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Cover Story

The Ukraine Endgame Who wants what?



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The Artemis Accords: Three reasons why Europe is not on the same page with the US
Mapping COVID-19 protests in Europe: Who and Why
In Europe, abortion rights are "a privilege." Four reasons why

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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*.

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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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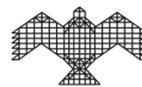
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National Institute of
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About NIAS

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.

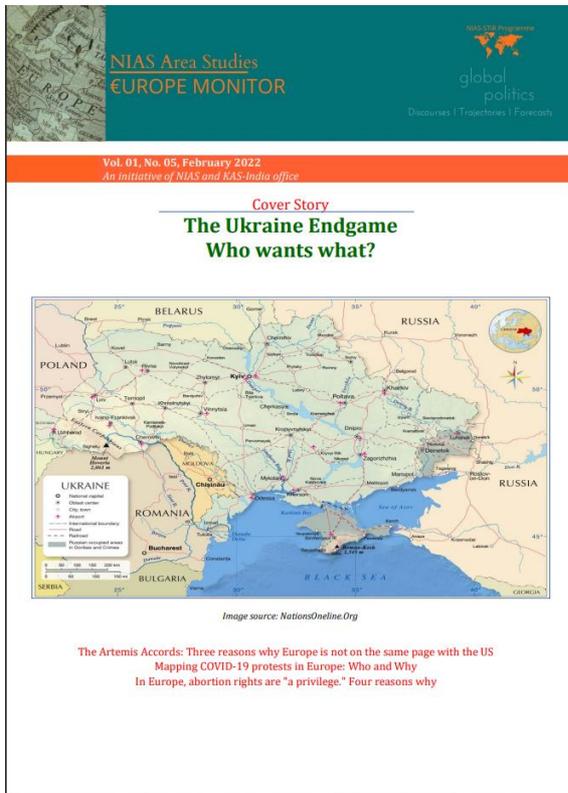
COMMENTS



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COVER STORY

The Ukraine Endgame: Who wants what?

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The anxiety and hysteria surrounding the assumed invasion, could turn into a major risk-off event, with a potential to cause damage to the already crawling global markets.

I The military standoff and Moscow' end-game

On 31 January 2022, the UNSC, by request of the US called for a meeting on the troop buildup and escalation of tensions at the borders between Ukraine and Russia. The month of January saw a steady increase in the tensions between US-NATO and Russia over the latter's military provocations at the Ukrainian borders. The NATO allies, fearful of an invasion by Russia, have been sending additional troops and military equipment to Ukraine to show support. All parties to the conflict have responded with a sense of hysteria, undermining the region's security. What is the Russian rationale behind the troop deployment? What have been the responses to the negotiation process? Can we predict the Russian end-game in the current situation at the borders?

Historically, the increased interactions of the European countries with Ukraine have irked the Russians. After Vladimir Putin took to office following the latest elections, referred to 'red lines,' of topics that were sensitive to Russia. The Ukrainian aspirations to join the European Union, which would necessarily bring NATO to the borders of Russia, was one of the red-lines. Russia has also repeatedly warned against the NATO members setting up centres of military training in Ukraine. To add to this, the US announced that it would keep up to 8,500 combat-ready troops on alert to be sent to Eastern Europe in the "near term." One of the primary demands of the Russian side to NATO is to rule out the possibility of Ukraine

joining the defense alliance; to which Vladimir accused the West of ignoring the security concerns of Moscow.

In the background to the military standoff is the renewed need for the US to reassure of its commitments to the NATO allies. In the year since taking office, Biden has shifted the

focus towards Russia. This includes the sanctions placed on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and the threat of sanctions on Russian officials for the standoff. Though the Russian side has time and again mentioned that it does not intend to invade Ukraine, the fear remains that the current situation would drive the prices higher, and worsen the energy crisis that Europe currently faces. Russia could hold on to commodity assets and make trade along the borders difficult, which would see a surge in the European gas prices and a spike in the region. Hence, the anxiety surrounding the assumed invasion could turn into a major risk-off event, with a potential to cause damage to the already crawling global markets.

Russian Rationale

At the borders with Ukraine, Putin has deployed offensive weapons, that includes main battle tanks, self-propelled howitzers, multiple launch rocket systems, Iskander short-range ballistic missile systems, infantry fighting vehicles and other military equipment at a striking range from Ukraine. This they have maintained as regular military exercises since October 2021 after they have been accused of increasing the number of troops at the borders. Currently, Russia has been accused of deploying 100,000 troops at the border of Ukraine and

has prepared for military exercises with Belarus. Villages near the borders have been asked to evacuate by the Ukrainian side.

Politically, Russia demands to prevent an eastward expansion of NATO and put a brick in the anti-Moscow Zelensky's closeness with the European countries. The Russian strategy calls for a permanent standing force with high readiness operational formations in all strategic directions, with the preparation to execute operations jointly. This formation is prepared with the ability to attack from Belarus, Russia, Donbas, and Crimea; a multi-axis attack that is designed to encircle the defending forces and likely capture territory. So far, Russia has displayed readiness for an attack, the ability to mobilize forces at a short notice and exert pressure from the directions of north, south, and east of Ukraine. To the west of Ukraine are the NATO forces. So far, Russia has conducted tank exercises in Belarus and is known to be supporting the rebel groups that are pro-Russia. It also holds the capability to hold on for the long haul.

“Politically, Russia demands to prevent an eastward expansion of NATO and put a brick in the anti-Moscow Zelensky's closeness with the European countries.”

Russia and the negotiation process

Russia has been bitter about alliances with its erstwhile Soviet states with NATO, which has necessarily been anti-Soviet and now anti-Russia. In 2018, the Ukrainian parliament made changes to its constitution-making the accession of the country to NATO and the EU a main foreign policy objective, and a central goal. Similarly, in 2019, the Ukrainian parliament voted in the majority to change the Ukrainian constitution to help them join NATO and the European Union. Throughout, the Russian demands have asked for NATO and the US to pull back forces from the region, and not attempt to admit Eastern European members to their security alliance. What started in 2013-14 since the Euro Square demonstrations and the civil unrest in Ukraine, has made the region a hotbed with tensions soaring across the Eurasian region and the fears of Ukraine

falling into the Russian hands like Crimea; with high economic and strategic costs. Throughout the negotiation process, Russia has observed that its core objectives or demands have not been met. However, in the weeks that have stretched the negotiation process, Russia has ensured to not send mixed signals or provoke any side. By the end of January, it was expected that Russia would formally respond to the negotiations over Ukraine to the proposal given to Moscow. However, it was notable that the Russian delegation had to walk away from the UNSC negotiations. The Russian ambassador to the UN has so far played down their public response and stated that the relevant ministries have been coordinating, and would reply to the US-NATO proposal after it.

Russian end-game

The alarmist prediction of the Russian end-game in the current crisis would be the complete takeover of Ukraine. This would however not be a feasible option for Russia as it would have to bear high economic and military costs to maintain the region, with its current abilities. The second, more moderate end-goal would be to get the west to agree on stepping away from the region. Additionally, the aggression could garner some concessions from the west. With mutual mistrust and hysteria as collaterals, economic sanctions have remained on Russian high-ranking individuals, which could be eased by leveraging this situation. Germany has not responded, so far, in opposition to Russia owing to its investments in Nord Stream 2. With a divided Europe, the Russian side stands a winning chance at negotiations, a war, however, is highly unlikely. Ukraine crisis would then be a trade-off for ease of politics.

II Russian threat, US Diplomacy, and the Normandy format: What does Ukraine want?

On 08 February, French President Emmanuel Macron met Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky after the talks in

Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Macron confirmed to Ukraine that Russia will not advance its military further and stressed the Minsk agreements signed by Ukraine in 2014 and 2015 as the right option to resolve the conflict. However, Zelensky said: "France plays an active role within the Normandy format. They demand unity and new proactive approaches from European leadership. We will continue to cooperate for the de-occupation of part of the territory of Ukraine."

On 26 January, Germany, France, Ukraine, and Russia representatives held talks under the Normandy Format at the Elysee Palace in Paris. After the talks, Adviser to Zelensky, Andriy Yermak, said: "The very fact that the Normandy format has resumed work is already a very positive signal... a kind of audit of the implementation of both the Minsk agreements and the agreements of the leaders of the Normandy format from 2019." With a series of diplomatic talks between the European powers, Ukraine faces uncertainty and risk similar to the Crimean Peninsula during the Russian annexation. Therefore, it is critical to look into a brief history of Soviet Ukraine, current internal and external challenges to analyze where Ukraine stands in the crisis.

Challenges faced: Internal

First, population divide. Ukraine consists of a majority of Russian-speaking people. Even after the annexation of Crimea and Donbas, few of them still have a sentiment towards Russia as their extended families still reside there. Many ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking populations dominate the region. It is due to the infiltration activities by the Russian aided separatist groups.

Second, the problem of oligarchs. They are a set of people present inside Ukraine with the ability to manipulate the operation of the government using their resources. Their influence in domestic politics, drafting economic reforms, and corruption led to frustration and lost trust in the Ukrainian government. Although the President has his anti-oligarch legislation on the agenda for this year, with the return of former President Petro Poroshenko, a pro-oligarch, the stakes for the internal clash are high.

Third, Increased involvement of the separatists. The Minsk protocol which aimed to achieve three key objectives: Establishing peace in eastern Ukraine; achieving Ukraine autonomy, and ceasefire and withdrawal of weapons. None of the objectives was achieved; the Donbas and Luhansk regions are still under the occupation of the Russian separatists.

"When it comes to assessing Ukraine's stance in the standoff, the possibility of a war is higher than ever."

Challenges faced: External

First, failure of dialogues so far on Ukraine. To address the Ukraine crisis, a series of dialogues have taken place in January, including the following: US-Russia talks, NATO-Russia Council (NRC) meet, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) special plenary meeting and the recent Geneva talks held again between the US and Russia. All these discussions have failed to defuse the Ukraine crisis.

Second, there is no room for voice in peace negotiations. In the continuous discussions held between the US, the NATO, and Russia over the developing conflict, it was only once Ukraine was allowed to engage directly, which was during the OSCE meeting held on 13 January. Apart from the talks held under Normandy Format, the country has wholly side-lined from voicing its problems. Russia has always been the first to be approached by any state.

Thirds, intervention of the US. The talks between the US and Russia over the military standoff have only heated up the negotiations and Russia continued to accumulate weapons in the Ukraine border. With Europe taking up the stage to mediate the problem since France took the EU Presidency through Normandy format and Macron's diplomatic trip, Russia has promised not to further its military, which is progress in the talks. However, it is still uncertain how the role of the US in the upcoming rounds of diplomatic dialogues steers Ukraine's problem.

Where does Ukraine stand?

First, military standoff. When it comes to assessing Ukraine's stance in the standoff, the possibility of a war is higher than ever with the aligning of the Russian forces at one side and the NATO, the US, the UK forces on the other. In case of a war, with uninterrupted military support from the European and transatlantic powers, Ukraine will win, but the recovery will cost its developing economy. Otherwise, through the diplomatic efforts, a ceasefire can be brought or marching of the Russian military into eastern Ukraine can be put to halt. Still, the future of Ukraine will continue to face the Russian threat until it becomes a member of NATO.

Second, the state of economy. While the debate over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline goes around the US, Germany, and Russia, the pipeline to come into operation seems to be delayed. If Ukraine could use the opportunity to sign alternative trade deals with the European countries similar to the economic deals signed with France during Macron's visit. Through which Ukraine will be able to keep the economy afloat even if the pipeline comes into operation and it will also strengthen its shield to face Russia in future standoffs.

Third, leadership. Although Europe did not step into the diplomatic game in the initial phase, under Macron, little progress is observed in the talks with Russia. In terms of leadership, Zelensky has used his voice to bring the international powers to deal with the crisis and has been outward in flagging the offensive acts of Russia. In terms of representation, there is a lack in putting forth the views of the Ukrainian people, but in comparison with the former Ukrainian leaders, Zelensky is a boon to Ukraine.

III The crisis in Ukraine: Europe's endgame

The possibility of a military conflict seems imminent in Ukraine. Though many European countries have taken divergent stands on the Ukrainian crisis, they all incline towards averting a war. The recent

diplomatic meets between Germany, France, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine could be seen to de-escalate or delay the imminent threat of war and look for the possibilities in diplomatic formats such as the Weimar Triangle the Normandy format talks.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been giving mixed signals as he participated in the bilateral meets with French President Emmanuel Macron and seemed hopeful of the steps taken towards de-escalation. However, at the same time, Russia was involved in military exercises with Belarus and sent nuclear-capable bombers to patrol the country. German Chancellor Scholz's meet with US President Joe Biden also highlighted how Germany did not want to take adverse steps against the Nord Stream (NS2P) two while Biden clearly stated that the US would end NS2P if Russia attacked. Polish President Andrzej Duda's discussion on reviving the Weimar Triangle proves how Europe wants to do everything in its capacity to avert a military conflict.

However, Europe has also been preparing for a likely war as NATO has taken steps to reinforce its eastern flank. For example, Germany sent troops to Lithuania to strengthen the NATO battle group present there. NATO has also scheduled to extend its Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) strategy to Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria.

Divisions within Europe

Even with the countries in Europe preparing for a diplomatic win or a military conflict, there have been differences in the stands taken by governments. Countries like France have been pushing for strategic autonomy concerning the diplomatic talks with Russia as the failure of the Geneva talks had highlighted Washington's shortcomings on the diplomatic front with Moscow. EU, under Macron's Presidency, has been pushing for strategic autonomy. Thus he has been on the go to visit Russia, Germany, Poland, and Ukraine in a short period to de-escalate tensions and put forward a diplomatic solution.

There have always been divisions concerning military support to Ukraine, as Germany had refused to provide military

assistance to Ukraine. Instead, it had sent helmets to Ukraine as a sign of its approval which showed an ambitious stance of Germany towards Russia. At the same time, according to a European Council on Foreign Relations report, "If Russia were to invade Ukraine, who should come to Ukraine's defense?" The data clearly showed how the people looked forward to NATO, the EU, the US, Germany, France, the UK, and their own country. Thus, because of multiple factors and stands, Europe cannot decide to have a common strategy or belief in a single entity if there is a military conflict with Russia.

"Europe for centuries has portrayed itself as an identity of a singular, homogenous unit, but its ruptures are visible during a crisis."

Endgame for a military conflict

With the situation continuing to escalate, the likely endgame of Europe in terms of a military conflict has to be analyzed. There are two questions to be addressed under this:

First, who should step up to defend Ukraine if a Russian invasion happens? Europeans were not even prepared for a war at this point. The only plausible war that could have been fought would have been between the US, Russia, and China. Thus, the people in Europe have been looking up to NATO and the EU to play a crucial role in the possible war. While the US, Germany, France, and the UK have been preparing for war, it is less likely to be involved in a military escalation individually.

Second, implications of a military conflict. The military conflict would affect a plethora of issues for Europe, such as migration, cyber warfare, an energy crisis, a direct military confrontation, and economic issues. Of course, there are national differences on these critical issues as the countries in Europe would be affected differently. But, the saying, "Remember what the Kremlin did to you last time," sums up their fear of a military conflict.

Endgame on the diplomatic front

An unlikely situation would be where the diplomatic formats of the Normandy and Weimar Triangle play a crucial role in achieving a stalemate and averting the imminent threat of a military confrontation. Nevertheless, their emergence can be seen as a part of Europe's diplomatic endgame that indicates Europe's role and ambition in dealing with the crisis at hand. Even Pope Francis had lauded the diplomats of the Normandy format talks. Germany's stance has been on diplomatic lines only due to its reliance on Russian gas.

Thus, Europe for centuries has portrayed itself as an identity of a singular, homogenous unit, but its ruptures are visible during a crisis. Furthermore, the Ukrainian crisis has highlighted the fractures through the dynamic stances that countries such as Belarus, Poland, France, and the UK have taken.

IV The Route of Diplomacy: Efforts at De-escalation

In an effort to de-escalate the Ukrainian border standoff, the second week of January was packed with diplomatic talks held between Russia and the West. Amidst one of the tensest situations in East-West relations since the Cold War period, a series of meetings occurred during this week. Unfortunately, none of these efforts resulted in substantive breakthroughs.

What happened?

On 10 January, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov met in Geneva under the Strategic Security Dialogue initiative. Although the primary intent behind the talks was to discuss arms control measures, this was lost in an attempt to de-escalate tensions in Ukraine. Despite the seven hour-long discussions culminating in promises of maintaining an open channel of communication, they were inconclusive.

On 12 January, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) held its first meeting since July 2019 in Brussels. Following the meeting, NATO

Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg expressed the meeting to be “a positive sign” as he termed the differences between the alliance and Russia “not easy to bridge”. Additionally, Russia’s security proposal was termed “unacceptable”.

On 13 January, the 57-member Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) held its 1350th special plenary meeting in Vienna. Poland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Zbigniew Rau addressed the meeting and discussed several issues and agendas that Poland as the council chair would consider in 2022. Rau initiated the meeting by addressing the military escalations; he said: “It seems, that the risk of war in the OSCE area is now greater, than ever before in the last 30 years.” He called for the Helsinki principles to be upheld for better European security while appreciating the OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine.

On 13 January, the EU Foreign and Defense Ministers met at Brest in Brittany for a two-day ministerial meeting. The meeting of the Foreign Ministers was followed by a joint working session involving the Defense ministers of the member states. The EU’s draft white paper on defense called the ‘Strategic Compass,’ which intends to bring a unified stance on international security situations, was discussed in-depth. The meeting garnered widespread support for conducting the Normandy Format talks to de-escalate tensions.

What is the background?

First, the Russian security proposal. Presented to both the US and NATO, the Kremlin put forth three demands in its security proposal. The first demand calls for NATO to deny accession to Ukraine and Georgia; Russia fears their accession into the alliance will make them anti-Russian proxy states. The second clause demands the withdrawal of NATO troops from former USSR countries like Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic while ending military exercises in the region. This request is justified by a few Kremlin leaders who claim that Putin’s interests currently lean towards geopolitical expansion. Hence, one can conclude that Russia’s enthusiasm to modify

the “post-cold war security architecture in Europe” is higher now than ever. Finally, the third demand is a legal guarantee from NATO and the EU of Ukraine never acceding to NATO. Apart from the evident lack of trust, this ensures the Kremlin never loses power over Ukrainian politics.

Second, a predetermined outcome. The West engaging with Russia and negotiating terms in a direct manner was bound to bring a substantial change in the status quo favouring de-escalation. Recognizing the West’s need for diplomacy, the Kremlin conducted talks that concluded with no concessions from either side. It seemed as though Russia was prepared to declare the negotiations a failure, even before the talks began. Sherman phrased it right as she expressed the US doubt regarding Russia's intentions of engaging in diplomacy – whether they were executed in good faith or just a pretext to justify war.

“All four meetings concluded with a note on continuing talks. The calls for continued talks imply a protracted process, leading to a delay in the escalation of tensions.”

What does it mean?

First, the lack of breakthroughs. All four “frank and forthright” talks, as Sherman put it, were disappointing. The uncertainty voiced by Sherman when questioned about de-escalation efforts was too hard to miss. The inconclusiveness accompanied by the lack of commitments led to the West being extremely disappointed; there was not even a verbal assurance of de-escalation from Russia.

Second, principles to stay. The Russian demands to stop NATO’s eastward expansion and deny membership to Ukraine were outrightly rejected by the West on the grounds that it went against NATO’s “open-door policy”. This sentiment was reiterated by Sherman and Stoltenberg in Geneva and the NRC, respectively. Bridging this gap in principles will be an uphill climb.

Third, the open channel of communication. All four meetings concluded with a note on

continuing talks. The calls for continued talks imply a protracted process, leading to a delay in the escalation of tensions. This gives time for diplomacy to work, avoiding war. Although the Kremlin agreed to this, they had earlier stated they would choose to 'act' instead of 'talk'. Thus, the Russian response is evidently unpredictable.

Fourth, growing ambiguity. Despite the efforts at diplomacy, one stands to see whether the Kremlin would engage and escalate tensions along the Ukrainian periphery. The contradictory statements emerging from the Putin administration are confusing — threats have been issued alongside reassurances of “no intent to invade”. This is the case even with the US. On one hand, it has announced potential sanctions on Russia if it invades, while on the other hand, it has called for increased diplomacy towards de-escalation.

Fifth, the sidelined EU and Ukraine. In a week filled with diplomacy and negotiations to de-escalate tensions along the Ukrainian borders, the OSCE meeting was the only one that saw Ukrainian participation. Meanwhile, the initial three meetings saw a largely absent EU. Commenting on this, a researcher states: “This feels like the post-World War II period when the Americans and Russians were deciding on Europe's future — especially as this conflict is taking place right at Europe's doorstep.” The absence raises a

series of questions: Does the Kremlin not deem the EU significant enough to negotiate regional security with them? Does the decision-making power on European security lie elsewhere? Nevertheless, the EU seems to be badly in need of introspection.

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COMMENT

The Artemis Accords: Three reasons why Europe is not on the same page with the US

Harini Madhusudan

While the US has been working with France and Germany to cooperate more on Outer Space, the two countries do not seem convinced with the text.

On 4 January, an opinion in Politico discussed the American push to get its allies on board with the Artemis Accords. Though a few European Space Powers signed the Accords, France and Germany have kept away. Space players are increasingly seen testing the ground with their moon missions. It includes operations on celestial bodies, creating self-sustaining outposts, understanding the technological and other requirements of these missions, and eventually applying the research and utilizing the expertise to Mars and beyond.

While the US has been working with Paris and Berlin to cooperate more on Outer Space, hoping to rope France and Germany into the Accords, the two countries do not seem convinced with the text. This lobbying is seen in the context of the US Space Race with China. Both Russia and China have also raised similar concerns about the accords and have declined to be a formal part of the Artemis Accords. The primary reason is, the Artemis Accords legally seeks to override the principles of the Outer Space Treaty of 1967. Countries like Luxembourg have willingly participated in the Accords for the same reason: to exploit the Lunar resources.

Artemis Accords: A brief note

The Trump administration introduced the Artemis Accords in 2020 to take humans back to the Moon and establish a permanent presence on the celestial surface. On 23 January, Israel became the fifteenth country to announce its participation in the Artemis Accords. The US allies have been asked to sign the 18-page document to access NASA's Artemis program that has outlined the course of human activities for the lunar surface in the upcoming decade. The signatories include Italy, the UK, Luxembourg, Australia, Japan, Canada, South

Korea, Brazil, Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, United Arab Emirates, Ukraine, and Israel.

The US sees the Artemis Accords as a gateway to their investments in landing humans and robotic exploration on the lunar surface and eventually on the surface of Mars. The European Space Agency has signed an MoU with NASA. This includes operations and development activities that would aid in launching the Lunar Gateway and the European Crew. Operations beyond the technological cooperation and crew; those taking place on the surface of the Moon, are not covered by the MoU. The ESA would provide a European Service Module to the planned Orion spacecraft used for the Artemis missions to the Moon with propulsion, oxygen, power, and water; with three flight opportunities for European astronauts. While several European countries have signed the Accords, the ESA is in talks with China and Russia for their moon-base project. On the other hand, UAE has signed the accords but is also negotiating to participate in the moon-base project, an option the European countries can choose.

Artemis 2020 vs OST 1967

Though the accords do not constitute any form of international law yet, there are clauses in the accords that override the norms of the Outer Space Treaty. Since the accords are bilaterally signed, they could cause legal issues at a future time. Separately, there is also a fighting perspective among these countries on the need to ally with the US ambitions in Space. The Outer Space Treaty has in-place laws regarding ownership, liability, and sovereignty, which the Artemis Accords aims to flesh out. The text of the accords asks the signatory countries to agree that "extraction of space resources does not inherently

constitute national appropriation," which indicates a signal for countries and companies to use them to their advantage. These deviations from the principles of the Outer Space treaty have placed an ethical question on the European countries. Besides space mining, the accords also propose designating "safe zones." These safe zones would give exclusive ownership access to the countries, a stark difference from the OST 1967.

“...there would remain a divide within Europe, between the countries that have already signed the accords and the ones that await more clarity of the US intentions.”

Resource Exploitation

Countries like France and Germany are staunch believers of the principles of non-appropriation listed in the OST. The Accords seeks to override this principle by allowing themselves to utilize the resources for commercial purposes. This would allow various countries to exploit lunar resources and allow commercial industries to take advantage. Resource exploitation will be a serious legal problem for space-faring countries in the upcoming decades. Ideally, the signatories should have opposed this clause in the Accords, as it does not align with the main theme of what the Accords stands for.

An exclusive role for Europe

The new government in Germany hopes to introduce a Europe-specific 'space law' that

would include common standards for the use of resources. Since Luxembourg, Italy, and Poland have already signed, they would remain engaged with the Accords bilaterally. Additionally, the Europeans are also technologically engaged with the Artemis program; they are building the Orion service module. France is Europe's space powerhouse, and the French space experts have a strong sentiment against the Accords. The US has also promoted the accords outside of the "normal" channels of International Law. In its right, after the restructuring of the ESA in 2019, the European side could represent their interests through the ESA while upholding the principles of the OST and not simply ally with the US. However, there would remain a divide within Europe, between the countries that have already signed the accords and the ones that await more clarity of the US intentions. In terms of collective participation, technological cooperation between the European Space Agency and NASA would have to continue despite the European stance on the accords.

One has to see the accords as a business deal to ensure the US interests are upheld in their attempts to drive back to their lunar glory of the 1960s. However, without careful negotiation, the accords would open Pandora's box of legal issues once countries begin to engage with the resources and seek ownership of assets and locations on the Moon. It would also be essential for space-faring countries and the European region to ensure they have a role in the decision-making and not have to play by the rules of the US, in this case.

COMMENT

Mapping COVID-19 protests in Europe: Who and Why

Padmashree Anandhan

There is a shift in the mindsets of the protestors from losing confidence in the government to asking for individual freedom.

On 2 January, Amsterdam witnessed demonstrations despite the Sunday ban on public gatherings. According to a police statement, four were injured, and 30 were detained.

On 4 January, Czech firefighters, police officers, and rescue workers voiced their concerns and signed a petition to withdraw the COVID-19 vaccine mandate. On 8 January, the French parliament's lower house passed a bill that replaced the option of showing a negative result of the COVID-19 test with a mandate to show a fully vaccinated certificate to enter public places. On the same day, Germany also witnessed protests from Hamburg, Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, and Koblenz.

Nature of protests

Europe has witnessed more protests, than the other regions. Within Europe, Germany and the countries surrounding it, Austria, Vienna, Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxembourg have witnessed numerous protests.

A major trigger for these protests has been the partial lockdown of public spaces such as restaurants and theatres, the government's inability to provide effective treatment and the imposing of the vaccine mandate on the working population.

The intensity of these protests is increasing. For example, in the Netherlands, the count of protesters has decreased, but it has become more aggressive. From protesting for the ban on the vaccine mandate, the Amsterdam protests demanded freedom and less repression from the government. In places where mass demonstrations took place, protesters threw glass bottles, sprayed

chemicals at police, and some even demanded the government to step down.

The change in the nature of these protests can be due to the change in the protestors' backgrounds. The participation of people from various social, religious and political groups, shows how the political element has now synced into the COVID-19 protest.

Who are the protestors?

Overall demography of the protestors belonged to the working class or a particular group of workers who were pushed to get vaccinated. The Anti-vaxxers accumulated most of these protests, but analysts observe that people from different social and religious groups are also involved in these protests. For example, in Vienna, the protestors belonged to the far-right Freedom Party of Austria. Also, supporters from the members of the conservative Catholic community are seen promoting the gatherings.

The demographic link is another factor to be observed. In most of the protests that occurred in France and Belgium, the anti-vaxxer population consisted of unvaccinated youth. The rioting youth threw stones, fireworks and engaged in physical clashes with the police. One of the reasons behind the youth turning aggressive is due to the impact caused by the vaccine mandate on their education, part-time jobs, and restrictions to enter social spaces. Due to the pandemic, they have faced difficulties in acquiring their university degree. They have lost their wages from part-time jobs as they cannot enter the supermarkets or any similar workspaces, and have a huge effect on their social life. Other protestors include those running small businesses. With a slow recovery from the pandemic losses, the

additional imposition of the vaccine mandate means the loss of more customers to their restaurants, coffee shops, and similar venues.

In Germany, the torchlit rally outside the house of Germany's health minister Petra Köpping was carried out by the Free Saxons, classified as a right-wing extremist group in Germany. The group has also voiced a similar concern loudly on Twitter.

“A major trigger for these protests has been the partial lockdown of public spaces such as restaurants and theatres, the government's inability to provide effective treatment and the imposing of the vaccine mandate on the working population.”

In the Netherlands, there was no division in terms of religious groups. However, both evangelical Christians and hooligans were involved in the protests. Apart from them, there are also political supporters involved in aggravating the protests against the present government. Therefore, the protests are moving slowly from the focus of COVID-19 measures to pursuing their own motivations.

State response

On 5 January, President Emmanuel Macron warned that the "life of the people will be made difficult" if left unvaccinated. He warned that those who remain unvaccinated would be strictly barred from coffee shops and other public places. In Amsterdam, many were detained by the Dutch police.

The handling of the protests is more important, as it is crucial to keep up with the domestic goodwill and international reputation, especially for a few leaders who are nearing elections like Macron and those who have just taken up the leadership like Olaf Scholz. The former German Chancellor Angela Merkel followed a tight health model by shifting from 3G to 2G+rule. Under the 3G rule, only the employees were asked to submit their vaccination proof and negative tests done in the last 24 hours. In the 2G+, the same was mandated not only in workplaces but to all public places. If the new coalition continues such repressive regulations, then the result is more likely to be protests in Germany.

