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AI, fulfilling an ancient wish to forge the gods?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence. This basic definition of AI is the one you can find in the excellent “A people’s guide to AI”*, written in 2018 by the artists and researchers Mimi Onuoha and Mother Cyborg (Diana Nucera). They considered it as a mission to open up conversation around AI by demystifying, situating, and shifting the narrative about what types of use cases AI can have for everyday people, young and old. This little booklet of 78 pages remains one of the best introductions to understanding AI and other data-driven tech, giving the knowledge to think critically about the kinds of futures automated technologies can bring. Back in 2018 discussions on AI were present but not that omnipresent as it is today. On May 11, Members of the IMCO and LIBE committees in the European Parliament (EP) voted in a joint committee the report on the Artificial Intelligence Act. The legislative train started in 2021 after somewhat earlier in 2020 there was already a white paper of the European Commission looking to set up a regulatory framework for trustworthy AI. In the plenary of June MEP’s will vote in the plenary on this and then the co-legislators, EP and the European Council, can sit together to come to the final text of legislation. The Council adopted its position in December 2022. In the recently published Design trend Report 2023 of the If Design Forum in Germany we get also an insight into what is now revolutionizing our interaction with machines, the subfields of machine learning and generative AI of which chatbots such as Chat GPT, brought by Microsoft and Bard launched by Google are most prominently publicly discussed these days. The charm these chatbots operate on us is put in context by e.g. the French Professor Alexei Grinbaum who writes on the ethical and social aspects of emerging technologies and recently published “Paroles de machines, dialoguer avec une IA”. He sees the fascination we have for Chatbots as comparable to the dialogues we search already for centuries with non-human entities that are omnipresent in myths. Those chat boxes have upon us the same effect of illusion and reality as is the case when chatting or praying to gods, angels and demons. Sacrilege? The debate on AI and how it can open doors for reimagining our present and future is a societal debate where we all should participate in as it concerns us all in our daily life. We can’t escape philosophical, ethical and theological discussions on how to make AI equitable for all of us. When do we use it and how? The debates in Europe and in the EP in particular show the way in the balancing act needed to cope with this whole range of new possibilities offered. Hopes are real this has the same worldwide impact as is the case with GDPR rules whereby a type of regulation is developed based more on principles and on risk-based approaches giving a stable but adaptable frame to all actors, public and private. In the people’s guide mentioned above one of the phrases put in bold is “The use of AI comes down to the question of who has power” The authors state that it is important for people and communities to identify their own problems, and decide on their own uses for technology. With this we are in political discussions and how to organize our states, democracies, communities, economies, workplaces, etc. Which place do we give to the governments, companies, communities, individuals...and how do they interact: in a power game or in a genuine search for coexistence and mutual respect, aware of interdependencies and respecting different cultures? We’re still at a moment where we can decide what types of algorithms we want to be used in our social spaces and give way to creative thinking. One of the first AI researchers in the contemporary sense, the late Pamela Mc Corduck, brings the history of that audacious effort to duplicate in an artifact what we consider to be our most important property our intelligence, to life in her book ‘Machines who think’, published in 2004. She traces this concept of automation back to the mid 8th century BC with Homer’s Iliad but already in 1974 she explained AI’s birth as an ancient wish to forge the Gods. The danger of excessive pride or hubris lurks around the corner. How are we going to cope with it?

 BRUSSELS

European Parliament Propels AI Act as Landmark Legislation

By Sarhan Basem

In a significant milestone for the European Union (EU), the European Parliament has championed the AI Act, which is hailed as a pioneering legislative framework worldwide. With the potential to revolutionize societies and economies, the AI Act has garnered immense support and is considered the most crucial legislation of this mandate. Members of Parliament (MEPs) have showcased a unified stance on the Act, aiming to ensure that artificial intelligence remains human-centric, trustworthy, and safe.



Dragoș Tudorache, the rapporteur in the LIBE committee for the AI Act, acknowledged the transformative impact of AI and expressed confidence in the EU's ability to lead globally in shaping its development. "The AI Act is very likely the most important piece of legislation in this mandate. And

it's the first legislation of this kind worldwide, which means that the EU can lead the way, globally, in making AI human-centric, trustworthy, and safe," he stated.

Tudorache further highlighted the significant improvements made by Parliament to the Commission's original text. Notably, recent advancements, such as foundation models and generative AI, have been taken into account. Balancing the imperative to support AI innovation in Europe, particularly for start-ups, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and industry growth, the Parliament's position ensures the protection of fundamental rights and strengthens democratic oversight

over the use of high-risk AI systems. It also aims to establish a robust system of AI governance and enforcement across the Union.



