, and if passed, it will be implemented into effect only in 2025. The new laws would hinder many non-Irish EU citizens living in the Republic of Ireland, who frequently cross the border for work or leisure. Irish Deputy Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said the government in Ireland will raise their "concerns and our objections." The Bill is part of the post-Brexit renewal of the UK's immigration laws. (Shane Harrison, "[Brexit: Non-Irish EU citizens could face Irish border travel checks](#)," *BBC*, 09 December 2021; Freya McClements and Pat Leahy, "[Non-Irish EU citizens will need 'travel clearance' to cross Border under UK plan](#)," *The Irish Times*, 08 December 2021)

Post-Brexit fishing and its complications for Paris and London.

Amid the diplomatic tussle between Paris and London, Guernsey granted 43 fishing licenses to French boats to continue operation in the English Channel Island. Following the move, Guernsey's External Affairs Minister Jonathan Le Tocq said: "The new authorisations are a milestone for Guernsey to exercise new power and control over their territorial waters." The European Commission had earlier asked both the governments to resolve the issues on the fishing licenses by 10 December. The contention has grown as even under the Brexit trade deal, EU fishing boats can continue to operate in British waters only if they can provide proof that they have a customary right of previously fishing there. It is difficult for the British and French sides to reach a consensus over the nature and extent of evidence for customary rights. France has been able to obtain 1000 licenses under the Brexit deal but is claiming for about 100 more of which 30 of them are top priority cases. ("[Post-Brexit fishing: Guernsey grants over 40 licences](#)

[for French boats](#)," *Euronews*, 01 December 2021)

COVID-19

The UK: Government builds temporary hospitals to deal with rising cases

On 31 December, the UK government announced plans to build temporary hospitals as Prime Minister Boris Johnson was concerned about the rapid surge of patients due to the rising COVID-19 cases. Johnson said: "Look at the people going into hospital now, that could be you. Look at the intensive care units and the miserable, needless suffering of those who did not get their booster, that could be you." On 30 December, the UK saw a total of 189,000 cases fuelled by the Omicron variant. The National Medical Director Stephen Powis said: "Given the high level of Covid-19 infections and increasing hospital admissions, the NHS is now on a war footing." Meanwhile, Johnson urged people to get tested, take booster shots and be "sensible" attending New Year's events. ("['War footing': UK builds temporary hospitals to prepare for Covid-19 surge](#)," *France24*, 31 December 2021)

Germany: Police under psychological stress due to continuous protests

On 29 December, the German Police Union raised concerns about the frequent COVID-19 protests and the psychological consequences faced by the police officers at work. The Union Chairman Oliver Malchow said: "The many coronavirus protests are putting a huge strain on our forces." The frequent protests and their rising intensity have taken a toll on the officers. The level of aggression towards police officials deployed has also increased lately. Malchow mentioned how 13 officers were injured the week prior to 29 December and additionally said: "Managers are working hard to reduce the stress on their staff, but this is becoming increasingly difficult". Germany has increased the number of personnel involved in dealing with the psychological service of the police, but the situation these days has been overwhelming. Continuous demonstrations and other assignments restrict officers from getting the help they need. Now with the new wave of cases

caused by the Omicron variant, more restrictions will likely cause further protests. ("Germany: COVID protests put police under 'huge strain'," *Deutsche Welle*, 29 December 2021)

Germany: Court rules to protect disabled people for fair COVID-19 treatment

On 28 December, the highest court of Germany declared that disabled people would be protected under the legally binding guidelines if hospitals were forced to prioritize patients based on the severity of illness. The purpose of the law is to prevent unfair treatments as the cases increase due to the Omicron variant. The constitutional court ordered legislators to create a framework to protect disabled people. It also urged states to list down the criteria which doctors need to refer before choosing the patient for lifesaving treatment. According to the ruling: "no person shall be disregarded because of disability." This issue did not emerge from COVID-19 alone but has been a debate in Germany for years. The pandemic only helped fast-track the ruling. Meanwhile, the Director of the German Institute for Human Rights has rejected the rule stating: "Vaccine status should not be allowed to play any role as to who should receive intensive medical treatment or not." (Kate Connolly, "German court rules disabled people must be protected in Covid triage cases," *The Guardian*, 28 December 2021)

Romania: Protests triggered over green pass mandate

On 21 December, more than 2,000 people gathered for protests before the Romanian Parliament in Bucharest against the imposition of COVID-19 green passes at workplaces. In recent months, Romania has experienced a severe surge in COVID-19 infections; this worsened the situation as the previous waves had adversely affected the country's health care facilities. The latest surge owes to the fact of Romania being the second-lowest vaccinated country in the EU. Despite efforts of the coalition government to mandate a health certificate at workplaces to increase vaccination, the outcome has only been protests. Another reason behind the protests is also said to be the opposition party, which opposes the

green passes. ("Romanians protest COVID certificates," *Deutsche Welle*, 21 December 2021; "Romanian crowd tries to storm parliament in protest at COVID-19 pass," *Reuters*, 21 December 2021)

WHO Director criticizes developed nations on COVID-19 booster programs

On 22 December, the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus criticized the COVID-19 booster programs of the developed nations. He stated that such programs only provide a chance for the pandemic to protract since it takes away the poor countries' chance to recover or immunize its populations. According to Ghebreyesus: "Blanket booster programs are likely to prolong the pandemic rather than ending it, by diverting supply to countries that already have high levels of vaccination coverage, giving the virus more opportunity to spread and mutate." On the question of the new variant's capacity to spread, WHO has commented that it is too early to disclose the severity of the infection. ("COVID: WHO rails against vaccine booster programs," *Deutsche Welle*, 21 December 2021)

WHO head warns of another wave as Omicron cases surge

On 22 December, the World Health Organization's (WHO) Europe head Hans Kluge warned of another COVID-19 wave given the significant increase in cases. Kluge said: "We can see another storm coming...Within weeks, Omicron will dominate in more countries of the region, pushing already stretched health systems further to the brink." His statements come after cases of Omicron were detected in at least 38 countries across Europe. Kluge also urged people to get booster shots to tackle the spread of the virus and stated: "The booster is the single most important defence against Omicron." The new variants' effects have been moderate until now and show common COVID-19 symptoms. However, Kluge is concerned about the rapid increase in cases that could lead to hospitalization and disruption of health systems in Europe. ("WHO's Europe chief says 'another storm coming' as

Omicron takes hold," *The Guardian*, 22 December 2021)

WHO Chief hopes pandemic to end by 2022

On 20 December, World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said: "2022 must be the year we end the pandemic." Ghebreyesus wants the world to get back to normal, but the new Omicron variant has raised concerns. He urged the world's people to cancel events "now and celebrate later than to celebrate now and grieve later," as cases have been increasing rapidly. Ghebreyesus also stressed the need to bring vaccine equality, as he said: "If we are to end the pandemic in the coming year, we must end inequity." Halting the pandemic was a possibility, but Ghebreyesus mentioned that vaccination, mask-wearing, and social distancing were the tools to stop the pandemic to an extent. ("WHO chief: World must pull together to 'end the pandemic' in 2022," *France24*, 20 December 2021)

European Medicines Agency recommends approval of Novavax vaccine

On 20 December, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) recommended the approval of the Novavax vaccine. The vaccine is considered to use more conventional technology making it beneficial for developing nations. According to the company, the vaccine showed 90.4 percent efficiency in the last trial and is scheduled to be delivered from January 2022 to the EU. According to Novavax Chief Executive Stanley Erck: "... looks forward to providing an additional vaccine option in Europe, built on a proven, well-understood technology platform...may help address major obstacles to global vaccination, including global distribution challenges and vaccine hesitancy." ("COVID: EU regulators recommend approval of Novavax vaccine," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 December 2021; Helen Collis, "EU regulator green-lights Novavax COVID-19 vaccine," *POLITICO*, 20 December 2021)

French leaders cancel their visits due to new COVID-19 measures.

On 17 December, French President Emmanuel Macron cancelled his Mali trip due to the new restrictions announced by France in the wake of rising COVID-19 cases. Macron was to meet transitional leader Colonel Assimi Goita and French soldiers stationed in Mali for Christmas. The President's office said: "This decision was taken in order for there to be coherence between national measures and the president's international agenda, and in order not to expose troops." The meeting had been organized to de-escalate the tensions between France and Mali as speculations arose on Russian mercenaries being deployed in the country as France was reducing its troops. Additionally, French Prime Minister Jean Castex cancelled his trip to meet French troops stationed in Jordan. ("Macron cancels visit to Mali after new Covid-19 measures announced," *France24*, 17 December 2021; "France's Macron cancels Mali trip over new COVID wave," *Reuters*, 17 December 2021)

Denmark approves the usage of COVID-19 pill ahead of EU-wide approval

On 16 December, Denmark approved the molnupiravir antiviral pill for high-risk Covid-19 patients and the elderly. According to the Health Authority Chief Medical Officer Kirstine Moll Harboe: "We believe that the benefits of being treated (with it) outweigh the disadvantages for those patients who are most at risk of becoming seriously ill with COVID-19." The European Medicines Agency, which is still reviewing the treatment, has recommended the usage of the drug for adults ahead of an EU-wide approval. So far, Britain has been the only country that has allowed the use of the COVID-19 pill. ("Denmark approves Merck's COVID-19 pill for at-risk patients," *Reuters*, 16 December 2021)

Germany: Raids on anti-vaccination activists of Saxony

On 15 December, German Police carried out raids in the eastern state of Saxony after they uncovered a plot to murder the Premier by far-right anti-vaccination activists. The charge was carried out by the

local security forces and the special Soko Rex anti-extremist unit to cover multiple locations. The plot against the Premier of Saxony Michael Kretschmer was discussed on the Telegram messaging app with about 100 people communicating about the same. Germany has been facing protests due to the tighter restrictions being placed in the wake of the new Omicron variant. Anti-Vaccination activists were against Kretschmer and other state officials as they recently changed their stance on COVID-19 restrictions. The change in perspective came after a switch in government policies due to the steep rise of coronavirus cases and the low vaccination rates in Saxony. In the wake of the raids, Kretschmer mentioned that the government would use all legal means to tackle the threats. He also said: "People in public office should not have to be scared of expressing their opinion or doing their jobs." (Kate Connolly, "[German police raids target 'anti-vaxxer murder plot' against state leader](#)," *The Guardian*, 16 December 2021; "[German raids on Covid extremists over Saxony leader death plot](#)," *BBC*, 15 December 2021)