Here the political leaders face huge political pressure to control the spread of covid. Macron, who has achieved the maximum vaccination rate in the region, is pushing further. While Germany's new government Olaf Scholz has just taken up leadership and doesn't want to earn people's hate. And is slow in imposing restrictions compared to other governments.

To conclude, protests in Europe show the following trends: utilization of the protest by the right-wing politicians in Europe to sabotage the image of the ruling government; issues within Europe to handle the next (fourth) wave; and a shift in the mindsets of the protestors from losing confidence in the government to asking for individual freedom.

COMMENT

In Europe, abortion rights are "a privilege." Four reasons why

Joeana Cera Matthews

Despite being a guaranteed right, how accessible are abortions in Europe?

According to the European Abortion Policies Atlas, abortion is a crime in 14 European countries. Abortion is also excluded from financial coverage by most countries' national health systems. Apparently, 26 countries permit health workers to deny care based on conscience clauses.

In a France24 interview, a woman who managed to terminate her pregnancy, rightly expressed: "If someone finds it difficult to access a right, it's not a right; it's a privilege." This analysis looks at four issues to answer why it is the case.

Availability vs Accessibility: "I can, but can I?"

The availability of a facility does not necessarily imply its accessibility; this is often the case when it comes to abortion. There are only a few regions across Europe where abortions are legal; even in these regions, women seeking abortions face hurdles. For instance, Spain has 50 provinces; 11 of these carry out abortions. In these 11 provinces, only 15 per cent of public clinics carry out abortions, while 200 private clinics have been subsidized to perform 85 per cent of the abortions. Such categorization and the subsequent case allocations alleviate the troubles faced by those attempting to terminate their pregnancies.

Furthermore, restrictions in residence force women to travel abroad for abortions. According to the UN, approximately 100,000 Polish women travel abroad, either to Germany or the Czech Republic, every year to terminate their pregnancies. There exist "informal" or "clandestine" abortions, apart from the legal abortions, that are carried out in non-medical environment. In Poland alone, these are estimated to be around 80,000 and 180,000 per year while the government places this at less than 10,000.

The Conservative protests

Besides the availability of abortion clinics, pro-life groups torment the lives of these women. The concept of abortion is riddled with social stigma, traumatizing those seeking the same. Surprisingly, anti-abortionists primarily consist of women, with significant support from doctors. They argue that fundamental rights are at stake when women choose to kill their foetuses.

Activist groups such as Spain's '40 Dias por la Vida,' a conservative religious entity, claim that abortions go against the fundamental right of respecting belief. Some of these groups protest outside abortion clinics, harassing women arriving at these clinics. They believe that prayer is a "powerful weapon" that can stop such "ungodly acts".

The Spanish government, in attempt to eradicate one of many obstacles faced by women seeking abortions, plans to list out 'conscientious objectors. This would ensure adequate doctors to guarantee abortions across the country. It also plans to ban or put an end to the tactics of pro-life groups that demonstrate outside clinics by stipulating a bill that would consider such acts as harassment, the violation of which would lead to three months to a year in prison. Although critics state that such a bill threatens the freedom of assembly, expression, and the right to worship, parliamentarians have countered it by saying: "Pray as much as you want but let women exercise their rights!"

A stigmatized health sector

Within the medical community, a widely-backed argument is that of the "conscience clause" that allows medical staff to refuse terminating pregnancies based on their beliefs. This is largely used to stigmatize abortions.

Stigmatization, is not limited to the women undergoing abortions; it extends to health personnel carrying it out, as well. A dreadful experience awaits those doctors and residents expecting to change their specialization after working in abortion clinics. Once an "accomplice" to abortion, their resumes are tainted along with their reputations.

Inadequate legal framework

According to the EU treaties, "the EU has no competence on abortion rights and legislation in this area is up to member states." Thus, from a legal perspective, the EU is helpless. Abortion laws vary across the bloc. From absolute bans and permission under certain conditions to legal restrictions and providing the freedom to choose.

Most EU countries such as the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Denmark, and Greece allow abortion on demand. Meanwhile, countries like Portugal, despite permitting abortions, require women to first undergo counselling and pay for the procedure. Other countries like Ireland, which reversed the abortion ban in 2018, allow it up to particular gestational limits. However, central and eastern Europe witness a polarization in the abortion debate. Abortion laws in Malta, Andorra and San Marino are more restrictive in comparison to Poland with Malta charging three-year prison sentences for the same. Nonetheless, several Catholic countries in Europe are now questioning the liberalization of abortion laws seeking to

reverse them, with conservative parties in Slovakia, Italy, Spain and Croatia idealizing Poland's restrictive abortion laws. In an effort to confront countries with restrictive abortion laws like Poland and Malta, the European Parliament passed a resolution declaring safe access to abortion a human right in 2021. The non-binding resolution is considered the first real resistance against anti-abortionists. Nonetheless, criticism against the resolution rose from all corners. A Spanish MEP criticized abortion being a human right as she added: "You can't ideologize a human right, this is not democracy and this is not what I want to see in Europe."

“Abortion laws vary across the bloc. From absolute bans and permission under certain conditions to legal restrictions and providing the freedom to choose.”

The European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF) released a statement that read: "Our atlas shows a mixed situation across the Continent. While national health systems in 21 countries treat abortion as any other medical service, in 14 countries and territories, abortion remains technically a crime, even though most Europeans consider abortion to be a women's right."

EM Short Notes*



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FRANCE

France: Celebrating 60 years of Yves Saint Laurent

By Joeana Cera Matthews

The Legacy

On 29 January 2022, the design house, Yves Saint Laurent (YSL), will complete 60 years in the fashion industry. The first-ever YSL show was on 29 January 1962. Founded by the late fashion designer and named after him, Yves Saint Laurent entered the haute couture industry succeeding the already established fashion house, Christian Dior, in December 1961. He worked with his life and business partner Pierre Bergé. In 2002, the duo established the Pierre Bergé-Yves Saint Laurent Foundation to conserve and promote the couturier's work.

A Tribute

As a tribute to the late designer, six leading museums in Paris, including the Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay, will hold exhibitions marking the 60th anniversary of the design house's first collection. The exhibition, scheduled from 29 January to 15 May, will

see different features of the designer's work. It is expected to showcase the inspirations of Saint Laurent including 20th-century greats like Picasso, Matisse and Mondrian. The curator of the multi-centre event, Mouna Mekouar justifies the need for such a tribute. She says: "We didn't want to put the clothes in a room, we wanted them there among the permanent collections. In this way visitors will rediscover those collections at the same time as paying homage to Yves Saint Laurent. It's like a cultural archipelago." In fact, the couturier himself had stated: "Always influenced by painting, I owe my July 1966 collection to American painters like Wesselman, Roy Lichtenstein. All my dresses were lit with landscapes, moons and sunlight." The Guardian reported a total of 50 creations and 300 designs to be on display during the exhibition.

President of the Pierre Bergé-Yves Saint Laurent Foundation, Madison Cox, commented on the upcoming event, stating: "To me, Yves Saint Laurent has always been cutting-edge and innovative, talking about how to see fashion in different ways, how to project fashion in different ways, and also how to look back at his work and how to make it relevant, in a sense. And I felt that

there was something else that could be said about Saint Laurent and his relationship with art." The YSL display will build on the peculiarities of the permanent collections showcased in the respective museums. Cox elaborates: "So we're not taking an empty temporary exhibition space and filling it, but we're actually placing the Saint Laurent designs within the permanent art galleries."

However, contrary to popular understanding, there will be no presentation of clothes. Instead, the process of building an haute couture piece from scratch will be the speciality of the display. Cox explained: "I think it's interesting also for the public to see, what is the process from a simple sketch with an HB pencil to almost the finished product, which is a toile, or a muslin dummy, that was produced for each item." This effort, he believes, will also give an opportunity for the works of the seamstresses, the hat-makers, the shoe-makers and everybody else who were part of creating a "maison de couture" or fashion house. The exhibition, as a whole, is expected to provide a new perspective into the couturier's work.

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ITALY

Italy: The Race for the Presidency

By Ashwin Dhanabalan

Upcoming presidential elections

On 24 January, Italy will hold elections for selecting a new head of state, replacing the incumbent Sergio Mattarella. The elections are being closely monitored given the candidacies of the current Prime Minister Mario Draghi and tycoon turned politician

Silvio Berlusconi. Presidential candidates in Italy usually do not declare themselves as potential contenders before the polls. Yet, these two have managed to break tradition and have turned heads since they put up their names as nominees for the post. The presidential elections in Italy would be conducted via a secret ballot, which will see more than 1,000 parliamentarians and regional representatives casting their votes.

The procedure for the elections involves each parliamentarian writing a name on a piece of paper and casting the ballot. Prior to this, parties try to choose a common candidate; however, the outcome cannot be controlled due to secretive voting. As a result, random names appear as nominees since anyone can stand for the post as long as they are Italian citizens above 50 years. As reported by Reuters, the Italian election process has "first three rounds of voting, a two-thirds majority is required to elect a president. From the fourth vote on, the threshold is lowered to an absolute majority, meaning more than half of those who cast a ballot". Each round takes at least four hours to complete. Other candidates who have expressed their interest in the post include the current Justice Minister Marta Cartabia, former lower house speaker Pier Ferdinando Casini and former Prime Minister Giuliano Amato.

A Profile: Silvio Berlusconi

Former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, nominating himself for the post, had allegedly promised his mother "that one day he would become president". Berlusconi was Italy's longest-serving post-war premier as he served three terms as Prime Minister. However, his sex party scandals and tax frauds barred him from public office in 2013. The billionaire media mogul has been in the limelight for his eclectic personality and analysts speculate that his personality could help him muster support during the elections. He has even sent out his speeches and policy priorities to parliamentarians, hoping they vote for him as he tries to broaden his appeal. Nevertheless, it has come to a point where he praised his arch political enemies' policies on "flagship citizens' income welfare schemes," making

him unpredictable to even the centre-right parties that support him.

A Profile: Mario Draghi

Current Prime Minister Mario Draghi is an all-time favourite among the Italian people as he played a crucial role to save Italy's economy when the pandemic hit. He is a respected banker-turned-emergency Prime Minister who brought structural reforms to the economy. He also served as the European Central Bank (ECB) Chief from 2011 to 2019, saving the Euro during the debt crisis. Nonetheless, the Italians do not see him as a presidential candidate since the role of a president is symbolic while the prime minister has a more vital role to play, being the head of the executive who deals with the immediate issues of the country. Concerning his nomination, Draghi stated: "I am a man and, if you like, a grandfather at the service of the institutions." If Draghi decides to stand for the elections, Italy would have to elect a Prime Minister a year earlier, immediately after the presidential elections.

As the elections are approaching, both the candidates find it challenging to secure the position as Berlusconi would need more support from other parliamentarians apart from the center-right ones. At the same time, Draghi would need to muster the support of coalition parties to help him secure the post.

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THE UNITED KINGDOM

Impact of BREXIT and COVID-19 on educational visits to the UK

By Ashwin Dhanabalan

BREXIT's impact on educational visits

On 01 January 2021, BREXIT was officially implemented, leading to the UK leaving the EU. A year later, the implementation of the new regulations under BREXIT has significantly impacted the educational sector, as academic trips to the UK have drastically reduced over the last year. Its implications on educational visits have directly affected the academic markets' supporting arms such as language schools, home-stays, and hotels. Organizers of school trips raised their concerns about the new rules under BREXIT to the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, as these school trips generated income for the families who hosted students in their homes. The students earlier opted for shorter visits for a few months, which helped them move between their countries and the UK. But now, with the new immigration rules in place, getting visas and passports have become a hassle and more expensive for short visits. In addition, visits by these students supported other attractions in the country such as museums, theatres, and cultural centres.

The Impact of COVID-19

In general, the pandemic has reduced educational visits across Europe. Even then, it has seen a further decline in those students interested in travelling to the UK; students now prefer to go to other English-speaking countries like Ireland and the Netherlands. The UK's day two lateral flow tests for international arrivals is a factor, as passengers have to take a COVID-19 test within two days of entering England. The government justified the fall in educational visits to the pandemic and the measures adopted by the government to strengthen its borders. Verdié Voyages, a French tourism company that organizes educational visits, said: "Requests are down for all destinations because of Covid." However, another reason for the decline in visiting the UK is the decrease in subsidized travel by educational institutes in the EU since to the UK.

Professors and teachers would now prefer to travel within the EU for cheaper opportunities than heading to the UK.

Implications to the supporting services

French and German educational trips accounted for 750,000 students visiting the UK every year till the beginning of the pandemic, but the numbers will likely reduce to half due to the new regulations. Earlier, a regular EU national ID card was enough for a student to enter the UK under the EU's laws, but now the students or their parents would have to pay to get a passport and a visa to traverse between the EU and the UK. A German federation of leading school trip organizers said: "In many British towns, student visitors are a vital part of the local economy," as there was an economic benefit to many smaller towns in the country. French Organizers stated: "France's 10,000 school trips a year represent a direct annual input into the UK economy of GBP 100 million." Therefore, the UK would lose a lot of income from the industry as visiting interests of students have now moved away from England to other parts of the EU. Apart from the ramifications to the educational sector, diplomatic ties fostered through school and college trips received a setback. As The Guardian reported: "They forge lifelong connections with the UK, increase tolerance for people, cultures and different ways of living and thinking, and help the acquisition of language skills in the internationally most important language." Students from not so well-off households in Europe were deterred from coming to the UK for short visits as they would have to pay for each visit to the country.

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POLAND

Poland's Pegasus Row: A Polish Watergate?

By Ashwin Dhanabalan

What is Pegasus?

Pegasus is a malware that allows its users to remotely hack into Android, Blackberry, iOS, and Symbian operating devices, turning them into remote surveillance systems without the knowledge of the phone's owner. An investigation into Pegasus in 2021 found that it was created by an Israeli company and used by many governments worldwide to spy on opponents, journalists, activists, and politicians. The Israeli-based firm clarified that the software was created to counter and monitor criminals and terrorists. However, due to leaks in July 2021, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) published on the true usage of the software. The findings indicated it was used to target individual phones of people such as the French President Emmanuel Macron and the former journalist Jamal Khashoggi's wife. In addition, autocratic states like Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Morocco were using the software; in 2021, Hungary was the only known user in the EU.

Poland's acceptance of owning Pegasus

On 07 January, Poland's ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) Chairman Jarosław Kaczyński confirmed the country had the hacking software system. However, he denied that it was used against the opponents in the 2019 elections; he stated: "the opposition's stories about the use of Pegasus for political purposes are utter nonsense." Kaczyński further justified Poland's need for the software, saying: "Pegasus is a program that is used by services combating crime and corruption in many countries...It would be bad if the Polish services did not have this type of tool." Kaczyński in December 2021 had denied knowing about the malware and the

government had downplayed the idea of owning it.

Is this Poland's Watergate moment?

Kaczyński's acceptance of Poland having the software, triggered both Poland and the EU. Furthermore, the incident provided a broader perspective on Poland's controversial media law and its rule of law challenge with the bloc. The recent revelations by Polish authorities have also drawn a comparison to the 1970s' Watergate scandal of the US. Poland's next steps could be similar to what happened in the US, where it could bring the Polish President to the spotlight and highlight the country's violation of the EU's rules on private communications and data protection. This could further initiate measures by the EU to take action against Poland under the infringement of the bloc's rule of law.

Implications on the EU's rule of law

On 09 September 2021, Members of the European Parliament (MEP) discussed the use of Pegasus and how the spyware was being used by governments in the EU. A French MEP said: "We need to enquire very specifically on the Pegasus case and disclose everything about it and put the governments in front of their responsibilities." This came in light of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stating that he used it for his own political advantage. On 21 December 2021, the concerns of the spyware in the region pushed the EU to reconsider tightening its rules on the use of such technology by authoritarian regimes. Concerning Poland's use of Pegasus, Dutch liberal MEP Sophie in 't Veld called on the Council to take necessary action and to not brush it off. She added: "What is happening here (in Poland) is no longer a democracy. It's no longer a rule of law."

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RUSSIA

Russia: One year since Alexei Navalny's arrest

By Joeana Cera Matthews

On 17 January, Kremlin dissident Alexei Navalny marked a year since his arrest. On the day, Navalny tweeted expressing his lack of "regret" regarding his decision to return to Russia, despite the implication of a second arrest. The occasion also saw many international and regional actors calling for his release. In 2020, a murder attempt on Navalny resulted in being poisoned leading to his treatment in Germany. On returning to Russia, he was detained by police at immigration in Moscow. However, the Kremlin denied having any role in the poisoning and had blamed the West for plotting to taint their reputation.

Alexei Navalny: "Putin's most prominent critic"

According to the Kremlin spokesperson: "The non-systemic opposition (Navalny's allies) crossed a red line a while ago. What they were doing was using provocations and all methods to try to stir up social unrest... The aim is to maintain stability in society." In 2021, Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) was closed down after being labelled an extremist organization, implying no member of the organization could run for public office. This kept them from participating in the 2020 parliamentary elections.

Navalny's popularity was a threat to Vladimir Putin staying in power. Surprisingly, the Russian repression of the opposition and media freedom largely coincides with the rise and fall of Navalny and his FBK group. Considered Putin's most

vocal political opponent, Navalny had managed to garner unprecedented popularity implying a direct challenge to Putin. As a result, Putin decided to term Navalny and his organization as a “threat to Russian stability.” The move removed Navalny and his allies from the competition, altogether.

The aftermath

Since 02 February 2021, Navalny has been imprisoned in a collective labour colony in Russia’s Vladimir Oblast region, east of Moscow. He currently serves a two-and-a-half years prison sentence for allegedly violating a parole. Apart from this, he faces six additional charges. Meanwhile, Navalny’s allies have been blacklisted, forced to leave the country, or restricted from free movement.

On 25 January, Russia’s Federal Service for Financial Monitoring added Navalny to a database of “terrorists and extremists”. This addition implied Navalny is now categorized along with right-wing nationalist organizations like Afghanistan’s militant Islamist Taliban and the extremist “Islamic State” (IS) group. Along with him, nine other members of the FBK were also added. Navalny’s brother Oleg Navalny has also been jailed by the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN). According to Amnesty International’s Eastern Europe and Central Asia Director Marie Struther: “... the politician, his supporters and Russian civil society organizations have suffered a relentless onslaught of repression. Dozens of Navalny’s associates and supporters are facing prosecutions on bogus charges, while a growing number of them are already in prison.”

Nonetheless, Navalny’s efforts have been recognized by the global community. In October 2021, the European Parliament honoured him with the Sakharov Prize, a laurel that has earlier been received by Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi and Malala Yousafzai.

What next for Navalny?

Navalny was quick to criticize the West with regard to the ongoing Ukraine conflict. He

accused the West of dancing to Russia’s tunes since Putin’s attempts at escalating tensions was a “smokescreen” that was driven by the fear of dissent within Russia. Navalny, has maintained long correspondences with magazines, one among which was the Time, saw the magazine citing him: “It isn’t NATO that keeps Putin up at night; it’s the space for democratic dissent that NATO opens up along his border.” In one of his many letters to the Time correspondent, Navalny added: “Time and again the West falls into Putin’s elementary traps... It just takes my breath away, watching how Putin pulls this on the American establishment again and again.”

Despite his pending prison sentence, Navalny’s online presence remains stronger than ever. His opinions on contemporary issues and updates from his daily life are regularly published on Twitter and other social media websites. To make things worse for the Kremlin, on 25 January, the Sundance Film Festival premiered a documentary titled ‘Navalny,’ portraying the events that led to his prison sentence, the Kremlin’s role in it and the agenda behind it all. Boosting an already popular Navalny, the film sees him saying: “As I became more and more famous guy, I was totally sure that my life became safer and safer because I am kind of famous guy — and it will be problematic for them just to kill me... I was very wrong.”

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UKRAINE

Profile of Ukraine: Looking into history, political demography and ethnic composition

By Padmashree Anandhan

Following World War I, Ukrainian territory was split into four. While the eastern flank remained under Soviet Ukraine, Romania occupied Bukovina (Central or Eastern Europe), while Transcarpathia (Westernmost) became part of Czechoslovakia and Poland merged Galicia and Volhynia along with few other smaller areas in the north west.

The History

Ukraine, in the interwar period, was dominated by the Communists, Poles, Romanians, and Hungarians. Soviet Ukraine’s two main challenges in this period was dealing with the New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced by Vladimir Lenin and the Russification process. With the launch of the NEP, industrialization and urban population flourished in Soviet Ukraine; however, along with collectivization rules came the famine which emptied out many Ukrainian villages. The policy of Russification, launched by the Soviet regime, gave rise to the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) that was led by Stalin-loyalists which was later taken over by CPU First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev. Russification suppressed all forms of Ukrainian culture and approved numerous arrests, executions and decimations of Ukraine elites, intellectuals and writers. All of this had emerged as the first step towards Ukrainization. In the West, the Polish, Romanians and Hungarian also followed similar trails with repressive measures against the Ukrainian language, education

system, and organizations. These factors became the cause for the rise of nationalism amongst the Ukrainian population, ethnic, cultural and religious groups.

During World War II and its aftermath, the major actors in Ukraine were the Nazi Germans, Soviet partisans, and Poles. While close to 1.5 million Ukrainians along with those of Jewish descent perished due to the countless killings, around 800,000 were displaced following German territorial occupation. The Battle of Stalingrad brought Ukraine completely under the control of the Red Army leading to its western borders being redrawn; for the first time, Polish-Ukrainian borders saw a clear ethnic and political composition.

In the post-war period, Ukraine was led by four prominent Soviet leaders, Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, Shelest and Shcherbytsky who revolutionized the regional demography, economy, politics, language and culture. The most prominent among them were Stalin and Khrushchev. Stalin in his last years, brought back totalitarian controls (Russification) and enforced Sovietization. Thousands of Ukrainian nationalists were deported to concentration camps and scholars who wrote patriotic themes against the Germans were expelled as their work was destroyed alongside cultural institutions of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign. Under the leadership of Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, the voice of Ukraine was made to sound louder. Although the primary leadership roles in the Communist Party belonged to Soviets, Khrushchev made exceptions by letting a few Soviet-loyal Ukrainians also hold them. Apart from this, it led to a steady increase in the Ukrainian party membership from 28 to 60 per cent as the decentralization policy was implemented to augment powers of the Ukrainian party in the administration and economic aspects. As the economic situation deteriorated in the late 1980s, the new leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s launch of economic campaigns ‘perestroika’ and ‘glasnost’ only deteriorated the economy leading to mass movements amongst the republics which took place from the Baltic, Transcaucasian, to Ukraine. In the next few years, Ukraine saw an emergence of

new parties, leaders, Ukrainian being declared as the official language, restoration of public awareness on historical events along with nationalist revival being at its peak. At the same time, the Ukrainians also faced resistance from the CPU. On 01 December 1991, following the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine gained independence and agreed to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

In the post-independence period, Ukraine along with other republics faced various challenges in terms of economic, political and military instability as well as a threat to sovereign territory. In the lens of Russia, CIS was still an option to pull back its lost territories. There was also the issue of dealing with Russia's influence. Infiltrating the population was a well-known strategy of Russians and handling this was a major problem for Ukraine. Further, the dilemma of engaging with the West was worrisome as Ukraine feared engaging with the West or pursuing membership into the EU or NATO would aggravate Russia. Since it still depended on Russia for financial strengthening and economic building, Ukraine was forced to adopt a "checks and balances" policy. This ensured a balance in relations with the West and Russia, all the while keeping its sovereignty undisturbed.

Ethnic composition

Previously, Ukraine's population consisted primarily of Jews and Poles in the Right Bank region (west of the Dnieper River). By late 19th century, the Jewish population increased to 10 million in the Ukrainian territory; however, the Holocaust led to a huge number either migrating or being killed. After World War II, Ukraine consisted of only around 150,000 ethnic Poles as the majority of the Polish went back to Poland. In 1991, when Ukraine was still a part of the USSR, two migration policies were in place. A policy of Russian in-migration and Ukrainian out-migration; under this, the population decreased in Ukraine going from 77 per cent to 73 per cent. This scenario reversed after the independence of Ukraine with three-fourth of ethnic Ukrainians settling in Ukraine; meanwhile, the Russian population stayed back, becoming the largest minority in Ukraine. The historical ethnic groups like

the Belarusians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians and the Crimean Tatars also remained in fractions as they were allowed to return in late 1980 to Ukraine.

Present-day Ukraine

From the historical backdrop, the following trends can be drawn by comparing with the contemporary conflict situation.

First, historic linkage. Amongst the other ex-USSR republics, Ukraine had the potential to be in equal power with the USSR in terms of territory, resource, talent and state administration. With years of developments in the region and with Russia seeking to reunite its historical links, Ukraine has become the target of Russia.

Second, decline in dependency. After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine was a new-born state with domestic instability and no external relations. It had to rely on Russia for economic and security needs as it was the only country it had relations with. The dependency has now reversed in over three decades through economic evolution and with a massive boost to its relations with the West.

Third, the increased role of the West. The role of the US or the EU with reference to Ukraine was largely absent in history. Ukraine has since increased the West's participation in the region due to the implementation of a strategic foreign policy.

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The Ukraine Crisis: Challenges and Ambitions

By Padmashree Anandhan

What happened?

On 10 January, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg invited Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Olga Stefanishyna, to NATO Headquarters. The minister was called to discuss ahead of bilateral talks between the United States and Russia and attend the NATO-Russia Council meetings on 12 January and a meeting of the OSCE on 13 January.

On 19 January, the US secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Kyiv to meet Ukraine's President and discussed the viewpoint of the US in dealing with a potential Russian incursion into Ukraine. According to the statement: "As much as we are all focused on Ukraine and our own commitment to its sovereignty, to its territorial integrity, to its independence, I think you all know very well that this is in a sense bigger than Ukraine."

On 21 January, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky responded to the US President's Joe Biden comments on how a minor attack by Russia might weaken the response of the US. Zelensky tweeted back, saying: "There are no minor incursions. Just as there are no minor casualties and little grief from the loss of loved ones."

Challenges

First, there is no room for voice in dialogues. In the continuous discussions held between the US, the NATO, and Russia over the developing conflict, it was only once Ukraine was allowed to engage directly, which was during the OSCE meeting held on 13 January. Apart from that, the country has wholly sidelined from voicing its problems or negotiating with Russia.

Second, the confusing stance of the US. When it comes to dealing with Russia in the forefront, the position of the US is not promising for Ukraine in two ways. One, Ukraine does not approve the sanction plans of the US on Russia over the invasion.

According to Ukraine, imposing sanctions cannot solve a military incursion. Two, Biden's denial to send ground troops to Ukraine has glitched the confidence of Ukraine in the US.

Third, internal issues. One, the population resists. Ukraine consists of a majority of Russian-speaking people. Even after the annexation of Crimea and Donbas, few of them still have a sentiment towards Russia as their extended families still reside there. The split in the population is one of the internal problems faced by the Ukrainian government. Two, dealing with the oligarchs. They are a set of people present inside Ukraine with the ability to manipulate the operation of the government using their resources. Although the President has his anti-oligarch legislation on the agenda for this year, with the return of former President Petro Poroshenko, a pro-oligarch, the stakes for the internal clash are high.

Ukraine's Ambitions

First, territory as a priority. The Kremlin's policy has alienated Ukraine in the last eight years since the annexing of Crimea in 2014 and its involvement in the Donbas conflict. Therefore, the pro-west approach of the Ukrainian leader is to shield itself from Russia's geopolitical dreams and achieve territorial integrity.

Second, democratic ambition. Ukraine's strategy to adopt democracy is to attract the west for support, and it is to become part of the NATO and the EU. Thereby, it will be able to strengthen and stabilize, politically, economically and mainly in terms of Security. In addition, it can position itself as a threat to Russia and by achieving democracy, it can prevent losing its territory.

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REGIONAL

Taking on China: EU, Lithuania, and France

By Ashwin Dhanabalan

In November 2021, Lithuania approved the opening of a Taiwan representative office in Vilnius. Since then, China's crackdown on the diplomatic ties of Lithuania and Taiwan has affected Lithuanian exports. The trade from other countries such as France, Germany, and Sweden, were also directly affected as they were a part of the bigger supply chain to Lithuania. France, also holding the rotating EU presidency, vowed to take measures against the Chinese actions. What are the options available for the EU?

EU's anti-coercion instrument has not been enacted yet; it will not be implemented until an agreement is reached. France hopes to implement the legislation by summer of 2022, but a new legislation can take several years to come into force. Till then, French President Emmanuel Macron has assured that the decisions would only be accepted, keeping in mind the overall EU-China policy agenda. Therefore, the EU has resorted to impose pressure on China solely via diplomatic channels.

Responses from Lithuania and Slovenia

China's tactics of downgrading Lithuanian diplomatic ties to chargé d'affaires level and taking a firmer stance through multinational companies (MNCs) have led the EU to unite and take a more affirmative stance against it. Lithuanian Parliament's Foreign Affairs expert Žygimantas Pavilionis said: "This is about the weaponization of trade. This is about the weaponization of European value chains." China's weaponization of European value chains could lead to the EU and regional countries stepping up their Indo-Pacific strategy.

Subsequently, Slovenia has confirmed setting up trade offices with Taiwan. Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša announced his support to the "sovereign decision" of Taiwan. He also commented on

the Lithuanian issue, saying: "Frankly speaking, there is a vast majority of the EU member countries holding some kind of representative offices with Taiwan. And Lithuania is not [an] exemption." However, Slovenia will continue to be a part of the 16+1 group led by Beijing, unlike Lithuania.

Reactions of MNCs in the EU

German MNCs have been pressuring the Lithuanian government to withdraw its dispute with China. China has been threatening to retaliate against the companies that operated or supplied to Lithuania. The diplomatic debacle has gravely hit the German car sector. The German-Baltic Chamber of Commerce said: "the basic business model of the companies is in question and some ... will have no other choice than to shut down production in Lithuania." Nonetheless, the Federation of German Industries announced a tough stance to be taken on China's economic sanctions and human rights policies. They also stated that Beijing's actions amounted to a trade boycott.