Svenja Hahn, shadow rapporteur in the IMCO committee, emphasised the liberal victories reflected in the Parliament's po-

LEAD ARTICLE

sition on the AI Act. Hahn described the Act as embodying a clear liberal approach, defying conservative surveillance desires and over-regulation fantasies of the left wing. The compromise achieved strikes a balance, offering proportional regulation for AI, safeguarding civil rights, and fostering innovation and economic growth.

Hahn highlighted the Parliament's commitment to civil rights by advocating for a ban on bio-

metric surveillance in public spaces, sending a powerful message to member states.

Additionally, she emphasized the importance of bolstering experimentation on AI within regulatory sandboxes, aiming to establish the EU as a vibrant hub for research and innovation in artificial intelligence.

With the European Parliament's resolute support for the AI Act, the EU is poised to shape the fu-

ture of AI by upholding ethical principles, ensuring transparency, and promoting responsible and accountable use.

The Act's human-centric approach, coupled with its emphasis on protecting civil rights and stimulating innovation, holds great promise for establishing a thriving and ethical AI landscape within the European Union and setting a precedent for global AI governance.



 BRUSSELS

Unveiling Solutions: Tackling the Global Mental Health Crisis Together

By Martin Banks



admit they have an issue and need help, which is already a courageous first step, but in today's judgemental world, such an admission could put their job or relationships at stake, so people tend to hide their problems.

Stress is one of the biggest causes of mental health issues, which can be managed through a healthy life balance, but for that people "need a little bit of care and attention". Unlike physical health, however, there are no "mental hygiene" courses in school. "More than half of the violence in the world comes from mental health challenges," Gurudev said. "In the US, more than 600 mass shootings have happened over the past 6 months. The cause for this is mental health."

To reduce mental health issues around the world, we first need to address societal prejudice, but then the different types of prejudice we harbour within ourselves, related to gender, religion, class or cast, Gurudev advised. Yoga and meditation can also greatly contribute to a healthy lifestyle, while social interaction, not through social media, but by meeting people in real life, can help heal trauma.

"The mission of politics is to ensure the common good, nationally and globally, but we can't ensure

The world is facing an unprecedented rise in depression, suicide and mental health issues.

According to the WHO World Mental Health Report published in June 2022, depression and anxiety rose by 25% in the first year of the pandemic, bringing the number of people living with mental disorders to nearly one billion people.

To address some of the current challenges related to mental health, an event hosted by World Forum for Ethics in Business (WFEB) took place at the European Parliament in Brussels on 22 May, hosted by MEP Ryszard Czarnecki and chaired by Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. The event addressed and discussed innovative solutions to

improve mental health that can be scaled up for global impact; the interconnection between mental health and peacebuilding, and the latest research on mental health and mental health efforts as a competitive advantage in the workspace.

"Mental health is one of the greatest challenges the world is facing today. Whether it is in developing or developed countries, in war or peace zones, it is an issue that affects the entire world," said Gurudev.

However, despite the worrying increase in mental health issues, there is still a prejudice around the subject, Gurudev stressed. A person cannot be treated unless they

the common good based on fear and anger,” said Alojz Peterle, Former Prime Minister of Slovenia.

“I am not a doctor, but I understand that a fragmented world means fragmented people and the more fragmented we are, the more mental health issues we will have,” said Peterle, exemplifying how suicide rates in Slovenia decreased by 10% after the country joined the European Union, as people had new hope brought on by the sense of belonging to a community sharing the same values and principles.

“No single organisation can handle the mental health crisis alone. Governments, healthcare institutions and NGOs must join forces to create comprehensive mental health strategies. Together we can create a healthier and more

resilient society,” MEP Ryszard Czarnecki added.

In Poland, a mental health plan has been implemented in centres across the country to help communities free of charge, explained Polish Minister of Health Adam Niedzielski. The treatment plans are developed by specialists based on their relations with the person experiencing the mental health crisis. Since 2019, 380 of these centres have been dedicated to children and adolescents.

“A sad face should not be allowed to exist because each one of us should take responsibility to bring the factor of happiness, then we can make society a better place”, Gurudev pointed out.

Moreover, since the outbreak of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Po-

land set has up medical centres for mental health along the border as well as across the country to support Ukrainian refugees in their trauma recovery, providing them with equal access to healthcare as to Polish citizens and conducting information campaigns in refugee camps. “Wars do not only cause physical wounds but also wounds to the mind, which can be harder to heal,” Gurudev said.