Belgium: Protests in Brussels against the COVID-19 restrictions

On 05 December, protestors angry over the COVID-19 restrictions stormed Brussels and marched towards the headquarters of the European Union. Initially, the march was peaceful but it took a violent turn when demonstrators started pelting stones at officers. That led to the Police using teargas and water cannons to disperse the protestors. The demonstrators were frustrated with the likely mandatory vaccination which is to be implemented by the EU in the future. And against the sanctions that the unvaccinated people had to face. Parents that joined the protests feared the harmful effects of the vaccine on their young children. The protestors echoed slogans of "Stop vax" and "Freedom" on their march in the capital. Even though Belgium had decided the COVID-19 restrictions at a national level the protestors were targeting the EU institutions in Brussels. ("[Protest against coronavirus restrictions turns violent in Brussels](#)," *Reuters*, 05 December 2021; "[Brussels police fire tear gas as COVID](#)

[restrictions protests turn violent](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 04 December 2021)

Europe reaches a mark of 75 million coronavirus cases

On 03 December, Europe hit the mark of 75 million coronavirus cases. More than 15 countries in Europe have reported the new variant cases. According to the European Union's Public Health Agency, "the omicron variant could be responsible for more than half of all COVID-19 infections in Europe within a few months." Eastern Europe has reported 33 percent new cases and 53 percent deaths of total Europe. This sums to 39 percent of the region's population. In the region, the UK marked the highest number of infections, along with Latvia, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Ukraine, where new cases have shot up. Several governments have taken various control measures to contain the spread by imposing restrictions in terms of lockdown in the unvaccinated parts of the country. (Aparupa Mazumder and Rittik Biswas, "[Europe surpasses 75 million COVID-19 cases amid spread of Omicron](#)," *Reuters*, 03 December 2021)

Germany: Mandatory COVID-19 vaccines for citizens aged 60 and above

On 01 December, Greece's premier said: "Greeks over the age of 60 must book their appointment for a first jab by 16 January 2022." The statement made to the cabinet requires for the measure to still be voted in the parliament. Greece is said to become the first country in the EU to target a specific age group for mandatory vaccines. Germany will start fining all unvaccinated people over the "age of 60s EUR100 a month". But there has been resistance to this decision from Greece's main opposition party called the Syriza who feel that these measures are "punitive and financially excessive". Austria too announced that it would start compulsory vaccinations in February. Meanwhile, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen suggested the European states consider mandatory vaccinations to combat the new COVID-19 variant of Omicron. ("[Covid: Greece to fine over-60s who refuse Covid-19 vaccine](#)," *BBC*, 01 December 2021)

ECONOMY**Turkey: Erdogan urges people to save currency in form of Lira**

On 31 December, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan urged his citizens to keep their savings in the form of the lira, reiterating that the country's currency was under control. The announcement comes as many people converted their savings into dollars and euros due to the currency crisis. According to Erdogan: "I want all my citizens to keep their savings in our own money, to run all their business with our own money, and I recommend this." The beginning of the free fall in the lira's currency value was because of Erdogan's interference in economic policy. To correct the situation, a scheme was introduced where the state protected the converted local deposits from losses in terms of hard currencies. Despite the moves by Erdogan, the currency is still traded at 13.3 to USD one. The same was traded at 7.4 at the start of 2021. ("Turkey: Erdogan tells savers to switch back to lira," *Deutsche Welle*, 31 December 2021)

Belarus: IMF states Minsk economy severely impacted under Western sanctions

On 20 December, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) staff stated that sanctions imposed by the West on Belarus were impacting the latter's economy. It further suggested Minsk slash fiscal expenditures to decrease foreign-currency borrowing. The statement released by the IMF read: "Risks to this outlook are large and revolve around geopolitical tensions, the possibility of further waves of COVID outbreaks, the impact of international sanctions, and contingent liabilities in the public sector... These major risks make a strong case for careful contingency planning." *Reuters* reported the statement has said that the present set of sanctions reduced the possibility of "rolling over expiring debt and new borrowing on Eurobond markets". The statement also included: "Although the authorities can continue to borrow on other markets, institutions and countries, a further reduction of the fiscal deficit in 2023 would alleviate pressure to issue new debt... A key concern is that 93 percent of public debt is

denominated in foreign currency and thus vulnerable to exchange rate movements." (David Lawder, "IMF says Belarus squeezed by Western sanctions, spending should be cut," *Reuters*, 21 December 2021)

Turkey: Business leaders condemn actions of Erdogan towards monetary policy

On 20 December, the Turkish lira was expected to recover after the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's speech, however, it further declined. Despite the annual inflation ranging at 20 percent, Erdogan's efforts to make the central bank lower the borrowing cost has not stopped. The president has backed his actions stating that it was Islam that led him to the decision. Critics believe that the rise in inflation rates is due to the "Islamic-infused" experiments of Erdogan and expect an increase by 10 percent in the coming months. In response to the decline in the Turkish lira, the business leaders (TUSIAD lobby) have condemned the steps taken by Erdogan towards correcting the monetary policy. ("Turkish lira hits turbulence as Erdogan cites Islam as reason for monetary policy," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 December 2021)

Greece: Protests demanding a raise of wages and pensions

On 16 December, labour unions staged a protest in Athens demanding a return of wages and pensions. Their wages were cut due to the international bailouts as Greece was on the brink of bankruptcy between 2010 and 2018. The protestors gathered in front of the Parliament building as the Parliament was discussing the budget for 2022. Due to the pandemic Greek Finance Minister Christos Staikouras said: "despite 6.9 percent growth forecast for this year, spending on the health service and income support during the pandemic allow for only modest increases in social spending." Thus, the budget included a minimum 2 percent wage increase. According to *Euronews*, Greece still has a public debt of "197.1 percent of gross domestic product this year, with a 7.3 percent budget deficit before debt obligations", and due to the pandemic, there has not been a significant increase in state revenues. ("Greece: Protest against

budget constrained by pandemic costs,”
Euronews, 16 December 2021)

Turkey: Lira suffers steep fall

On 13 December, Turkey saw its currency falling by seven percent in reference to USD. The crash of Lira 14.99 to the dollar follows the increased concerns over Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's 'political influence' over the central bank. The lira which saw a fall did later rebound but only by a slight margin. In the background of growing pressure from Erdogan, the central bank has functioned off four percent on its policy rates since September. The policy rate refers to the rate of interest central banks charge commercial banks when money is being lent to the latter. The Turkish economy has witnessed an inflation rate of 21.3 percent in November alone. According to Erdogan, economic growth can be achieved only via slashing interest rates and believes high-interest rates spike inflation. ("Turkish lira tumbles to new record low," *Deutsche Welle*, 13 December 2021)

ECB announces plans to redesign Euro banknotes

On 06 December, the European Central Bank (ECB) disclosed its plans of renewing the look of euro banknotes. The input from the public is scheduled to be taken by the 19-member eurozone on the redesigning. According to the ECB President Christine Lagarde After 20 years, it's time to review the look of our banknotes to make them more relatable to Europeans of all ages and backgrounds. The new designs are expected to be released by 2024. Eight EU member states, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Sweden will remain unaffected by the changes. ("European Central Bank plans euro bill redesign," *Deutsche Welle*, 06 December 2021; Richard Partington, "Euro banknotes to get first big redesign with 19-nation consultation," *The Guardian*, 06 December 2021)

Turkey's currency crash and Erdogan's ignorance of the crisis

On 03 December, Turkey's national currency plummeted about 45 percent to the dollar, and yet Erdogan has been

pushing an economic model that would exacerbate the crisis. Erdogan sees inflation as "an evil that make the rich richer and the poor poorer". Erdogan did reduce Turkey's interest rates, but only by 1 percent from 16 percent to 15 percent. Turkey's economy is an import-dependent economy and with rising inflation, the prices of necessities such as food and textiles have increased tremendously. The Turkish youth are the worst affected by the rising unemployment and have been showing their discontentment on social media platforms. Turkey did well after the 2008 financial crisis and received foreign funds, but it used those funds to invest in the construction industry and hence is still dependent on imports for basic necessities. (Ozge Ozdemir, "Why Turkey's currency crash does not worry Erdogan." *BBC*, 03 December 2021)

ENERGY

Russia: Deputy Prime Minister hopes for Nord Stream 2 to be activated soon

On 29 December, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak while speaking to *RBC* media stated that he believed the Nord Stream 2 would soon receive the required certification and begin transits. The construction of the second pipeline was completed in September 2021; however, it awaits ratification from Berlin and Brussels. When questioned on the existence of backup plans if the pipeline failed to be certified, Novak answered: "We don't consider such options and we believe it will be launched in line with the timings, set for certification." ("Russia says failure to certify Nord Stream 2 is not an option -RBC," *Reuters*, 29 December 2021)

Belgium: Brussels to turn off all its nuclear plants by 2025

On 23 December, Belgium declared that it would close all its nuclear reactors by 2025. The current government had committed to this target when it was elected to office in October 2020. Belgium will shut down its seven nuclear reactors, but it plans on opening doors and funds to smaller generators. Belgian Prime Minister Alexander de Croo said that his government's objective was "to fully opt for innovation...In concrete terms, this means

that we will invest in research into newer technologies". As reported by *Deutsche Welle*, Belgium's stance comes in line "...as the European Commission prepares a so-called EU taxonomy, in which it lists what the bloc considers as environmentally sustainable economic activities". EU members have a divided opinion on nuclear energy being sustainable as France pushes for green use of the power while Germany intends to shut down its last nuclear plant by 2022. ("Belgium agrees to close controversial ageing nuclear reactors," *BBC*, 23 December 2021; "Belgium to close all current nuclear reactors by 2025," *France24*, 23 December 2021; "Belgium to close all existing nuclear power plants," *Deutsche Welle*, 23 December 2021)

German Minister warns Russia of halting Nord Stream 2

On 18 December, German Economic Affairs and Climate Action Minister Robert Habeck warned that the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline will be halted and Russia would face severe consequences if it attempted any attack on Ukraine. He said: "Any new military action cannot remain without severe consequences." He also added: "From a geopolitical point of view, the pipeline is a mistake... All the countries were against it except Germany and Austria." The Nord Stream 2 pipeline which extends through the Baltic Sea will enable the supply of natural gas in double capacity and also at a cheap cost. Germany is in great need of it as it is transitioning from coal and nuclear energy, but the project is under pressure due to delays and criticisms from the US. Ukraine has depicted it as a geopolitical weapon. ("Nord Stream 2: German minister warns Russia over Ukraine," *Deutsche Welle*, 18 December 2021)