France denounces Chinese genocide of Uyghur muslims

On 20 January, the French Parliament passed a resolution that officially recognized China's treatment of Uyghurs as genocide. The resolution by the National Assembly read: "... officially recognises the violence perpetrated by the People's Republic of China against the Uyghurs as constituting crimes against humanity and genocide." The non-binding resolution also calls on the French government to protect the interests of the minority group in China.

Socialist Party Chief Olivier Faure commented on this: "China is a great power. We love the Chinese people. But we refuse to submit to propaganda from a regime that is banking on our cowardice and our avarice to perpetrate genocide in plain sight." The Chinese embassy in France retaliated, saying the recent judgment would seriously damage China-France relations, stating: "...the French side is fully aware of the absurdity and harmfulness of this resolution."

European Parliament's resolution on Hong Kong

On 20 January, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the violation of fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, and Sudan. The Parliament condemned the deteriorating fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong as the government had imposed severe restrictions on various facets of human rights. Furthermore, the Members of Parliament noted the increasing legitimization of the authoritarian system internally and externally and urged the Council to impose sanctions against Hong Kong and Chinese officials responsible for the ongoing human rights crackdown.

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France: EU Foreign and Defense Ministers' Meeting

By Joeana Cera Matthews

On 13 January, the EU Foreign Ministers met at Brest in Brittany for a two-day ministerial meeting. The informal meeting was called for by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell and the French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. Also referred as the Gymnich meeting, this gathering happens twice a year in the EU member state which holds the EU Council's Presidency – now France.

Following the above meeting, the Foreign Ministers' meeting was held. A joint working

session called the "Jumbo" format, which involves the Defense ministers of the member states was also held. The following four became the focus points of the above meeting.

The "Strategic Compass".

The EU's draft white paper on defense called the 'Strategic Compass' was discussed in-depth while the technicalities regarding the same were simultaneously addressed. The policy paper intends to bring a unified stance on international security situations while preparing "Europe's civilian and military capabilities to global challenges". The policy draft which was originally presented on 15 November 2021 during a joint session of the EU foreign affairs and defense ministers. This policy has been worked on since the German Council Presidency in July 2020. The compass aims at incentivizing action with flexibility, investing in the EU defense capabilities and resources, strengthening partnerships while bringing about a strategic culture of a "shared perception of threats" combined with a "common strategic vision". It is expected to be adopted via the European Council on 24 and 25 March.

The Russia-Ukraine border situation

The German Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht expressed the consequences Moscow would face if it were to invade Ukraine. However, she added: "We must exhaust all options to resolve this conflict." Meanwhile, Borrell stated: "The European Union is certainly ready to respond directly to any aggression but our preference ... is that of dialogue and negotiations." There was also widespread support for conducting the Normandy Format talks to de-escalate tensions.

EU-China relations

The economic pressure faced by Lithuania from Beijing gave way to the discussion regarding bloc's relations with China. Member states backed Lithuania while maintaining the importance of the EU "to have the means to combat all forms of economic pressure to protect sovereign interests".

EU-Africa relations

Discussions on the bloc's approach to Africa primarily focused on the upcoming summit of the bloc with the African Union (AU) on 17 and 18 February. Targeted sanctions against the Malian junta were also decided upon via the meeting.

The Diminishing Presence of the EU

On 05 January, following her meeting with the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock had stated: "There can be no decision on security in Europe without Europe." In a week filled with diplomacy and negotiations to de-escalate tensions along the Ukrainian borders, the EU was largely absent. Be it the Geneva summit, the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, or even the OSCE council meeting – the European Council failed to portray its significance. Sciences Po University's Head of Research Jacques Rupnik commented on this absence: "This feels like the post-World War II period when the Americans and Russians were deciding on Europe's future — especially as this conflict is taking place right at Europe's doorstep."

The absence of the bloc in talks concerning European security raises a series of questions. Does the Kremlin not deem the EU significant enough to negotiate regional security with them? Does the decision-making power on European security lie elsewhere? What substantial measures have been undertaken by the EU regarding defense? Nevertheless, the EU seems to be badly in need of introspection as a regional organization.

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Pan-European Ink Ban: What does it mean for the Tattoo industry?

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 03 December, The EU announced a ban on tattoo ink due to the hazardous effect of the chemicals and substances used in the colouring inks. EU tattoo artists criticized the ban as their business had taken a toll in the pandemic. With the new restrictions in place, tattoos will now lack the vibrancy customers desire.

The ban on hazardous chemicals

The first move towards the tattoo ink ban was taken by former Germany's consumer affairs Minister Christian Schmidt, who launched an awareness campaign for the public in 2016 known as "Safer Tattoo". It included members of Germany's Federal Tattoo Association (BVT) in Berlin. He called for protocols across Europe on the chemicals in tattoo inks and urged for better hygienic standards.

The EU found that 54 million people were tattooed across the region, out of the 54 million up to 12 percent comprised of adults and twice the percentage were young adults who had a tattoo. In Germany, every one in five people are predicted to have a tattoo, and close to 500,000 new tattoos have been recorded every year by the Belgian government. The ban will form part of the EU regulation on Chemicals under Reach (Registration, Evaluation, Authorization, and Restriction of Chemicals) passed in 2020, where around 4,000 similar chemicals such as azo dyes and isopropanol alcohol stand restricted. Usage of these inks can cause severe health issues like cancer, chronic allergic reaction, and inflammatory skin reactions. Hence through Reach, the EU directs the tattoo artists to opt for safer alternatives in place of harmful chemicals.

The primary issue behind the complaints of the tattoo artist is the unavailability of safer alternatives to Blue 15:3 and Green 7 colours. While other options to yellow, red, and orange colour pigments are available, without blue and green, it is feared that 60 percent of the coloured tattoo cannot be designed. The ban has led to frustration and irritation amongst the tattoo artists in the EU.

The UK's take on the law

The ban does not apply to the UK as the EU passed the law after Brexit. However, the government has asked the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to investigate the health risks associated with the use of tattoo inks. According to a spokesperson from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the UK Reach allows the government to make its own decision when it comes to regulating the chemicals. The Defra handles the UK's Reach and the regulation is done based on the scientific evidence, upon which the issue will be considered for restrictions.

Future of Tattoo industry in the EU

First, fear amongst tattoo artists. There are 175,000 artists all over the EU, and the ban has invoked fear and anger amongst everyone. Despite a year given to prepare for the ban, there is complete rejection from the EU tattoo industry. They have argued that the direct link between tattoo ink and cancer is not entirely proven. The new restrictions are said to destroy their business, promote illegal ink supplies and give rise to the black market.

Second, possible alternatives. Although the European Commission has announced support measures to help small and mid-size firms, many individuals are trying to find alternatives that can be labelled safe under Reach. For example, a biomedical engineering professor, Carson Bruns from the University of Boulder, has found a way to produce blue pigments using nanotechnology, which does not contain banned chemicals listed in Reach. Third, people's stance. The ban does not seem to affect the interest of tattoo enthusiasts. Few have expressed that they would still prefer to get a coloured tattoo. On

the other hand, it does not change the market condition for black and white tattooing. This shows the lack of awareness amongst the people on the effects of tattoos.

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France's EU presidency: What it means for Europe?

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 01 January, France celebrated the launch of its EU presidency by lighting up the EU flag on historical monuments and embassies across Paris. The country is set to hold the presidency of the Council of the EU for the next six months, till 30 June 2022. In the statement released by the French President Emmanuel Macron, he said: "This is a time for Europe. Faced with health and economic challenges, the rise of aggressive powers and climate change, the best response is a European one." However, replacing the French flag with the EU's was criticized by French right-wing politicians, leading to the eventual removal of the flag from the Arc de Triomphe. Macron's opponent, and far-right independent candidate Eric Zemmour called it "an outrage", as the move was seen as an attack on the French identity.

French agenda for its Presidency

The critical role of France as it holds the EU presidency will be first, to organize meetings for the Council of the EU. Second, to nurture cooperation among member states. Third, to handle the Council relation with the European Commission and Parliament. Fourth, to mediate negotiations. Fifth, to create a new growth model for Europe and finally, the sixth, to bring out a human-centered Europe. According to Macron: "This agenda for a sovereign Europe will be

accelerated with the French Presidency. Europe must rise to the major economic, educational, migration and military challenges. The French Presidency must be a moment of truth for the regulation and accountability of digital platforms, the carbon pricing at European borders on imported products, minimum wages, and our relationship with Africa.”

Other responses

First, the domestic level. A survey conducted by POLITICO’s Cornelius Hirsch among the French public revealed that the majority of the people were not aware of France taking up the Presidency. On being questioned regarding the issues that France as the Council President needed to prioritize, issues such as environment, climate change, immigration, economy and health topped the graph.

Second, the community level. The Muslim community feels that France’s divisive anti-Muslim political discourse will see a manifestation in the EU policymaking. Many French politicians have opted for raging against Islamophobia as their electoral strategy in the recent days. Macron’s government has been criticized for closing the collective against Islamophobia in France, an anti-discriminatory body documenting anti-Muslim hate crimes. The community now fears that with France taking up the Presidency, such repressive measures might widen across Europe.

Third, the regional level. Germany’s Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock has said that Germany and France, being the closest of friends, now have an obligation to join together for a united and stronger EU.

What does it mean for Europe?

The rampant problems Europe faces is more challenging than ever for the French government leading the bloc. The challenges range from controlling the spread of the new Omicron variant, handling the COVID-19 protests across the region, the migration crisis, the Russia-Ukraine border tensions to climate change. It is well-known that the six-month tenure of France will not bring a solution to everything, but the French President nearing his elections in April 2022

cannot afford to take any missteps while dealing with these issues. If there is a change in the leadership, the situation will get chaotic, as is seen with the unsettled migration issue; the new party might have a different agenda for Europe.

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BREXIT

One year of Brexit: What does it mean for European exporters to the UK?

By Padmashree Anandhan

A recent report of the European Commission shows that the value of the EU agri-foods exports to the UK has barely changed with only 0.4 percent reduction in the first eight months of 2021 when compared to 2020. Although the report draws comparison between 2020 and 2021, the struggle was real between the exporters of the EU and the UK. Keeping the pandemic period away for the comparison, the difference in trade between both countries widens when 2019 and 2021 are considered. For the UK exporters it was a rough path as the borders were redrawn, but it was the same even for the EU exporters. Despite exclusion of tariffs and quotas, the exit of the UK from the bloc created barriers while affecting cost and advent of new import controls. The farming sector was one such industry that was hit due to Brexit.

Major issues in exports to the UK

First, farming and agri-food. A major exporter of such products to the UK is Brittany, located in northwest France, whose entire exports fell by 19 percent with a loss of EUR 53.2 million. It had a larger effect on the local farming industry of Brittany where cheese and dairy product exports declined by 58 percent while that of beef and pork fell by 43 percent in 2021. There are various reasons behind the drop. One, dairy products have a short storage life and with borders in place it increases the delivery time, thereby, raising the cost. Two, apart from facing new measures of the UK government, before the exit Britain stockpiled the necessary products. Three, it also restricted its exporters from selling the dairy products outside the country. Hence, the domestic production kept the UK afloat. Second, cooked meat and vegetables. While the farming products saw a decline, the cooked meat, fresh vegetables, and other vegetable products were highly exported to the UK. This particular set of products saw a rise in exports mainly due to the shortage in the workforce that the UK faced. The gardeners of the UK were forced to leave their fresh farms to rot as it did not have workers to harvest the yield.

Third, small firms versus large firms. Many large companies like Laita and Arla Foods had better winning rates than other small firms which struggled to keep up with the Brexit and the COVID-19 effect. The reason behind the variance is that the small firms never ventured their products out of Europe and the UK had remained a major consumer of their products. Therefore, big firms were able to strive through both Brexit and the pandemic by establishing alternative channels of transport to export their products despite some challenges.

Fourth, seed potato. While farming and dairy products faced a downfall of exports, the production of seed potato collapsed. This was a hard hit for the Dutch producers since it was completely excluded from the Brexit trade deal. This failure was due to the inability to reach an arrangement on regulatory terms and end of six-month exemption for the EU exporters to the UK. Industrial experts state that the lack of

political will and flexibility led to a dead-end. A solution to the export situation could be if the UK made a dynamic alignment like Switzerland, but the political scenario is not in favor.

What is ahead?

The after-effects of the post-Brexit period has pushed France and the Netherlands to depend on the EU's EUR 5 billion emergency fund to cope with its businesses while searching for alternative markets. Here, the question of sustainability plays a vital role. The UK has been a viable market for many countries to export; however, venturing into new markets holds the question of how well the EU products will sustain there. Even if new companies in the EU decide to launch branches into the UK, Britain's new rules will create complications.

Meanwhile, many are ready to adapt to the new system of import control by the UK as they consider the British market as potential as ever. Another reason is that the UK still remains one of the biggest importers of the EU products and as the interdependency exists, it is expected that the trade between both will continue to grow with new rules.

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ENERGY

Kosovo: The ban on Crypto mining

By Ashwin Dhanabalan

On 04 January, Kosovo's government announced a blanket ban on cryptocurrency mining due to the energy crisis. It launched a crackdown on mining and confiscated high-tech devices. Kosovo, until recently, offered cheap electricity rates that made crypto mining more lucrative.

Apart from the low prices, Kosovo has the world's fifth-largest lignite reserve, which is also the best grade coal for electricity generation. Thus, it provided subsidized fuel bills helping crypto mining to flourish. Ethnic Serbs in Kosovo have been using the

available prospects to mint up to EUR 2,000 per month, mining crypto.

Ethnic boundaries and crypto mining

The northern region of Mitrovica has been home to the country's ethnic Serb population, who refuse to recognize Kosovo as an independent country. Kosovo Liberation Army fought former President Slobodan Milošević's Serbian forces to gain independence during the 1998-1999 wars. In 1999, the UNSC passed a resolution stating autonomy for the region of Kosovo, and NATO peacekeeping forces were called to intervene. In February 2008, Kosovo voted to declare independence from Serbia, as the latter called it illegal. Since 1999, the ethnic Serbs in the enclaves of North Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, Zvečan, and Leposavić have been availing free electricity. Kosovo estimates their refusal to pay electricity at an annual loss of EUR 12 million. Even the EU, states that this unpaid energy is a reason for continuing disagreement and hinders the bloc's efforts to mediate between the two countries. In addition, crypto miners have used this free electricity to mine cryptocurrency at Kosovo's expense and at the cost of Serbian reconciliation.

Power outage and Crypto usage

In December 2021, the government announced a 60-day state of emergency, even though 90 per cent of Kosovo's energy demands were met domestically. A combination of reasons caused Kosovo's recent energy shortage. First, it shut down one of its outdated power plants, which led the country to import 40 per cent of its energy from international markets. Second, the government faced a sudden increase in energy demands due to the cold climatic conditions. Third, gas and power prices in Europe increased tremendously due to COVID-19 and the geopolitical tensions with Russia; Moscow supplies one-third of Europe's gas.

The emergency led to stricter restrictions over power use and highlighted the power usage by crypto miners. Cambridge University's bitcoin electricity consumption index stated that the global crypto mining consumed electricity up to 125.96 terawatt-

hours a year, which is greater than the annual consumption of Argentina annually. Concerning the energy issues, Kosovo planned to allocate funds of EUR 20 million to provide subsidized electricity. The Minister of Economy Artane Rizvanolli commented on the matter, stating that the government's efforts to subsidize electricity rates were being cancelled out by the unregulated crypto mining. Meanwhile, the Finance Minister Hekuran Murati said: "We cannot allow the illegal enrichment of some, at the expense of taxpayers."

The crackdown of miners in Kosovo and across the world

On 07 January, authorities launched several raids to crack down on the crypto mining operations. By 12 January, the police announced that they had confiscated 30 bitcoin mining devices. The Murati said: "The confiscated equipment uses as much electricity as 500 homes a month or between EUR 60,000 and 120,000." But, crypto enthusiasts have questioned Pristina's actions as the cryptocurrency bill drafted in October 2021 had not been yet legislated. They also emphasized that many people had heavily invested in crypto mining, while others had taken loans and now were directly affected by the restrictions. Iceland has clearly stated that it no longer welcomes crypto miners because of its power shortages. At the same time, US President Joe Biden has assured that the US will convene a hearing regarding the issues of crypto mining. Meanwhile, Iran placed a temporary ban to avoid power shortages caused by crypto mining. In September 2021, China launched a crackdown on crypto miners, resulting in the sale of thousands of cryptocurrency-mining rigs to Southeast Asian crypto enthusiasts.

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INTERNATIONAL

Former Syrian Colonel Raslan's conviction and its implications

By Ashwin Dhanabalan

Raslan's conviction

On 13 January, a German court in Koblenz sentenced former Syrian Colonel Anwar Raslan to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity in Syria between 2011-2012. The ruling was considered a landmark judgment as it was the world's first trial that prosecuted state-sponsored torture in the country under the Bashar al-Assad regime. Raslan was caught in Germany while he was among other Syrian refugees who remembered him from the prison called Branch 251 in the capital of Damascus. He was found guilty on 27 counts of murder, rape, and sexual assault. His case is also a first of its kind as it led to the implication of a former high-ranking Syrian officer while the Assad regime is still in power. Spokesperson for the Delegation of the EU to Syria said: "This verdict is part of the first trial worldwide on state-sponsored torture in Syria and an important step towards the fight against impunity and to secure justice and accountability in Syria."

Principle of Universal Jurisdiction

Under the law, grave crimes that involve human rights violations, war crimes, genocide, and torture can be prosecuted anywhere around the world. States may act to protect against these crimes as the issues can gravely affect the international community or the international order itself. As defined by The International Justice Resource Center, the principle also revolves around the concept of the Responsibility to Protect, which promotes the idea that the international community has a responsibility to assist a State in fulfilling its primary responsibility of protecting the lives and wellbeing of those within its territory. The conviction also highlighted the limitations of international organizations and the restricted options left for victims to

seek justice. The concept of the principle of universal jurisdiction goes back to the Nuremberg trials. A well-known case example of the principle is the Attorney General v. Adolf Eichmann.

Role of national courts

Syria is not a signatory party to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Hague; thus, it restricts the principles from being applied to the country. Apart from that, even if the case was suggested to the ICC by the UN Security Council (UNSC), it would be blocked by allies of the Assad regime, Russia and China. Russia and China have been traditional allies of the government and prevent any ruling against the government in the UNSC using their right to veto. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet hailed the court's decision and said: "This is a clear example of how national courts can and should fill accountability gaps for such crimes wherever they were committed." The conviction would encourage national courts to step up to play decisive roles for crimes against humanity.

Germany as a harbinger of justice

Germany has always played a significant role in upholding the legal principle. Since the country has adopted the legislation recognizing the relevant crimes and authorizing their prosecution domestically, it has been a ray of hope to prosecute cases such as that of Raslan. Syrian opposition and rebel groups also praised Germany's verdict on Raslan but called for justice against more senior targets. Syrian Front for Liberation's party head Mustafa Sejari said: "Justice begins by holding and pursuing Assad and his top henchmen, aides, and supporters of his crimes."

The case is a first as it holds accountable a government in power that has been accused of crimes against humanity. Germany also used universal jurisdiction to intervene in matters of the Yazidis genocide in Iraq by members of the Islamic State, the crimes committed in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and now against the Assad regime.

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NATO-Russia Council: What does it mean for Europe?

By Padmashree Anandhan

A brief background

On 12 January, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) held its first meeting since July 2019 in Brussels. The talks were primarily scheduled to discuss the border issue of Ukraine. Russia, found to be assembling troops along Ukraine's eastern border, has been viewed as a threat to both Ukrainian and European security. There have been demands from all sides – Ukraine, Europe and Russia. The US considers this as a serious and the issue of Ukraine has been the focus of Washington's recent talks with Moscow.

To address the security situation of Europe while taking into account Russian demands, there have been a series of diplomatic talks held between the US and Russia; NATO and Russia; The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Russia. Out of the above four meetings, this analysis looks at the NATO and Russia Council meet. This analysis intends to bring out the following three key factors with regard to the NRC. One, Russia's determination to threaten the integration plans of NATO. Two, divided focus of NATO in addressing the problem of Ukraine. Three, the US's tactical stance to keep Russia on the edge.

Russian demands

First, Refusal of NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia. NATO's promise to accede Ukraine into the alliance has been pushed since 2008. However, the reason behind Russia's demand for never letting Ukraine and Georgia into NATO is to prevent them from becoming anti-Russian proxy states.

Second, withdrawal of NATO military exercises from former USSR nations. Russia requires NATO to exit Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. According to few Russian leaders in the administration, Putin's interests seem to lean towards geopolitical expansion over other existing issues. This is justified given Russia's annexation of Crimea following the change in its leadership in 2014. Hence, Russia's interest to modify the "post-cold war security architecture in Europe" is higher now than ever.

Third, a legal guarantee from NATO. According to Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov: "For us, it's absolutely mandatory to make sure that Ukraine never, never, ever becomes a member of NATO, we need ironclad, waterproof, bulletproof, legally binding guarantees." Russia strongly demands a legal guarantee from NATO and the EU, stating that Ukraine will never become a member of NATO. This shows a lack of trust between the two parties; it also ensures the Kremlin never loses power over Ukrainian politics.

Europe's Response

First, NATO. According to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg: "Our differences will not be easy to bridge, but it is a positive sign that all 30 NATO allies sat down with Russia after two years." The NATO allies have termed Russian demands to be unacceptable while suggesting more talks to reduce tensions. Apart from this, an alternative solution to Russia's demand of withdrawal of NATO troops from former soviet republics, NATO has agreed to bring transparency in its military operations to prevent disastrous events, reduce space and cyber threats and also to focus on arms control.

The US: What does it want, and why

On one hand, the US has disclosed its plans to impose mandatory sanctions on Russian leaders close to President Putin, on the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), the global banking transaction system. It has warned that it would order the Defense and State Departments to advance transfer of weapons and military equipment and also provide USD 500 million as security assistance to Ukraine.

On the other hand, it has shown readiness to Russia to negotiate on the mutual restrictions and scope of military exercises in Europe. Such an act draws confusion, whether the US is tactically using the security situation of Ukraine to balance out with Russia to counter the larger issue of China.

What does the above mean?

First, the lack of unity in Europe against Russia. The allies of the NATO are against the Russian military build-up, but when it comes to Nord Stream 2, with Europe going through an energy crisis, not all have strong opposition to Russia.

Second, the sidelining of Ukraine. Taking in the series of meetings, the representation of Ukraine or the opportunity to voice its concerns in the meeting has been drastically lower.

Third, NATO or the larger Europe does not have anything to offer Russia. Therefore, keeping the diplomatic talks in the loop is the only option to avoid the escalation of conflict on the Ukraine border.

Fourth, the US offer to Russia. Russia is not just assembling its troops on the Ukraine border, but has begun to send its forces from eastern military district, which is a warning sign for NATO to be ready. The US move to hit Russia with strict sanctions is convincing, but the scope of negotiation with Russia to reduce down the existing NATO military troops in Europe is inciting fear.

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The 1350th Special Plenary Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council

By Ashwin Dhanabalan

Poland taking over as the OSCE Chair

On 13 January, the 57-member Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) held a special plenary meeting in Vienna. The meeting was held in the historical city that marked Poland's official take over of the council's chairmanship. Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs Zbigniew Rau addressed the meeting and discussed a plethora of issues and agendas that Poland as the council chair would be focusing on in 2022.

Ukraine-Russia military escalations discussed

The meeting was held in the backdrop of the escalating tensions; with the Russian military build-up on the Ukrainian border and no sign of de-escalation in sight. Rau initiated addressing the military escalations in the meeting, stating: "It seems, that the risk of war in the OSCE area is now greater, than ever before in the last 30 years." He also talked about the possibility of a significant military build-up in the region. Finally, on the tensions, Rau stated: "For several weeks we have been faced with a possibility of a major military escalation in Eastern Europe."

To better assess the situation and improve the security in the OSCE region, Rau revived the need for "finding peaceful solutions to regional and protracted conflicts". He also mentioned the need to reinvigorate the debate about European security by first committing to uphold the Helsinki principles

in full conformity with international law. Lastly, focusing on the conflict in Ukraine, he appreciated the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, which made a significant difference and proposed the extension of the mandate beyond 31 March 2022.

Responses from Russia and the US

Russian and US officials were pessimistic about the talks at the OSCE meeting as there was no breakthrough regarding the negotiations. Russia's envoy to the OSCE Alexander Lukashevich said: "Most member countries preferred to look into the Polish priorities...The OSCE has a big agenda of its own, which has accumulated many systemic problems.." The US Ambassador to the OSCE Michael Carpenter said: "The drumbeat of war is sounding loud, and the rhetoric has gotten rather shrill."

Moscow felt more discontented as their demands to NATO and the EU were not discussed. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov expressed that the talks had reached "a dead-end or a difference in approaches". In response, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, concerned about the outcome of the meeting, said: "the option of fabricating a pretext for an invasion, including through sabotage activities and information operations, by accusing Ukraine of preparing an imminent attack against Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine." This was similar to the concern raised by US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman who mentioned that the US was doubtful if Russia's actual intentions of coming to the table were in good faith or just a pretext to justify war.

Other issues discussed

Rau addressed divergent issues relating to the OSCE region. He highlighted a few, as he stated: "Protracted conflicts, military confrontation, radicalization, terrorism, together with ongoing erosion of arms control regimes, effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and profound violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals are leading to rising uncertainty, unpredictability, fragmentation and growing fears in our societies." He revived the Helsinki decalogue and maintained that issues should be dealt with a more proactive

and positive approach. Furthermore, he reiterated the need to have a shared commitment to the people in the region and each other for building a future without conflict and war.

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Geneva Talks: Three Takeaways

By Joeana Cera Matthews

On 10 January, top US and Russian diplomats met in Geneva under the Strategic Security Dialogue initiative. The US was represented by the Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman while Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov negotiated on Russia's behalf. The bilateral meeting occurred during one of the tensest situations in East-West relations since the Cold War period. Nonetheless, the seven hour-long discussions did not see substantive breakthroughs. The inconclusive meeting came to an end with the parties hoping to maintain an open channel of communication.

What did they discuss?

Although there was a substantial deviation from set agendas, given the media frenzy over the Russian military build-up along the Ukrainian borders, the primary intent behind the talks was to discuss arms control measures. Along these lines, the US proposed the prospect of reciprocal

agreements on missile deployments while putting a cap on the size and range of military exercises. The US expressed its interest in discussing a return to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty after withdrawing from the same in August 2019. However, the larger potential of the initial structure was lost in an attempt to de-escalate tensions in Ukraine. The Russian security proposal, essentially a list of demands that both the US and NATO were presented with, was also discussed during the meeting.

Takeaways

First, the inconclusive talks. Despite the detour, the meeting between the US and Russian delegations was a beacon of hope for Ukrainians and the larger international community. The two superpowers talking to each other in a direct manner was bound to bring a substantial change in the status quo favouring de-escalation. However, the “frank and forthright” talks, as Sherman put it, were disappointing. Concerning the de-escalation of the troop build-up by Moscow, she said: “I don't think we know the answer to that. We made it very clear that it's very hard to have constructive, productive and successful diplomacy without de-escalation.” The uncertainty voiced by Sherman was too hard to miss.

Second, the lack of commitments. Recognizing the US' need for diplomacy, the Kremlin conducted talks concluding in no concessions from either side. The US was extremely disappointed with the Russian delegation neither committing to a de-escalation nor verbally assuring the same. As is the larger consensus, it seemed as though Russia was prepared to declare the negotiations a failure, even before the talks began. The calls for continued talks implies a protracted process; although the Kremlin agreed to this, they foresaw such an outcome and had stated they would choose to ‘act’ instead of ‘talk,’ essentially avoiding prolonged talks.

Third, principles to stay. The Russian demands to stop NATO's eastward expansion and defy membership to Ukraine were outrightly rejected by Sherman on the grounds that it went against NATO's “open-

door policy.” Ryabkov responded with: “Unfortunately we have a great disparity in our principled approaches to this. The U.S. and Russia in some ways have opposite views on what needs to be done.” Bridging this gap will be an uphill climb.

What does it mean?

First, the open channel of communication. This essentially indicates a delay in escalation. As the US Information and Cybersecurity Expert Dmitri Alperovitch opined: “I think it's a very positive development because it could mean that we can go into potentially prolonged discussion... we would avoid war, so that I view as the best outcome that we could get out of the situation is to simply delay buy time for diplomacy to work.”

Second, escalation threats. Despite the efforts at diplomacy, one stands to see whether the Kremlin would engage and escalate tensions along the Ukrainian periphery. The contradictory statements emerging from the Putin administration are confusing — threats have been issued alongside reassurances of “no intent to invade.” There is no doubt, however, that the Kremlin wants the West out of its “sphere of influence.”

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P5 statement to prevent nuclear wars: Four takeaways

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 03 January, China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US issued a joint statement to prevent further nuclear arms. The statement said: “We affirm that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. As nuclear

use would have far-reaching consequences, we also affirm that nuclear weapons—for as long as they continue to exist—should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war. We believe strongly that the further spread of such weapons must be prevented.” The five nuclear power nations called the P5 or N5, recognized under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968, hold permanent membership of the UN Security Council.

The Takeaways

First, the commitment the P5 nations are ready to give to the NPT. The treaty is an international agreement that aims to achieve nuclear disarmament, deals with the prevention of nuclear weapons and related technology development. The treaty came into force in 1970 with 191 signatories. Two exceptions to the treaty include South Africa and North Korea. The former initially possessed nuclear weapons but later took down the arsenal while the latter withdrew from the treaty and has recently been testing hypersonic missiles. The 10th review of the treaty, scheduled to take place in January 2022, was postponed. In place of this review session, the joint statement has been issued. The statement shows the commitment of the P5 nations to the treaty and increased momentum it is to gain in the coming decades.