Gurudev’s International Association for Human Values (IAHV) and Art of Living organisations have also managed to set up over 400 workshops for Ukrainians both inside Ukraine and in Europe, helping more than 5,000 Ukrainians currently located in over 20 countries. They were taught how to self-manage stress, insomnia, despair and traumatic symptoms.

BRUSSELS

Breton visits Germany to seek support on EU’s development of ammunition By Marta Pacheco

European Commissioner for Internal Market, Thierry Breton, travelled to Germany on Thursday, where he met with government officials and defence industry manufacturers as part of his tour of EU defence industries.

The French Commissioner met with Defence State Secretary Benedikt Zimmer and exchanged views on the increased ammunition production for Ukraine and assessed the state of the EU’s security.



In Lower Saxony, the Commissioner visited a major defence equipment factory, Rheinmetall, together with Zimmer, where they talked with representatives of manufacturers in order to assess the needs of the defence industry.

Armin Papperger, CEO of Rheinmetall, told German newspaper Handelsblatt on the occasion of the Commissioner's visit that Rheinmetall would be able to increase shell production at its factory to 700,000 shells per year within the next year and a half to meet the needs of the Ukrainian armed forces.

The EU is considering providing further tailored support, including "through EU funds, and addressing relevant bottlenecks".

Breton's visit follows the Commission's announcement on Wednesday to "urgently boost

EU defence industry capacities in ammunition production".

The aim is to produce 1 million rounds of ammunition within one year – €500 million from the EU budget into EU shell factories to boost weapons manufacturing, matched with €500 million from EU countries.

"The Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) is unprecedented. We want to directly support, with EU money, the ramp-up of our defence industry for Ukraine and for our own security," said Breton.

"Europe has a substantial, diversified defence production capacity. It does not have the scale today to meet the security needs of Ukraine and our Member States, but it certainly has the potential to do so," he added.

Next week, Breton will complete his defence industry tour. These field visits have been driven by the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) regulation, which aims at supporting the EU's industry in ramping up its production capacities in ammunition and missiles.

"Our ammunition production industry in Europe is ready to increase the rate of production to 1 million rounds per year, and the Union must make it happen. This is one more step towards a concrete European sovereignty and an opportunity to support jobs for Europeans," said MEP Nathalie Loiseau, Chair of the Subcommittee on Security and Defence.

In March, more than a dozen EU countries agreed to supply Ukraine with at least one million artillery shells over the next year – a plan worth €2bn in total.

BRUSSELS

Ukraine crisis will hit economy but EU is ready

By Martin Banks

The EU admits there is "persistent uncertainty" stemming from Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. But it also says that the European economy "continues to show resilience in a challenging global context."

Lower energy prices, abating supply constraints and a strong labour market supported moderate growth in the first quarter of 2023, it announced.

This, adds the Commission, has dispelled fears of a recession. The



“better-than-expected” start to the year lifts the growth outlook for the EU economy to 1.0% in 2023 and 1.7% in 2024.

Inflation has also been revised upwards, to 5.8% in 2023 and 2.8% in 2024, in the euro area.

In a statement, the EC said, “The European economy has managed to contain the adverse impact of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, weathering the energy crisis thanks to a rapid diversification of supply and a sizeable fall in gas consumption.”

Markedly lower energy prices are working their way through the economy, reducing firms’ production costs. Consumers are also seeing their energy bills fall, although private consumption is set to remain subdued as wage growth lags inflation.

A record-strong labour market also seems to be bolstering the resilience of the EU economy.

The EU unemployment rate hit a new record low of 6.0% in March 2023, and participation and employment rates are at record highs, according to the EC.

The forecast publication includes, for the first time, an overview of the economic structural features, recent performance and outlook for Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which were granted candidate status for EU membership in June and December 2022.

Commenting on the findings, BusinessEurope Director General Markus J. Beyrer said, “Top quality competitiveness checks are



needed for all EU policy and regulatory initiatives.”

He added, “We urgently need to define and implement a strong and ambitious long-term competitiveness strategy ensuring that Europe becomes the place to invest and do business again.

“Concrete actions are needed to reduce the cost of compliance with European regulation. We welcome President von der Leyen’s recent pledge to reduce reporting burden by 25%, and look forward to tangible proposals.

“The European Commission must live up to its commitment to carry out top quality competitiveness checks on all EU regulatory initiatives, taking the cumulative impact of EU legislation on companies into account. In addition to individual legislative initiatives, the competitiveness check should assess the impacts of strategies and Commission annual work programmes in their entirety.”

He also said more concrete actions needed to achieve a fully functioning Single Market.

The message was timed to coincide with the publication of the

European Commission communication “The Single Market at 30”.