Hike in energy prices cause a rift between the EU and Poland

On 16 December, the EU leaders met in Brussels to discuss various issues including the spiral in energy prices. When the talks began on energy, it was paused as Poland, the Czech Republic, Spain, and a few other countries called out to curb the role of financial speculators responsible for volatile

prices in the energy market. The Prime Minister of Poland said: "ETS prices should be fairly constant and reasonably predictable, not in spikes." He also added that the Polish government had proposed to the European Commission on changes to be made with regard to the carbon market. The carbon prices of the EU have shot up by more than 50 percent. The carbon market has been one of the core policies of the EU to cut down the greenhouse gas emissions and the commission has proposed to expand the scheme on enforcement on factories to buy a permit for every ton of CO2 emitted. (Kate Abnett, "EU energy talks paused as Poland seeks carbon market curbs," *Reuters*, 17 December 2021)

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Portugal: Young adults file climate case against 33 countries

On 30 December, the *BBC* reported a group of six children from Portugal to have filed the first-ever climate case against 33 countries to counter climate change. In the past years, Portugal has been frequently exposed to wildfires and extreme heatwaves due to human-induced climate change. The children have urged for the protection of the natural world and wish the same for future generations. The primary argument of the case revolves around how the existing government has failed to undertake the rightful measures to prevent the adversaries of climate change. According to the children, they have raised concerns stating the neglect of the government has taken away their individual right to life, privacy and non-discrimination under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The case has been accepted by the court and it has assured that it will be taken on priority. (Maarten Willems and Kate Vandy, "COP 26: The teenagers suing 33 countries," *BBC*, 30 December 2021)

Poland: Morawiecki's hopes for progress on the Turow mine issue

On 28 December, Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki mentioned how Warsaw was hopeful of the new Czech Republic government in renegotiating the Turow mine issue. As reported by *Reuters*: "The European Union's top court told

Poland to halt operations at the Turow mine on the border with the Czech Republic after Prague complained of environmental damage in Czech villages, which would also mean closing a nearby power plant." However, Poland did not halt operations even after the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ordered its closure. Morawiecki said the mine was crucial as it provided heat and electricity to the people of Poland. He was hopeful as the Czech Environment Ministry in November stated: "a new proposal from Poland on the settlement of a dispute was unacceptable, adding it would have to be discussed with the incoming government formed earlier this month following October's election." The mine was ordered to close as it caused environmental damage to the Czech villages close to Poland's border. (["Poland hopes for progress in talks with Czechs over Turow mine," Reuters, 28 December 2021](#))

Germany: Katjuscha, the oldest polar bear in Europe, passes away

On 27 December, Europe's oldest polar bear called Katjuscha passed away at 37. The polar bear had an underlying heart condition and was suffering for some time. The zoo released a statement on Twitter saying: "Farewell Katjuscha! After almost four decades in the Berlin zoo, we have had to bid farewell to our Katjuscha." Since the Berlin Zoo had experts who cared for Katjuscha, she lived till the age of 37. In the wild, polar bears can only live for 25-30 years on average. The zoo director further commented, saying: "We have of course observed our senior citizen very closely over the past few years. Thanks to optimal veterinary care and daily medication Katjuscha was able to reach such a stately polar bear age." PETA campaign team leader Peter Höffken took the opportunity to mention how Germany should stop keeping polar bears in zoos. He further stated: "If the Berlin Zoo would publicly stand by an end to the keeping of polar bears, this would be a great step with a signalling effect for all other zoos with disturbed polar bears running around in circles." (["Europe's oldest polar bear, Katjuscha, passes away at Berlin Zoo," Deutsche Welle, 27 December 2021](#))

Spain: La Palma to restrict cruise ships citing environmental impact

On 27 December, *The Guardian* reported Balearic Islands 'officials to have sought to restrict vessels arriving at its largest port of Palma in Mallorca. From 2022, the port would see only three cruise ships arriving at the port per day. The historic five-year deal is expected to reduce the port arrivals by 13 percent when compared to statistics from 2019. In 2019, over 25 organizations had released a joint statement, calling for the reduced arrivals. It read: "The mega-cruise ship tourism arriving in Palma has grown in a way that is unsustainable and undesirable for our city, leading to serious environmental impact and increasing social protest." The Regional Official in charge of Economy and Tourism Iago Negueruela said: "It means setting, for the first time, a real limit to the arrival of cruise ship passengers to Palma, something that would not have been possible without the will of the sector... We're the first to do so in a port as large as Palma." However, critics of the deal such as Platform Against MegaCruises, stated: "Three cruise ships a day – one of them with a capacity of more than 5,000 passengers – still seems to us a very high figure for what the city can bear... The regional government has missed out on the opportunity to make a courageous decision to safeguard residents of the Balearic Islands, their environment, their health and their right to the city." Meanwhile, counter-organization Yes to Cruises' spokesperson Álex Fraile stated: "Is the next step to restrict the arrival of aircraft at [Mallorca's] Son Sant Joan airport?" (["Palma to limit cruise ships after environmental concerns," The Guardian, 27 December 2021](#))

Serbia's lithium project to be put on hold due to protests

On 24 December, Serbian mining group Rio Tinto decided to temporarily stop its controversial western Serbia lithium project worth USD 2.4 billion. The company had planned to develop the mine located in the western Jadar river valley to extract lithium that can be used in electric car batteries, solar panels, and wind turbines. Initially, the company had stated that the project would benefit the environmental

standards at domestic and EU levels. Apart from satisfying the environmental aspect of the society, it became part of the Serbian government's efforts to generate more investment and economic growth. In recent weeks, protests have emerged demanding for the project to be banned. These protests have taken a political turn as the present administration fears its outcome in the nearing elections. According to the CEO of Rio Tinto Vesna Prodanovic: "We want to call for a public dialogue, to acquaint residents with all aspects of our project. It is extremely difficult in such an intense anti-mining and negative campaign to have a reasonable debate on any topic." ("[Rio Tinto puts Serbia lithium mine on hold](#)," *The Guardian*, 24 December 2021)

The Netherlands: Plans to build two new nuclear plants to tackle climate change

On 15 December, the coalition government in the Netherlands decided to build two nuclear power stations to achieve climate goals. As reported by *Reuters*, the government has kept aside investments "needed to secure a carbon-neutral economy by 2050 and helped by ultra low interest rates, the government's fiscal pledges presented this week contain generous spending plans ranging from sustainable energy to housing, education and childcare". According to the agreement, the government plans to invest more in its green transition and has earmarked EUR 35 billion. The Ministry of Climate and Economy will be separated to form a new ministry for climate and energy to handle the fund and the transition. (Karl Mathiesen, "[The Netherlands to build new nuclear plants under coalition deal](#)," *POLITICO*, 15 December 2021; Bart H. Meijer, "[Frugal no more: New Dutch government promises to ramp up spending](#)," *Reuters*, 16 December 2021)

Germany is not in consensus with France's nuclear energy strategy

On 09 December, Germany's foreign minister Annalena Baerbock said: "Germany will oppose French efforts to label nuclear electricity as green energy." The French government has proposed to build new

nuclear reactors and gas as part of green investment. Although Germany is dependent on gas, it has opposed France as it does not see nuclear energy as green. The European Commission is said to reveal the investment rules for nuclear and gas on 22 December. However, a debate is expected to happen between the leaders of Germany and France on the same. (Wester Van Gaal, "[Germany tells France: 'nuclear is not green'](#)" *EU Observer*, 10 December 2021)

GENDER

Spain: Femicides now included in gender-based violence statistics

On 31 December, Spain declared itself to be the first country to include the count of femicides on the official statistics of gender-based violence. According to Spain's Equality Minister Irene Montero: "What is not named does not exist... We have to recognise all of the victims and make visible all forms of violence – all machista [sexist] killings – so that we can put in place policies for prevention, early detection and eradication." Earlier, Spain filed femicides as gender violence if it found evidence of a relationship between the killer and the victim. After 01 January 2022, the definition of gender violence is set to be broadened to include the murder of any women and child. Henceforth, cases will be analyzed according to five categories, from killings connected to sexual exploitation, trafficking, or prostitution to the killing of minors. The decision to change the record-keeping did not occur instantly but after multiple high-profile cases and protests. This move was seen as essential in Spain where the majority of the murdered women had their partners or ex-partners being the murderer. (Ashifa Kassam "[Spain says it is first in Europe to officially count all femicides](#)," *The Guardian*, 31 December 2021)

France to provide free birth control pills to women between 18 to 25

On 31 December, France announced birth control pills to be made available for all women between the ages of 18 to 25. The move is aimed to stop unwanted pregnancies and is seen as an extension to the existing program for minors. It is said that close to three million women will

benefit from the program, getting easy access to contraceptive patches and jabs. According to the France Health Ministry: "As of January 1, 2022, the health insurance system will cover the cost of contraception and related procedures (annual consultation with a doctor or midwife, and biological tests) without advance payment." Many European countries including Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Norway have made the usage of contraceptives free for its teens and minors; however, it is yet to do the same for its women aged 25 to 28 since they are not considered vulnerable. It is different only in the case of the UK where contraceptives are free for all. France easing the access of contraceptives for its women will set an example for other European countries. ("France to make birth control free for women aged 18-25," *Deutsche Welle*, 31 December 2021)

Norway: Christmas commercial portrays Santa Claus as gay

On 23 December, the *BBC* published a story on a recent Christmas advertisement that caught public attention. According to the article, the four-minute advertisement features "Father Christmas kissing a man waiting for him at home on Christmas Eve". Created by Norway's state-run Posten postal service, the commercial has crossed two million views online. Posten's Marketing Director Monica Solberg commented: "We wanted to celebrate the 50-year anniversary since the abolition of a law prohibiting same-sex relationships... The magnitude of response took us a bit by surprise. We expected a reaction, but not to such an extent." Criticisms did arise with some claiming that Father Christmas was being sexualized and Santa was "cheating on Mrs Claus". Norway decriminalized homosexuality in 1972, and the acceptance to the advertisement only shows "Norway's progressive approach to LGBT rights". (Alexander Maxia, "Gay Santa ad highlights big shift in Norwegian society," *BBC*, 23 December 2021)

The Pope comments on domestic abuse

On 20 December, Pope Francis condemned violence against women and called it "almost satanic". The recent comments

came as he spoke to a panel of four people, including one who was a domestic abuse survivor. He further said: "The number of women who are beaten and abused in their homes, even by their husbands, is very, very high." The Pope spoke to Giovanna, a member of the panel who was a victim of domestic abuse and mentioned: "I see dignity in you because if you didn't have dignity, you wouldn't be here... Look at the Blessed Mother and stay with that image of courage." The Pope has addressed domestic violence issues since the pandemic began as cases of the same saw an increase during the lockdowns. ("Pope Francis condemns domestic abuse as 'almost satanic,'" *BBC*, 20 December 2021; "Pope Francis says domestic violence against women 'almost satanic,'" *The Guardian*, 20 December 2021)