Second, the assurance provided to non-nuclear weapon states. The non-nuclear-weapon states who are members to the NPT are angered with the nuclear developments taking place in the P5 countries. This statement assures the non-nuclear nations that the nuclear power nations will keep their nuclear capacities under control.

Third, the pledge helps P5 nations monitor Russian and Chinese nuclear developments. In terms of bilateral arms control agreements, only one exists between both, that is the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I and SALT II) which was recently extended till 2026. Apart from that, Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty in 2002, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty in 2019 and the Open Skies agreements in 2020, were all withdrawn by the US while the Comprehensive Test Ban

Treaty (CTBT) is yet to be ratified. In the case of China, the count of nuclear arsenals is on the rise, and the US and other nations need to ensure that Beijing does not become a global nuclear threat. China is estimated to have around 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030, and the US, foreseeing this threat, has been urging both parties to sign a new arms treaty.

Fourth, the statement masks the hypersonic tests conducted by nuclear power nations. 2021 saw various hypersonic missiles, hypersonic glide vehicle tests, and the like being launched by the P5 countries. The technology enhances the capability of deploying nuclear weapons, thereby making it more critical for the rest of the world. Hence, the issuing of the joint statement helps reduce criticism against testing of new technologies.

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Geneva: What to expect in the January US-Russia security talks?

By Joeana Cera Matthews

On 28 December, The Guardian reported Russian and the US officials to have verified security talks between the two countries on 09 to 10 January 2022 in Geneva, Switzerland. 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." The bilateral talks are expected to be a part of the Strategic Security Dialogue, an initiative begun by US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

The discussions, actors, reasons, and results

First, the discussions. The 09 and 10 January talks are not the only deliberations scheduled for Russia with the West. On 12 January, Russia and NATO are set to talk over the escalating border crisis and the measures to be adopted regarding the same. On 13 January, Russia will meet with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Second, the actors. The 2021 Geneva Summit saw Biden and Putin personally meeting and deliberating issues of significance. The upcoming security talks, however, will be held between Russian officials along with officials from the US, the EU, NATO, and the OSCE. It is still unclear who will represent Russia and the US during the high-stakes discussions.

Third, the Ukraine crisis. The primary focus of the NATO-Russia Council meeting and the OSCE's Permanent Council is expected to be the Ukrainian border standoff. The Guardian, in its article, had stated that the deliberations were 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". Russia, however, seems to be clear on its result from the talks – get the West out of its "sphere of influence". The Kremlin despises NATO's expansion into eastern Europe. However, a spokesperson for the White House's National Security Council stated that no decisions about Ukraine would be made without its presence.

Fourth, the expected results. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Russia would be taking a "hard line" during the negotiations, permitting "no concessions" concerning their demands. Meanwhile, commenting on the possibility of discussions on arms control and the Russian military build-up during the talks, 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." The focus, according to Ryabkov, is set to be the two documents submitted to NATO and the US which lists Russian demands for the region.

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In Brief*

Europe in February 2022



Source: ELYSEE, AP Photo/Mark Baker, Alexei Nikolsky, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo/AP, Lasse Modin/ the Swedish Nuclear Fuel and Waste Management Company, Gonzalo Fuentes, Pool Photo/AP, AP Photo/Virginia Mayo

AUSTRIA

Austria warns to take legal steps against labelling of nuclear energy as green

On 21 January, Austria is considering taking legal steps to fight against the labelling of nuclear energy as “green.” In the recent announcement by the EU, it stated its taxonomy plans, where it aims to direct investments into sustainable energies. Under the plan, the EU proposed to label nuclear energy as green to ease states and the private sector to invest money into the nuclear sector. It has created a divide amongst the EU as half of its member states have opposed the proposal. The Austrian Climate and Energy Minister Leonore Gewessler has warned that if the European Commission goes ahead with the proposal, then Austria will opt for legal steps. Along with Austria, Luxembourg, Spain, and Denmark have joined the appeal and have urged Germany to join the same.

(“Austria, Luxembourg eye legal steps in EU nuclear energy row,” *Deutsche Welle*, 21 January 2022)

Former Chancellor Kurz appointed as ECTR co-chairman

On 09 January, former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz was appointed as the new co-chairman of the European Council on Tolerance and Reconciliation (ECTR). According to the ECTR’s official website, the international NGO works against “such evils as extremism, racism, antisemitism and xenophobia”. Responding to Kurz’s appointment, ECTR founder Moshe Kantor tweeted: “We could not have found a better person to lead with passion, wisdom and determination against today’s global challenges.” Kurz replied to the announcement via an ECTR statement, saying: “It is a great honor to join such an important organization which works against extremism and for greater tolerance

* In Brief are notes published every evening, by the NIAS Europe Monitor team on contemporary developments. Visit <https://globalpolitics.in/europe/> to read it everyday.

across Europe." The former chancellor had resigned from his post as he was faced with allegations of corruption and wrongdoing. ("Austria's former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz joins anti-racism NGO," *Deutsche Welle*, 09 January 2022)

Vienna: Law implementing assisted suicide approved

On 01 January, Austria implemented a law legalizing assisted suicide of terminally-ill adults or people with a permanent health condition. As reported by the *BBC*:

"Parliament approved the new law in December, following a constitutional court ruling on the issue. The practice will be tightly regulated, with each case assessed by two doctors - one of whom would have to be a palliative medicine expert." Assisted suicide has been gaining traction across Europe with countries such as Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands decriminalizing it, while Switzerland has legalized the act. The Archbishop of Austria Franz Lackner commented on how the Austrian legislation had ignored the importance of human life and further said it was "unfair toward all those people who make it possible to die with dignity through reliable and attentive care and who will continue in the future". ("New law allowing assisted suicide takes effect in Austria," *BBC*, 02 January 2022; Stefan J. Bos, "Austria: Assisted suicide legalized despite Church opposition," *Vatican News*, 02 January 2022)

Kurz to join Thiel Capital

On 30 December, former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz joined the investment firm Thiel Capital as a global strategist. Peter Thiel is a German-American billionaire who owns Thiel Capital. An early investor in Facebook and co-founder of Paypal, Thiel also backed former US President Donald Trump during his tenure. After being implicated in a corruption scandal, Kurz resigned from his post and left politics entirely as he wanted to spend more time with his family. Concerning the implications, the *New York Post* reported: "Austrian authorities are investigating claims that Kurz and his political allies used public money to publish doctored polls in a

bid to retain power. Kurz has denied wrongdoing." Kurz will be receiving EUR 300,000 in his new job role as he plans to commute between Europe and the firm headquartered in the US. (Thomas Barrabi, "Peter Thiel hires disgraced ex-Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz," *New York Post*, 30 December 2021; Thibault Spirlet, "Ex-Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz to work for tech billionaire Peter Thiel," *POLITICO*, 30 December 2021)

ARMENIA

President Sarkissian announces resignation

On 23 January, the President of Armenia Armen Sarkissian announced his resignation claiming to have failed in influencing the domestic policy during the crisis situation. A domestic political crisis arose from the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. The clash began between Sarkissian and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan during the war over removing the Chief of General Staff. Sarkissian was against the removal, but Pashinyan fearing a military coup proceeded with the removal. In Armenia, the President's role is considered ceremonial and the Prime Minister holds the executive power to influence the processes of foreign and domestic policy. According to Sarkissian: "The president does not have the necessary tools to influence the important processes of foreign and domestic policy in difficult times for the people and the country." ("Armenian president resigns, citing lack of powers," *Deutsche Welle*, 23 January 2022; "Armenian president resigns citing 'difficult times' for nation," *France24*, 23 January 2022)

BULGARIA

ECtHR rules Bulgarian surveillance laws to be in breach of ECHR

On 11 January, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that Bulgaria's surveillance laws were in breach with the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). According to the ruling, Bulgaria's legislation had violated the human rights convention in terms of "respect for private

life and correspondence and retention and accessing of communication data". Grounds for violation also include the absence of clear regulation and incapacity to limit the secret collection of communication data. Thereby, due to the ruling, Bulgaria will now have to change its domestic laws to render it consistent with the ECHR. ("Bulgaria's surveillance laws violate European human rights code, court rules," Deutsche Welle, 11 January 2022)

THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Ruling government wins customary vote of confidence

On 13 January, *Euronews* reported: "The Czech Republic's new conservative-led government won a vote of confidence in the lower house of parliament on Thursday in a mandatory ballot that every administration must win to govern." The three-party liberal-conservative coalition called "Together" came first with a 27.8 percent vote share and joined two other parties of the center-left liberal coalition to form the government. The winning alliance comprises the Civic Democratic Party, the Christian Democrats, and the TOP 09 party, who formed a larger coalition with Pirate Party and STAN. As cited by *Reuters*: "The new five-party ruling coalition won a combined 108 seats in the 200-member lower chamber, making it certain to win the confidence vote called after it took office last month." The opposition party ANO of former Prime Minister Andrej Babis lost the vote by a small margin of 27.1 percent of the vote share. ("New Czech governing coalition wins confidence vote," Euronews, 13 January 2022; "Czech lawmakers interrupt marathon debate over government confidence," Reuters, 13 January 2022)

CROATIA

Alaskan Malamute keeps injured hiker warm for 13 hours before being rescued

On 04 January, *The Guardian* reported an eight-month-old Alaskan Malamute to have saved a hiker who was injured in the Velebit range of the Croatian mountains. The dog named North, lay on an immobile Grga

Brkic, for 13 hours to keep him warm until rescue services arrived. After they were rescued, Croatia's mountain rescue service took to Facebook, posting: "Friendship and love between man and dog have no boundaries." The post also accompanied a photo of Brkic on a stretcher with North lying on top of him. ("A real miracle': dog saves injured hiker stranded in Croatian mountains," The Guardian, 04 January 2022)

FINLAND

Prime Minister Marin: Membership application to NATO "very unlikely"

On 19 January, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin stated that the country applying for membership to NATO was "very unlikely". During the interview with *Reuters*, she commented on the support Finland would provide via imposing sanctions on Russia if it were to escalate tensions. She said: "It would have a very substantial impact and the sanctions would be extremely tough." Further stating the possibility of joining NATO in the future, Marin maintained: "Nobody can influence us, not the United States, not Russia, not anyone else." She added that discussions on NATO would grow in years to come. ("Finland's PM says NATO membership is 'very unlikely' on her watch," Reuters, 20 January 2022)

FRANCE

Presidential candidate Zemmour fined for hate speech

On 17 January, a court in France fined far-right French presidential candidate Eric Zemmour an amount of EUR 10,000 for hate speech. Zemmour was fined for the comments he made back in September 2020 on *CNews*, where he used to work as a pundit. While answering a question regarding the knife attacks by a young radicalized Pakistani immigrant in Nice, he replied: "They have nothing to do here. They are thieves, they are murderers, they are rapists, that's all they are. They must be sent back and they must not even come." Zemmour, known for his anti-Islam and anti-immigration views, has earlier been

convicted for hate speech twice. ("[Eric Zemmour: Far-right candidate found guilty of hate speech](#)," *BBC*, 17 January 2022; "[Far-right French presidential candidate found guilty of racist hate speech](#)," *The Guardian*, 17 January 2022)

French Presidential candidate praises Greece

On 14 January, French Presidential candidate Valerie Pécresse visited Greece. During the visit, she stated that the EU would need stronger borders to deter migration into the bloc. She said: "There is no Europe without borders, and the question of borders is absolutely key today to building European power." Pécresse is the presidential candidate for the conservative Republicans party and has been seen as a challenger to the incumbent President Emmanuel Macron in the elections that are to be held in April. Pécresse has often made her tough stance on migration clear; she stated: "It is not at all fortress Europe, but it is not a supermarket Europe either. When we have required entry points, that means there are doors. There are doors, and you must go through the door, and for me, that is my European model." She further praised Greece for its methods and measures to reduce the number of asylum seekers coming through the Aegean sea. ("[French presidential candidate says strong EU borders needed](#)," *Euronews*, 14 January 2022)

France: Use of plastic in packaging and single-use plastics banned in the country

On 31 December, France passed a law to ban plastic in packaging fruits and vegetables. As reported by *The Guardian*: "From New Year's Day, France will ban supermarkets and other shops from selling cucumbers wrapped in plastic, and peppers, courgettes, aubergines and leeks in plastic packaging. A total of 30 types of fruit and vegetables will be banned from having any plastic wrapping, including bananas, pears, lemons, oranges and kiwis." French President Emmanuel Macron called this "a real revolution" and stated how "France was taking the lead globally with its law to gradually phase out all single-use plastics

by 2040". According to a poll organized in 2019 by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Paris cited that 85 percent of French people wanted to ban single-use plastic products and packaging. The citizens were supportive of the initiative and further said this was "a positive step in the right direction". (Angelique Chrisafis, "[That's a wrap: French plastic packaging ban for fruit and veg begins](#)," *The Guardian*, 31 December 2021)

GERMANY

Green Vault jewel theft trial begins in Germany

On 28 January, the trial of the Six suspects involved in the Green Vault jewel theft began in Germany. The prosecutors have accused the men who carried out the heist at Dresden's Museum worth EUR 113.8 million. According to the police report, the heist was done by setting fire to the power distribution box and using the darkness the robbers had taken away the jewels. Till now the stolen jewellery remains to be found and the director of the museum has denied to provide the value estimation of jewels as he considers them "priceless." ("[Dresden Green Vault jewelry heist trial starts](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 28 January 2022)

Berlin denies to permit to Estonia in exporting weapons to Ukraine

On 21 January, in the news conference, the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that Germany government will not support the export of lethal weapons. Similarly, Berlin has taken the same stance in blocking Estonia from exporting German origin weapons to Ukraine. Recently, to support Ukraine in the ongoing crisis with Russia, the allies of the NATO, the UK and Poland have agreed to directly export weapons to Ukraine. While Berlin has denied as it fears delivery of weapons can escalate the conflict situation, the Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have announced to supply the US-made stinger missiles to Ukraine. ("[Germany blocks Estonian arms exports to Ukraine: report](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 21 January 2022)

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz urges for continued dialogue with Moscow

On 13 January, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz commented on the ongoing talks between Russia, the United States, NATO and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Scholz urged for a “continued dialogue” with Moscow and said that engaging in any kind of military activity would be a costly affair for Russia, Ukraine and the US. He said: “We are very happy that soon the negotiators from all four sides will also meet again to start preparatory talks for this.” On the same day, Germany’s Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock called on the West to hold a strong stance against Russia and urged for unity amongst the European states for the Ukraine issue. She said: “If we Europeans are united and whole, then we can play our role in the different formats very, very strongly, a role that relies on toughness, but also on dialogue.” (“Germany sees need for toughness with Russia after European security talks,” *BBC*, 13 January 2022)

Greens support another term for President Steinmeier

On 04 January, the German Green party released a joint statement extending their support to President Frank-Walter Steinmeier for another term in the Presidency. The Party leaders said: “(Steinmeier is a) very good and highly respected Federal President who earned great merits for our country in his first term of office... We are convinced that he will continue to support and guide our society on the difficult way out of the pandemic.” Steinmeier has held the office since 2017 and is the only presidential candidate running for the February 13 parliamentary elections. Steinmeier is also backed by his Social Democratic Party and the Free Democrats. (Thibault Spirlet, “Frank-Walter Steinmeier set for second term as German president, after winning Greens' support,” *POLITICO*, 04 January 2022)

GREECE

Prime Minister Mitsotakis apologizes over delay in handling the snow storm

On 26 January, the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis apologized for the state’s inability in tackling the intense snowstorm that the country was facing. He attributed the lag in the readiness of the government to evacuation procedures of those trapped in the storm due to delayed calculations of incurred damages. According to the meteorologists of the country, the warning for the storm was given early but the government reportedly ignored it. Mitsotakis said: “It is equally true, however, that the state mechanism is not yet at the point of readiness that phenomena of such great intensity require.” (Helena Smith, “Greek PM faces blizzard of anger as thousands stranded in Athens snow,” *The Guardian*, 26 January 2022)

HUNGARY

Election 2022: Parliamentary elections scheduled for 03 April

On 11 January, President Janos Ader’s office declared that the Hungarian parliamentary elections would be held on 03 April. The elections will be conducted alongside the long-expected and Fidesz party-proposed referendum on LGBTQ issues. For the first time, Prime Minister Viktor Orban will run against a strong opposition as opinion polls predict a close race. The opposition alliance, led by Peter Marki-Zay, is a six-party entity involving the Democratic Coalition, the Socialists, liberals and the centre-right Jobbik. (Krisztina Than, “Hungary sets April 3 election with PM Orban facing united opposition,” *Reuters*, 11 January 2022)

THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Dublin: Birth Information and Tracing Bill approved by the government

On 12 January, the Republic of Ireland introduced a law to allow adoptees to access their birth certificates under the “Birth Information and Tracing Bill”. The legislation has been termed a landmark ruling as it would give adoptees above the age of 16 the right to know the identity they were born with, their medical information, and details about their early life. Minister for Children Roderic O’Gorman said: “With this bill, we are restoring to adopted people

the information that so many of us take for granted as part of our own, personal stories." He added: "... for decades in this country, adopted people have been failed in being denied clear access to their identity information." Earlier, the parents had the right to object and block the release of information to the adopted individuals which gave those adopted a disadvantage when it came to knowing about inherited medical conditions and genetic diseases. ("[Irish adoptees to get right of access to birth certificates](#)," *BBC*, 12 January 2022; "[Ireland to give adopted people access to birth records to end 'historic wrong'](#)," *The Guardian*, 12 January 2022)

ITALY

Sixth round of Presidential voting ends with no winner

On 28 January, the sixth round of voting took place in Italy for the selection of a new president. At the end of the voting, no winner was declared to succeed Italian President Sergio Mattarella. On the fifth day of voting, nationalist League leader Matteo Salvini made an effort to push votes for conservative Senate president, Maria Elisabetta Alberti Casellati by urging his party members. When the results came in, Casellati had received only 382 votes in place of 505, losing by a small margin. The issue behind the hustle for presidency is, outgoing president Sergio Mattarella has refused to continue second-term despite gaining the maximum number of votes. ("[Italy: Six rounds of voting fail to yield new president](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 28 January 2022)

Presidential Elections 2022: First round of voting inconclusive

On 24 January, the first round of voting for the Italian presidential elections that lasted for five hours saw Italian lawmakers unsuccessful in agreeing on a candidate. Although Prime Minister Mario Draghi was the most popular choice; however, concerns of political instability led to a unanimous decision not being reached. Rightist League leader Matteo Salvini commented on the proceedings: "I am working to ensure that in the next few hours the centre-right will

offer not just one but several quality proposals." The second round of voting will be held on 25 January. (Gavin Jones, Angela Amante and Crispian Balmer, "[Italy president vote ends in stalemate; leaders seek deal](#)," *Reuters*, 25 January 2022)

Presidential Elections 2022; Parliament begins secret ballot

On 24 January, the Italian Parliament initiated its voting process to select a candidate who becomes the country's next President. On 23 January, Presidential candidate Silvio Berlusconi withdrew his name from the race for Presidency as he failed to garner enough support for his candidature. Incumbent Prime Minister Mario Draghi is currently the most prominent candidate. However, Parliament members equate Draghi's victory with political instability in the country. Rightist League leader Matteo Salvini said: "At this difficult moment, it would be dangerous to remove Draghi from the post of prime minister." The Presidential elections in Italy are conducted via a secret ballot, which will see more than 1,000 parliamentarians and regional representatives casting their votes. The process will take up to several days as the procedure involves three rounds of voting, and each round takes a minimum of four hours. (Angelo Amante, "[Italy's parliament starts voting for president in wide-open race](#)," *Reuters*, 24 January 2022; Angela Giuffrida, "[Secret ballot to elect president of Italy begins as Berlusconi drops out](#)," *The Guardian*, 23 January 2022; "[Italy: Silvio Berlusconi drops presidential bid](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 22 January 2022)

Italian fashion icon Nino Cerruti dies at age of 91

On 16 January, Nino Cerruti who is known for his Italian fashion was reported to have passed away at the age of 91 while being treated for hip operation. He created his own fashion designs and his designs remained kept at his grandfather's textile factory situated in the town of Biella in 1881. After excelling at his family textile mill, he then switched into clothing business in the late 1950's, later went on to revolutionize the fashion industry. It is said that in the 1980's he expanded his works to

designing clothes for top Hollywood actors for big time film festivals. ("Nino Cerruti: Italian fashion great dies aged 91," *BBC*, 16 January 2022)

The Scala dei Turchi found to be damaged with red iron oxide powder

On 09 January, the renowned white limestone Scala dei Turchi cliff in Sicily was found to be ruined with red iron oxide powder, upon which an investigation has been initiated to track down the responsible perpetrators. The site, which was an entry for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage status in 2019, is one of most visited tourist spots of Italy. The chief prosecutor of the Agrigento region, Luigi Patronaggio, is leading the investigation to trace the perpetrators. (Angela Giuffrida, "Italy's Scala dei Turchi cliffs defaced with red powder," *The Guardian*, 09 January 2022)

Presidential elections to be held on 24 January

On 04 January, President of the Chamber of Deputies Roberto Fico released a statement via Facebook announcing that the presidential elections for the country were set to be held on 24 January. He said: "I have convened the Parliament in a common session for the election of the President of the Republic on January 24 at 3 pm." The elections will have a series of voting rounds and will see 1,009 electors casting secret ballots. Although Italy does not have official candidates, those vying for the position include present Prime Minister Mario Draghi, former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, former lower house speaker Pierferdinando Casini, former Prime Minister Giuliano Amato and the current Justice Minister Marta Cartabia. The victor will replace incumbent President Sergio Mattarella for a seven-year term. (Thibault Spirlet, "Italy's parliament set to vote for new president on January 24," *POLITICO*, 04 January 2022; Gavin Jones and Angelo Amante, "Italy parliament to begin voting for new head of state on Jan. 24," *Reuters*, 04 January 2022)

KAZAKHSTAN

Parliament elects new Prime Minister; Putin comments on protests

On 11 January, Alikhan Smailov was appointed as the new Prime Minister of Kazakhstan after the parliament election on the same. Smailov held the post of the country's finance minister from 2018 to 2020. The appointment followed President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev dissolving the Cabinet due to the protests in the country. Commenting on the presence of foreign troops, Tokayev said: "The main mission of the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) troops has been completed." The Russian President Vladimir Putin stated: "The events in Kazakhstan are not the first and far from the last attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of our states from the outside." (Louis Westendarp, "Kazakhstan gets new prime minister, with foreign troops set to leave," *POLITICO*, 11 January 2022)

MONTENEGRO

The government of Montenegro in the brink of collapse

On 27 January, Montenegro government reached a breakpoint of collapse as the coalition parties came into conflict over ideological differences. Previously, the coalition government was formed in December 2020 winning one of the strongest parties, Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). The first step taken to dissolve the leadership was taken on 19 January when the Deputy Prime Minister filed a motion for a vote of no confidence against Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić and the government. ("Montenegro lurches back into political crisis as former allies try to oust PM," *Euro news*, 27 January 2022)

NETHERLANDS

Netherlands world's largest canal lock to facilitate entry of large ships

On 26 January, the Netherlands launched the world's largest canal lock which connects the North Sea Canal with the port of Amsterdam. The construction project which was estimated to be completed by 2019 did not only get delayed but overshoot

the budget by EUR 300 million. The completion of the canal means an easy passage for large, modern cargo ships to reach Amsterdam. Apart from the economic benefit, with the advance of technical development it will facilitate accurate water level for larger ships to enter the canal. ([“Netherlands unveils ‘world’s-largest’ canal lock,” Deutsche Welle, 26 January 2022](#))

RUSSIA

Kremlin includes Navalny in “terrorist” list

On 25 January, Russia’s Federal Service for Financial Monitoring added Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny to a database of “terrorists and extremists.” This implies that Navalny is now in the same category as other right-wing nationalist organizations like Afghanistan’s militant Islamist Taliban and the extremist “Islamic State” (IS) group. The decision comes in the backdrop of Putin’s attempts to dull down dissent. Nine other members of Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation are also said to be added to this list; earlier in January, Leonid Volkov and Ivan Zhdanov who aided Navalny were also included in the same. On the same day, Russia’s Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) called for Navalny’s brother Oleg Navalny to be jailed for provoking people to violate COVID-19 restrictions. ([“Russia adds Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny to ‘terrorist’ list,” Deutsche Welle, 25 January 2022](#))

Marking one year since Navalny’s arrest

On 17 January, Kremlin dissident Alexei Navalny marked a year since his arrest at the Moscow International Airport which followed a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence for violating parole conditions on fraud charges. On the anniversary, Navalny took to Twitter and expressed his lack of “regret” regarding his decision to return to Russia, even though it meant a second arrest. He added: “Having served my first year in prison, I want to tell everyone exactly what I shouted to those gathered outside the court when a convoy led me to a police van: Don’t be afraid of anything... Why live your whole life in fear, and even to be robbed, if you can arrange everything differently — more fairly.” Many

international and regional actors called for the release of Navalny; including Amnesty International and the EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell. ([“Alexei Navalny says he has ‘no regrets’ 1 year since arrest,” Deutsche Welle, 17 January 2022](#); [“EU urges Moscow to free Navalny on anniversary of his arrest,” Reuters, 17 January 2022](#))

Russia’s Federal Security Service arrestshackers of REvil for launching cyber-attack on Colonial Pipeline

On 14 January, the US “welcomed” the Russian arrest of REvil from Ransomware group who were responsible for the attack on the colonial pipeline last spring. Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) also found that REvil was behind the cyber-attack in Kaseya which affected close to 1,000 businesses including Swedish supermarket chain. The arrest was possible due to FSB’s search raids, where it recovered more than EUR 4.9 million worth cash, cryptocurrency and cars. According to the officials, the operation took place upon the order of US authorities who urged for the arrest of the group’s leader. ([“US ‘welcomes’ Russian arrests of REvil ransomware gang,” Deutsche Welle, 15 January 2022](#))

Moscow Court orders close of MHRC after Memorial International

On 29 December, Moscow court Judge Mikhail Kazakov declared the closure of the Memorial Human Rights Center (MHRC) since it failed to label all its publications as “foreign agent”. The prosecutors stated that Memorial “creates a false image of the USSR as a terrorist state and denigrates the memory of World War II”. The ruling garnered international responses including those from the UN Human Rights Office and the UK Foreign Minister Liz Truss; they expressed concern over the ruling, stating that it “further weaken(ed) the country’s dwindling human rights community”. The Director of Human Rights Watch (HRW) Kenneth Roth said: “(the closure) speaks to the fears of the Russian government that it is no longer willing to tolerate the honest and objective accounting of its conduct that Memorial provides.” This ruling followed the ban on the main organization, Memorial International, on similar charges. The

MHRC, which plans to appeal against the ruling, advocated for “political prisoners, migrants and other minorities” while concentrating on rights violations in the North Caucasus. (“Moscow court orders Memorial Human Rights Center to be banned,” *Deutsche Welle*, 29 December 2021; Andrew Roth, “Russian court orders closure of another human rights group,” *The Guardian*, 29 December 2021; “Moscow court orders closure of Memorial human rights centre,” *France24*, 29 December 2021)

SPAIN

Catalonia passes resolution in memory of women executed for witchcraft

On 26 January, Members of Parliament in Catalonia approved a resolution to rehabilitate the memory of more than 700 women killed. The women were accused of being witches and were victims of execution; their details were discovered by the scientific journal *Sapiens* and Barcelona's historian Pau Castell. *BBC* reported: "We have recently discovered the names of more than 700 women who were persecuted, tortured and executed between the 15th and 18th centuries." Historians in Spain discovered that the region of Catalonia was one of the first regions in the 1400s to carry out mass witch hunts and was considered one of the worst areas for executions. Pro-independence and left-wing MPs mentioned how women were "victims of misogynistic persecution" in the middle ages. As reported by *Euronews*: "An estimated 50,000 people were condemned to death for witchcraft across Europe between 1580 and 1630, around 80% of whom were women." (“Catalonia pardons women executed for witchcraft,” *BBC*, 27 January 2022; “Catalonia's parliament pardons hundreds of women executed for 'witchcraft',” *Euronews*, 26 January 2022)

Spain's national institution proposes investigation into sexual misconduct case

On 27 January, for the first time the three left leaning political parties, Podemos, ERC (The Republican Left of Catalonia), and EH Bildu (Euskal Herria Bildu) of Spain announced a proposal to create a

commission of inquiry to look into pedophilia and sexual misconduct of the Catholic Church. The other European countries such as Germany and France have begun investigations on the same. (“Spain: Left-wing parties call for inquiry commission into church sexual abuse allegations,” *Euro news*, 27 January 2022)

SERBIA

Belgrade cancels lithium mining plans

On 20 January, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić announced the cancellation of the Rio Tinto lithium mine plans after weeks of protests. Brnabić said: "We have fulfilled all the demands from the environmental protests and have put an end to Rio Tinto in the Republic of Serbia." The protestors had taken to the streets as they were concerned about the mine's environmental ramifications in the lithium-rich western Serbian region. The move has also been influenced by the souring diplomatic ties between Belgrade and Canberra over the deportation of tennis player Novak Djokovic from Australia. The country might face a legal challenge from the company as it stated: "Rio Tinto is reviewing the legal basis of this decision and the implications for our activities and our people in Serbia." (“Serbia scraps plans for Rio Tinto lithium mine after protests,” *The Guardian*, 20 January 2022; “It's over': months of protests force Serbian government to scrap planned lithium mine,” *Euronews*, 20 January 2022)

Prime Minister Brnabić extends support to Djokovic

On 08 January, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić backed tennis player Novak Djokovic who is being held in Australian immigration detention over concerns regarding his vaccination credentials. Djokovic's visa has been invalidated over these concerns. Brnabić, responding to Serbian media, stated that there were “positive” talks underway and added: “The Serbian government is ready to provide all the guarantees necessary for Novak to be allowed to enter Australia, the Serbian president is also involved.” The case concerning this issue will be heard on 10

January. Djokovic, competing for his 21st Grand Slam title, was to participate in the Australian Open starting on 17 January. (Samuel Stolton, "[Serbian PM pledges support for Djokovic in Australia spat](#)," *POLITICO*, 09 January 2022)

SWEDEN

Sweden approves new nuclear waste storage facility

On 27 January, the government of Sweden approved the site in Forsmark, located in the north of Stockholm to function as the nuclear waste storage facility. The facility is planned in a way to hold the nuclear waste in the bedrock level and is expected to get filled by the end of 70 years, upon which the bentonite clay will be used to seal the facility. So far, Sweden has three nuclear power plants which produce close to 8,000 tonnes of radioactive waste. In recent days, the nuclear waste and disposal mechanism is turning into a major problem, especially among European countries. ("[Sweden approves plans for Forsmark nuclear waste storage site](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 28 January 2022)

Sweden authorities spot drones flying around government building

On 17 January, Swedish authorities spotted drones flying over three nuclear sites, airports and the royal palace. It is said that the spotted drone was found to be circling the parliament and government buildings and the royal palace in Stockholm. The investigation has begun to trace the suspect behind the drones, but the authorities have not disclosed the details of the drones. According to the security agency Sapo: "The security service is conducting the investigation regarding the drone flights over our nuclear plants. Regarding other drone observations it's so far a matter for the police." So far, the prosecutors have decided to keep an open mind in finding the suspect as the security alert comes with tensions building between Russia and Ukraine. ("[Sweden drones: Sightings reported over nuclear plants and palace](#)," *BBC*, 18 January 2021)

TURKEY

Turkey faces high inflation with Erdogan's policies.