He said, “European companies consider that the EU Single Market is the crown jewel of the European Union. 30 years is a significant milestone to celebrate, but it is also time for concrete actions for the benefit of citizens and businesses. We welcome the Commission’s acknowledgement of the urgent need to deepen the Single Market. But the proposed actions fall short of addressing barriers to the internal market for services. For example, 60% of current barriers to the provision of services have been there for 20 years and now also hamper the twin transition.

“A thorough screening of permitting, licencing and authorisation schemes, also beyond the narrow scope of services related to clean-tech, would help move forward.

“A fully-fledged programme to advance the Single Market integration by removing regulatory barriers to cross-border business operations and reducing bureaucracy has the potential to unleash €713 billion by the end of 2029. The time to act is now.”

BRUSSELS

The Need for Methane Emission Regulation to Combat Climate Change

By Sarhan Basem

The European Parliament is taking an important step towards regulating methane emissions by adopting a new, ambitious legislation. In this context, the EU is discussing the importance of regulating methane emissions and the need to extend the scope of regulation to imports.



MEP Pascal Canfin, the ENVI chair and rapporteur on this file, stated, "We need to regulate our methane emissions in the same way as we do with our CO2 emissions if we are to be consistent in the fight against climate change."



This statement highlights the importance of regulating methane emissions to combat climate change. Methane has a warming effect that is 28 times greater than that of CO2, making it a potent greenhouse gas. Therefore, regulating methane emissions is crucial in reducing global warming and achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement.

The Role of Fossil Fuel Imports



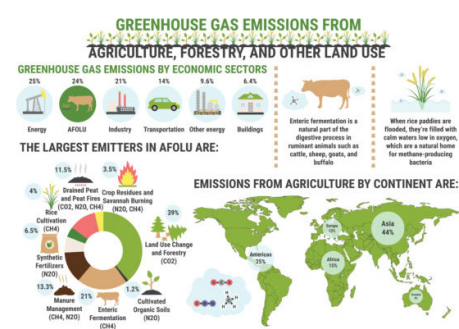
The majority of methane emissions are linked to fossil fuel imports. Therefore, extending the scope of regulation to imports will be essential in reducing global methane emissions. Canfin welcomed the extension of the scope of regulation to imports, indicating the significance of regulating methane emissions in the fight against climate change.

The European Union (EU) has pledged to sharply reduce methane emissions at the COP26 in Glasgow, and an ambitious Methane Regulation demonstrates the EU's commitment to achieving this goal.



Regulation preventing methane emissions and capturing waste gases are crucial tools in achieving climate neutrality.

MEP Martin Hojsík stated, "Preventing methane emissions and capturing gas that would have previously been wasted, is one of the key tools towards climate neutrality. It is a solution that brings several benefits – slows down climate change and brings back valuable economic and energy sources."



Methane emission regulation can have multiple benefits, including slowing down climate change, providing valuable eco-

conomic and energy sources, and reducing air pollution.

In conclusion, regulating methane emissions is essential in combating climate change. The adoption of an ambitious position by the European Parliament is a step towards achieving this goal. The extension of the scope

of regulation to imports is necessary to reduce global methane emissions.

Methane emission regulation can have multiple benefits, including slowing down climate change, providing valuable economic and energy sources, and reducing air pollution.

The EU's commitment to achieving its international obligations and reducing methane emissions can be a significant step towards achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement and promoting a sustainable future for all.

BRUSSELS

EU research commissioner Mariya Gabriel resigns By Martin Banks

Mariya Gabriel, the European Union's Commissioner for Research and Innovation, has stepped down from her position in the EU to undertake the task of establishing a new coalition government in Bulgaria. Gabriel was chosen by Boyko Borissov, the leader of her party, to assume the role of Bulgaria's next prime minister last week.

On Monday, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev granted her the official mandate to form a government. Initially appointed as the commissioner for digital affairs in 2017, Gabriel later assumed responsibility for research, innovation, education, and culture at the beginning of the current term in 2019.

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has praised outgoing EU commissioner Mariya Gabriel following her shock resignation.

Gabriel, the European Commissioner for Innovation and Re-



search, quit on Monday to focus on helping to form Bulgaria's next coalition government.

She had served as European Commissioner since 2017, when she replaced Kristalina Georgieva, now the head of the International Monetary Fund, as commissioner in charge of the digital economy and society.

Gabriel has been nominated by the centre-right GERB party to lead the upcoming negotiations.

No direct replacement for Gabriel has so far been named, so Vice

President Margrethe Vestager will cover her duties for the time being along with fellow commissioner Margaritis Schinas.