Hungary: Venice Commission states anti-LGBTQ law creates "threatening environment"

On 14 December, the Venice Commission which is an expert panel of the human rights body of the Council of Europe stated the Hungarian anti-LGBTQ law was in violation of international human rights standards. The law, passed in June 2021, has received widespread condemnation due to its ban on the use of materials encouraging homosexuality and gender change. The panel stated: "... the amendments contribute to creating a "threatening environment", where LGBTQI children can be subject to health-related risks, bullying and harassment... The amendments leave space only for one-sided and biased teaching, opening doors to stigmatisation and discrimination of LGBTQI people." ("Hungary's anti-LGBTQ law breaches international rights standards - European rights body," *Reuters*, 14 December 2021)

Vatican department apologizes to the Catholic LGBTQ community

On 13 December, the Vatican department of the Synod of Bishops apologized for "causing pain to the entire LGBTQ community" as they removed a website link of a webinar from the New Ways Ministry. New Ways Ministry is a US-based group that ministers to LGBTQ Catholics. The Synod Communications Manager Thierry

Bonaventura took personal responsibility for removing the link and apologized, saying: "I feel that I must apologize to all LGBTQ people and to members of the New Ways Ministry for the pain caused." The apology was accepted and the gesture drew praise from the New Ways Ministry. The group's Executive Director Francis DeBernardo said that: "Vatican officials rarely apologize, and they almost certainly have never apologized to LGBTQ people or an LGBTQ Catholic ministry." The removal of the link highlighted the mixed feelings the Vatican had on the LGBTQ community. (Nicole Winfield, "Vatican official apologizes for taking down LGBTQ resource," *The Washington Post*, 13 December 2021; Philip Pullella, "Vatican office apologizes for hurting Catholic LGBTQ community," *Reuters*, 13 December 2021)

Orban's government approves referendum on LGBTQ issues

On 30 October, Hungary's parliament approved a referendum on LGBTQ issues. The lawmakers of the ruling Fidesz party agreed on four referendum questions pertaining to sex education programs in schools and the availability of information on sexual orientation to the children. Although the bill received substantial backing, opposition lawmakers abstained from voting since the bill included a statement on "unrestricted presentation of media content that influences the development of underage children". The move orchestrated by Prime Minister Viktor Orban has been criticized in terms of suppressing human rights and recently, the European Commission launched legal action on Hungary for discriminating against the LGBTQ community. As per Orban, he has reasoned these actions as a measure to safeguard the Christian values from western liberalism. Another factor to note is Orban's policies on gender and migration being in the forefront as the elections in Hungary draw nearer. Therefore, it can be an exercise to ensure his votes from the Christian community of Hungary stay put. ("Hungary approves referendum on limiting LGBTQ representation in education," *Deutsche Welle*, 30 November 2021)

MIGRATION

More than 400 migrants rescued off the Mediterranean Sea

On 27 December, the German NGO Sea-Watch rescued more than 446 migrants from a recent drowning incident in the Mediterranean Sea. As per the UN data, 1,600 people are said to have died in 2021. The rescue mission by the NGO was the fifth within three days while the Greek and Tunisian coast guards simultaneously carried out rescue missions. So far, migrants from Africa who attempt the crossing have had Italy as their destination. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has reported that the disaster is seen as one of the most fatal events in the Aegean Sea. ("German NGO rescues over 400 migrants over Christmas weekend," *Deutsche Welle*, 27 December 2021)

The English Channel: Bodies of Iraqi Kurd migrants repatriated

On 26 December, the bodies of 16 Kurdish migrants who lost their lives trying to cross the English Channel were repatriated to Iraqi Kurdistan. According to UN reports, the 24 November incident has been the highest loss of migrants attempting to cross the channel since 2014. The incident claimed the lives of 27 migrants who tried to cross the Channel in a dinghy that deflated. As reported by *Deutsche Welle*: "Of the 27 who died, 26 have been identified. In addition to the 16 ethnic Kurds from Iraq, the victims included an Iranian Kurd, four Afghan men, three Ethiopians, a Somali and an Egyptian." French investigators are still probing the incident as the survivors mentioned they tried telephoning British and French emergency services, but neither responded to help. The repatriation was set to happen on 24 December but was postponed twice for various reasons. ("Bodies of Kurdish migrants who drowned in English Channel repatriated," *Deutsche Welle*, 26 December 2021; "Iraqi Kurds mourn their dead from Channel migrant boat tragedy as bodies repatriated," *France24*, 27 December 2021)

The UK: Authorities rescue 67 migrants trying to cross the Channel

On 25 December, the UK authorities rescued 67 migrants trying to cross the English Channel on Christmas. Minister of Justice Tom Pursglove said: "The public have been crying out for reform for two decades and that's what this government is delivering through our new plan for immigration," as the UK was reforming its nationality and borders bill to change its approach to people crossing the channel. He also mentioned how "the nationality and borders bill will make it a criminal offence to knowingly arrive in the UK illegally, and introduce life sentences for those who facilitate illegal entry into the country". In addition, this bill would strengthen the Border Force to deter vessels from crossing the Channel and encourage people to seek asylum in the first safe country they reach rather than crossing the treacherous Channel. ("Border Force picks up 67 people after Christmas Day attempt to cross Channel," *The Guardian*, 25 December 2021)

Greece: 16 dead after migrant boat capsizes near Paros islands

On 25 December, 16 migrants died while crossing the Aegean Sea as their boat capsized near the island of Paros. Greek authorities carried out an extensive search operation that continued for almost two days, searching for survivors. This is the third incident of capsizing boats in three days that has led to the death of 30 migrants till now, and the recent trends suggest that the traffickers have changed their route for smuggling migrants. Earlier the coast of Greece was a lucrative entry point for migrants, but the extended high wall at the Turkish border and the Greek coast guard's timely intervention of migrant boats has reduced the influx of people from this route. The locations where the recent boats capsized were Antikythera, Folegandros, and Paros, and neither are close to the usual way for smugglers. The coast guard speculates that the ships were heading towards Italy to avoid getting caught by Greek authorities in the eastern Aegean Sea. (Niki Kitsantonis, "At Least 16 Dead After Migrant Boat Capsizes Off Greece," *The New York Times*, 25 December

2021; "At least 16 dead after third migrant boat in three days sinks in Greek waters," *The Guardian*, 25 December 2021)

Hungary: Orban denies repealing "controversial immigration law"; states EU "sabotaging European unity"

On 23 December, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban stated that his government would abide by the decision to continue on its "controversial immigration laws", defying the EU ruling against the same. In November 2021, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled against Hungary criminalizing those lawyers and activists who aided asylum seekers citing that it "breached" EU law and "failed to fulfil its obligations". The Hungarian government's defiance is set to cost itself "billions of dollars in cash". The immigration law, also called the "Stop Soros law", was passed in 2018 forbidding aid to asylum seekers. However, in Orbans' end-of-year news conference held on 21 December, he stated the "obsolescence" of the EU law amidst "massive migration". He further added: "The reality is that we have to stop migrants at the borders... This can be solved by one thing: changing the European asylum rules, but this process has not even started yet." Speaking on the EU withholding pandemic-recovery funds due to the breach of EU law, Orban said: "The whole process, from the point of view of the unity and the future of Europe, is the most brutal sabotage. This is what shatters the EU." ("Hungary's Viktor Orban to defy EU over immigration law," *BBC*, 23 December 2021)

NGO files lawsuit against France and the UK for English Channel migrant deaths

On 20 December, an NGO called Utopia 56 filed a lawsuit against France and the UK for failing to act and rescue migrants whose boats capsized on 24 November. At least 27 people lost their lives in the incident, with two survivors claiming the migrants made distress calls to France and the UK. However, the response they received was: "...if I call 999 they say call France and when we call France they tell us to contact the UK. Both couldn't care less." This led to Utopia 56 filing a complaint to the Court of Appeals of Paris, reported by *Euronews*: "...to the prosecutor of the Paris Judicial Court for

manslaughter and failure to provide assistance." The tragedy brought in a political crisis as France and the UK blamed each other for causing the issue and not deterring people from crossing the Channel. ("France, UK authorities face manslaughter lawsuit over deaths of migrants in Channel boat tragedy," *France24*, 20 December 2021; "NGO sues French and British authorities over Channel migrant boat tragedy," *Euronews*, 20 December 2021)

French boats rescue 138 refugees off the English Channel

On 17 December, French authorities reported that 138 refugees were rescued using two navy vessels and two lifeboats as the makeshift vessels got stranded in the English Channel. Despite the past mast drownings in the English Channel, the crossings by the migrants haven't stopped. This increase in the movement of migrants across the Channel has amplified tensions between the UK and French governments. The UK, in order to reduce the crossings, funded France GBP 54 million to deploy police patrols along the French beaches. They have blamed the French administration for not meeting the obligation and have urged for more police on the beaches. (Nadeem Badshah, "More than 130 people rescued after becoming stranded in the Channel," *The Guardian*, 17 December 2021)

More victims identified from the English Channel drowning disaster

On 14 December, the French authorities identified close to 27 bodies that were recuperated from the English Channel drowning. Of the identified victims, 16 belonged to Iraq and four to Afghanistan. According to the *BBC* report, the families were not aware of the state of their relatives since the disaster. They said that the members had paid smugglers thousands of dollars to help reach the UK. Apart from the Iraqis and Afghans several others from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Egypt were also identified. ("Channel tragedy: French authorities identify 26 victims," *BBC*, 14 December 2021)

Polish Foreign Minister condemns Belarus for "destabilizing" borders

On 07 December, *Deutsche Welle* published an article wherein the Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau condemned Belarus for "destabilizing" the border. He said: "Obviously it's not a migratory crisis, it's a political crisis purposefully launched by (Belarusian strongman Alexander) Lukashenko... You have to keep in mind that the migrants were first brought to Minsk by Belarusian authorities where they were instructed, some of them even trained how to behave at the border, how to cross it, certainly illegally, and how to deal with the police, border guards and so on." Rau believes that the border standoff needs to be seen in relation to the military buildup at the Ukrainian borders and said: "We have to acknowledge the right of Ukrainians to defend themselves. We will support them the way they ask for." (Konstantin Eggert and Roman Goncharenko, "Polish FM advocates 'most severe' sanctions against Belarus," *Deutsche Welle*, 07 December 2021)