On 04 January, Turkey's inflation rate reached a record high of 36 percent. The last time Turkey registered an inflation rate similar to this was in October 2002. The likely reason for the economic turmoil is President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's unconventional economic approach and his policies on inflation. Erdogan's party was credited to steer the country out of the 2002 financial crisis but, due to the current situation, the party now faces uncertainties in the 2023 elections. Erdogan's unconventional style of handling the crisis is peculiar as he stuck to his policies and opposed the hiking of interest rates. As reported by *France24*, Erdogan believed: "High interest rates are a drag on activity and slow down economic growth, but they are useful to tamp down inflation as they cut demand and encourage savings." A dollar was about Lira 7.4 at the beginning of 2021 but has now dropped down to Lira 18.4 in December. ("[Turkish inflation soars to 36% as financial turmoil continues](#)," *France24*, 04 January 2022; "[Turkey's inflation hits 36% amid financial turmoil](#)," *BBC*, 03 January 2022)

THE UNITED KINGDOM

Boris Johnson faces accusation over the partygate scandal

On 26 January, during the weekly session of the Prime Ministers' Questions (PMQ), British parliamentarians raged accusations against Prime Minister Boris Johnson over the partygate scandal. The opposition leaders of the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party questioned Johnson's actions and accused him of breaking his own laws during the pandemic. On 25 January, London Metropolitan Police force announced that an investigation into the events was underway and a report of the same was to be released soon. This report will decide whether or not Johnson and his staff broke the pandemic rules. ("[UK PM Boris Johnson faces heat ahead of 'partygate' report](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 26 January 2022)

Lawmakers challenge Boris Johnson to resign over lockdown parties

On 19 January, the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson was challenged to resign by lawmakers over allegations regarding the lockdown parties. Johnson, who won with a huge majority in 2019, was found to be defending against the repeated accusations made by lawmakers. To bring about a challenge to leadership, it is necessary for 54 Members of Parliament to submit no confidence letters to the chairman of the party's committee. It is said that 20 of the conservative lawmakers who had won their seats in the 2019 elections have planned to submit the no confidence letter and a few of others have said to have already written. Johnson has repeatedly based his arguments on various reasons, but the opponents have called for him to resign. ("UK PM Johnson faces growing pressure to resign," *Reuters*, 19 January 2022)

BBC to face fund shortage as culture secretary decides to freeze funds

On 16 January, in a recent news report by the *Mail on Sunday*, the Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries was reported to have decided on freezing the license-payer fees of BBC for two-years due to inflation rates exceeding five percent. The said decision will drastically impact BBC which will fall short of funds by EUR 2.4 billion and apart from this its competition with private funded channels such as Netflix will have a larger effect. According to the report, *BBC* has been in clash with the conservative government due to its left-wing bias. According to the Labour lawmaker and Culture Policy Chief Lucy Powell: "The prime minister and the culture secretary seem hell-bent on attacking this great British institution because they don't like its journalism." ("UK to cut BBC funding by freezing license-payer fees," *Deutsche Welle*, 16 January 2022)

Prince Andrew gives up patronages and affiliations to fight sexual abuse allegations

On 13 January, Britain's Prince Andrew announced that he would be returning all his patronages and military affiliations as he prepares to fight a sexual abuse case against him. Buckingham Palace released a

statement, saying: "The Duke of York will continue not to undertake any public duties and is defending this case as a private citizen." The palace also mentioned Prince Andrew to have taken this step "with the Queen's approval and agreement". As cited by *Euronews*: "Queen Elizabeth's third child is being accused by Virginia Guiffre of sexually abusing her in 2001 when she was 17 and being trafficked by the late financier Jeffrey Epstein." She had launched legal proceedings against the Prince in August 2020, and the recent ruling by a US judge rejected his attempt to dismiss the case against him. ("Prince Andrew returns military affiliations and patronages as he prepares to fight sexual abuse case," *Euronews*, 13 January 2022; Ben Quinn and Caroline Davies, "Prince Andrew loses military roles and use of HRH title," *The Guardian*, 13 January 2022)

Johnson accepts violating restriction measures during May 2020 lockdown; apologizes

On 12 January, Prime Minister Boris Johnson apologized for attending a drinks party on Downing Street when Britain underwent its first lockdown in May 2020. Johnson spoke to lawmakers during the weekly Prime Minister's Questions session in the House of Commons saying: "I want to apologize. I know that millions of people across this country have made extraordinary sacrifices over the last 18 months." He had claimed that it was a work event as opposition leaders such as Labour leader Keir Starmer said his reasons were "ridiculous" and called for Johnson's resignation. Starmer further said: "Can't the Prime Minister see why the British public think he's lying through his teeth?" Johnson has recently been facing a lot of heat with the uncovering of scandals and discontentment from his colleagues as he accepted he should have sent everyone home than continue with the event. (Esther Webber, "Boris Johnson apologizes for attending Downing Street lockdown garden party," *POLITICO*, 12 January 2022; "UK PM Johnson offers apology for attending party during Covid-19 lockdown," *France24*, 12 January 2022)

More migrants cross the English Channel

On 11 January, close to 100 migrants crossed the English Channel using small boats. Despite the UK's investment in France to prevent migrant crossings, the number of people who have crossed the Channel is three times the number in 2020. According to the Minister of Justice and Tackling Illegal Migration Tom Pursglove: "People fleeing persecution should seek safety in the first safe country they reach and not risk their lives paying criminal gangs to cross the Channel." The UK government is currently reforming its approach to asylum seekers and illegal entries in order to take a tougher stance against exploitation of its laws. It also plans to consider those who illegally arrive in the UK as committing a criminal offense under the Nationality and Borders Bill. ([Channel migrants: Three boats with 96 people make the crossing](#), *BBC*, 11 January 2022)

UKRAINE

Kyiv residents prepare for war

On 27 January, as tensions between Ukraine and Russia escalate, and western countries calling back their citizens and officials, the residents of Ukraine said they were already preparing for war. A Kyiv resident Lolita said: "...The exchange rate for the dollar is rising, prices are getting higher...My friends and I are thinking of going to Europe for some time and wait there." Another citizen, Oleh, expressed: "It concerns every Ukrainian. Some people have started gathering food, some are cleaning their weapons and preparing for an attack. There is a lot of information about this in the media. Everyone knows about this threat." Ukrainian officials have urged people to remain calm and worry that Russia could take advantage of the environment of fear. Meanwhile, Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France met in Paris to discuss the de-escalation of tensions using the Normandy format talks. (["People in Ukraine are ready for war": Kyiv residents speak on Russia tensions](#), *Euronews*, 27 January 2022; James Marson, ["On the Brink of War With Russia, Ukrainians Are Resigned and Prepared](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 January 2022)

Poroshenko back in Ukraine

On 17 January, former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko returned to the country's capital to undergo trial as he has been charged with high treason. On reaching Ukraine, investigators tried to subpoena him but Poroshenko declined from accepting the documents. Thousands of supporters had gathered outside the airport as the former President addressed the crowd, saying: "[The authorities] are setting us back 10 years. We're here not to defend Poroshenko, we're here to join forces and defend Ukraine. United Ukraine is strong, and a strong Ukraine is capable of pushing back (against) Putin... Now I'm heading to the court where we'll give them a fight." The court placed his bail at UAH 1 billion and asked him to wear an electronic tracing bracelet. If convicted, Poroshenko faces a prison sentence of 15 years. (["Ukraine: Ex-President Petro Poroshenko returns to face treason charges](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 17 January 2022; Luke Harding, ["Former Ukraine president returns to Kyiv to face treason charges](#), *The Guardian*, 17 January 2022)

Ex-president of Ukraine to return despite treason charges

On 16 January, former President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko announced his return to the country. Poroshenko, who is facing treason charges for supporting Russian-backed separatist fighters through illegal sale of coal, has now denied the accusations and has boldly said that he won't face detention. According to the critics, the return of the ex-president is seen only as a diversion to Russian invasion and the current administration is trying its best to keep away from the allegations against Poroshenko. (["Ukraine: Ex-leader Poroshenko to return amid treason charges](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 16 January 2022)

Zelenskiy hopes Normandy Format talks to stabilize eastern Ukraine

On 11 January, President Volodymyr Zelenskiy announced the country's resolve to undertake appropriate decisions to stabilize the Donbass region via the Normandy format talks. In a statement, he said: "It is time to agree on an end to the

conflict, and we are ready for the necessary decisions during a new summit of the leaders of the four countries." The Normandy Format talks include Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany. *Reuters* reported a French presidential official to have reported Russia's Chief Negotiator Dmitry Kozak along with Zelenskiy and his Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak to have approved the talks. The French official is said to have added: "The difficulties remain. We are not under any illusions, but we think we can hold a first meeting of the Normandy format advisers by the end of January." ("Ukraine ready to take decisions to end war at new four-way summit - president," *Reuters*, 12 January 2022)

Ukrainian court freezes former President Poroshenko's assets

On 07 January, a court in Ukraine ordered the freezing of the assets of former President Petro Poroshenko on charges of high treason. Poroshenko was charged with purchasing coal from the Dunes region that was speculated to fund pro-Russian separatists. He has denied the claims and his party called the decision "illegal, unjust". Poroshenko's party further stated: "The government, instead of consolidating Ukrainian society to oppose Putin, is fueling internal confrontation. Thus, it recklessly and irresponsibly weakens the front against Russian aggression." Post the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine scrambled for coal and seized many coal mines to fulfil the country's energy demands. Authorities allege that Poroshenko had conspired with pro-Russian leader Viktor Medvedchuk to secure coal purchases from the eastern region. ("Ukrainian court freezes assets of former President Petro Poroshenko," *Deutsche Welle*, 07 January 2022; Pavel Polityuk and Natalia Zinets, "Ukraine opposition blasts president as court freezes predecessor's assets," *Reuters*, 07 January 2022)

Tkachenko registers complaint against Netflix's "Emily in Paris"

On 03 January, Ukraine's Cultural Minister Oleksandr Tkachenko registered a complaint to Netflix regarding the portrayal of a character from Kyiv. In the Netflix show

"Emily in Paris", the protagonist Emily's Ukrainian friend Petra is depicted as a shoplifter. Petra's role was seen as "insulting" to the country and the Ukrainian people; this instigated Tkachenko to write to the streaming service. Tkachenko said: "In Emily in Paris, we have a caricature image of a Ukrainian woman that is unacceptable. It is also insulting... Is that how Ukrainians are seen abroad?" This is not the first time the series has been criticized. As reported by *BBC*, its previous season "...was criticized, particularly in France, for promoting stereotypical images of the city and its residents. It portrays the French as rude people who wear berets and frequently cheat on their partners". ("Emily in Paris: Ukraine complains over Kyiv character stereotype," *BBC*, 03 January 2022)

REGIONAL

Ukraine: Putin and Macron conduct telephonic conversation, Lavrov calls US response better than NATO's

On 28 January, Russian President Vladimir Putin conversed with French President Emmanuel Macron via phone. A Kremlin readout of the phone call stated that Putin had agreed for further talks with the West while maintaining that the US and NATO had failed to consider their demands in their counterproposals. Following the talks, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that the US' counterproposals were better than those of NATO. Lavrov added that the US response included "grains of rationality" on "secondary issues." Meanwhile, he said that he was "ashamed for the people who wrote these (NATO) texts" as considered them to be "idealized". ("Ukraine tells West not to 'panic' over Russia tensions," *Deutsche Welle*, 28 January 2022; Jennifer Rankin, Kim Willsher and Luke Harding, "Putin accuses Nato of ignoring Russia's concerns as Ukraine crisis simmers," *The Guardian*, 28 January 2022)

EU to enforce the classification of branches as subsidiaries

On 28 January, the officials of Brussels proposed to classify the foreign banks as subsidiaries instead of branches. The move

will force them to boost up their local balance sheet and bring the branches directly under the supervision of the EU. Apart from this, the position of lenders who opened branches post-Brexit will be entangled. The force's efforts to change the branches into subsidiaries is viewed as a last resort, as many member states have complained the current system of banks is complicated. As per the document: "Scope of systemic importance assessment and of the eventual joint decision seem unclear and exhibit apparent inconsistencies." (Huw Jones, "Exclusive Foreign banks face bigger capital bill under draft EU plan," *Reuters*, 29 January)

France: Normandy talks held; leaders reiterate need to maintain a ceasefire

On 26 January, the Normandy format talks were held in France's Elysee Palace. The eight-hour-long meeting saw representatives from Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France discuss efforts to de-escalate Ukrainian tensions. The first meeting under the format since 2019, saw Ukraine being represented by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's adviser Andriy Yermak while Russia was represented by Kremlin envoy Dmitry Kozak. Despite the complicated nature of the talks, Kozak stated that there was just one common ground that all the parties agreed to, which was a ceasefire (in eastern Ukraine). This would be maintained according to the "accords," referring to the Minsk Protocol. After the meeting, the Elysee Palace released a statement that said further dialogue would happen in two weeks at Berlin. ("Russia, Ukraine agree to uphold ceasefire in Normandy talks," *Deutsche Welle*, 26 January 2022)

Germany: President Macron meets Chancellor Scholz

On 25 January, French President Emmanuel Macron met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz during the former's visit to Berlin. The two leaders discussed the Ukraine conflict and mentioned how France and Germany were ready to dialogue with Russia. Macron commented on the US-Russia talks and said they were a "good

thing," despite being inconclusive. He also said: "We are preparing in parallel a joint reaction and the response in case of aggression." Scholz added: "We expect from Russia clear steps that contribute to a de-escalation of the situation. We are all in agreement that a military aggression will trigger heavy consequences." Scholz's comments reaffirmed Germany's support to Ukraine as mixed signals were sent when it previously refused to sell weapons to Kyiv. ("Macron says Europe is preparing 'common response' in case of Russian aggression," *France24*, 25 January 2022; "Macron says cost to Russia will be 'very high' if it attacks Ukraine," *Euronews*, 25 January 2022)

Ukraine: EU Foreign Ministers meet to discuss response to imminent Russian invasion

On 24 January, EU Foreign Ministers met in Brussels to discuss the measures to be undertaken in the face of a Russian invasion into Ukraine. Following the meeting, EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell commented on the necessity of a "united" response from the member states if Russia were to escalate tensions. Borrell added that the EU would support Ukraine to counter Russian attacks while maintaining the "path of dialogue" in resolving the conflict. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken virtually participated in the same. The meeting also saw European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announce a new Ukrainian aid fund of EUR 1.2 billion that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called "timely". ("Ukraine-Russia crisis: Attack will have 'consequences,' EU and US warn," *Deutsche Welle*, 24 January 2022)

Ireland: Russia to hold live-fire naval exercise off the coast of Ireland

On 24 January, Ireland informed Russia that it was not welcome to host a live-fire naval exercise off its coast. Ireland has a long-standing policy of military neutrality but keeping the rising tensions in mind and with Russia's troop buildup on the Ukrainian border, it chose to decline Moscow's notification. But, Ireland's Defence Minister Simon Coveney said that

the country did not have the power to stop the exercises. He further said: "We don't have the power to prevent this happening, but certainly I've made it clear to the Russian ambassador in Ireland that it's not welcome." Russia's timing of holding live-fire naval exercises away from any of its permanent bases has raised many Defense pundits' concerns. The location of the activities would hamper flights to and from Ireland and would also pose a risk to the transatlantic data cables laid on the sea bed. ("Ireland tells Russia live-fire naval exercise is 'not welcome'," BBC, 24 January 2022)

A rare snowstorm in southern Mediterranean countries

On 24 January, a heavy snowstorm called Elpida paralyzed the capital of Athens overnight, as the government declared a holiday in parts of the country. Temperatures in the capital fell to minus 14 degrees Celsius; this was an unusual occurrence. But due to climate change, this was the second time the phenomenon happened in the last two years. Climate Change and Civil Protection Minister Christos Stylianides said: "We ask citizens to avoid leaving their homes. It will be a difficult night...the height of the snow is unprecedented in some areas." Albania also closed all its elementary and high schools due to the freezing temperatures, while Turkish authorities halted their flights at the Istanbul Airport due to heavy snowfall. ("Snowstorm brings much of Turkey and Greece to a halt," Deutsche Welle, 24 January 2022; "Heavy snow paralyzes Greek capital, crews struggling to free stranded drivers," Reuters, 24 January 2022)

Ukraine and the UK accuses Russia's plan to position former Ukraine minister

On 23 January, the Foreign Office of Russia planned to name the former Ukrainian minister Yevhen Murayev as a probable candidate for Ukrainian government. Upon which the UK government accused Russia's plan and warned that it shall face serious consequences if it invades Ukraine. The UK intelligence found out the backend attempts of the Russian intelligence officers in contacting former Ukrainian leaders to take charge of Ukraine after a planned attack.

While Russia has denied the allegations stating it as "disinformation." Ukraine and the Western powers have objected to the act of Russia. ("Russia-Ukraine tensions: UK warns of plot to install pro-Moscow ally," BBC, 23 January 2022; "Ukrainian politician mocks 'stupid' UK claims," Reuters, 23 January 2022)

Ukraine: German Vice-Admiral resigns after remarks on Putin and Crimea

On 22 January, German Navy Chief Kay-Achim Schönbach resigned following his remarks of Putin "deserving respect" and Crimea being lost forever. The Vice-Admiral, addressing India's Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, understated the possibility of a Russian invasion. Although the German government declined from an official statement, it distanced itself from Schönbach's comment. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry summoned the German ambassador as Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba asked Germany to "stop undermining unity" provoking a "new attack" from the Kremlin. Later, Schönbach released an apology and clarified that the statement was a personal remark and "in no way reflect the official position of the defense ministry". The Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht is said to have accepted Schönbach's resignation. The Ukrainians are disappointed in Germany blocking Estonian attempts to provide weapons while refusing to send any themselves; they have, however, offered a field hospital. ("German navy chief Schönbach resigns over comments on Putin, Crimea," Deutsche Welle, 22 January 2022; Philip Oltermann, "German navy chief quits after saying Putin deserves respect over Ukraine," The Guardian, 23 January 2022; "German navy chief resigns over Ukraine comments," BBC, 24 January 2022)

EU Parliament to regulate live animal transports within and out of the EU

On 20 January, the EU Parliament ruled to regulate live animal transportation within the EU and non-EU states. The regulations come after the EU Parliament's fact-finding committee presented the results of an investigation held in December 2021 regarding the violations of the current rules

on transporting live animals. As reported by *Deutsche Welle*: "The committee had called for transport times to be limited to eight hours by road and air and 24 hours by sea for animals intended for slaughter. This has been approved with exceptions." At the same time, a general ban on the transport of pregnant animals and newly born animals has not been accepted. But, animal rights organizations have been calling for a ban on the export of live animals outside the EU, citing unprofessional slaughtering of animals, which could have been an offense in the region. (Max Zander, "[EU parliament restricts live animal transports](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 January 2022)

Poland: European Commission blocks funds to Poland over coal mine issue

On 19 January, the European Commission blocked the funds for Poland as the country's leaders refused to pay the legal fines put on Turow coal mine. The European Court of Justice (ECJ) had ordered the mine which is located near the border of the Czech Republic to be closed down as it is found to be polluting the nearby Czech villages. Poland has refused to close down the mine citing it would adversely affect their economy. As per the ECJ it has levied a fine of EUR 500,000 per day on Poland continuing to operate the mine. Warsaw had also stated that the issue does not come under the purview of the EU and it cannot ask the country to close down the mine. ("[EU to withhold funds for Poland over Turow coal mine](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 January 2022)

European Parliament elects Roberta Metsola as new President

On 18 January, the European Parliament elected Roberta Metsola as the new President after the death of David Sassoli. Metsola is a conservative Maltese lawyer and the first woman to hold the post in 20 years. Metsola is also the youngest person in the history of the EU legislation to be elected as the President; she was Vice President to Sassoli and took charge of the office as the acting President from 11 January. Accepting the office, she said: "I feel honored by the responsibility with which you are entrusting me." Metsola has

been a member of the Parliament since 2013 and played a crucial role as a representative of Malta's center-right Nationalist Party. However, she has drawn criticism from the opposition Greens and the Left group for her stance on anti-abortion. Meanwhile, French left-wing member of the European Parliament Manon Aubry recognized that Metsola advocated for LGBTQ rights. ("[Who is Roberta Metsola, the new president of the European Parliament?](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 18 January 2022; "[European Parliament elects conservative Roberta Metsola as president](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 18 January 2022)

Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov dialogues with North Macedonian counterpart

On 18 January, Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov met with his North Macedonian counterpart Dimitar Kovačevski on his visit to Skopje. The two leaders discussed the need for an improvement in bilateral relations as they said via a joint statement: "We have promised each other that we will use new energy to improve our relations with respect." Relations between the two countries turned sour after Bulgaria blocked North Macedonia's bid to join the EU in 2020. Bulgaria had argued that North Macedonia failed to keep its commitment in honouring a 2017 agreement regarding disputes over shared history and language. *Euronews* reported: "...both governments will have a joint meeting in Sofia next week to form cooperation groups in economic issues, infrastructure, European integration, trade, education, culture, and history." ("[Bulgaria and North Macedonia agree to improve relations after talks](#)," *Euronews*, 18 January 2022; "[North Macedonia and Bulgaria agree to work on issues blocking EU talks](#)," *Reuters*, 18 January 2022)

Germany's Annalena Baerbock visits Moscow amid tensions

On 18 January, Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock met with her Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on her visit to Moscow. She held discussions with her Russian colleagues to ease tensions amid speculations that Moscow was preparing to invade Ukraine. She commented on the

issue saying: "Each further aggressive act will have a high price for Russia, economically, strategically, politically.... Diplomacy is the only way." As reported by *The Guardian*: "Her visit is being watched warily by European, UK and US administrations for signs that Germany may revert to its traditional role of seeking independent dialogue with Russia in preference to firmness". Baerbock's visit came after three high-level diplomatic meetings failed to give a positive outcome; she has called for "bringing new life" to the Normandy format talks that involve Ukraine, Germany, Russia, and France to deal with the crisis. (Darko Janjevic, "Germany's Baerbock says Russia troop buildup 'hard not to take as a threat'." *Deutsche Welle*, 18 January 2022; Patrick Wintour and Philip Oltermann, "Russia would pay 'high price' for attack on Ukraine, says German minister." *The Guardian*, 18 January 2022)

Ukraine: Baerbock's two-day visit

On 17 January, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock visited Ukraine. During her visit, she said: "... we are ready to have a serious dialogue about joint agreements and steps that bring more security for everyone in Europe, Russia included." Her comments followed Russia increasing its troop buildup and military equipment along the Ukrainian border. Baerbock further emphasized that Kyiv would be involved and informed of any talks that are to happen regarding Ukraine. Meanwhile, the UK government extended its support to Ukraine as it supplied Kyiv with short-range anti-tank missiles for self-defense. British troops have been in Ukraine since 2015 and had committed to help rebuild the Ukrainian navy after Russia invaded Ukraine. The UK's Secretary of State for Defense Ben Wallace spoke about the supply of weapons, stating: "Let me be clear: this support is for short-range and clearly defensive weapon capabilities; they are not strategic weapons and pose no threat to Russia; they are to use in self-defence."

(Joseph Lee, "Russia-Ukraine crisis: UK sending weapons to defend Ukraine, says defense secretary." *BBC*, 18 January 2022;

"Germany's Baerbock visits Ukraine amid rising tensions with Russia" *Deutsche Welle*, 17 January 2022)

United Resolve: Russia and Belarus plan joint military exercises in February 2022

On 17 January, *The Guardian* reported Russian troop movement towards western Belarus ahead of joint military exercises set between the two countries for February. Named the United Resolve, the Belarusian Security Council's Head Alexander Volfovich stated that the troops were coming ahead of the drills. *The Guardian* stated this was a matter of concern for the West given that analyses made with reference to Russian invasion of Ukraine involved scenarios where the latter was captured via Belarus. Meanwhile, other theories maintained Belarus' limited role in the conflict. Responding to the international concern regarding the movement, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said: "Why are we and Russia being reproached for holding manoeuvres, exercises and so forth when you've come from far away?.. There are some hot-heads calling for war. We hear these statements." (Andrew Roth, "Russia moves troops to Belarus for joint exercises near Ukraine border." *The Guardian*, 17 January 2022)

Madrid: Scholz meets Spanish counterpart Sanchez

On 17 January, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez during the former's visit to Madrid. The two leaders discussed the possibility of working together closely on the EU's fiscal policies. Sanchez said: "The chancellor and I note that we are entering a new phase in our cooperation at European level." He expressed this sentiment given the similar vision both countries share on social and economic progress. The leaders also discussed the expansion of clean energy sources in the bloc, as Scholz expressed: "Spain and Germany are both very ambitious. We want to achieve fast progress in the expansion of renewables." ("German Chancellor Scholz and Spanish PM Sanchez discuss relaxing EU fiscal policy." *Deutsche Welle*, 17 January 2022)

Peskov denies possibility of Russian invasion into Ukraine

On 16 January, the Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov appeared on *CNN*'s "Fareed Zakaria GPS". He was cited by *POLITICO* as saying: "I'm a spokesperson to Kremlin, and I officially can tell you that there are no Russian troops on Donbas and on Ukrainian soil." He further added that the Kremlin was hopeful of future diplomatic efforts, as he said: "We have to find out a combination to solve this problem, taking into account concerns of Russia." However, he was quick to state the differing views held by Moscow and NATO. He stated: "... in general, in principle, we can now say that we are staying on different tracks, on totally different tracks, and this is not good, and this is disturbing." Although he refused to put a clock on the possibility of action, Peskov mentioned: "... not going to say that we will not deploy any offensive weapons on Ukraine's territory." (Maev Sheehy, "Russia and NATO 'on different tracks' in negotiations, Putin spokesperson says," *POLITICO*, 16 January 2022)

European Parliament President Sassoli dies at 65

On 11 January, European Parliament President David Sassoli died at the age of 65. A former Italian journalist, center-left politician, and television newsreader, Sassoli became the President of the European Parliament in July 2019. The European Council President Charles Michel, in Sassoli's memory, described him as a "sincere and passionate European". He also said: "We already miss his human warmth, his generosity, his friendliness and his smile." Sassoli had been working remotely as he had a severe case of pneumonia in September 2021. He had resumed his political duties in November 2021 but was again hospitalized on 26 December 2021. The European Parliament had already planned to elect a replacement for him earlier this month as his term was coming to an end, and he did not seek a re-election. ("David Sassoli: European Parliament president dies aged 65," *BBC*, 11 January 2022; "David Sassoli: European Parliament President dies at 65, spokesman says," *Euronews*, 11 January 2022)

German and Italian diplomats meet to discuss Russia-Ukraine tensions

On 10 January, Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock met with her Italian counterpart Luigi Di Maio to discuss the EU's approach to Russian actions near the Ukrainian border. Both the countries also decided to cooperate and work together to tackle the pandemic and climate change issues. Baerbock, on the topic of the Russia-Ukraine tensions, said: "One thing is clear: the only way out of the crisis is through dialogue. And it is equally clear that a renewed violation of Ukrainian sovereignty by Russia will have serious consequences." She also spoke about the unrest in Kazakhstan and warned that the country's dependence on Russia and China could have implications on Europe. As reported by *Deutsche Welle*: "Baerbock and Di Maio also visited a coronavirus vaccination center in Rome where doctors and medical staff have been administering jabs seven days a week since January 2021." ("Russia tops agenda on German foreign minister's Italy trip," *Deutsche Welle*. 10 January 2022)