In a statement, von der Leyen said, "Commissioner Mariya Gabriel has informed me that today she will be presented to the President of the Republic of Bulgaria to receive the institutional mandate to form a government.

"She has therefore submitted her resignation as a member of the College of Commissioners.

"I have accepted her resignation."

She added, “I would like to thank Mariya Gabriel for her service as Commissioner for Innovation, research, culture, education, and Youth. In her three and a half years in this role, she has made a great contribution to advancing the Commission’s priorities in this area.

“I am grateful in particular to Commissioner Gabriel for the excellent implementation of our flagship innovation program Horizon Europe, for the strong push for

innovation and start-ups through the European Innovation Council, and for her personal engagement in making the European Year of Youth a success.

“I would also like to thank Commissioner Gabriel for her constructive and friendly contribution to the work of the College of Commissioners, in general.

“I wish Mariya Gabriel all the best and I am confident that her European experience, in this and the previous College of Commis-

sioners, will be put to good use for the country.”

Von der Leyen added, “In the meantime, Executive Vice-President Margrethe Vestager and Vice-President Margaritis Schinas will be in charge of overseeing Commissioner Gabriel’s portfolio, with immediate effect. Executive Vice-President Vestager will be responsible for innovation and research, while Vice-President Schinas will be in charge of education, culture, and youth.”

BRUSSELS

European Banking Union in Crisis: Why EDIS is a Bad Idea

By Sam Vaknin

Banks are the most unsafe institutions in the world. Worldwide, hundreds of them crash every few years. The fact that banks are very risky is proven by the inordinate number of regulatory bodies which supervise their activities.

As far as banking goes, the European Union is a heterogeneous area with weaker, more vulnerable financial systems in the south and east. Introducing a European Insurance Deposit Insurance Scheme (EDIS), which draws on the national resources of Deposit Guarantee Schemes (DGSs), would penalise countries such as Germany and Austria.

This punitive disparity has led to a stalemate. Even as other components of the envisaged European banking union – su-



pervision (SSM) and resolution (SRM), most notably – have fallen into place, EDIS remains controversial.

At the heart of this conundrum is a debate about who should be left holding the can when banks fail: shareholders and creditors – or taxpayers and savers? The EU Commission leans towards the latter, to the evident displeasure of the more liquid, austere, and disciplined member countries.

The European banking union seeks to decouple banking risks from geography. Depositor confidence would no longer reflect the level of trust (or distrust) in local authorities. The EU will become a universal guarantor and shock absorber for banks of all sizes, drawing on the resources of national DGSs.

This would be similar to the situation in federated entities such as the USA, Mexico, or the Russian Federation. But this is a superficial similarity. The EU is not nearly as homogeneous and centrally managed as the USA, either fiscally and monetarily.

Many of the initiatives of the European banking union, such as the sovereign bond-backed securities (SBBS), make eminent sense. But EDIS is an exception: it would have an adverse impact on the risk profile of banks in the EU and create moral hazard in many of its territories, especially in southern and eastern Europe.

Deposit insurance should be an instrument of last resort. After all, legal steps have been exhausted to recover funds from

shareholders and creditors. Even then, it behoves it to be limited. Every stakeholder in the banking system needs to do their due diligence before they plunge into a relationship with a financial institution.

Moreover: deposit insurance ought to reflect local risks and be responsive to idiosyncratic information about the profiles of depositors, lenders, borrowers, and intermediaries.

A Europe wide insurance scheme is liable to foster recklessness and engender deceitful practices in pockets of the industry, among specific types of lenders and borrowers, or at times of bubbly irrational exuberance.

In short: EDIS may boost depositor confidence in the short-term, but as banking crises proliferate, it will come to be seen as liability among the more sober and responsible members of the Union. Such discontent can lead to a serious rupture in the solidarity of the banking sector as reified by institutions such as the ECB, SSM, and SRM.

A better idea would be to group banks by size across the EU and create the EU-wide equivalents of the mutual deposit guarantee schemes among Volksbanks, Sparkassen, and Raiffeisenbanks in Germany and in Austria.

The industry must bear the brunt of its own miscalculations and misconduct. The only way to secure this outcome is to force banks with the same financial profile (e.g., small or medium-sized) across the entire area

of the EU to forge together insurance schemes, replete with annual contributions.

These premiums payable by the member financial institutions will be based on the bank's own unique risk profile, the risk profile of the bank's domicile and of the geographical distribution of its operations (credit ratings), and the risk profile of the EU itself, i.e., the market risk (the equivalents of alpha and betas in portfolio management).