Pope's second visit to the Greek island of Lesbos

On 05 December, Pope Francis visited the Greek island of Lesbos and spoke about the migrant crisis as a "shipwreck of civilization". After walking through the refugee camps of Mavrovouni he greeted the refugees and grieved as "little had changed" since his last visit in 2016. He rebuked those who used the migration crisis as a means of political purposes and further talked about "living in an era of walls and barbed wire". European leaders like Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki called for the EU to jointly finance a border wall using barbed wire to stop the migrants coming from the Middle East through Belarus. The refugees were hopeful with the Pope's visit and found strength knowing that people like him were still thinking about the crisis than coming up with strategies like "pushbacks" that are being used in Greece. (Philip Pullella and Lefteris Papadimas, "Pope calls migrant crisis 'shipwreck of civilisation'," *Reuters*, 05 December 2021; "Pope condemns treatment

of migrants in Europe,” BBC, 05 December 2021)

Western countries impose severe coordinated sanctions against Lukashenko’s regime and close associates

On 02 December, the US, the EU, the UK, and Canada together imposed sanctions on people and entities related to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. The statement mentioned that the sanctions were levied due to the “continuous attacks on fundamental freedoms, human rights, acts of repression and disregard of the international norms”. It is believed that the Belarusian regime tricked migrants to enter Belarus promising easy migration into Europe. At the Council of Ministers in Brussels, the EU diplomats decided to impose sanctions on those who were directly involved in bringing in the migrants. The fifth set of sanctions directed at the regime covers several commanders who were in the border strife and Belarusian state airline Belavia and Syrian airline Cham wings. Meanwhile, the US Treasury Department also imposed restrictions on "dealings in new issuances of Belarusian sovereign debt, limiting the government's ability to borrow money". It also targeted the associates of Lukashenko's son, as well as others related to third-country airlines and a potash company. Belarus responded by stating that these sanctions would hurt the civilians and requested for reconsideration of the same. However, they also warned of responding via asymmetrical measures. ([EU, UK, US, Canada issue coordinated sanctions against Belarus regime,” Deutsche Welle, 02 December 2021\)](#))

Poland, Latvia, Lithuania: Reimposition of emergencies and other restrictive measures at the borders

The EU has proposed a new measure that allows Poland and Belarus to suspend protections for asylum seekers. The European Commission intends to extend the rule to Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. This will enable them to hold up the existing asylum seeker applications from the previous 10 days to almost four weeks. In terms of the treatment of the migrants, the three countries have taken a strong stance

and the European Commission backs their decision, although it stands to violate the EU and international laws on humanitarian grounds. According to a senior researcher from Brussels-based Center for European Policy Research: “The commission seeks to apply fundamental exceptions instead of making sure that current norms and standards are delivered by national governments.” (Elian Peltier and Monika Pronczuk [“New E.U. Measures Set to Restrict Asylum Rights at the Belarus Border,” The New York Times, 01 December 2021\)](#))

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Poland: Donald Tusk claims government’s use of Pegasus, “crisis for democracy”

On 28 December, Polish opposition leader Donald Tusk stated that the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) spied on its opposition, calling it the latest “crisis for democracy” after communism. The accusations followed a cybersecurity watchdog claiming that the Pegasus spyware had been used to single out opposition leaders, one among which was Civic Platform member Krzysztof Brejza, a scandal which the media has termed “Polish Watergate”. Calling for a parliamentary inquiry into the matter, current head of the Civic Platform party, Tusk added: “This is unprecedented in our history... This is the biggest, deepest crisis for democracy since 1989.” ([“Claims Polish government used spyware is 'crisis for democracy', says opposition,” The Guardian 28 December 2021\)](#))

Google fined EUR 73 million for not acting on illegal content in the country

On 24 December, a court in Moscow ruled a judgement against Google and fined it EUR 73 million for not acting on content that the country deemed illegal. As reported by *The Guardian*, the court's ruling came after Russia "ordered companies to delete posts promoting drug abuse and dangerous pastimes and information about homemade weapons and explosives, as well as ones by groups it designates as extremist or terrorist". Russia's actions have been criticized as *BBC* reported that analysts speculated Moscow to use the campaign to further "...clamp down on free speech and online dissent". Moscow has additionally

demanded big tech platforms like Google and Meta to set up companies in Russia by 01 January 2022; else, they would face potential restrictions and bans. ("Russia fines Google £73m over failure to delete 'illegal' content," *The Guardian*, 24 December 2021; "Russia fines Google over illegal content breach," *BBC*, 24 December 2021)

Belgium: Ministry of Defense tracks down 23 December cyber-attack

On 20 December, Belgium's Ministry of Defense detected a cyber-attack that occurred on 23 December. It is said that the hackers had targeted a loophole in software called Log4j. Researchers had previously warned that the state-backed hacking groups which had ties with China, Iran, North Korea, and Turkey had made use of the susceptibility to hack rival networks. According to a spokesperson for the Belgian Defense Minister Ludivine Dedonder: "the ministry's teams have been working hard in the past days to secure its networks." He also added the government's plans to further its investment in cybersecurity. (Laurens Cerulus "Belgian defense ministry hit by cyberattack," 20 December 2021)

Ireland: Report on May 2021 cyber-attack on Ireland's health services

On 10 December, an independent report by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) about the cyberattack on Ireland's health services said the attack had "a far greater" impact than what was expected. The attack in May 2021 affected more than 80% of the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE) IT infrastructure. As a result, thousands of peoples' healthcare was disrupted with all the computers switching off. The attack was perpetrated by a group called Conti, and the ransomware according to the report has been linked to Russian criminal gangs. The report suggested that a "transformational change" was needed in dealing with technology and cyber-security. Even though the attackers gave the decryption key, which allowed the recovery to begin, it took until late September for all the computer services to work. The 157 report still says that "The HSE remains vulnerable to cyber-attacks that may have an even greater

impact". (Gordon Corera, "Irish health cyber-attack could have been even worse, report says," *BBC*, 10 December 2021; Shawn Pogatchnik, "Weak defenses made cyberattack on Irish hospitals easy, experts find," *POLITICO*, 10 December 2021)

Italy: Amazon penalized with EUR 1.1 billion in antitrust case

On 09 December, The Italian Competition Authority (AGCM) penalized Amazon with EUR 1.1 billion for misusing its supremacy over the market. This follows a EUR 68.7 million penalty that the company incurred after they were found guilty of breaching EU laws by the AGCM. According to the authority, Amazon had created a harsh environment for service providers as third-party sellers were required to use their own logistics service termed Fulfilment by Amazon (FBA). AGCM stated: "The investigation showed that such benefits are crucial to gain visibility, to boost sales and, in turn, to the success of sellers' offers on Amazon.it." The e-commerce giant intends to appeal the verdict and said: "When sellers choose FBA, they do so because it is efficient, convenient and competitive in terms of the price... The proposed fine and remedies are unjustified and disproportionate." The fine which is accompanied by countermeasures will soon be reviewed by a monitoring trustee. ("Italy fines Amazon €1.1 billion in antitrust case," *Deutsche Welle*, 09 December 2021)

SPORTS

Football players raise concern over FIFA proposal on biennial World Cup

On 27 December, star players of European football, France's Kylian Mbappe and Poland's forward Robert Lewandowski expressed concerns over FIFA's biennial World Cup proposal. The governing body of FIFA in a recent summit announced the idea of holding the World Cup every two years instead of four. Along with the players, many European leagues such as the UEFA, Conmebol and the African governing body Caf have opposed the plan. They reasoned that FIFA, which is the best competition that happens every four years, requires players to be well-prepared both physically and mentally. The parties fear that if the event is

conducted every two years, it will adversely impact both the health of the players and the quality of the game. According to Paris St-Germain forward Mbappe: "If people want to see quality in the game, the emotion, to see what makes the beauty of football, I think we have to respect the health of players." According to Bayern Munich striker Lewandowski: "We have so many games every year, so many tough weeks, not only the games but preparation for the season, preparation for the big tournaments...If we have a World Cup every two years, the expectation is the time where footballers play at a high level will go down ... It is physically and mentally impossible." (["Kylian Mbappe & Robert Lewandowski voice concerns over a biennial World Cup," BBC, 27 December 2021](#))

INTERNATIONAL

Italy recovers stolen antiques from the US

On 30 December, Italian authorities recovered ancient artefacts worth EUR 10 million found in the US. Italian authorities and their US counterparts raided multiple locations in a joint operation to secure 201 pieces of antiques. The Carabinieri Cultural Protection Commander Roberto Riccardi said: "Investigators have reconstructed a chain leading from illegal excavations to art dealers to US museums, auction houses, art galleries and private collections." As reported by *Euronews*: "Some were bought by international auction houses, galleries and private collectors, as well as museums including the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Fordham Museum in New York." In addition, the Carabinieri and the FBI have been working together to trace several other ancient artefacts over the years. They have been successful in recovering artefacts worth EUR 427 million in 2021 alone. Italy is the current G20 Chairman and has used its authority to urge member nations to crack down on these artefact smuggling networks. (["Italy seizes ancient artworks worth €10 million from the US," Deutsche Welle, 30 December 2021](#); [Theo Farrant, "Italy recovers €10 million worth of stolen artworks from around the world," Euronews, 31 December 2021](#))

Biden and Putin to conduct a telephonic conversation to discuss Ukrainian issue

On 30 December, Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden are set to hold a telephonic conversation at Putin's request. Given the concerns raised by both the US and the Ukrainian governments, the two leaders will discuss the military build-up by Russia at the Ukrainian border. According to a senior US administrative official, Biden is expected to state that the US seeks a diplomatic path over conflict. He said: "Biden is also expected to emphasize that talks with Russia ought to occur in "a context of de-escalation rather than escalation." The call will be the second one between the leaders in December, since the previous call failed to provide clear conclusions. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said: "We believe that only through talks is it possible to solve all the immediate problems that we have in abundance between us." (["Ukraine-Russia tensions: Biden and Putin to hold new call," Deutsche Welle, 30 December 2021](#))