Geneva Talks: Sherman and Ryabkov discuss Ukrainian border tensions

On 10 January, the US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov held talks in Geneva to de-escalate tensions on the Ukrainian border. Concerning the de-escalation of troop build-up by Moscow, Sherman said: "I don't think we know the answer to that. We made it very clear that it's very hard to have constructive, productive and successful diplomacy without de-escalation." Other statements from the US delegation included concerns on whether the Russians would "enter those meetings in good faith," as they felt the Kremlin was looking for chances to declare a failure in negotiations. ("Russia and US hold tense talks on Ukraine crisis," *Deutsche Welle*. 10 January 2022; James Landale, "Ukraine crisis: Why Russia-US talks may prove crucial," *BBC*, 10 January 2022)

EU's Home Affairs Commission proposes legislation against child sexual abuse

On 09 January, EU's Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson proposed to

pass a legislation to detect, report and remove child sexual abuse on digital platforms. According to Johansson, five companies similar to Meta (former Facebook) accounted for 95 percent of the offences. She said: "I will propose legislation in the coming months that will require companies to detect, report, and remove child sexual abuse... during the pandemic, when more perpetrators were at home in isolation, the demand for material depicting child sexual abuse increased, in some EU member countries even by up to 25 percent." The Commissioner has called for cooperation at global and the European level against child sexual abuse. ("EU to step up fight against child abuse content") *Deutsche Welle*, 09 January 2022)

Macron meets von der Leyen; discusses Kazakhstan and Russian military build-up

On 07 January, in a press conference, French President Emmanuel Macron and head of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen expressed their concerns over deadly clashes in Kazakhstan. Von der Leyen called for the end of violence in the region and Macron said that he would monitor the developments in the upcoming days. Apart from this, they also discussed Russian developments in Ukraine. Macron suggested an EU level dialogue with Russia. According to him: "I continue to ask for a dialogue that is frank, exacting and coordinated, because member states don't have the same history with regard to Russia, nor the same geography." ("Macron, EU's von der Leyen call for end to Kazakhstan violence," *France 24*, 07 January 2022; Lisa O' Carroll, "EU must have 'frank, exacting' dialogue with Russia, Macron says," *The Guardian*, 07 January 2022)

France plans to use anti-coercion instrument against Chinese pressure on Lithuania

On 06 January, *POLITICO* reported a senior French government official stated that the bloc's in-process anti-coercion instrument would be preceded by alternative action. The official was speaking in the background of the pressure Lithuania was facing from China due to the Taiwanese embassy in Vilnius. He said: "The anti-coercion

instrument is still under negotiation, but maybe something can be done in advance in support of Lithuania... It is not clear what the determining reason for China's behavior towards this country was. Perhaps it was the Taiwan issue, but there was also the fact that Lithuania left the 17+1 mechanism that China had initiated." The issue which has garnered international responses saw the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken saying: "China is pushing European and American companies to stop building products with components made in Lithuania or risk losing access to the Chinese market... The United States will work with our allies and partners, including Germany, to stand up against intimidation like this." (Jakob Hanke Vela, Giorgio Leali and Stuart Lau, "France eyes quick anti-China action to bail out Lithuania in trade war," *POLITICO*, 06 January 2022)

Poland to call back ambassador to the Czech Republic over "unacceptable comments"

On 06 January, the Polish government announced that it would soon recall the country's ambassador to the Czech Republic. Miroslaw Jasinski will be called back for his comments on the Turow mine which has been a source of tension between Prague and Warsaw. The Polish government spokesperson Piotr Müller tweeted: "Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has decided to start the procedure for recalling the Polish Ambassador to the Czech Republic... Extremely irresponsible statements about the Turow mine are not acceptable." In an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, Jasinski had claimed the tensions originated from "a lack of empathy, a lack of understanding and a lack of willingness to engage in dialogue — above all on the Polish side." (Richard Connor, "Warsaw to recall ambassador to Prague after Poland criticism," *Deutsche Welle*, 07 January 2022)

Ukraine: Normandy format talks to be held on 06 January

On 03 January, Russia's *Interfax* news agency reported that Russia had called for urgent talks with Ukraine, Germany and France. The talks will, thus, be held under the Normandy format on 06 January. Russia

is expected to be represented by its Deputy Head of the Russian Presidential Administration Dmitry Kozak who will also be hosting the talks. Germany will send German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Foreign Policy Advisor Jens Plötner while France is expected to send French President Emmanuel Macron's advisor Emmanuel Bonne. *Deutsche Welle* reported that the Ukrainian representative was still unclear. This will be the first Normandy format talks since 2019. (["Ukraine tensions: Normandy format talks set for Thursday,"](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 03 January 2022)

Borrell to visit east Ukraine to reaffirm the EU's support to the country

On 03 January, EU's diplomat Josep Borrell decided to visit east Ukraine near the line of contact to reaffirm the bloc's support to Kyiv. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba is expected to accompany him on his three-day visit. The EU Commission released a statement that read: "His first foreign trip of this year underscores EU's strong support to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity at a time when the country is confronted with Russian military build-up and hybrid actions." East Ukraine is the centre of conflict between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian separatists. Borrell also mentioned: "any discussion about European security must happen in coordination with and participation of EU." The US and Russian officials are to meet in Geneva on 10 January, while discussions are scheduled to take place between NATO and Russia, later that week. (["Borrell to reiterate EU support to Kyiv during visit to eastern Ukraine as US-Russia talks near,"](#) *Euronews*, 04 January 2022; ["EU's Borrell to Visit Ukraine Frontline Amid Russia Tensions,"](#) *The Moscow Times*, 03 January 2022)

France: New Year's Eve sees Paris at the helm of the EU presidency

On 01 January, France took over the rotating presidency of the EU for the 13th time on the eve of the new year. The EU presidency which rotates every six months amongst the 27-nation bloc, saw France lighting up the EU's blue flag across historical places in Paris. The move of

displaying the EU flag on the day when France was taking over was criticized by right-wing politicians leading to the flag being taken down later. The EU presidency is seen as an advantage to the French President Emmanuel Macron who is up for elections in April 2022. In a statement, Macron said: "This agenda for a sovereign Europe will be accelerated with the French Presidency. Europe must rise to the major economic, educational, migration and military challenges." Overall, France aims to bring a new model of growth in Europe which includes innovation, job creation and job security to compete internationally and adopt climate harm reduction initiatives. (["France takes over EU presidency with push for 'strategic autonomy,'"](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 01 January 2022; ["EU flag removed from Arc de Triomphe after right-wing outrage,"](#) *BBC*, 02 January 2022)

BREXIT

Truss and Coveney meet to discuss Northern Ireland

On 07 January, UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and Ireland's Foreign Affairs Minister Simon Coveney met to discuss the issues of the BREXIT arrangements in Northern Ireland. They also discussed their relationship with the EU and the UN security matters with regard to the crisis in Ukraine and Kazakhstan. An Irish government source stated: "The minister for foreign affairs and the foreign secretary have previously worked together in the agriculture brief, so it was good to have the opportunity early in the new year to meet in person. They had a good and friendly discussion on all matters in their current brief, including Brexit in Northern Ireland, as well as matters of the UN security council." The two ministers had earlier met in 2014 when they both were responsible for their countries' agricultural ministries. The discussion comes before the Stormont elections that are to be held in May 2022. (Lisa O'Carroll, ["UK and Irish foreign secretaries meet over Northern Ireland Brexit impasse,"](#) *The Guardian*, 07 January 2022)

COVID-19

Denmark announces to remove COVID-19 restrictions

On 26 January, Denmark Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced the removal of all the existing COVID-19 restrictions, despite increasing Omicron cases. Till now 46,000 new cases have been recorded, but the restrictions are set to be put off from 01 February. The Health Minister has also agreed on the removal of the restrictions stating the drive for revaccination is at a good rate. Overall, 82 per cent of the Denmark population stand fully vaccinated. (Thibault Spirlet "[Denmark becomes first EU country to scrap all COVID-19 restrictions](#)," *POLITICO*, 26 January 2022)

Belgium: Protests against COVID-19 measures near EU institutions in Brussels

On 23 January, Belgium experienced violent protests against COVID-19 restrictions on the streets of the Brussels. The capital saw 50,000 people taking to the streets to protest against the measures; the demonstrations were organized by a network involving Europeans United for Freedom and other groups. The police used tear gas and water cannons to control the protestors near the EU institutional area as protestors threw objects at the officers and even charged at them. The demonstrators lit an escalator on fire and shattered the exterior glass of the European External Action Service office. Three officers and 12 protestors were injured while 70 people were detained. Chairman of Europeans United for Freedom group Tom Meert said: "We do not deny that there are diseases. Our arguments would be the same in the case of a natural disaster or any other crisis: a country's policies must be deliberate and founded on the principles of the democratic rule of law." (Pietro Lombardi, "[Rioters fight Brussels police, smash headquarters of EU foreign service](#)," *POLITICO*, 23 January 2022; Johnny Cotton, "[Belgian police fire water cannon, tear gas during COVID curbs protest](#)," *Reuters*, 24 January 2022)

Austria: Vaccine mandate passed by Parliament

On 20 January, Austria became the first EU country to legislate a vaccine mandate. The

law which will come into effect in February, saw the Austrian parliament successfully passing it. The mandate requires all adults to be inoculated against COVID-19. Those denying the vaccinations will be fined up to EUR 3,600 from mid-March. Pregnant women and individuals with health conditions hindering them from being vaccinated will be excused from the mandate and the subsequent fine.

Chancellor Karl Nehammer commented on the mandate: "Vaccination is an opportunity for our society to achieve lasting and continuous freedom, because the virus cannot restrict us any further."

("Coronavirus digest: Austria becomes first EU country to pass vaccine mandate,"

Deutsche Welle, 20 January 2022;

"[Coronavirus: Austrian parliament approves mandatory vaccination order](#)," *BBC*, 21 January 2022)

The Netherlands: Cultural sector carries out creative protests in museums and concert halls

On 19 January, the culture sector in the Netherlands protested against the COVID-19 rules. While the cultural centers were asked to remain closed due to the fear of the spread of infection by the government, salons and gyms were allowed to stay open during the lockdown. This move prompted the cultural sector to open up museums and concert halls, where a part of the area was allotted for haircuts, yoga sessions, and manicures. Meanwhile, artists also performed Symphony in some historic venues such as the Concertgebouw and the Van Gogh Museum. According to the Van Gogh Museum Director Emilie Gordenker: "I understand that the government has opened gyms but... you need a mental gym, too, and a museum is a place where people are increasingly coming to find a little depth or reason for their life." ("[Dutch museums open as salons to protest COVID rules](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 January 2022)

Germany: 70,000 demonstrators protest against vaccine mandate and restrictions

On 17 January, 70,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Germany to protest against COVID-19 measures in the country. Protestors brandished signs and banners to

show their disapproval of the vaccine mandate and the new measures implemented to tackle the rising cases of Omicron. Large police contingents were present at the locations as counter-demonstrations also took place. The regions of Rostock and Bautzen saw police interventions as protests were either unregistered or failed to abide by health and safety requirements. Although other locations like Thuringia and Bavaria were comparatively peaceful, they saw people demonstrating in numbers of 21,000 and 14,000 respectively. Given the situation, German Health Minister Karl Lauterbach suggested a lockdown while he also commented on the vaccine mandate and said: "I would prefer that we protect [the unvaccinated] with a general obligation to be vaccinated, rather than with restrictions for everybody in the spring." ("Over 70,000 attend German protests against COVID measures," *Deutsche Welle*, 18 January 2022)

WHO Director predicts half of Europe to be infected in next six weeks

On 12 January, the WHO issued a warning that half of Europe would probably be affected by the new COVID-19 variant Omicron between six to eight weeks. The projection was done based on the number of new cases reported in Europe during the first week of 2022. According to the WHO Regional Director Dr Hans Kluge: "How each country now responds must be informed by its epidemiological situation, available resources, vaccination uptake status and socio-economic context." Although the new variant is considered less threatening, the infection spread rate is high and can infect those even fully vaccinated. ("Covid: Half of Europe to be infected with Omicron within weeks – WHO," *BBC*, 12 January 2022)

Europe sees a wave of COVID-19 protests

On 09 January, a wave of COVID-19 protests was witnessed in Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany and Austria. The protests were sparked due to the new rules established by governments mandating its citizens to take booster shots. Among the EU countries, Austria showed the highest participation with more than 40,000 people gathering

against compulsory vaccinations. The Czech Republic's new government has even considered scrapping the vaccine mandate for those above the age of 60 to curb protests. Among all the European countries, Germany is experiencing the greatest number of protests ranging across various cities including Hamburg, Frankfurt, Düsseldorf and Koblenz. ("Thousands protest COVID curbs in Europe amid omicron surge," *Deutsche Welle*, 09 January 2022)

France: New COVID-19 rule sparks protests

On 08 January, COVID-19 protests were held by anti-vaxxers across France against President Emmanuel Macron's warning to stiffen the COVID-19 rules. The protests witnessed more than 100,000 people marching against the new restriction. The French government has proposed a law, where the COVID-19 negative test is to be replaced by mandatory vaccine certificates which will be the token of access for entry into restaurants, theaters and bars. The protestor who took part in the march expressed that their freedom had been taken away and that they were being treated unequally. ("We'll piss you off: French anti-vaccine protesters rally against Macron," *The Guardian*, 08 January 2022)

Serbia: Tennis player Novak Djokovic receives backlash over attempted vaccine exemption

On 06 January, Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic was denied entry to Australia. It was said that the tennis player was granted a medical exemption by the Victoria state and event organizers. Despite the exemption to play the Australian Open, the player's visa was cancelled. The Australian border officials reported that Djokovic's failure to provide valid evidence to enter Australia after coming from Dubai would keep him in the immigration detention hotel. The issue has caused irritation amongst tennis supporters and Djokovic's family. His supporters have blamed Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison for reversing his decision from supporting the exemption to not, and is accused of politicizing. According to Morrison: "If that

evidence is insufficient, then he won't be treated any differently to anyone else, and he'll be on the next plane home." ("Novak Djokovic: Australia cancels top tennis player's visa," *BBC*, 06 January 2022; "Novak Djokovic denied entry to Australia, requests injunction," *Deutsche Welle*, 02 January 2022)

France: Macron says unvaccinated will be "hassled", restricted from public life

On 05 January, French President Emmanuel Macron said: "I really want to hassle them, and we will continue to do this - to the end," as he warned the unvaccinated people in the country that he would pester them until they were vaccinated. He added: "I won't send [unvaccinated people] to prison...So we need to tell them, from 15 January, you will no longer be able to go to the restaurant. You will no longer be able to go for a coffee, you will no longer be able to go to the theater. You will no longer be able to go to the cinema." His comments sparked criticism from the opposition as the word "emmerder" that he used has a vulgar connotation in French implying "to annoy something". France has the highest vaccination rates and has inoculated at least 90 percent of its population. On 04 January, France reported 271,686 cases, which is the highest rise in daily cases since the pandemic's start. ("Covid: President Macron warns he will 'hassle' France's unvaccinated," *BBC*, 05 January 2022; Jon Henley, "Macron declares his Covid strategy is to 'piss off' the unvaccinated," *The Guardian*, 04 January 2022)

France: French MP's receive threats for law on "vaccine pass"

On 04 January, French Members of Parliament (MP) received death threats as the government sought to legislate a "vaccine pass" law. The vaccine pass would be used as a means to identify unvaccinated people and bar them from much of public life in France. As reported by the *BBC*: "The government is seeking to pass a law that would require people to show proof of vaccination to access public venues and transport with some exceptions." On 02 January, center-right party member Agnès Firmin Le Bodo received death threats as

she supported the vaccination pass. Another MP, Naïma Moutchou received similar threats in an email that she shared on Twitter. Assessing the situation, the lower house of the parliament suspended debates on the law and the next date for the discussion is yet to be decided. France has been very strict with COVID-19 regulations, and an individual using a fake vaccine pass could be sentenced to five years in prison with a fine of EUR 75,000. ("Covid-19: French MPs get death threats over support for vaccine pass," *BBC*, 03 January 2022; "French lawmakers suspend fractious vaccine pass debate in setback for government," *France24*, 04 December 2022)

France: New variant discovered in southern France and the rising COVID-19 cases in Europe

On 03 January, scientists in the country raised concerns about "the emergence of a new variant" in the southern part of France. As reported by *The Daily Express*, 12 patients tested positive for COVID-19 and indicated "an atypical combination". IHU Mediterranee Infection in Marseille discovered the variation, and the experts named the new variant B.1.640.2. COVID-19 cases have recently surged all across Europe due to the emergence of the new Omicron variant. Over the last few days, the UK registered 189,846 new cases, while Italy saw 98,030 new cases. As a result, countries like France, Germany and Greece have started implementing tighter restrictions such as more social distancing regulations and mandatory masking. (Callum Hoare, "Covid warning as new variant with '46 mutations' infects 12 in southern France," *The Daily Express*, 03 January 2022; "COVID in Europe: UK health service under strain, PM says," *Euronews*, 03 January 2022)

The Netherlands: Amsterdam witnesses protests against pandemic restrictions

On 02 January, Amsterdam witnessed mass protests against the restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of coronavirus. A huge number of people gathered at the center of the city engaging in clashes with riot police as the latter tried to clear the place. The

signboards carried by the protestors varied from, "It's not about a virus, it's about control" to "Trump 2021". This showed the difference in demands amongst the protestors. Although the 02 January protests were banned, the local government was aware of the protestors' plan to cause violence. It later issued an order for people to exit the area. ("Amsterdam: Thousands protest COVID measures despite ban on gatherings," *Deutsche Welle*, 02 January 2022)

ECONOMY

Russia-Ukraine tensions to cause high inflation for an extended period

On 25 January, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) released a statement that claimed the escalated conflict between Russia and Ukraine would lead to higher inflation for an extended period. IMF's Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath said the situation was different from the Crimean annexation which saw a fall in energy prices and a low demand for shale gas. However, Gopinath maintained that "if this conflict were to happen, you would see an increase in energy prices". The 2015 sanctions imposed on Russia contracted its economy by 3.7 per cent, while currently, it is aimed to grow at 2.8 per cent without the forecast of a military conflict. As reported by *Reuters*: "Gopinath told...that an escalation of the conflict and potential Western sanctions on Russia would likely push oil and natural gas prices higher, driving energy costs higher for many countries in the world." (Andrea Shalal and David Lawder, "Escalated Russia-Ukraine conflict would keep inflation higher longer - IMF," *Reuters*, 26 January 2022)

Ukraine: Global stock markets fall sharply following NATO announcement of military reinforcements

On 24 January, global stock markets fell steeply following a NATO announcement of additional forces being reinforced along its eastern flank. European markets saw a decline of 3.8 per cent which is considered to be the lowest since October 2021, as well as the biggest one-day decline in 18 months. While volatility rose, the UK's blue-chip

index fell by 197 points, losing GBP 53 billion off its share index. Meanwhile, cryptocurrencies were affected by the sell-off in risk as bitcoin fell to a six-month low of USD 33,000. An Equiti Capital market analyst commented on the situation: "Traders continue to be in selling mode as fears mount surrounding the Russia-Ukraine situation." (Graeme Wearden, "Global stock markets dive as fears of Ukraine conflict rattle investors," *The Guardian*, 24 January 2022)

ENERGY

Austria: Government prepares EUR 1.7 billion energy package

On 28 January, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer declared that the government would initiate a EUR 1.7 billion package of measures to support households deal with the hike in the energy prices. During a press conference, Nehammer said: "These are many individual steps that will be taken. The decisive issue is that these 1.7 billion (euros) are transferred to people quickly and they are, from our point of view, a first step. We are following developments very closely." According to the national electricity and gas regulator E-Control, 60 per cent of Austrian power is generated via hydroelectricity and 14 per cent off natural gas. Energy prices in Europe have been soaring since fears of Russia invading Ukraine began. ("Austria plans 1.7 billion euro package to cushion energy price rises," *Reuters*, 28 January 2022)

Ukraine: Australia to provide Europe with LNG if Russia cuts gas supply

On 25 January, the Australian Resources Minister Keith Pitt stated that the country was "ready to assist with any request for further supplies" amid concerns of European reliance on Russian gas whilst the conflict. Pitt added: "This shows how important Australian resources are to energy supplies around the world." A senior US official stated that alternative LNG requirements were being considered "whether it's from the United States or from Australia or from other places". Russia is said to have already reduced the gas flow to 50m cubic metres per day from the

previous 100m cubic metres. Meanwhile, the Russian ambassador to Australia Alexey Pavlovsky commented on the troop buildup: "These troops are not a threat, they are a warning – a warning to Ukraine's rulers not to attempt any reckless military adventures." (Daniel Hurst, "[Australia could send extra gas to Europe as Russia cuts supplies due to Ukraine tensions](#)," *The Guardian*, 26 January 2022)

Russia's Novak states energy crisis to be the EU's fault

On 15 January, TASS reported Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak accusing the EU of having created the region's energy crisis. He was cited by *POLITICO* as saying: "the short-sighted policy of the European Union and the European Commission, which for many years has deliberately moved away from long-term contracts, shifted its energy sector toward reducing dependence on by switching from long-term contracts to spot ones." Novak added that Moscow had completed its long-term contracts with the bloc and could not be blamed for orchestrating the present energy crisis. He added: "We delivered much more to Germany, to Turkey, to other countries that chose their volumes... Incorrect planning, short-term energy policy is a headache for European politicians, which they are trying to pass on to others." (Karl Mathiesen, "[Russia says 'short-sighted' EU has only itself to blame for energy crisis](#)," *POLITICO*, 15 January 2022)

US Senate fails to pass Nord Stream 2 sanctions bill

On 13 January, the US Senate failed to pass a bill to impose sanctions on Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. As reported by *Reuters*: "The tally was 55 in favor and 44 against the bill that needed 60 votes to pass, a major hurdle in the 50-50 Senate. The vote spanned nearly seven hours as Majority Leader Chuck Schumer considered options on voting rights legislation." On the failure of not being able to pass the sanctions, Republican Senator Ted Cruz said: "Only immediately imposing sanctions can change Putin's calculation, stop a Ukrainian invasion, and lift the existential

threat posed by Nord Stream 2." The recent bill was part of a more extensive set of White House-backed sanctions against Russia that were to be implemented if Moscow decided to invade Ukraine. On 12 January, other possible sanctions discussed by the Senate included those on Russian military heads, Russian President Vladimir Putin, political leaders, and financial institutions. (Timothy Gardner and Richard Cowan, "[Cruz's Nord Stream 2 sanctions bill fails in US Senate](#)," *Reuters*, 13 January 2022; Callie Patteson, "[Senate to debate dueling Russia sanctions in case of Ukraine invasion](#)," *New York Post*, 12 January 2022)

IEA head claims Russia to have caused European energy crisis

On 12 January, the Executive Director of the International Energy Agency (IEA) Fatih Birol blamed Russia for creating an energy crisis in Europe. *The Guardian* cited Birol speaking to reporters, saying: "We believe there are strong elements of tightness in the European gas market due to Russia's behaviour. I would note that today's low Russian gas flows to Europe coincide with heightened geopolitical tensions over Ukraine." This is considered to be the most incriminating statement the agency has released against the Kremlin's energy policy. Birol added: "The current storage deficit in the European Union is largely due to Gazprom. The low levels of storage in company's EU-based facilities account for half of the EU storage deficit although Gazprom facilities only constitute 10 percent of the EU's total storage capacity." (Jillian Ambrose, "[Russia is orchestrating Europe's gas crisis, says energy agency boss](#)," *The Guardian*, 12 January 2022)

Kosovo: Waning electricity crisis leads to ban on crypto-mining

On 06 January, the government of Kosovo banned the mining of cryptocurrencies to cut down the electricity usage given the waning energy crisis. It ordered security services to track down the sources of cryptocurrency mining and shut it down. The reason for the energy shortage is attributed to the closure of the largest coal-fired power plant due to technical issues. This led to the government importing

electricity at high prices. With Europe going through an energy crisis and various member countries taking necessary measures, Kosovo has opted to ban cryptocurrency mining. ("[Kosovo bans cryptocurrency mining after blackouts](#)," *BBC*, 05 January 2021)

Nord Stream 2: Putin comments on pipelines' progress

On 29 December, Russian President Vladimir Putin commented on the progress of the Nord Stream 2, saying: "Today the procedure of filling the second pipe of Nord Stream 2 with gas should be completed. The first string was filled in October... This new route will certainly serve to stabilize prices on the European market." Meanwhile Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller stated: "The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is ready for operation." The pipeline, completed in September 2021, is yet to receive approval from Berlin and Brussels. ("[Russia says Nord Stream 2 loaded with gas, no alternatives needed](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 29 December 2021)

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Research article accounts for significance of rainy days in economic impact of climate change analyses

On 12 January, *POLITICO* reported a research article published in the journal *Nature* titled "The effect of rainfall changes on economic production". The article commented on how scientists had failed to account for rainy days when analyzing the economic impact of climate change. One of the article authors and Deputy Head of the Complexity Department at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research Leonie Wenz said: "More rainy days: that's bad for the economy. Droughts and extreme rainfall events and the number of wet days ... are all changing due to climate change." A survey conducted in association with the research estimated that 77 countries in 1,554 regions were inept at dealing with varying weather. *POLITICO* cited the example of Spain where the "second-worst summer storm of the past 100 years" had "paralyzed the city, flooding tunnels, interrupting metro and regional train

services and clogging highways with traffic jams caused by weather-related accidents". (Karl Mathiesen and Aitor Hernández-Morales, "The rain in Spain causes financial pain," *POLITICO*, 12 January 2022)

EU satellite data reveals last septennium to be the hottest

On 10 January, the EU's satellite system revealed new data that the last seven years had been the hottest since the beginning of its record-keeping. The EU's Earth observation program Copernicus Climate Change Service said 2021 was the fifth warmest year and many regions had crossed record-breaking temperatures. The Program Director Carlo Buontempo said: "These events are a stark reminder of the need to change our ways, take decisive and effective steps toward a sustainable society, and work towards reducing net carbon emissions." The summer of 2021 was Europe's warmest, with wildfires that burnt almost entire towns to the ground affecting the wildlife and taking human casualties. The increase in warming gases is another contributing factor to climate change. Director of the Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service Vincent-Henri Peuch commented on the same, saying: "The increasing concentrations of these gases showed no signs of slowing down." Scientists have also warned of the increase in methane levels which is more harmful to the Earth's atmosphere. (Georgina Rannard, "[Past seven years hottest on record - EU satellite data](#)," *BBC*, 10 January 2022)

The Czech Republic: Push to phase out coal by 2033

On 07 January, the new centre-right government of the Czech Republic released a programme deciding to phase out the use of coal by 2033. The government's stand on the issue aligns with its support for nuclear and gas energy as part of its future energy investments. The programme further said: "We will create conditions for an energy transformation and the development of coal regions so that a shift from coal will be possible by 2033." In 2020, the Czech Republic used 43 percent of coal for its energy generation while only 37 percent was produced via nuclear plants. The

country's dependence on coal has made the government push towards cleaner sources of energy. As reported by *Reuters*: "The Czech Republic had pushed for nuclear power and gas to be included in the European Union's hotly-debated green investment plan, whose proposed rules were circulated on the last day of 2021." (["New Czech government sees coal exit by 2033, backs nuclear power," Reuters, 07 January 2022](#))

Serbia: Renewed protests against lithium mining plans in the country

On 03 January, hundreds of protesters in Serbia's Novi Sad region took to the streets and blocked roads in multiple locations, demanding the government to stop lithium mining plans. One of the protest leaders Aleksandar Jovanovic said: "They (the government) could only implement this project with police and the army. There's nothing to talk about any more, this agony has to stop." The protestors took to the streets as they were concerned about the environmental ramifications of the mine to the lithium-rich western Serbia. Protestors threatened more action unless the company Rio Tinto's application was rejected. The Balkan countries have become more environmentally aware due to the rising problems of waste management, as well as air and water pollution. The Serbian protestors were worried about their homes and lands as they would be relocated if the mines were opened. (["Hundreds block roads in Serbia against lithium mining plans," The Washington Post, 04 January 2022](#); Stefan Goranovic, ["Hundreds of protesters in Serbia call for an end to lithium mine plan," Euronews, 04 January 2022](#))

Denmark: Domestic flights to be fossil fuel-free by 2030

On 02 January, the Government of Denmark announced its goal to eliminate the use of fossil fuels in its domestic flights by 2030. It aims to cut down the carbon emissions by 70 percent in comparison to the 1990 levels. The plan to achieve the goal is through developing hydrogen-fuelled planes, where the fuels are expected to be produced from renewable energy. An

unclear factor is that, whether the said technology will be cost-effective to achieve it by 2030. According to Denmark Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen: "When other countries in the world are too slow, then Denmark must take the lead and raise the bar even more." Apart from Denmark, countries like Sweden and France have also drafted similar plans to cut down fossil fuel usage. (["Denmark to make domestic flights fossil fuel free by 2030," BBC, 02 January 2021](#))

Germany: EU proposal to label gas and nuclear power as 'green' garners criticism

On 02 January, the EU announced its plans to categorize certain gas and nuclear energy as green. The proposal arose from the pledge the bloc has taken to maintain the temperatures within 1.5C. Meanwhile, Germany, which considers nuclear power to be polluting, has shut down most of its major reactors. The EU looks at gas and nuclear energy as a way to shift to cleaner power. Germany's Environmental Minister Svenja Schulze criticized the move by calling the proposal "absolutely wrong". A significant element of the proposal is that it approves only highly standardized gas and nuclear plants as green. However, if the majority of the EU members back the proposal, it will become a law. In such a scenario Germany will have to stand out, maybe along with a few other countries like Belgium. (["EU plans to label gas and nuclear energy 'green' prompt row," BBC, 02 January 2022](#))