The EU-wide schemes will spring into action only when relevant DGSs had failed. At no point will savers, depositors, or taxpayers be asked to foot the bill unless all the insurance schemes have exhausted their combined resources (a highly unlikely event).

Deposit insurance schemes should be allowed to issue and sell bonds (borrow) and to temporarily own equity and debt instruments of failing banks. In short: in some respects, they should function a lot like modern central banks.

EDIS is an antiquated concept which penalizes the virtuous to salvage the profligate and the reckless. This is not right – or sustainable in the long run.



 BRUSSELS

MEPs raise concerns over draft EU-US data transfer deal

By Martin Banks

MEPs are in the United States this week for meetings with their U.S. counterparts working on EU-US cooperation on justice and home affairs.

The delegation in Washington D.C. includes LIBE chair Juan Fernando López Aguilar and S&D spokesperson for justice and home affairs Birgit Sippel.

They will speak to counterparts about the protection of personal data, internal security, women's rights and visa reciprocity.

It comes after members voted on the issue last week.

They claim the vote sent a message to the Commission over what they say are insufficient safeguards in the EU-US Data Privacy Framework.

In a plenary vote, with 306 votes in favour, MEPs urged the European Commission to refrain from adopting an adequacy decision on the transfer of personal data between the EU and the US until it is clear that EU citizens' rights are sufficiently protected.

According to the Parliament, reforms introduced by an Executive Order of the President of the United States that were aimed at resolving previous failed agreements are not enough.

MEPs are keen to introduce a sunset clause that would allow



the adequacy decision to expire and would trigger a renewal process that upholds the EU's data privacy standard.

The vote was held by Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs.

Commenting, Juan Fernando López Aguilar, Chair of the LIBE committee, said: "Like its predecessors Safe Harbor and Privacy Shield, we are concerned that the new EU-US framework will yet again be rejected in the European courts. Citizens and businesses need certainty, not more doubt, and we are not there yet.

"We are not convinced that the new framework sufficiently protects the personal data of our citizens. The Commission needs to deal with the concerns raised

by the European Data Protection Board and the Civil Liberties Committee so that we can reach equivalent levels of data protection between the EU and the US, even if that means reopening the negotiations."

Further comment comes from Marina Kaljurand, S&D MEP and shadow rapporteur for the EU-US Data Privacy Framework.

She said, "I would like to recognise the Commission's negotiation efforts and the legal steps taken by the Biden Administration. But this new framework is still not enough to fill our citizens with full confidence that their rights will be adequately protected."

Meanwhile, the EPP Group in parliament say it wants European

data on US servers to have equivalent protection as on servers in the EU.

The EPP Group says it supports the European Commission's plan

to consider US data protection provisions as adequate.

"A solid legal basis for transatlantic data transfer is very important for businesses, especially

small companies, which do not have the legal and financial capacity to avail themselves of other data storage services," a spokesman said.

BRUSSELS

European Parliament Implements Cuts to Lavish MEP Pension Fund

By Aleksandar Srbinovski

The EU Parliament has made the decision to reduce payouts from the heavily indebted 'luxury' MEP pension scheme by 50 percent, freeze automatic indexations, and increase the pension age from 65 to 67.

The move comes as a measure to prevent a potential bailout that could cost EU taxpayers millions. Over 900 former members, including ex-pro-Brexit MEPs and current EU commissioners, currently receive substantial monthly payouts from the additional pension fund.

However, the pension scheme, which operated for two decades before closing to new members in 2009, is projected to deplete its funds by early 2025, potentially leaving EU taxpayers with a burden of €310 million.

During a closed-door meeting, senior EU lawmakers in charge of the institution's finances opted to cut payouts to beneficiaries by half, raise the eligible age, freeze annual inflation-linked increases, and offer beneficiaries a one-time option to leave the scheme.

The decision is expected to extend the fund's lifespan until the



second half of 2027 and reduce the funding deficit to approximately €86 million. The final resolution on whether to allow the scheme to collapse or use taxpayer money for a bailout is postponed until after the 2024 EU elections.

The Bureau rejected a less extensive option that would have only reduced payouts and frozen indexation. Potential legal action by beneficiaries has influenced the decision-making process of the Parliament. While the chosen solution carries a moderate level of legal risk, it aims to minimize negative consequences for European taxpayers.

The fate of the pension scheme

may ultimately be tested in the courts, and some MEPs argue that winding it up entirely should be considered. Measures implemented now are seen as temporary solutions that will prolong the fund's existence for a few more years.

The chosen course of action has prompted mixed reactions from MEPs, with some stating that the fund should have been closed earlier and calling for commissioners to voluntarily withdraw from the scheme. The decision-making process involved discussions and analysis of legal implications, aiming to strike a balance between reducing the deficit and protecting European taxpayers.