Happiness Index 2021: Gallup International poll releases global happiness index

On 28 December, *Deutsche Welle* interviewed Gallup International President Kancho Stoychev regarding the association's End of Year survey on global happiness and optimism. Gallup International Association (GIA) has been conducting a global tracking study on hope, happiness, and economic expectations around the world for more than 40 years. According to Stoychev, this year's survey concluded that "global public opinion is seriously concerned about economic prospects and expects a deepening of the crisis", further adding that Europe led the charts in this regard with Eastern Europe seeing "an average of about two-thirds show a worsening of expectations". The polls ranked Colombia as the happiest country while the unhappiest was Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Indonesia became the most optimistic country while Turkey became the most pessimistic. Justifying his homeland Bulgaria being ranked the second-most pessimistic country, Stoychev said: "Pessimism in Bulgaria is realism; it is not due to failed public dreams. It is rather a

condemnation of the way Bulgarian society functions and, in that regard, it is rather a positive and productive attitude.” Regarding Germany, he stated: “... the Germans' consciousness is somehow irritated, tired and, in a way, not confident in itself. At the bottom of this could be a complex uncertainty — about the lockdowns, the vaccines, the complicated formula of the new government, the weak performance of the EU, the sharp confrontation between the West and Russia or about China.” On being questioned whether happiness could be measured, Stoychev stated: “... we do not look for their individual attitudes or preferences, but try to reflect public perceptions.” The GIA poll for 2022 stated that “38 percent of respondents believe that 2022 will be better than 2021, compared with 28 percent who expect a worse year and 2 percent who believe that 2022 will be no different from 2021”. (Christopher Nehring, [“Gallup International: ‘We cannot know our future, even though we think we can’,” Deutsche Welle](#), 28 December 2021)

Ukraine: The US financing projects in Ukraine, says border service

On 28 December, the Ukrainian border service stated that the US would be financing surveillance and monitoring equipment in attempts to strengthen the country's borders against Russia and Belarus. Reuters cited the border service to have stated: “... the projects worth USD 20 million involved the purchase of video recording systems and drones, as well as personal protective equipment for border guards.” Ukraine has received military support from the US since 2018. This fact has only let the Kremlin increasingly criticize Kyiv. ([“US helps Ukraine to strengthen its border with Russia, Belarus,” Reuters](#), 28 December 2021)

US and Russia to hold talks on 10 January 2022

On 28 December, *The Guardian* reported Russian and the US officials to have verified security talks between the two countries on 10 January 2022 in Geneva, Switzerland. According to *The Guardian*, the deliberations are expected to cover “Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's

borders, while Moscow will press demands that Nato pledges not to admit Ukraine and roll back the alliance's post-cold war development”. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Russia would be taking a “hard line” during the negotiations. However, Kremlin Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov stated: “(there was) no need to invent an oversized agenda and to stuff it with issues, which have long been addressed through other channels, to serve one's own interests.” Earlier on 27 November, a spokesperson for the White House's National Security Council had said: “When we sit down to talk, Russia can put its concerns on the table, and we will put our concerns on the table with Russia's activities as well. There will be areas where we can make progress, and areas where we will disagree. That's what diplomacy is about.” (Andrew Roth and Jon Henley, [“US and Russia to hold talks amid Ukraine tensions,” The Guardian](#), 28 December 2021)

Russia: Eighty percent of NATO's 2021 fighter jet scrambling was a response to Russia

On 28 December, NATO stated that its fighter jets had been scrambled numerous times in 2021 in order to stop hostile aeroplanes which were mainly Russian-based. ‘Scrambling’ in military terms refers to the act of quickly mobilizing military aircraft in response to an immediate threat, which is usually a hostile aircraft. The alliance said that 290 of almost 370 missions were a response to Russian triggers; most of these interceptions took place in the Baltic region of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania where NATO runs an air-policing mission. A statement released by the alliance read: “Generally, intercepts occurred without incident as NATO planes take off to identify the approaching aircraft and escort it out of the area. Very few intercepted flights entered allied airspace.” However, the number of NATO interceptions that responded to Russia decreased by 60 in 2021 when compared to 2020. NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu said: “NATO fighter jets are on duty around the clock, ready to take off in case of unverified flights near the airspace of our

allies... NATO is vigilant, and we will always do what it takes to protect and defend all allies." ("NATO scrambled jets 290 times due to Russian planes in 2021," Deutsche Welle, 28 December 2021)

Putin on Ukrainian border standoff: "We have nowhere to retreat"

On 26 December, Russian President Vladimir Putin speaking on state television said: "We have nowhere to retreat... They have pushed us to a line that we can't cross. They have taken it to the point where we simply must tell them 'Stop!'" He further stated the threat posed by NATO if it were to deploy missiles from Ukraine which would reach Moscow in around five minutes. The statements followed NATO proposing to initiate talks with Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry was quoted by TASS saying: "We have already received this (NATO) offer, and we are considering it." Putin also expressed his concern over long-drawn negotiations. He stated: "They will talk endlessly, talk endlessly about the need for negotiations, and do nothing. Except pumping the neighbouring country with modern weapons systems, and increasing the threat to the Russian Federation, which we have to do something with, somehow to live with... I don't see anything bad here. It puts everyone involved in this process in a certain framework. But there is only one goal for us – to reach agreements that would ensure the security of Russia and its citizens today and in the long term." ("Putin says 'diverse' options open to fight Western 'threat'," Deutsche Welle, 26 December 2021)

Blinken and Stoltenberg discuss Russia-Ukraine border standoff

On 23 December, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and examined the Russian troop buildup along the Ukrainian borders. The US State Department released a statement following the announcement, which said: "They discussed NATO's dual-track approach to Russia, noting the alliance remains ready for meaningful dialogue with Russia, while standing united to defend and protect allies." ("Blinken speaks with NATO secretary general about Russia-Ukraine tensions," Reuters, 23 December 2021)

Biden administration agrees for talks with Putin in early January 2022

On 23 December, a senior Biden administration official said that the US was set to have talks in early January 2022 with Russia. They would ready themselves to address the security proposals put forward by Moscow. Although both parties have agreed for the talks, the time and venue are yet to be decided. The US spokesperson commented on the Ukraine issue, stating: "Well facts are a funny thing and facts make clear that the only aggression we're seeing at the border of Russia and Ukraine is the military build-up by the Russians and the bellicose rhetoric by the leader of Russia." (Alexandra Alper, "White House says no agreement on new Biden-Putin talks," Reuters, 23 December 2021)

Germany: Foreign Minister assures plan of action for evacuation in Afghanistan

On 23 December, Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said that the German government would take all the measures to evacuate all those in need of protection from Afghanistan. She outlined the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and Germany's plan of action to hasten the evacuation. So far, the government has promised to rescue 15,000 people from the region, which includes 135 Germans. According to Baerbock: "Major sectors of the economy have collapsed, many people are starving, one can hardly bear it when one reads that families in their desperation are selling their daughters to buy food." ("Afghanistan suffering 'humanitarian catastrophe' says Germany Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock," Deutsche Welle, 23 December 2021)

16 western countries issue statements against Russian involvement in Mali

On 23 December, 16 western countries released a joint statement accusing the deployment of Russian mercenaries in Mali. The statement said: "This deployment can only further deteriorate the security situation in West Africa, lead to an aggravation of the Human Rights situation in Mali, threaten the Agreement for peace and reconciliation in Mali." The situation in Mali took an adverse turn when French President Emmanuel Macron announced

the withdrawal of troops from the Sahel region by early 2022. It is believed that Russia has been supporting the government with a private military which it has denied. This was identified when the private military was seen helping pro-Russian separatists in the Eastern Ukraine Conflict. The EU has also levied sanctions on the Wagner group due to its human rights violations. The issuing of the statement is seen as a strong disagreement from the West against the Russian involvement in the region. ("West condemns 'deployment' of Russian mercenaries in Mali," *Deutsche Welle*, 23 December 2021; "Mali: West condemns Russian mercenaries 'deployment'," *BBC*, 23 December 2021))

EU and Germany call for dialogue to resolve the issue of Ukraine

On 23 December, the EU high representative for Foreign Policy Josep Borrell responded to Russia's controversial security demands that were put on 17 December. The diplomat alleged that Russia was causing deterioration to Europe's security and called for a dialogue to resolve the Ukrainian issue. On 22 December, the EU released a statement: "They underlined that any further military aggression against Ukraine will have massive consequences and severe costs." The EU representative spoke on the same lines with the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to discuss the Russian proposals. With regard to the issue, Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock has called for Berlin to take a stronger stance against Moscow compared to the previous government and has also highlighted the need for a dialogue to prevent the conflict. (Jennifer Rankin, "Russia causing 'severe deterioration' of European security – EU," *The Guardian*, 23 December 2021; "Germany urges dialogue with Russia, says 'greatly concerned' by Putin military threat," *France24*, 22 December 2021)

Lavrov confirms talks between Russia and the US for early January

On 22 December, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov verified that they would initiate talks with the US in early 2022.

Speaking at an interview with *RT* television station, Lavrov said: "The first round will be held in the form of a bilateral contact between our and US negotiators, who have already been named and are acceptable for both sides... We do not want war. We do not need conflicts and, hopefully, everyone else does not view conflicts as a desirable course of action." Although the West is yet to confirm any such talks, they intend to dialogue with Russia. On 21 December, a statement released by the German government read that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz held a telephonic conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin over the "increased Russian military presence near Ukraine"; Scholz reportedly "expressed his concern about the situation and the urgent need for de-escalation". On 21 December, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg commented on maintaining dialogue with Russia, as he stated: "Any dialogue with Russia needs to be based on the core principles of European security and to address Nato's concerns about Russia's actions. And it needs to take place in consultation with Nato's European partners, including with Ukraine." (Russia: Security talks with US and NATO set for January," *Deutsche Welle*, 22 December 2021; Andrew Roth, David Smith, and Dan Sabbagh, "Russia claims it will begin talks with US and Nato," *The Guardian*, 22 December 2021))

Russia's eight-point draft treaty to de-escalate tensions

On 17 December, Russia put forward a list of demands to de-escalate tensions in Europe. The list was an eight-point draft treaty issued by Russia's Foreign Ministry that was handed over to the US and NATO. A senior US official mentioned that certain parts of the treaty were "unacceptable" as one of the treaties said, according to *BBC*: "... countries that joined Nato after the fall of the Soviet Union not to deploy troops or weapons in areas where they could be seen as a threat to Russia." In light of the draft treaty, the White House press secretary Jen Psaki said: "There will be no talks on European security without our European allies and partners." The Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov stated that

Russia was keen to meet "without delays and without stalling" as Moscow focused on its talks with the US. At the same time, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warned about Russia increasing troops on its side of the border as it had already stationed about 100,000 troops. ("Russia Ukraine: Moscow lists demands for defusing Ukraine tensions," *BBC*, 17 December 2021; Andrew Roth, "Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe," *The Guardian*, 17 December 2021)

Moscow calls on the US to fasten considerations on security proposals

On 20 December, Russia stated it required a reply from the US regarding the security demands the former had proposed. Russia's "wishlist of security proposals" became quite controversial after the US stated that some of the terms in it were unacceptable. According to White House National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan had conversed with Russian counterpart Yuriy Ushakov regarding the same. She said: "(Sullivan) made clear that any dialogue must be based on reciprocity and address our concerns about Russia's actions, and take place in full coordination with our European allies and partners. He also noted that substantive progress can only occur in an environment of de-escalation rather than escalation." Meanwhile, *RIA* news agency quoted a Russian diplomat in Vienna Konstantin Gavrillov saying: "The conversation needs to be serious and everyone in NATO understands perfectly well despite their strength and power that concrete political action needs to be taken, otherwise the alternative is a military-technical and military response from Russia." (Tom Balmforth, "Russia presses for urgent US response on security guarantees," *Reuters*, 21 December 2021)