Spain: Record-breaking temperatures experienced across the country

On 31 December, Spain experienced record-breaking temperatures of 24 degree Celsius in the lower areas of the country while the Alps registered temperatures of 15 degrees Celsius. A meteorologist Luca Mercalli said: "At the moment it is about 15C in areas of the Alps at an altitude of 1,600 metres and is not hitting zero beneath 4,000 metres. It hasn't even been freezing at night – the temperature has not dropped below 10 degrees, and this is very unusual." A member of the State Meteorological Agency AEMET Rubén del Campo said: "These are temperatures that you would normally see

in the month of April." Spain's climatic conditions are said to be influenced by the climate crisis and global heating. Campo further talked about the abnormal climatic conditions as Spain had experienced extreme temperatures that ranged from minus 25 degrees Celsius to 30 degrees Celsius in 2021. (Angela Giuffrida and Ashifa Kassam, "[24C in Spain, 15C in the Alps: oddly warm end to 2021 in parts of Europe](#)," *The Guardian*, 31 December 2021)

GENDER

Poland: Pregnant woman succumbs to death after doctors refuse abortion

On 25 January, *The Guardian* reported that a Polish woman, referred to as Agnieszka T, had died after doctors refused to terminate her pregnancy despite the foetus's heartbeat stopping. On 21 December 2021, Agnieszka was admitted to the Blessed Virgin Mary hospital in Poland's Częstochowa during the first trimester of a twin pregnancy. Within two days, the first foetus died in the womb; however, the doctors refused to remove it, citing the Polish legislation on abortion. This led to the quick deterioration of her health. The pregnancy was terminated on 31 December 2021 after the heartbeat of the second twin stopped. Agnieszka's family has blamed the Polish government for having "blood on their hands". Poland's already restrictive abortion laws were further tightened in 2021, making it one of the most repressive in Europe. (Weronika Strzyżyńska, "[Polish state has 'blood on its hands' after death of woman refused an abortion](#)," *The Guardian*, 26 January 2022)

France: Parliament adopts law banning gay conversion therapy

On 25 January, the French Parliament approved a law banning gay conversion therapy in the country. The bill, passed by 142 Members of Parliament with no opposition, had in October 2021 received support from the French Assembly to be eventually passed by the senators in December 2021. Under the new law, anyone attempting to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of the LGBTQ+ people would face up to three years imprisonment

along with a EUR 45,000 fine depending on the situation and the people involved. MP of the En Marche party Laurence Vanceunebrock said: "We are sending out a strong signal because we are formally condemning all those who consider a change of sex or identity as an illness." ("[French MPs approve law banning so-called gay conversion therapy](#)," *Euronews*, 25 January 2022)

The Vatican City: Pope Francis encourages women's role in the diocese

On 23 January, Pope Francis recognized the role of women in Catholic ministries by conferring them with the functions of lector and catechist. The conferring happened at a mass in St. Peter's Basilica. *Reuters* reported: "The ministries of lector and acolyte existed before but were officially reserved to men. Francis instituted the ministry of the catechist last year." Pope Francis' actions came as a reference for change as, over the years, conservatives have used rules and rigid regulations to block women in their dioceses and from taking up those roles. However, the Vatican also emphasized that this would not lead to women becoming priests and justified it by saying that Jesus only chose men as his apostles. Pope Francis has played a vital role in appointing women to senior positions in the Vatican departments. Pope Francis' initiative has also encouraged women's role in the Amazon region where there is a shortage of priests. (Philip Pullella, "[Pope confers lay ministries on women, formalising recognition of roles](#)," *Reuters*, 23 January 2022)

Pope Francis pledges justice for victims abused during Benedict XVI papacy

On 21 January, Pope Francis promised justice to the victims who suffered sexual abuse in the Catholic Church that occurred between 1970 and 1980. The report highlighted sexual abuse in the Munich diocese that criticized his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI's handling of several abuse cases when he was archbishop. Pope Francis said: "The church, with God's help, is carrying out the commitment with firm determination to do justice to the victims of abuse by its members, applying with

particular attention and rigor to the canonical legislation envisaged." The report's authors suggested that the cardinal's mishandling of the cases amounted to misconduct, and the prosecutors in Munich are now examining 42 cases to determine if there was wrongdoing by the church. A spokesperson for German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that the report "clearly and shockingly shows once again the scale of the abuse and the breaches of duty by church dignitaries". (["Pope Francis pledges justice for abuse victims after report faults Benedict XVI," Euronews, 21 January 2022](#))

France: Rising cases of femicide under Macron's Presidency

On 04 January, feminist groups in France called on the government for failing to protect women against domestic violence and raised concerns about the increasing atrocities against women. As reported by *Deutsche Welle*: "...three women were found dead in different parts of the country on New Year's Day, in suspected domestic violence attacks." Prime Minister Jean Castex was concerned about the recent murders and raised the issue in the Parliament stating: "There were more than 100 femicides in 2021 and already since the start of the year three new murders committed in scandalous conditions." France has one of the highest femicides per capita, where at least one woman is killed every three days. Two feminist groups *Féminicides Par Compagnons ou Ex* and *#NousToutes* in France commented on the issue saying they denounced "the silence of Emmanuel Macron and the government in the face of sexist and sexual violence in France". The government had taken measures to combat femicide by setting up sensitivity training for police officers and a 24/7 helpline, but the recent murders have questioned its effectiveness. (["France vows action on femicide after 3 more women killed," Deutsche Welle, 04 January 2022](#); Josephine Joly, ["Feminist groups denounce French government's 'silence' after New Year's Day femicides," Euronews, 04 January 2022](#))

MIGRATION

Italy: Seven migrants dead and 280 migrants rescued in Tunisian waters

On 25 January, the Italian coastguard reported the death of seven migrants who were trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea in freezing conditions. Three migrants were found dead, and four had died due to hypothermia while being transported to the Greek island of Lampedusa. Another 280 migrants were also rescued as they were on board a 20-metre wooden boat in Tunisian waters when they made a distress call. The rough sea conditions delayed the search of the boat for several hours. Most of the migrants on board were of Egyptian and Bangladeshi origin. The NGO Alarm Phone who had informed the authorities about the boat commented on the issue, saying: "Their deaths could have been prevented." (["7 migrants die, 280 rescued off Italian island of Lampedusa," The Washington Post, 25 January 2022](#); ["Seven migrants die and 280 more rescued off Italian island of Lampedusa," Euronews, 25 January 2022](#))

Doctors Without Borders leaves Poland-Belarus border

On 06 January, the medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) stated that it had withdrawn its medical staff from the Belarus-Poland border. MSF's Emergency Coordinator for Poland and Lithuania Frauke Ossig said: "Since October, MSF has repeatedly requested access to the restricted area and the border guard posts in Poland, but without success... We know that there are still people crossing the border and hiding in the forest, in need of support, but while we are committed to assisting people on the move wherever they may be, we have not been able to reach them in Poland." The lack of access to the region owes to the state of emergency imposed by the Polish Interior Ministry since 01 December 2021. (["Medics leave Poland-Belarus border without reaching migrants," Deutsche Welle, 06 January 2022](#))

Spain: Walking Borders reports 4,404 migrants died at sea in 2021

On 03 January, the NGO Caminando Fronteras (Walking Borders) released a report concluding that the refugee attempts to reach Spain took 4,404 lives, 205 of whom are children. The death toll is said to be the highest since 2015, when they began data tracking. The NGO's founder Helena Maleno commented on the report and said: "It's horrible... These are the worst figures we've seen since we began keeping count in 2007." The reason for the increased deaths were attributed to the deviation of the migrants to the Canary Islands route which is extremely dangerous since it has stronger currents and is longer. According to the NGO's data until 28 December 2021, 22,200 migrants landed on the Canary Islands. The NGO also called on Spain's government to respond to the worsening situation. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) had earlier termed 2021 to be the "deadliest for migration routes to and within Europe" since 2018. (Ashifa Kassam, "[Death toll of refugees attempting to reach Spain doubles in 2021](#)," *The Guardian*, 03 January 2022; "[Death toll of migrants trying to reach Spain doubles in 2021](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 03 January 2022; "[4,400 migrants lost at sea bound for Spain in 2021, double previous year](#)," *Reuters*, 04 January 2022)

Report claims more than 28,000 migrants crossed English Channel in 2021

On 04 January, the *PA* news agency declared that more than 28,000 migrants had crossed the English Channel from France to the UK in 2021. The statistics were concluded based on the agency's study of government data. The exact figure of 28,395 people (based on statistics by *France24*), is reported to be three times of what was recorded in 2020. November 2021 saw the highest number of migrants crossing the Channel into the UK. This was attributed to the fact that larger boats were used instead of the usual dinghies. The migration situation has been troubling both the British and French governments, putting at stake their bilateral relations. The UK's Nationality and Borders bill is being reviewed by the parliament; the passing of the bill would legally permit repatriation of

those asylum seekers who have crossed the "safe third countries". UK Home Office Minister Tom Pursglove commented on the bill, stating: (the government was) making the tough decisions to end the overt exploitation of our laws... The sooner the House of Lords approves the Nationality and Borders Bill, the sooner these reforms will be delivered." ("[Record number of migrants crossed Channel from France to UK last year, says report](#)," *France24*, 04 January 2022; "[Channel migrants: Crossing numbers in 2021 triple 2020's figure](#)," *BBC*, 04 January 2022)

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

EU General Court voids antitrust fine imposed on Intel

On 26 January, the EU General Court invalidated a European Commission fine of EUR 1.06 billion that was imposed on the US tech giant Intel citing antitrust matters. According to the ruling, the court maintained that the findings of the Commission were incomplete and failed to prove that Intel had given discounts to customers that accounted for anti-competitive effects. Intel had reportedly pushed other competitors out of the market. The Commission can further appeal to the European Court of Justice (ECJ). This is the second time the case is being examined; earlier, the ECJ had ordered a further study on the case citing a legal error. The EUR 1.06 billion fine was the fourth-largest penalty forwarded by the bloc's antitrust regulator. Google has been similarly fined and is now appealing against the same. ([EU court annuls €1 billion Intel antitrust fine](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 26 January 2022)

Ukraine: Belarusian railway hacked by 'Cyberpartisans' to deter Russian troops

On 25 January, Belarusian hacktivist group "Cyberpartisans" have claimed that the state-run railway's computer system has been hacked in an attempt to deter Russian forces from travelling to Ukraine. According to *The Guardian*, they have threatened to "paralyse trains". Staunch critics of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, the group aims to free political prisoners while stopping Belarusian

soldiers from “dying for this meaningless war”. They have called on the government to stop acting as a “staging ground,” saying: “We don’t want Russian soldiers in Belarus since it compromises the sovereignty of the country and puts it in danger of occupation. It also pulls Belarus into a war with Ukraine.” (Andrew Roth, [“Cyberpartisans' hack Belarusian railway to disrupt Russian buildup,” Deutsche Welle, 25 January 2022](#))

Cyberattack on Red Cross leaves almost half a million vulnerable

On 19 January, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva announced that they had been hacked and the hackers gained access to information about 515,000 people. ICRC's Director General Robert Mardini said: "An attack on the data of people ICRC who are missing makes the anguish and suffering for families even more difficult to endure...We are all appalled and perplexed that this humanitarian information would be targeted and compromised." His comments came after the hackers accessed sensitive information on people who had fled conflicts, migrated, were missing, or in detention. ICRC's spokesperson Crystal Wells issued an appeal, saying: "Your actions could potentially cause yet more harm and pain to those who have already endured untold suffering...Please do the right thing. Do not share, sell, leak, or otherwise use this data." ([“Red Cross' cyber attack exposes data of 515,000 vulnerable people,” Euronews, 21 January 2022; “Hacking attack on Red Cross exposes data of 515,000 vulnerable people,” The Guardian, 19 January 2022](#))

Telegram refuses to cooperate over investigation of a death threat post on its app

On 19 January, Germany warned Telegram of imposing tougher rules to restrict its operations. Recently, members of Germany's Querdenker protest movement, also called the “lateral thinkers,” posted a death threat to Manuela Schwesig via the Telegram messaging app. Schwesig is the Premier of the eastern state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. The

caption of the post read: “She will be taken away ... either by a patrol car or by a hearse, but she will be taken away.” German authorities were not able to proceed with their investigation as Telegram refused to cooperate. This act has pushed the German government to threaten the app on imposing fine and tougher measures. ([“Germany takes on Telegram to fight extremism,” Deutsche Welle, 19 January 2022](#))

Ukraine: Russia blamed of massive cyberattack

On 16 January, following the massive cyberattack that hit the country, Ukraine's Digital Development Ministry released a statement that read: “All evidence points to the fact that Russia is behind the cyberattack. Moscow continues to wage a hybrid war and is actively building up its forces in the information and cyberspaces.” The ministry also reassured the citizens of their personal data being unaffected and safe. The statement further read: “... not only intimidate society but also destabilize the situation in Ukraine by stopping the work of the public sector and undermining Ukrainians' trust in the government.” (Zia Weise, [“Ukraine blames Russia for cyberattack against government websites,” POLITICO, 16 January 2022](#))

Ukraine: Microsoft discovers disguised malware planted in Ukrainian government computers

On 15 January, Microsoft security specialists found disguised malware in many Ukrainian government computers capable of destroying data at the command of the hacker group. The detection comes after the recent cyber-attack of Ukrainian government sites of which Russia is suspected to be the culprit. As per Microsoft’s blog post: “The malware, which is designed to look like ransomware but lacking a ransom recovery mechanism, is intended to be destructive and designed to render targeted devices inoperable rather than to obtain a ransom.” ([“Ukraine: Microsoft reports destructive malware after cyberattack,” Deutsche Welle, 16 January 2022](#))

Poland: Defense Ministry says military data leak not a concern

On 14 January, Poland's Defense Ministry stated that the massive military leak was not harmful as the database only contained publicly available information. The Ministry released a statement, saying: "We want to stress that the publication of the data does not mean any danger to the state's security or to the functioning of Poland's Armed Forces." The Ministry also mentioned that there was no IT system security breach and blamed it on the negligence of an employee. However, as cited by *Deutsche Welle*:

"Opposition parties... weren't convinced and demanded Defense Minister Mariusz Błaszczak's resignation." Furthermore, according to a Polish web portal Onet.pl, the Russians and the Chinese had downloaded the information as the data mentioned details on equipment purchased by Poland from countries like Germany, Israel, and the US. ("Poland: huge military data leak has only public information," *The Washington Post*, 14 January 2022; "Poland's military not concerned about database leak," *Deutsche Welle*, 14 January 2022)

Ukraine: The US and NATO accuses Russia on the recent cyber-attack

On 14 January, 70 government websites in Ukraine were hit by a massive cyber-attack with the hacked sites displaying a warning message that read: "Ukrainian! All your personal data has been uploaded onto the public internet... This is for your past, your present and your future...prepare for the worst." The Ukraine government has suspected Russia to be behind the attack due to two reasons. The Russian media reporting it ahead of Ukraine and the serious errors in the Polish language message as reported by the Poland government. So far, NATO and the US have criticized the attack and offered to support Ukraine in its recovery. Apart from this, NATO has proposed an agreement to augment cyber cooperation with Ukraine, where the latter will get access to NATO's malware information sharing platform. According to Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby: "It has pre-positioned a group of operatives to conduct what we call a false-flag operation, an operation designed to

look like an attack on them or Russian speaking people in Ukraine as an excuse to go in." ("Ukraine cyber-attack: Russia to blame for hack, says Kyiv," *BBC*, 14 January 2022)

Meta to face lawsuit in the UK for exploiting personal data of user

On 14 January, Facebook, now known as Meta, faces a EUR 2.7 multi-billion case for imposing terms and conditions which exploit personal data of users, filed by the UK government. According to Competition Expert Dr Liza Lovdahl Gormsen: "Facebook is dominant in the market, the social network, so they have a special responsibility, I don't think exploiting users is having a special responsibility to behave in a way as if you are not dominant. They do it because they can, and somebody's got to stop that." Meta has responded by saying that the services offered are chosen by people because of the value and meaningful control offered via the platform. (Pascale Davies, "Meta faces €2.7bn civil lawsuit over allegations it exploited UK Facebook users' data for profit," *Euronews*, 14 January 2022)

Poland: Kaczyński confirms the acquisition of Pegasus by the country

On 07 January, Poland's ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) Chairman Jarosław Kaczyński confirmed the acquisition of Pegasus spyware by the country. He also clarified that it was not used against opposition politicians in the 2019 elections and said: "the opposition's stories about the use of Pegasus for political purposes are utter nonsense." Member of the Sejm party Krzysztof Brejza noted his phone was hacked about 33 times before the elections, and his texts were leaked to news channels. Amnesty's Poland Director Anna Błaszczak in a statement, mentioned: "These findings are shocking but not surprising. They raise serious concerns not only for politicians but for the civil society in Poland in general particularly given the context of persistent and serious concerns over the government's record on human rights and the rule of law." The opposition has compared the use of Pegasus to the Watergate scandal in the US, calling it "Poland's Watergate". ("Poland:

Top leader admits government bought Pegasus spyware," Deutsche Welle, 07 January 2022; Zoysia Wanat, "Poland's Watergate: Ruling party leader admits country has Pegasus hacking software," POLITICO, 07 January 2022)

France: Google and Facebook fined for tracking users

On 06 January, the French privacy watchdog Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés (CNIL) fined Google and Facebook with penalties of EUR 150 million and EUR 60 million, respectively. They were charged for their inability to permit "French users to easily refuse cookies". According to *POLITICO*: "Cookies are tracking tools responsible for irritating consent pop-ups and ads that follow you around the internet, are regularly decried as the scourge of the web, one that Paris has vowed to stamp out." Commenting on the move, CNIL President Marie-Laure Denis said: "This topic is really a priority of our control policy this year, and if necessary these controls could be followed by formal notices, public or not, and financial penalties, public or not." (Vincent Manancourt and Laura Kayali, "France flexes muscles with fines against Facebook, Google over cookie banners," POLITICO, 06 January 2022)

France: Macron targets negotiation on digital acts between the European Commission and Parliament

On 06 January, the first meeting of the 27 EU Commissioners took place in Paris. According to French President Emmanuel Macron: "the French presidency must be a moment of truth for the regulation and accountability of digital platforms, the carbon pricing at European borders on imported products, minimum wages, and our relationship with Africa." As part of France's digital agenda for Europe, Paris plans to negotiate the proposal of the European Commission on Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA) with the European Parliament. While DSA targets disinformation, murky advertising practices and illegal content, the DMA targets MNC's from manipulating their power in digital forums. According to Europe Policy Analyst Eliska Pirkova: "We

can expect the French presidency to focus on reinforcing measures to combat illegal content online, safeguarding due diligence measures as well as on pushing for strong centralized enforcement of the future DSA regulation." (Jack Parrock, "France aims at Big Tech as it kicks off EU presidency," Deutsche Welle, 05 January 2022)

INTERNATIONAL

Ukraine: US ambassador calls for UNSC meeting on 31 January

On 27 January, the US ambassador to the UN's Security Council (UNSC) Linda Thomas-Greenfield has called for a meeting on 31 January to deliberate the "threatening behaviour" of Russia against Ukraine. The ambassador released a statement: "Russia is engaging in other destabilizing acts aimed at Ukraine, posing a clear threat to international peace and security and the UN Charter... This is not a moment to wait and see. The council's full attention is needed now." The previous meetings held on the issue have been inconclusive as Russia vetoes decisions made against it. (Michelle Nichols, "US asks UN Security Council to meet on Russia, Ukraine," Reuters, 28 January 2022)

Ukraine: Biden-Zelenskyy holds telephonic conversation

On 27 January, US President Joe Biden held a telephonic conversation with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to discuss de-escalation efforts regarding the Ukraine conflict. Although Zelenskyy thanked Biden for the "military assistance," on 28 January, he asked the West to not create 'panic' during an international media conference. He stated: "There is a feeling abroad that there is war here. That's not the case. I am not saying an escalation is not possible ... (but) we don't need this panic." Meanwhile, a statement by the White House maintained that the Biden administration was considering "additional macroeconomic support to help Ukraine's economy" given the immense pressure it faces from the Russian military build-up. ("Ukraine: Biden, Zelenskyy talk de-escalation with no end to tension in sight," Deutsche Welle, 27 January 2022; "Ukraine tells West not to 'panic' over

Russia tensions," Deutsche Welle, 28 January 2022; Jennifer Rankin, Kim Willsher and Luke Harding, "Putin accuses Nato of ignoring Russia's concerns as Ukraine crisis simmers," The Guardian, 28 January 2022)

US officials spot supply of blood along the Russian-Ukraine border for the wounded

On 28 January, the US officials reported blood supplies being circulated along the Russian border with Ukraine for the wounded. The recent development has further added to the obscurity of the rising tensions between the US and Russia. The Russian Defense Ministry is yet to respond to the comment. On the other hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin has complained that the West is yet to address Russia's security demands but Russia is still open for diplomatic talks. (Phil Stewart and Vladimir Soldatkin, Alexander Marrow, "Russian buildup at Ukraine border includes blood for wounded, U.S. officials say," Reuters, 29 January)

Denmark: Withdrawal of troops from Mali

On 27 January, Denmark announced the pullback of its troops from Mali after the transitional junta government demanded Copenhagen for an immediate withdrawal. The withdrawal led to a major setback for France's attempts to lead counter-terrorism operations in the region of Sahel. Tensions had resumed in Mali as the transitional government failed to organize elections after the military coup, which led to International actors imposing sanctions on the junta government. Denmark had sent 105 military personnel to Mali after the country invited them to join the European special forces to fight against Islamist militants in the region. But, the Mali government clarified that they had not decided to allow Danish troops to be deployed in Mali. The withdrawal has highlighted Mali's issues with France as Bamako was a former French colony. The junta lashed out on France saying it should keep its "colonial reflexes" under check. (Nikolaj Skydsgaard and John Irish, "Denmark pulls Mali troops out as junta takes swipe at France," Reuters, 27 January 2022; "Denmark to start pulling troops out

of Mali after junta's demand," France24, 27 January 2022)

EU accuses China of illegal trade practices with Lithuania

On 27 January, the EU launched an official dispute on behalf of Lithuania with the World Trade Organisation(WTO). The EU accused China of boycotting Lithuanian goods; But, Beijing refuted the allegations. European Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis said: "For the time-being we have not found a negotiated solution. That's why we are now exercising our WTO rights." He justified Lithuania's stance with Taiwan, saying: "The EU is respecting the One-China policy and our assessment is that steps taken by Lithuania do not step out of the One-China policy framework." China has denied all allegations and stated that it rejected goods due to customs issues. Since the case has been taken to the WTO, it will positively respond, but its intervention would impact regional trade. (Jessica Parker, "Lithuania-China row: EU escalates trade dispute with Beijing," BBC, 27 January 2022)

US warns Russia on halting Nord Stream 2 pipeline in case of invasion

On 27 January, the US State Department spokesperson warned Russia that if Ukraine was invaded, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline would not go forward. Although inclusion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline as part of the sanctions on Russia is still under debate. According to the previous government under Angela Merkel the pipeline was considered entirely commercial, but with regard to the current government, it perceives the other way. The German Chancellor said: "Should this situation occur, we will jointly act. There would be a high price." The US President Joe Biden is scheduled to meet Qatar's Emir on 31 January to discuss on the stability of global energy supply and the security situation in the Middle East. ("US: Nord Stream 2 will not move forward if Russia invades Ukraine," Deutsche Welle, 27 January 2022; "Scoop: Qatar emir to visit White House on Monday," Axios, 25 January 2022)

Ukraine: US and NATO issue written reply to Russian demands

On 26 January, the US declared that a written reply to Russian security demands had been delivered via the US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken claimed the document made no concessions while addressing Moscow's concerns and raising those of Washington's allies. Blinken, who is expected to hold talks with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, said that the letter could not be made public. Blinken justified this by stating, "diplomacy has the best chance to succeed if space was provided for confidential talks". NATO has also sent a similar response to Moscow. Both the responses have maintained the US' and NATO's stance on the Russian demand that Ukraine is never given NATO accession; they stated NATO's commitment to the open-door policy stayed put. ("[US, NATO send written response on Russia's security demands](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 26 January 2022; Julian Borger, Angelique Chrisafis, Luke Harding and Andrew Roth, "[US holds firm on Ukraine's right to join Nato in its response to Russian demands](#)," *The Guardian*, 26 January 2022)

Ukraine: Biden says personal sanctions could be imposed on Putin

On 25 January, US President Joe Biden stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin could be impacted by personal sanctions if Moscow were to invade Kyiv. He expressed that if Russia were to invade Ukraine it would be the "largest invasion" after World War II, as "it would change the world". Meanwhile, the US has been diplomatically engaging with leading energy-producing countries preparing for a scenario of Russia restricting gas supply to Europe. The White House released a statement confirming a meeting with Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and Biden, by the end of January. However, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, commenting on the current condition in the country, stated: "We are strong enough to keep everything under control and derail any attempts at destabilization." ("Ukraine: Joe Biden says

US could sanction Vladimir Putin," *Deutsche Welle*, 25 January 2022)

Ukraine: US and NATO dispatch further military support to Eastern Europe, infuriating Kremlin

On 24 January, NATO announced its decision to provide Eastern Europe with increased military aid in the form of fighter jets and ships. This move, along with the Pentagon's deployment of 8,500 troops on heightened alert, is bound to anger the Kremlin given Putin's earlier warning of a military buildup being a "red line". Following a meeting with the leaders of the US, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, the UK and the EU, the alliance's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said: "We agree that any further aggression by Russia against Ukraine will have severe costs." He also commented on the extensive support allies were providing by contributing additional forces. However, the Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov alleged that the West's "information hysteria" and "concrete actions" were escalating tensions in the region. ("Russia tensions: NATO bolsters deployments, angering Kremlin," *Deutsche Welle*, 24 January 2022; Daniel Boffey, Andrew Roth, Julian Borger and Kim Willsher, "US puts 8,500 troops on heightened alert amid fears over Ukraine," *The Guardian*, 24 January 2022; Quint Forgey, "US puts 8,500 troops on alert as Russia tensions ramp up," *POLITICO*, 24 January 2022)

Norway: Day two of the Taliban talks in Oslo

On 24 January, the Taliban met with diplomats of the US, France, UK, Germany, the EU, and Norway in the capital to discuss unfreezing of the Afghan assets abroad. Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan said: "From these meetings we are sure of getting support for Afghanistan's humanitarian, health and education sectors." About USD 10 billion of Afghan assets were frozen abroad by the US and other Western countries in response to the Taliban taking over Kabul. The Taliban representative Shafiullah Azam said: "We are requesting them to unfreeze Afghan assets and not punish ordinary Afghans because of the

political discourse." Afghan activists in Norway also confronted the Taliban delegation regarding the whereabouts of two women who were arrested for protesting against the mandate on wearing hijab. Diplomats of the UN took note of the issue and called on the Taliban to investigate and release the women. ("Taliban, Western envoys discuss Afghanistan crisis in Oslo," Deutsche Welle, 24 January 2022; "Afghan activists ask about whereabouts of two women as Taliban talks with West continue," Euronews, 24 January 2022)

Western countries advise families of embassy staff to withdraw from Ukraine

On 24 January, the US, UK, Australia, and Germany advised and informed the families of diplomatic staff to leave Kyiv as the situation at the Ukrainian border turned tense. Several other countries also announced caution against traveling to Ukraine due to the mounting tensions as Russia increases its buildup on the border with Kyiv. The US State Department's travel advisory said: "The security conditions, particularly along Ukraine's borders, in Russia-occupied Crimea, and in Russia-controlled eastern Ukraine, are unpredictable and can deteriorate with little notice." The UK also took measures even though its diplomatic staff were not in immediate threat and called back about half of the staff working in Kyiv. ("Ukraine: US, Western countries tell families of embassy staff to leave," Deutsche Welle, 24 January 2022; "Ukraine: UK withdrawing some embassy staff from Kyiv," BBC, 24 January 2022)

Ukraine: US State Department asks diplomats' families to leave Kyiv; issues travel advisory

On 23 January, the US State Department asked families of US diplomats residing in Kyiv to begin leaving the capital. Releasing a travel advisory on its website, the State Department cautioned against travelling to Ukraine given the "increased threats of Russian military action" along with COVID-19. A voluntary departure for embassy employees, funded by the US government, has also been arranged. The

Department officials clarified that the move was not an evacuation and that the embassy would continue functioning with the Charge d'Affaires Kristina Kvien staying back. Nonetheless, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry called the move "premature and a manifestation of excessive caution". Meanwhile, Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov extended gratitude to the US for its USD 200 million worth of defense aid that reached the country. ("US orders families of Kyiv embassy staff to leave Ukraine," Deutsche Welle, 23 January 2022; Jem Bartholomew, "US embassy in Ukraine 'requests staff evacuation' amid war fears," The Guardian, 22 January 2022; "Ukraine receives second batch of US weapons in Russian stand-off," Reuters, 24 January 2022; David Shepardson and Paul Sandle, "US tells diplomats' families to leave Ukraine, weighs troop options," Reuters, 24 January 2022)

Norway: Taliban delegation in Oslo begins talks with Afghan civil society members

On 23 January, the Norway Foreign Ministry announced an all-male 15-member Taliban delegation to have begun talks with Afghan civil society members in Oslo. Focused on human rights, the talks are a precursor to meetings set with Western leaders. Following the talks, a Taliban official commented that the meetings were an effort to "legitimize the Afghan government". He added: "This type of invitation and communication will help the European community, the US or many other countries to erase the wrong picture of the Afghan government." An activist attending the meeting expressed that the meeting resulted in a positive outcome with the Taliban "patiently" listening to their concerns. However, multiple protests related to the event were seen in Norway, London and Toronto. ("Afghanistan: Taliban envoys start talks in Norway," Deutsche Welle, 23 January 2022)

Germany: Israel's Cabinet orders State Commission to look into corruption case in naval vessel purchase