📍 BRUSSELS

Connectivity as the guiding principle of contemporary societies

By Lieven Taillie

The idea connectivity is a megatrend in this 21st century is not new but gains continuously more importance. It was already very present in the previous decade in EU pep talks on EU relations with Asia eg. It is also the abbreviation most used for one of the Directorates General of the European Commission (DG Connect) and remains a buzzword present in the different summits and exchanges with leaders of non-EU countries worldwide. Connectivity was and is in EC jargon understood as permitting closer economic and personal relationships and includes hard and soft factors, infrastructure as well as cultural relations.



and megatrends influence each other. iF Design was founded in 1953 as Die Gute Industrieform e.V under the impulse of the visionary entrepreneur and designer Philip Rosenthal, then at the head of the famous porcelain manufacturer of the same name. iF design is known worldwide for its yearly prizes rewarding outstanding creativity and design in different competitions.

The trend report was written in collaboration with the ZukunftsInstitut Frankfurt. They pointed out 6 megatrends that have a particularly great impact on design. First and most present is connectivity, reaching far beyond digital technology. One conclusion is that the two dimensions “real” and “digital” are merging and indeed we realize bit by bit how this is the new nor-

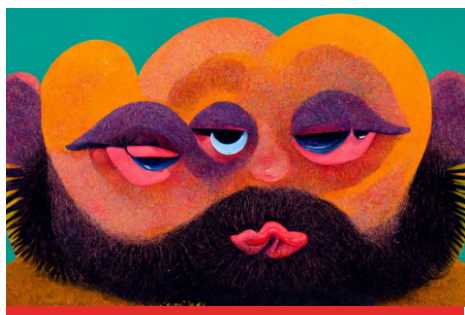
mal in our daily life environment eg. when driving a car, meeting online and so much more such as listening to music, taking a flight and getting stopped by the police. The increasing invasion of artificial intelligence (AI) across all parts of society prompts many questions and challenges for our societies. How to adapt our views on what is human?

What is fairness when computers shape decision-making, who is creating the future and how can we ensure that these creators reflect diverse communities and complex social dynamics? We find an attempt to elaborate on all this in the excellent brochure written by the New York artists Mimi Onuoha and Diana Nucera, alias Mother Cyborg, back in 2018, entitled “A people’s guide to AI” . It



Mid May the iF Design Forum published its second design trend report which summarizes the influence of megatrends on current global design – showing the impact design disciplines have on each other and how social trends

also features a glossary of terms useful to follow and enter the ongoing debates. Debates which these days are also fueled by the legislative process going on in the EU that is advancing in adapting an AI Act.



An Eu pioneer in setting standards.

When the European Commission unveiled in April 2021 its proposition for a new Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act) in April 2021 they also proposed to adapt a set of rules tailored on a risk-based approach with four levels of risks: unacceptable, high-risk, limited risk and minimal risk AI. Unacceptable harmful uses of AI that contravene EU values such as social scoring by governments will be banned because of the unacceptable risk they create.

In its position of december 6 in 2022, the European Council voicing the member states' positions, extended to private actors the prohibition on using AI for social scoring. Furthermore, the provision prohibiting the use of AI systems that exploit the vulnerabilities of a specific group of persons now also covers persons who are vulnerable due to their social or economic situation. As regards the prohibition of the use of 'real-time' remote biometric

identification systems in publicly accessible spaces by law enforcement authorities, the text clarifies the objectives where such use is strictly necessary for law enforcement purposes and for which law enforcement authorities should therefore be exceptionally allowed to use such systems.

Now MEP's, as we can read in the press release of the EP, substantially amended the list in their text to include bans on intrusive and discriminatory uses of AI systems such as biometric identification systems. It is worth going through the list that can be found in the press release (AI Act: a step closer to the first rules on Artificial Intelligence | News | European Parliament) of which we took over several passages. One should take the time to inform oneself on the classification of high risk areas where they added beside the harm to people's health, safety, fundamental rights or the environment also AI systems to influence voters in political campaigns and in recommender systems used by social media platforms (with more than 45 million users under the Digital Services Act) to the high-risk list. Obligations for providers of foundation models* who would have to guarantee robust protection of fundamental rights, health and safety and the environment, democracy and rule of law, are also added. These providers would need to assess and mitigate risks, comply with design, information and environmental requirements and register in the EU database. Generative foundation models, like GPT, would have to comply

with additional transparency requirements, like disclosing that the content was generated by AI, designing the model to prevent it from generating illegal content and publishing summaries of copyrighted data used for training.