Putin raises concerns on the US supplying weapons to Ukraine

On 21 December, Russian President Vladimir Putin raised concerns about the US and the West's aggressive stand on Ukraine. Putin said: "What the US is doing in Ukraine is at our doorstep... And they should understand that we have nowhere further to retreat. Do they think we'll just watch

idly?" Putin made these remarks as he felt Russia had no room to retreat if the US supplied more weapons to Ukraine. Moscow also rejected claims of planning a Ukrainian invasion and instead stated that they wanted to de-escalate tensions via the draft agreement and treaty. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken mentioned that an in-person meeting between the two heads would not be possible as the situation continued to be diplomatically sensitive. The US, in the meantime, has planned to continue exporting military equipment and supplies to Kyiv. (Mark Trevelyan, "Putin says Russia has 'nowhere to retreat' over Ukraine," *Reuters*, 22 December 2021; "Russia simply has 'nowhere to retreat' if US weapons appear in Ukraine — Putin," *TASS*, 21 December 2021)

World Economic Forum postpones its annual meeting for 2022

On 20 December, the World Economic Forum (WEF) announced that it would not be hosting its in-person annual meeting in Davos due to the spread of the new Omicron variant. Instead, the event will take place as an online series of sessions titled "State of the World" which will bring all the global leaders to bring solutions to the most persisting challenges. As per the statement released by WEF: "Current pandemic conditions make it extremely difficult to deliver a global in-person meeting." The cancelled in-person meeting will take place in the early summer of 2022. The previous meeting held by WEF at Davos was in January 2020 for its 50-year anniversary, which was attended by US President Donald Trump along with campaigners including Greta Thunberg. (Richard Partington, "Davos economic forum delayed until summer amid Omicron fears," *The Guardian*, 20 December 2021; "COVID: Davos meeting called off due to omicron variant," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 December 2021)

Germany signs controversial arms deal with Egypt

On 16 December, as reported by *Deutsche Welle*, "Former Chancellor Angela Merkel's government approved controversial weapons exports to Egypt before leaving office". The move was criticized by a few political leaders as Egypt had a poor human

rights record. The current Chancellor Olaf Scholz was the former Finance Minister under the Merkel government; thus, he knew about the deals. The government would be delivering three MEKO A-200 EN frigates and 16 air defence systems made in Kiel and Baden-Württemberg. The agreement also discloses Germany was increasing its exports to non-EU countries, which has brought it to international attention. Germany's new coalition government has decided to accept a "restrictive weapons export policy," to tackle the backlash received under the former government's deals. (Wesley Dockery and Sabine Kinkartz, "[Germany: Merkel government greenlit controversial arms deal with Egypt](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 16 December 2021)

Lithuania: Vilnius recalls diplomats from Beijing due to "safety concerns"

On 15 December, the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry published a statement on their website after diplomats placed in Beijing returned to Vilnius. The statement read: "Charge d'affaires ad interim in China, Audra Ciapiene, returns to Vilnius for consultations." According to *Reuters*, 19 Lithuanian Embassy personnel were returning to Vilnius via a plane to Paris due to "safety concerns". Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis commented on the situation: "Uncertainty creates various possible interpretations... I want to say very strictly that this is not the closure of the embassy." The statement released by the ministry also read: "Lithuania is ready to continue the dialogue with China and restore the functions of the embassy to their full extent once a mutually beneficial agreement has been reached." Currently, the embassy is expected to function remotely while consular services resume in a constrained manner. The Taiwanese Foreign Ministry responded to the move stating their "highest respect to the Lithuanian government and its diplomatic decision-making". (Yew Lun Tian and Andrius Sytas, "[Lithuanian diplomats leave China as relations sour over Taiwan](#)," *Thomson Reuters Foundation News*, 15 December 2021; "[Lithuania's diplomats](#)

[leave Beijing](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 15 December 2021)

Biden's promise of support to NATO states of eastern Europe

On 09 December, US President Joe Biden called and pledged support to NATO states of eastern Europe and Ukraine if Russia attacked Ukraine. Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke to Biden about a "discussed possible formats for resolving the conflict". Biden also reassured the NATO leaders that he would keep them informed of all the agreements with Russia. Lithuanian diplomat Linas Antanas Linkevičius said that Biden's "transparency" regarding Russia's buildup in the region had been appreciated by Lithuania. Biden's talk with NATO leaders came after his video call with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The latter voiced concerns about Russia increasing forces around Ukraine. Biden also reiterated his support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity on a call with Putin. (Andrew Roth, "[Biden promises eastern Europeans support in event of Russian attack on Ukraine](#)," *The Guardian*, 09 December 2021; Andrius Sytas and Joanna Plucinska, "[Biden pledges more military support for Central Europe](#)," *Lithuanian official says*," *Reuters*, 10 December 2021)

Germany's new foreign minister to face the diplomatic rift between the US and Berlin

The new foreign minister of Germany, Annalena Baerbock, has been caught in a diplomatic rift between the US and Berlin. The issue is, the US has been levying back-to-back sanctions on the coalition government of Berlin, demanding to block Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline. While Russia has posed a threat for a military invasion in Ukraine and has also warned Germany to stop the supply of Gas as winter nears. Baerbock, a Greens co-leader, has been against the idea of a pipeline for a long time but has not voiced it out due to enduring support from the new German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz. According to her, the pipeline only benefited Russia by undermining Ukraine, negating the climate change targets of the EU and conflicting with Europe's geostrategic interests. Along

with French foreign minister Jean Yves Le Drian, Baerbock said: "The territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine are non-negotiable for us. Russia would pay a high political and economic price for renewed violation of Ukrainian statehood." (Patrick Wintour and Philip Oltermann ["Germany's foreign minister under pressure over Nord Stream 2 sanctions,"](#) *The Guardian*, 09 December 2021)

France releases the suspect arrested for the murder of Khashoggi

On 08 December, France released a Saudi man who was considered a suspect in the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The man was suspected due to the detection of a warrant in the passport that was issued by Turkey. After the arrest, the suspect's identity was investigated for 24 hours, post-investigation the Paris General Prosecutor's office released a statement, which said: "In-depth verifications to determine the identity of this person has enabled us to establish that the [arrest] warrant was not applicable to him, He has been released." The arrest provoked serious criticisms from the Saudi Arabian embassy. The Saudi Arabian government has so far maintained that the investigations for Khashoggi's killing stand complete and need no further probing. (["Khashoggi killing: French police nab wrong person in case of mistaken identity,"](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 08 December 2021; Angelique Chrisafis and Stephanie Kirchgaessner ["Man arrested in Paris over Jamal Khashoggi killing is released,"](#) *The Guardian*, 08 December 2021)

Biden-Putin Virtual Summit: US denies provision of troops to Ukraine; Putin reiterates "right to defend its security"

On 08 December, *The Guardian* reported US President Joe Biden to have stated the possibility of troops being provided to Ukraine being null. This came a day after Biden's talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Following the meeting, Biden said: "It was polite, but I made it very clear. If in fact, he invades Ukraine, there will be severe consequences, severe consequences. Economic consequences like you've never seen. I am absolutely confident he got the message." Biden plans to conduct higher-level talks with Russia that would

involve NATO members. Regarding this, he said: "... at least four of our major Nato allies and Russia to discuss the future of Russia's concerns relative to Nato writ large and... bringing down the temperature along the Eastern Front." Putin, in the meanwhile, commented on the talks saying: "I want to emphasise once again: the talks were very open, substantive, and I would say constructive. In any case, I hope the US side feels the same way about the results of our meeting... Every country certainly has the right to choose the most acceptable way of ensuring its security, but it must be done in a way that doesn't infringe on the interests and undermine security of other countries, in this case Russia." Biden will speak with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on 09 December. (Andrew Roth, ["Biden says he won't send US troops to Ukraine to deter Russian threat,"](#) *The Guardian*, 08 December 2021; ["Russia says it has 'right to defend its security,' as Biden warns of sanctions,"](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 08 December)

Biden-Putin virtual summit sees slow progress

On 07 December, the US President Joe Biden met with Russian President Vladimir Putin via a virtual conference in an effort to de-escalate tensions along the Ukrainian borders. During the conference, the respective ambassadors were asked to maintain contact in order to make progress with regard to the border standoff. The virtual summit lasted for about two hours. Before the talks, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said: "Russia isn't going to attack anyone, but we have our own concerns and our own red lines. (Putin) has made them clear." After the summit, the US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan commented: "The discussion between President Biden and President Putin was direct and straightforward. There was a lot of give and take, there was no finger-wagging. But the president was crystal clear about where the United States stands on all of these issues." (Julian Borger and Andrew Roth, ["Biden and Putin make little apparent headway on Ukraine in virtual summit,"](#) *The Guardian*, 07 December 2021)

France: One of the suspects in Jamal Khashoggi's murder arrested

On 07 December, French authorities at the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris arrested Khaled Aedh Alotaib, a suspect involved in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Alotaib, a former member of the Saudi royal guard, traveled to Riyadh under his own name when he was caught and taken into custody by the police in Paris. The arrest came two days after French President Emmanuel Macron visited Saudi Arabia. Interpol put the suspects on a red list for killing the former *Washington Post* journalist Khashoggi, while Turkey issued warrants for their arrests in March 2019. Alotaib was part of a rogue operation, speculated to have been sent by the Saudi government "to persuade him to return to the kingdom". Instead, Khashoggi was injected with a drug that resulted in an overdose. His body was dismembered and never found. Since Khashoggi was murdered in Turkey, the suspect will be extradited to Turkey for the criminal proceedings against him. ("Jamal Khashoggi: Suspect in murder of journalist arrested in Paris," *BBC*, 08 December 2021; Lukas Kotkamp, "Suspect in Jamal Khashoggi murder arrested in Paris," *POLITICO*, 07 December 2021)

Ukraine: West backs Kyiv against Russian aggression

On 06 December, leaders of the West expressed their support to Ukraine amidst the ongoing Russian aggression at the border. German, French, US, Italian, and British leaders reiterated the "need to protect the sovereignty of Ukraine". Both the White House and Downing Street verified the talks between the US President Joe Biden, the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, and French President Emmanuel Macron. According to a senior official of the Biden administration: "We have had intensive discussions with our European partners about what we would do collectively in the event of a major Russian military escalation in Ukraine, and we believe that we have a path forward that would involve substantial economic countermeasures by both the