On 23 January, Israel's Cabinet ordered an investigation into a corruption case in the purchase of submarines and warships from Germany. So far, Israel has purchased naval vessels worth EUR 1.76 billion from Germany between 2009 and 2016. Those close to former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are suspected to be involved in the submarine affair, which is known as Case 3000 in Israel. Netanyahu has called it the most serious corruption scandal in the country's history. The investigation has been handed over to the State Commission, which will focus on the procurement and not investigate the defendants. ("Israel to probe purchase of German submarines under Netanyahu," *Deutsche Welle*, 23 January 2022)

US along with NATO to hold maritime exercise in the Mediterranean Sea

On 22 January, the United States and the NATO partners announced to conduct a 12-day maritime exercise called as "Neptune Strike 22" in the Mediterranean Sea from 24 January. The naval drills aim to test the maritime capabilities of the NATO, as Russia announced its plans to exercise in January and February from the Pacific to the Atlantic Sea. According to the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, the decision to conduct the exercise is to reassure Europeans as tensions grow with Russia. ("NATO to hold major naval drills in the Mediterranean Sea," *Deutsche Welle*, 22 January 2022)

Blinken meets Lavrov in Geneva; calls talks "constructive and useful"

On 21 January, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Geneva. Although there were no significant breakthroughs in the discussion, they called the talks useful and agreed to maintain dialogue to resolve the crisis. Blinken said: "It can choose the path of diplomacy that can lead to peace and security, or the path that will lead only to conflict, severe consequences and international condemnation." Meanwhile, Lavrov said: "I can't tell you if we're on the

right track or the wrong track. We'll understand this when we receive the American response on paper to all the points in our proposal." Blinken said the US agreed to: "to meet again after Russia has had an opportunity to look at this paper and then we'll see where we go from there." ("US to respond to Russia's NATO demands' next week", *Lavrov says after Geneva talks*," *Euronews*, 21 January 2022; Simon Lewis, "US and Russia agree to keep talking after meeting on Ukraine," *Reuters*, 21 January 2022)

Iran; Benjamin Brière's case to go on trial soon

On 20 January, as reported by *BBC*, the French citizen Benjamin Brière's lawyer Saeid Dehghan said: "A French tourist who has been held in Iran since 2020 charged with espionage has gone on trial." Brière was arrested in 2020 for flying a drone near the Iran-Turkmenistan border and was charged with spying and acting against the Islamic Republic. If he is convicted, Brière will be sentenced to prison or be included in a prisoner exchange. Dehghan said: "The trial was held behind closed doors at branch 4 of the Revolutionary Court in Mashhad city." Rights groups worldwide have accused Iran of using such prisoners to extract concessions from other countries. His trials are happening when the US, Iran, and France discuss the restoration of Iran's 2015 nuclear deal, which was abandoned in 2018. ("French tourist Benjamin Briere goes on trial in Iran for espionage," *BBC*, 21 January 2022; "Verdict in Iran's trial of jailed French tourist likely within days - lawyer," *Reuters*, 20 January 2022)

UN General Assembly adopts resolution against Holocaust denial

On 20 January, The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution proposed by Israeli and German ambassadors that rejected and condemned any denial of the Holocaust. German ambassador to Israel Susanne Wasum-Rainer and the Israeli ambassador to Germany Jeremy Issacharaoff published a joint appeal to coincide it with the 80th anniversary of the Wannsee Conference. They said: "This resolution is meant to be a sign of hope and inspiration for all states

and societies that stand up for diversity and tolerance, strive for reconciliation and understand that remembering the Holocaust is essential to prevent such crimes from happening again." The 193-member assembly, except Iran, agreed to the proposal without holding a vote. Germany's UN Ambassador Antje Leendertse also mentioned how the General Assembly was revoking the idea of a strong message against the denial or distortion of historical facts as this could lead to harmful consequences and risk of repetition. ("UN General Assembly adopts German-Israeli proposal against Holocaust denial," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 January 2022)

Ukraine: Sanctions imposed on four Ukrainians by the US Treasury

On 20 January, the US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on four Ukrainian citizens for associating with Russia in destabilizing the country. The individuals targeted involve two current members of the Ukrainian parliament — Taras Kozak and Oleh Voloshyn — and two former officials — Volodymyr Oliynyk and Vladimir Sivkovich. The Treasury released a statement, saying: "Russia has directed its intelligence services to recruit current and former Ukrainian government officials to prepare to take over the government of Ukraine and to control Ukraine's critical infrastructure with an occupying Russian force." The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, visiting Berlin, commented on the sanctions: "This action is intended to target, highlight, and undercut Russia's ongoing destabilization effort in Ukraine." ("US imposes sanctions on four Ukrainians over Russia links," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 January 2022; Julain Borger, Luke Harding and Andrew Roth, "US accuses Russia of conspiring to take over Ukraine government," *The Guardian*, 20 January 2022)

Ukraine: Zelenskyy responds to Biden's comment on "minor incursion"

On 20 January, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy responded to US President Joe Biden's statement on Russia conducting a "minor incursion" into the country. Zelenskyy took to Twitter and

tweeted: "There are no minor incursions. Just as there are no minor casualties and little grief from the loss of loved ones." Later, in an attempt to provide clarity on the issue, Biden stated: "If any assembled Russian units move across the Ukrainian border, that is an invasion." ("Ukraine tension: President Zelensky hits back at Biden comments," *BBC*, 20 January 2022; "US imposes sanctions on four Ukrainians over Russia links," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 January 2022)

France: Parliament denounces genocide by China against Uyghur Muslims

On 20 January, the French parliament passed a resolution that officially recognized China's treatment of Uyghurs as genocide. The resolution by the National Assembly read: "... officially recognises the violence perpetrated by the People's Republic of China against the Uyghurs as constituting crimes against humanity and genocide." The non-binding resolution also calls on the French government to protect the interests of the minority group in China and to take "the necessary measures within the international community and in its foreign policy towards the People's Republic of China." Socialist Party Chief Olivier Faure commented on China and the regime's atrocities against the Uyghurs and that Paris should refuse to submit to the curtailment of violations through propaganda by the country. Meanwhile, the EU Parliament had condemned the human rights violations in June 2021. ("French lawmakers officially recognise China's treatment of Uyghurs as 'genocide'," *France24*, 20 January 2022; "French MPs officially recognise China's treatment of Uyghurs as 'genocide'," *Euronews*, 20 January 2022)

World Economic Forum: Scholz comments on Ukraine-Russia tensions

On 19 January, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz virtually attended the third day of the World Economic Forum (WEF) being held remotely in Davos. *Deutsche Welle* reported Scholz expressing Germany's "clear commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine". He stated: "The Russian side is aware of our determination.

I hope it is also aware that the benefits of cooperation are significantly higher than the price of further confrontation." Scholz added that "borders must not be moved by force". The chancellor also commented on the COVID-19 situation, saying: "Without a truly global immunization campaign, we will soon run out of letters in the Greek alphabet to name new virus variants." This is the second year the WEF is being held online. ("Davos: Germany's Olaf Scholz says silence on Ukraine is not an option," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 January 2022)

Ukraine: Antony Blinken visits Kyiv amid rising tensions

On 19 January, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Kyiv and met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. He stated that the visit confirmed the US' absolute support as Ukraine's "security, its prosperity, its democracy, its fundamental right to exist as a sovereign independent nation" were being threatened by Russia. He commented: "Moscow has systematically sought to weaken Ukraine's democratic institutions, as well as to divide Ukrainian society using everything from election interference to disinformation to cyberattacks." Blinken reiterated that the two countries had to remain united in their efforts against Russian attempts to divide them. He added that the Kremlin was acting with "no provocation, no reason," and said requested them to undertake a "peaceful path". Blinken is expected to meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Geneva on 21 January. ("Ukraine faces 'unprecedented challenge from Russia,' say US top diplomat," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 January 2022)

Biden comments on Ukraine-Russia border standoff; says Putin "has to do something"

On 19 January, US President Joe Biden commented on the Russian military build-up along the Ukrainian border during a press conference. He stated: "This is not all just a cakewalk for Russia militarily... They'll pay a stiff price, immediately, short-term, medium-term and long-term if they do it." Predicting Russian President Vladimir Putin's intentions, Biden said: "I'm not so sure he is certain what he's going to do. My guess is he will move in. He has to do

something." Regarding the response to a Russian invasion, Biden added: "What you're going to see is that Russia will be held accountable if it invades and it depends on what it does. It's one thing if it's a minor incursion, and then we end up having to fight about what to do and not do etc... There are differences in Nato as to what countries are willing to do, depending on what happens." Meanwhile, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba maintained that his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov was "avoiding" him. (Luke Harding, Andrew Roth and Julian Borger, "Joe Biden thinks Russia will attack Ukraine – but will face a 'stiff price'," *The Guardian*, 20 January 2022)

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to meet Russian counterpart in Geneva

On 18 January, the US announced that Secretary of State Antony Blinken would meet with Russian Minister Sergey Lavrov in Geneva on 21 January. The announcement came at a crucial period as the US speculated that Russia could invade Ukraine at any time; White House spokesperson Jen Psaki commented on the issue: "We're now at a stage where Russia at any time could launch an attack on Ukraine." A US state department official also said: "The fact that Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Lavrov agreed to meet on Friday in Geneva suggests that perhaps diplomacy is not dead." The department's comments came after a Russian diplomat earlier said that talks with the West were approaching a "dead end" as the three high-level meetings were inconclusive. (Julian Borger and Patrick Wintour, "US and Russia to hold talks on Ukraine in potential sign' diplomacy is not dead'," *The Guardian*, 19 January 2022; Michael Crowley and Anton Troianovski, "Blinken Will Meet With Russia as U.S. Pushes for More Diplomacy," *The New York Times*, 18 January 2022)

The talks on the US aluminium and steel tariffs to take place without notice

On 18 January, the US and Britain planned to launch talks to settle the dispute on the US aluminium and steel tariffs. The announcement to the talks is expected to be said during the upcoming meeting on

mental tariffs between the officials of the US and the UK. Although the announcement is said to not disclose the timeline to reach the agreement, the US Commerce Department spokesperson is yet to confirm on the plans of the declaration. According to U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai: "when the time is right." Which means the talks are expected to happen without any notice. (David Lawder and Andrea Shalal, "[U.S., UK to announce plans for formal talks on metals tariffs on Wednesday -sources](#)," *Reuters*, 19 January 2022)

Germany's Scholz and Chinese Li hold telephonic conversation

On 18 January, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz received a call from Chinese Premier Li Keqiang pledging China's readiness to work with Germany. Li talked about German and Chinese long-term relations and expressed that both countries were "responsible countries in the world, as well as supporters of multilateralism and practitioners of free trade". His comments came in light of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of German and Chinese diplomatic ties. (Joel Day, "[China finds ally in Germany following 'below radar' meeting: 'Let's work together'](#)," *Daily Express*, 18 January 2022)

Serbia: Djokovic returns to Belgrade following Australian deportation

On 17 January, Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic returned home after being deported from Australia given he was unvaccinated against COVID-19. He was received at the Belgrade airport with fans chanting "we love Novak". The Australian Immigration laws state that Djokovic cannot be provided with another visa for the next three years; however, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated: "[The ban] does go over a three-year period, but there is the opportunity for them to return in the right circumstances and that would be considered at the time." The Australian Open, from which Djokovic was removed, began on 17 January in Melbourne. The top men's tennis player's condition put at stake his 21st Grand Slam title. ("[You are our champion': Deported Djokovic welcomed](#)

[home to Serbia](#)," *France24*, 17 January 2022; "[Djokovic back in Serbia after Australia deportation over visa row](#)," *BBC*, 17 January 2022)

US Senator comments on Putin's agenda in Ukraine

On 16 January, US Senator Mitt Romney spoke on *NBC's* "Meet the Press". During the course of the show he maintained that it was the responsibility of the West to limit Russian influence in the European region. He was cited by *POLITICO* as saying: "He's trying to reestablish what he had before. That can't be allowed to happen... [Putin]'s trying to take NATO apart — to weaken it. We need a strong NATO not just for Russia, but for the emergence of China." Romney suggested the possibility of using the Nord Stream 2 as a negotiating tool to reason with Russia's aggressive activities in the region. Romney said: "We should let him know that that Nord Stream 2 pipeline is not going to operate... He's not going to have that wealth if he does any action to overthrow the government in Ukraine — that's getting shut down." (David Cohen, "[Romney: Putin can't be allowed to rebuild the Soviet Union](#)," *POLITICO*, 16 January 2022)

Lithuania: Brussels to back Vilnius in its trade altercations with Beijing

On 14 January, the EU announced its decision to back Lithuania over its escalating trade clashes with China. EU's High Representative Josep Borrell said: "Notably in the meeting we talked about Chinese activities in Lithuania and the impact of these activities in terms of the EU as a whole. Member states expressed clear solidarity with Lithuania, and we discussed how we can actively press on with de-escalation in terms of this crisis." Lithuanian and Chinese tensions began when Vilnius, in May 2021, left the 17+1 group that China used as a medium to negotiate with the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs). In November 2021, Lithuania approved the opening of a Taiwan representative office that further led to clashes between the two countries. China responded by restricting Lithuanian goods from entering the country and

further escalated the trade war between the two. (Christopher Pitchers, "[Brussels backs Lithuania in row with China over Taiwan](#)," *Euronews*, 14 January 2022)

Ongoing rounds of Russia-West talks show no progress

On 14 January, the talks conducted by the West on Ukraine from Geneva to Brussels and finally the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna came to an end. The talks brought out the grievances and concerns of both sides regarding Ukraine. However, the talks showed no progress as Russia had provided no assurances of withdrawing its forces from the Ukrainian border. According to the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov: "The main problem is the US and its NATO allies are not prepared under any guise, for any reason, which we have discussed and analyzed over and over, to meet our key demands to NATO." (Paul Adams, "[Ukraine crisis: Risks remain as Russia and West talk](#)," *BBC*, 14 January 2022)

US diplomats working in Geneva and Paris infected with Havana Syndrome

On 13 January, four US diplomats operating in Geneva and Paris were identified with a certain neurological illness termed the 'Havana Syndrome'. The syndrome, first found in 2016 in Cuba, has affected those diplomats, spies and Canadian staff working in Cuba. According to the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the US government is currently investigating the source of the illness. In a recent interview, Blinken said that he was going around the world to meet the employees of the State Department to study how the illness was disrupting their lives. He said: "To date, we don't know exactly what's happened and we don't know exactly who is responsible. We are working overtime across the entire government to get to the bottom of what happened, who's responsible." ("[Havana syndrome': US baffled after new cases in Europe](#)," *BBC*, 13 January 2022)

Human Rights Watch releases its annual report

On 12 January, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) released its annual report on increasing human rights violations across the globe. The "World Report 2022," revealed a worldwide increase in repressive and violent acts against civilian protestors by autocratic leaders and military regimes. In contrast, the report also mentioned how ideologically-opposing parties formed coalition governments to remove corrupt, repressive governments and leaders. *The Guardian* cited instances of these "unlikely" opposition coalitions, stating: "... the Czech Republic, where the prime minister, Andrej Babiš, was defeated, and Israel, where the premiership of Benjamin Netanyahu was brought to an end after 12 years in power in 2021." HRW Director Kenneth Roth, concerned with the rising repression and violence, said: "There is a narrative that autocrats are prevailing and democracy is on the decline, yet if you look at the trends in human rights over the last 12 months it doesn't look so rosy for the autocrats." (Annie Kelly, "[Increased repression and violence a sign of weakness, says Human Rights Watch](#)," *The Guardian*, 13 January 2022)

NATO-Russia Council: Russian demands rejected; agreement on further talks

On 12 January, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was held in Brussels for the first time since July 2019. Primarily focused on the Russian military build-up near the Ukrainian borders, the meeting lasted four hours. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg commented on the talks: "Our differences will not be easy to bridge. But it is a positive sign that all 30 NATO allies sat down with Russia after two years." Stoltenberg stated that both sides agreed on further talks relating to arms control and missile deployment, along with negotiations to reinstall the Brussels and Moscow offices. The Russian security proposals, however, were rejected by NATO; Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko commented: "I think we have managed to make it clear to NATO members that the situation is becoming intolerable for Russia." He maintained that NATO's

“expansion” into eastern European countries failed to “resolve them” as it only “moves the division lines” instead of removing them. Stoltenberg responded: “We can discuss many issues but we cannot discuss some core principles.” Meanwhile, the US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman warned: “Russia, most of all, will have to decide whether they really are about security, in which case they should engage, or whether this was all a pretext. And they may not even know yet.” ([“NATO open to more talks with Russia amid Ukraine tensions,” Deutsche Welle](#), 12 January 2022; [“Ukraine tensions: US says Russia faces stark choice,” BBC](#), 12 January 2022; David M. Herszenhorn, [“NATO, Russia in a standoff after talks in Brussels,” POLITICO](#), 12 January 2022)

Ukraine: Russia conducts live-fire drills post Geneva talks

On 11 January, Russia executed live-fire drills with its troops stationed near the Ukrainian border. *Reuters* reported the continuation of drills near the border implied the reduced possibility of a Russian retreat. In fact, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that although the 10 January Geneva talks were frank and useful, there were no breakthroughs. The US Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland expressed her disappointment in Russia’s lack of satisfaction from the talks and added that the drills went in “exactly the opposite direction” of the talks’ motive. Following the Geneva meeting, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said: “For us it’s absolutely mandatory to make sure that Ukraine never, never, ever becomes a member of NATO.” Meanwhile, the US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said: “We were firm ... in pushing back on security proposals that are simply non-starters to the United States.” (Dmitry Antonov and Tom Balmforth, [“Russia holds tank drills near Ukraine, sounds downbeat on talks,” Reuters](#), 12 January 2022)

Russia: Ryabkov and Sherman to meet on 10 January

On 10 January, the US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will meet with the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei

Ryabkov in Geneva. The diplomat-level talks will primarily focus on the Russian demands regarding the Ukraine crisis, the restrictions on military exercises and the possibility of missile deployments in the region. On 09 January, the two ministers met ahead of the talks over dinner. On the same day, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken commented on the imminent talks in an interview with *CNN*, saying: “There are two paths before us. There’s a path of dialogue and diplomacy to try to resolve some of these differences and avoid a confrontation. The other path is confrontation and massive consequences for Russia if it renews its aggression on Ukraine. We’re about to test the proposition about which path President Putin’s prepared to take.” Given the significant absence of the EU from the scheduled negotiations, France’s European Affairs Minister Clément Beaune commented: “Europeans shouldn’t be absent from the negotiation table.” The US-Russia talks will be followed by the NATO-Russia Council on 12 January and the meeting of the OSCE’s permanent council on 13 January in Brussels and Vienna, respectively. (Julian Borger, [“Ukraine’s fate hangs in balance as ‘critical’ week of talks begins,” The Guardian](#), 09 January 2022; [“US ready to discuss curbing military exercises in Ukraine talks with Russia,” The Guardian](#), 08 January 2022)

Geneva Talks: Blinken, Ryabkov doubtful of “breakthrough”

On 09 January, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated ahead of the Geneva talks between the US and Russia that he did not expect any “breakthrough in the coming week”. He was speaking on *CNN*’s “State of the Union”. Meanwhile, *Interfax* cited Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov saying it was “naive” if one predicted “progress, let alone quick progress”. He added: “We will not agree to any concession. That is completely excluded... We are disappointed with the signals coming in the last few days from Washington but also from Brussels.” There was significant tension between the two sides ahead of the scheduled talks with Blinken citing Kazakhstan’s case and

warning: “One lesson of recent history is that once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave.” The Russian Foreign Ministry was quick to respond via its Telegram channel: “If Antony Blinken loves history lessons so much, then he should take the following into account: when Americans are in your house, it can be difficult to stay alive and not be robbed or raped.” The Russian response can be subject to the US Uniform Code of Military Justice leading to a court-martial for violating conduct. (Jordan Wolman, [“Blinken sets limits on US talks with Russia,” POLITICO](#), 09 January 2022; [“Russia says not hopeful ahead of talks with US over Ukraine,” Deutsche Welle](#), 09 January 2022; [“Ukraine-Russia crisis: US refuses to draw down troops,” Deutsche Welle](#), 08 January 2022)

NATO foreign ministers meet on Ukraine issue; yet to reach decision

On 07 January, NATO foreign ministers met virtually to discuss the growing Russian military troops at the Ukrainian border. According to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg: “We are ready to engage in arms control with Russia, conventional and nuclear, but that has to be reciprocal...We can't end up in a situation where we have second-class NATO members, where NATO as an alliance is not allowed to protect them. The risk of conflict is real. Russia's aggressive actions seriously undermine the security order in Europe.” The outcome of the discussion shows the existence of tensions in deciding how to handle Russia. The top leaders of the EU have called for larger involvement of the bloc in the security situation of Ukraine but have not disclosed the details of how the involvement will proceed. Meanwhile, the West has assured full support to Ukraine in terms of independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. The US has also warned that there will be serious consequences if there are further intrusions from the Russian end. ([“NATO won't create '2nd-class' allies to soothe Russia, alliance head says,” Deutsche Welle](#), 07 January 2022)

Albania: The US sets up Special Force command post in the country

On 07 January, European Command headquarters in Germany's Stuttgart confirmed the construction of a regional command post for the US special force in Albania. The same was confirmed by the US Special Operations Major General David H. Tabor, who said: “The ability to rapidly move and train within the Balkans, in close coordination with other allied and partner forces, made Albania the best location for this effort.” In response to the efforts of the US, the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has welcomed the set-up of the special force. The special forces are those which are specially trained to deal counter-terrorism and reconnaissance missions, hence, it is still unclear what the US is aiming at by placing its operations in Albania. ([“US constructs new special forces regional base in Albania,” Deutsche Welle](#), 07 January 2022)

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken indicts Russia of a false narrative

On 08 January, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken accused Russia for its justification for the military build-up at the Ukrainian border as the latter considers Ukraine and NATO to be threatening its security. He added that Russia's process to weaken the politics, democratic institutions and energy sectors of Ukraine began long ago. According to Blinken: “Next week we'll reconfirm our readiness to increase transparency, institute new risk-reduction measures and renew efforts to address nuclear and conventional threats to European security... But again, it has to be a two-way street.” (Simon Lewis, [“Blinken accuses Russia of 'false narrative' on Ukraine ahead of talks,” Reuters](#), 08 January 2022)

Germany: Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock in the US, discusses Ukraine with Blinken

On 05 January, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock met in Washington. Regarding the military developments along the Ukrainian border, the US has recommended its European

allies to impose further sanctions on Russia. According to Blinken: “Strong trans-Atlantic solidarity is the most effective response and most effective tool that we have in countering Russian aggression.” Baerbock commented after the meeting that it is impossible to arrive at an alternative for a political solution. Although the new coalition supports the joint statement against Russia that was signed by the previous government with Washington, it is yet to disclose the sanctions to be imposed on the Kremlin if an invasion occurs. (Simon Lewis and Madeline Chambers, “[Blinken, German minister reiterate warning to Russia over Ukraine](#),” *Reuters*, 06 January 2022)

Russia: Russian “peacekeeping forces” to quell Kazakhstan protests

On 05 January, the Armenian Prime Minister and Chairman of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Nikol Pashinyan stated that a Russian-led alliance of “peacekeeping forces” would be dispatched to the region. The announcement came as a response to Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s appeal for troops to “stabilize” the country. Meanwhile, *Interfax* reported Russian MP Leonid Kalashnikov to have added that the forces would remain in the region “for as long as the president of Kazakhstan believes it necessary”. Tokayev stated: “Almaty was attacked, destroyed, vandalised, the residents of Almaty became victims of attacks by terrorists, bandits, therefore it is our duty ... to take all possible actions to protect our state.” According to the *Belta* news agency, Tokayev consulted with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Russian head Vladimir Putin. The violent protests followed a steep hike in the liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) prices. (Shaun Walker and Naubet Bisenov, “[Shots heard in Kazakhstan as protests enter third day](#),” *The Guardian*, 06 January 2022; Shaun Walker and Naubet Bisenov, “[Kazakhstan protests: Moscow-led alliance sends 'peacekeeping forces'](#),” *The Guardian*, 05 January 2022; “[Kazakhstan unrest: Government calls for Russian help](#),” *BBC*, 06 January 2022; “[Armenia says peacekeepers](#)

[from Russian-led alliance to go to Kazakhstan](#),” *Reuters*, 06 January 2022)

Serbia: US Treasury sanctions Dodik for “attempts to threaten the stability of the region”

On 05 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported the US Treasury Department to have imposed sanctions on the Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik claiming he “improperly used his position to amass riches through a patronage system of bribery and graft”. The department’s Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson was quoted as saying: “Milorad Dodik's destabilizing corrupt activities and attempts to dismantle the Dayton Peace Accords, motivated by his own self-interest, threaten the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the entire region.” The sanctions will be manifested via reporting, freezing, and blocking of those US assets that the Dodik owns; US citizens and companies will also be prohibited from trading with them. However, Dodik seemed least concerned about the move. He was quoted saying: “If they think that they will discipline me like this, they are grossly mistaken... I do not intend to apply for a visa for America even if my sanctions are lifted tomorrow.” (“[US sanctions Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik over corruption](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 05 January 2022; Julian Borger, “[US sanctions Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik for 'destabilizing activities'](#),” *The Guardian*, 05 January 2022)

Lithuania: Taiwan steps in with EUR 176 million fund to reduce Chinese economic pressure

On 05 January, Taiwan announced that it would establish a EUR 176 million fund to invest in Lithuania’s semiconductor, laser and biotechnology industries. The investment comes in the backdrop of Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda terming the establishment of a Taiwan representative office in Vilnius under the name of “Taiwan” instead of “Taipei,” a “mistake”. Nausėda’s statement was a result of the excessive economic pressure that China was putting on Lithuania. The Taiwanese investment hopes to reverse or reduce the pressure from Beijing. Taiwan’s

Deputy Foreign Minister Tseng Hou-jen was quoted by *Deutsche Welle* as saying: "It's time for us to help with your difficulties... China's action seems to have targeted what it perceives as a vulnerable country, for its political gains. But giving in is not the best way in dealing with bullies." ("Taiwan to establish \$200 million Lithuania investment fund," *Deutsche Welle*, 05 January 2022; "Taiwan setting up \$200m Lithuania fund amid China row," *BBC*, 06 January 2022)

Lithuania: President Nauseda calls naming the Taiwan office "a mistake"

On 04 January, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda said the country made a mistake when it opened a Taiwan office termed "Taiwan" and not "Chinese Taipei". Claiming he was not consulted on the decision, Nauseda added: "The name of the office has become the key factor that now strongly affects our relations with China." China has restricted issuing visas to Lithuania, while Vilnius closed its Beijing embassy after recalling its last diplomat. Nauseda stated that he would take this up with the EU, saying: "We have to be extremely active and make it very clear to the European Union that this is an attack, a kind of pressure on one of its member states." Lithuania still plans to open a trade office in Taiwan, while the latter has recently bought 20,000 bottles of Lithuanian rum that China blocked from entering the country due to the diplomatic debacle. ("Opening a Taiwan Representative Office was 'mistake', says Lithuanian president," *Euronews*, 04 January 2022; "Taiwan buys 20,000 bottles of Lithuania rum destined for China," *BBC*, 05 January 2022)

P5 releases joint statement, says "nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought"

On 03 January, the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) permanent five (P5) group of countries involving China, France, Russia, the UK and the US, released a joint statement on the impossibility of nuclear war. The statement read: "We believe strongly that the further spread of such weapons must be prevented... A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be

fought." The English-language version of the statement also included: "As nuclear use would have far-reaching consequences, we also affirm that nuclear weapons — for as long as they continue to exist — should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war." The agreement has been released before the tenth review session of the Treaty of the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The Russian Foreign Ministry was quoted saying: "We hope that in the current difficult conditions of international security, the approval of such a political statement will help reduce the level of international tensions." ("Five world powers issue pledge to prevent nuclear war," *Deutsche Welle*, 03 January 2022; "Russia, China, Britain, US and France say no one can win nuclear war," *Reuters*, 04 January 2022)

Ukraine: Biden and Zelenskyy hold 2022's first telephonic conversation

On 01 January, US President Joe Biden spoke on a call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and reiterated his support for Ukraine amid growing tensions with Russia. According to the White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki: "President Biden made clear that the United States and its allies and partners will respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine." Psaki further mentioned how Biden "reaffirmed the United States' commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity". After the call, Zelenskyy tweeted about his telephonic conversation with Biden where he said: "The first international talk of the year with @POTUS proves the special nature of our relations." Russia has been skeptical about the recent developments and has expressed their potential vulnerability if Ukraine joined NATO. (David Cohen, "Biden reaffirms support for Ukraine in phone call with president," *POLITICO*, 01 January 2022; Meryl Kornfield, "Biden says he warned Putin of 'severe sanctions' if Russia invades Ukraine again," *The Washington Post*, 31 December 2021)

Ukraine: Biden and Putin hold telephonic conversation

On 30 December, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Joe Biden held a telephonic conversation regarding the Ukraine standoff that lasted for 50 minutes. On their second call in a month, the two leaders agreed to continue talks till the Geneva meeting scheduled for 10 January 2022. After the call, Russian spokesperson Yury Ushakov commented on the threat of sanctions: "(sanctions would) lead to a complete breakdown in ties between our countries and cause the most serious damage to relations between Russia and the west." The White House

spokesperson Jen Psaki responded: "President Biden reiterated that substantive progress in these dialogues can occur only in an environment of de-escalation rather than escalation... He made clear that the United States and its allies and partners will respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine." ("Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin hold 'constructive' phone call," *Deutsche Welle*, 30 December 2021; David Smith, "Biden and Putin exchange warnings during phone call amid rising Ukraine tensions," *The Guardian*, 30 December 2021; Bryan Bender, "Biden-Putin call ushers in new phase of diplomacy," *POLITICO*, 30 December 2021)

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