Europeans and the United States." The US also assured military backing to NATO along with the imposition of sanctions in the face of such an attack. On 03 December, Biden spoke to reporters, stating: "What I am doing is putting together what I believe to be will be the most comprehensive and meaningful set of initiatives to make it very, very difficult for Mr. Putin to go ahead and do what people are worried he may do." Biden and Putin are set to conduct a secure video call on 07 December at 1500 GMT where the US President is expected to clarify the possibility of Ukraine being a member of NATO. ("West determined to protect Ukraine sovereignty in face of 'Russian aggression'," *Deutsche Welle*, 07 December 2021; Andrew Roth and Julian Borger, "US says it will send troops to eastern Europe if Russia invades Ukraine," *The Guardian*, 06 December 2021; Quint Forgey, "U.S. and Europe ready 'significant and severe' sanctions if Russia invades Ukraine," *POLITICO*, 06 December 2021; "Biden to warn Putin of 'very real costs' of Ukraine invasion in high-stakes call," *France24*, 07 December 2021)

Russia: President Vladimir Putin's visit to India

On 06 December, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Delhi. The bilateral ties were already strained with growing discontentment since India joined the Quad. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke about the displeasure and how the West was "trying to engage India in anti-China games by promoting Indo-Pacific strategies". The visit by Putin comes with Russia delivering the Russian-made S-400 missile defense systems to India that gives it a strategic deterrence to counter China and Pakistan. Apart from the missile systems, there were shared concerns about Afghanistan and how bilateral trade between the two countries could be improved. The leaders have aimed for trade between the two countries to touch USD 30 billion by 2025. In addition, India would give Russia USD one billion in line of credit as a business investment for the Russian far-east region. As Deputy Director at Washington's Wilson Center think-tank

Michael Kugelman said: "As long as trade, defence deals stay relevant, the two nations will find a way to sort out their geopolitics differences." (Vikas Pandey, "[Vladimir Putin: What Russian president's India visit means for world politics](#)," *BBC*, 06 December 2021; Dmitry Trenin, "[Russia-India: From Rethink to Adjust to Upgrade](#)," *The Moscow Times*, 06 December 2021)

Ukraine: US officials raise concern over Ukraine under Russia

On 05 December, a senior US administration official warned of the possibility of Ukraine becoming "the next Afghanistan" if Russia were to overpower the country by early 2022. Speaking to the *Washington Post* anonymously, the official said: "The Russian plans call for a military offensive against Ukraine as soon as early 2022 with a scale of forces twice what we saw this past spring during Russia's snap exercise near Ukraine's borders... The plans involve extensive movement of 100 battalion tactical groups with an estimated 175,00 personnel, along with armor, artillery and equipment." However, Moscow has maintained its stance of denying any such plans while blaming Ukraine for amassing troops along its borders. The Connecticut senator Chris Murphy said: "I've been in Ukraine six times. I've seen the intelligence, the threat is serious... Ukraine can become the next Afghanistan for Russia if it chooses to move further." Russia, however, has denied these claims. Deputy speaker of the Russian parliament's upper house Konstantin Kosachev, while speaking to *Russia-24*, said: "There is no preparation underway for an offensive." The US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin are set to have talked over "a secure video call" on 07 December. (Martin Pengelly, "[Ukraine could be 'next Afghanistan' for Russia if it invades](#), US senator warns," *The Guardian*, 05 December 2021; Saim Dusan Inayatullah, "[US claims Russia planning Ukraine offensive](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 05 December 2021)

Russian foreign ministry accuses US and NATO of risking civilian life via air accident

On 05 December, the US Air Force was condemned by the Russian foreign ministry

for causing "a threat to civil aviation". This followed an incident on 03 December, when two civilian aircraft and a NATO reconnaissance plane were caught in a mid-air-near-miss over the Black Sea. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova took to Twitter, tweeting: "Just because an air incident over the Black Seas 'Int waters has been prevented, this does not mean the US and NATO can further put lives at risk with impunity." ("[Moscow claims US spy plane nearly caused mid-air 'catastrophe'](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 05 December 2021)

French President meets Saudi crown prince to reach a peace deal

On 04 December, French President Emmanuel Macron held an in-person meeting with the crown prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad bin Salman. This will be the first time a western leader visits the kingdom after the Jamal Khashoggi incident. France and its leader sees Saudi Arabia as a vital actor to strike a peace deal with Iran and to fight against Islamist militants in the MENA region. Post the meeting, Macron said, "We talked about absolutely everything, without any taboos and we were obviously able to bring up the question of human rights." From the point of view of Saudi Arabia, which has been facing global criticism after the killing of Khashoggi, the meeting with Macron will assure its arms imports. (John Irish, "[In Khashoggi's shadow, Macron holds Saudi talks with crown prince](#)," *Reuters*, 05 December 2021)

France: A joint French-Qatar evacuation operation in Afghanistan

A French evacuation mission took place in Afghanistan with the help of the ministry of Qatar. The evacuees consisted of journalists; civilian workers employed by the French army. As per the recent statement, 110 French along with 396 Afghans have been evacuated from Afghanistan till now. This evacuation operation also involved a humanitarian mission on supplying medical equipment, food and winter essentials to international organizations in Afghanistan through a military plane of Qatar. ("[France evacuates](#)

more than 300 people from Afghanistan,”
Reuters, 04 December 2021)

Russia: Possible escalation and Putin’s ‘red lines’

On 04 December, US President Joe Biden warned his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin that it would be “very, very difficult” for Russia to invade Ukraine. This statement appears after the recent escalations and military buildups on the eastern borders of Ukraine. A video call is expected to happen this week to further ease the tensions, but Biden has been firm on not “accepting anybody’s red lines”. Ukraine’s defense minister Oleksii Reznikov is concerned about a possible large-scale escalation by the end of January, this is similar to the US intelligence officials’ claim of a possible offensive. While the deputy speaker of the Russian Parliament, Konstantin Kosachev denied any attack or preparation underway for an offensive. Russian Foreign policy advisor Yuri Ushakov said that President Putin will only be reiterating Russia’s “Red lines” in the negotiations ahead and he would demand a legally binding guarantee that NATO would not expand into Ukraine. (“Russia Ukraine: Biden warns Russia against Ukraine ‘red lines,’” *BBC*, 04 December 2021)

France signs deal with the UAE to boost defense industry

The French government has signed a purchase deal with the UAE of 80 Rafale military fighter aircraft worth EUR 16 billion. Additionally, another contract on the purchase of 12 Caracal helicopters was also signed. The deal comes as a result of the first day visit of the French president in the Emirates which is said to continue to Qatar and Saudi Arabia. This contract is said to boost France’s defense industry after the loss of the submarine contract with Australia. (“UAE signs contract with France for 80 Rafale warplanes as Macron visits Gulf,” *Euronews*, 03 December 2021)

Blinken warns Russia of ‘serious consequences’ if tensions with Ukraine escalate

On 02 December, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Russian Foreign

Minister Sergey Lavrov. The meeting addressed the issue of the Russian aggression near the Ukrainian borders as Blinken warned the “serious consequences” that an escalation of the same could ensue. The leaders met in the backdrop of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Stockholm. While Blinken maintained that “the best way to avert crisis is through diplomacy”, Lavrov explained: “We, as President (Vladimir) Putin has stated, do not want any conflicts.” (“US top diplomat Blinken warns of ‘serious consequences’ if Russia attacks Ukraine,” *Deutsche Welle*, 02 December 2021)

Blinken and Lavrov set to meet on the sidelines of NATO summit

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov are set to meet on 02 December amid the worsening tensions between Russia and Ukraine. This meeting comes a day after Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba participated in the meetings of NATO Foreign Ministries. Ukraine at the NATO summit has sought greater cooperation with the alliance and suggested sanctions against Russia. Although NATO itself cannot impose sanctions, its member states can. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken raised concerns about the significant Russian aggression against Ukraine and said that the US would respond with economic measures of “high impact”. Putin said that he was looking forward to the US-Russia discussions to work out ways to de-escalate tensions by excluding any new eastward moves by NATO, closer to Russian territory. Putin also mentioned that an immediate de-escalation of troops is not possible as he alleged that Ukraine had built up troops in the Donbas region. (“US, Russian top diplomats to discuss Ukraine after NATO talks,” *Deutsche Welle*, 01 December 2021)

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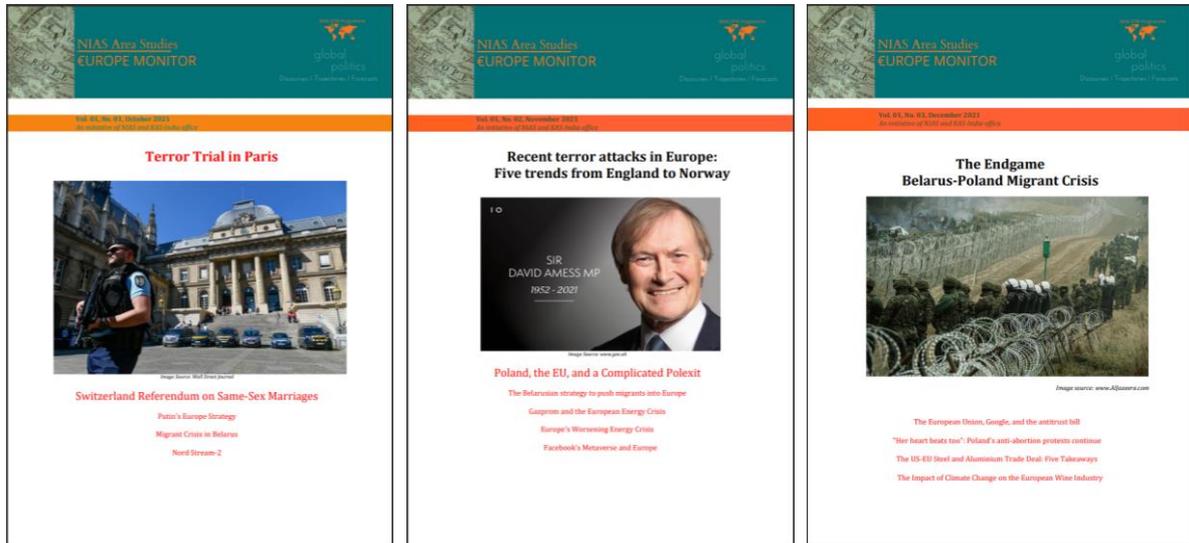
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