This made tycoons in AI such as Sam Altman from OpenAI, the company that developed the bot Chat GPT, and Elon Musk as owner of Twitter threatening to withdraw from the European market as they consider this legislation over regulates too much, but what is too much? It is in an interesting and factual way discussed in the American news website Quartz in an article by Ananya Bhattacharia published on May 25. The central technological question seems to be how to respond to the honest question of transparency over the data collected to train the algorithm.

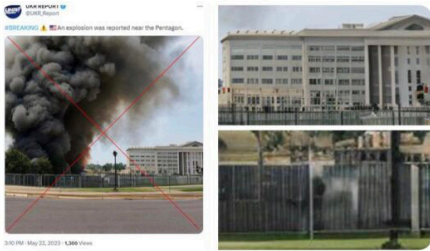
Beside those who are on a collision course you have most that are on a wait and see stance and on the other side you have Sundar Pichai, CEO of Alphabet that is Google's parent company, who is taking a proactive approach in collaborating with the lawmakers in the EU working on an AI pact ahead of the definitive adoption of the AI regulation. Thierry Breton, the responsible European Commissioner, is clearly also on this line and dismissed the statements of Sam Altman as blackmail , objecting to the statement that regulation is going to hamper progress in generative AI.



Nick Waters
@N_Waters89

Confident that this picture claiming to show an "explosion near the pentagon" is AI generated.

Check out the frontage of the building, and the way the fence melds into the crowd barriers. There's also no other images, videos or people posting as first hand witnesses.



16:19 · 22.5.23 from Earth · 797K Views

390 Retweets 111 Quotes

A proportional regulation.

When the text in the EP was voted, Romanian MEP Dragos Tudorachi from Renew, rapporteur for the Committee on Civil Liberties (LIBE), very triumphantly declared: "The AI Act is very likely the most important piece of legislation in this mandate. And it's the first legislation of this kind worldwide, which means that the EU can lead the way, globally, in making AI human-centric, trustworthy, and safe." He was echoed by the other rapporteur, Italian Brando Benifei of the Socialists (S&D) of the Internal Market Committee (IMCO): "We are on the verge of putting in place landmark legislation that must resist the challenge of time. It is crucial to build citizens' trust in the development of AI, to set the European way for dealing with the extraordinary changes that are already happening, as well as to steer the political debate on AI at the global level. We are

confident our text balances the protection of fundamental rights with the need to provide legal certainty to businesses and stimulate innovation in Europe".

Both rapporteurs will also have to negotiate on behalf of the EP the final legislative text with the negotiators from the Council after the EP votes the text in the plenary, expected to happen during the mid June session in Strasbourg. We'll see what comes out at the end but meanwhile we may expect further discussions worldwide where balances in regulating lay and also how further research can be done. This attention for further research and development is present in the draft legislation as we can read in the press bulletin stating the draft pays attention to the way innovation is supported while protecting citizen's rights. To boost AI innovation, MEPs added exemptions to these rules for research activities and AI components provided under open-source licenses. The new law promotes regulatory sandboxes, or controlled environments, established by public authorities to test AI before its deployment. MEPs want to boost citizens' right to file complaints about AI systems and receive explanations of decisions based on high-risk AI systems that significantly impact their rights. MEPs also reformed the role of the EU AI Office, which would be tasked with monitoring how the AI rulebook is implemented.

Despite the outcry from Elon Musk and Sam Altman it is clear that generative AI poses concerns and over the whole world

critics are calling for increased oversight. China, India and also, though more hesitating the US, are also thinking of developing their own rules but the EU is the closest to creating a first-of-its-kind regulation for ChatGPT-like AI tools, showing the way as she did with the GDPR rules. And funny enough even Chat GPT, as Quartz news site remembers us, in response to a request by journal Scientific American, penned a thoughtful essay on how ChatGPT should be regulated. It established a need to strike a balance, identifying that "overly strict regulations could stifle innovation" but "insufficient regulation could lead to abuses of the

A question of democracy.

Paul Nemitz, principal advisor for the DG Justice and consumers in the EC, interviewed by Gian Paolo Accardo of Vox Europe, explicitly makes the link with democracy and different world views: "Without binding law, the power of technology to shape society lies solely in the hands of those who develop and own it. If society were organized in this way, democracy would not work, nor could we ensure respect for fundamental rights. The EU's internal market also needs regulation, because without a law at EU level, we would soon have a fragmentation of legislation across 27 Member States and thus no functioning internal market in high technology. The EU's AI Act addresses many important issues related to the development and use of AI and, like everything in democracy, will be an act of compromise, a compromise in the

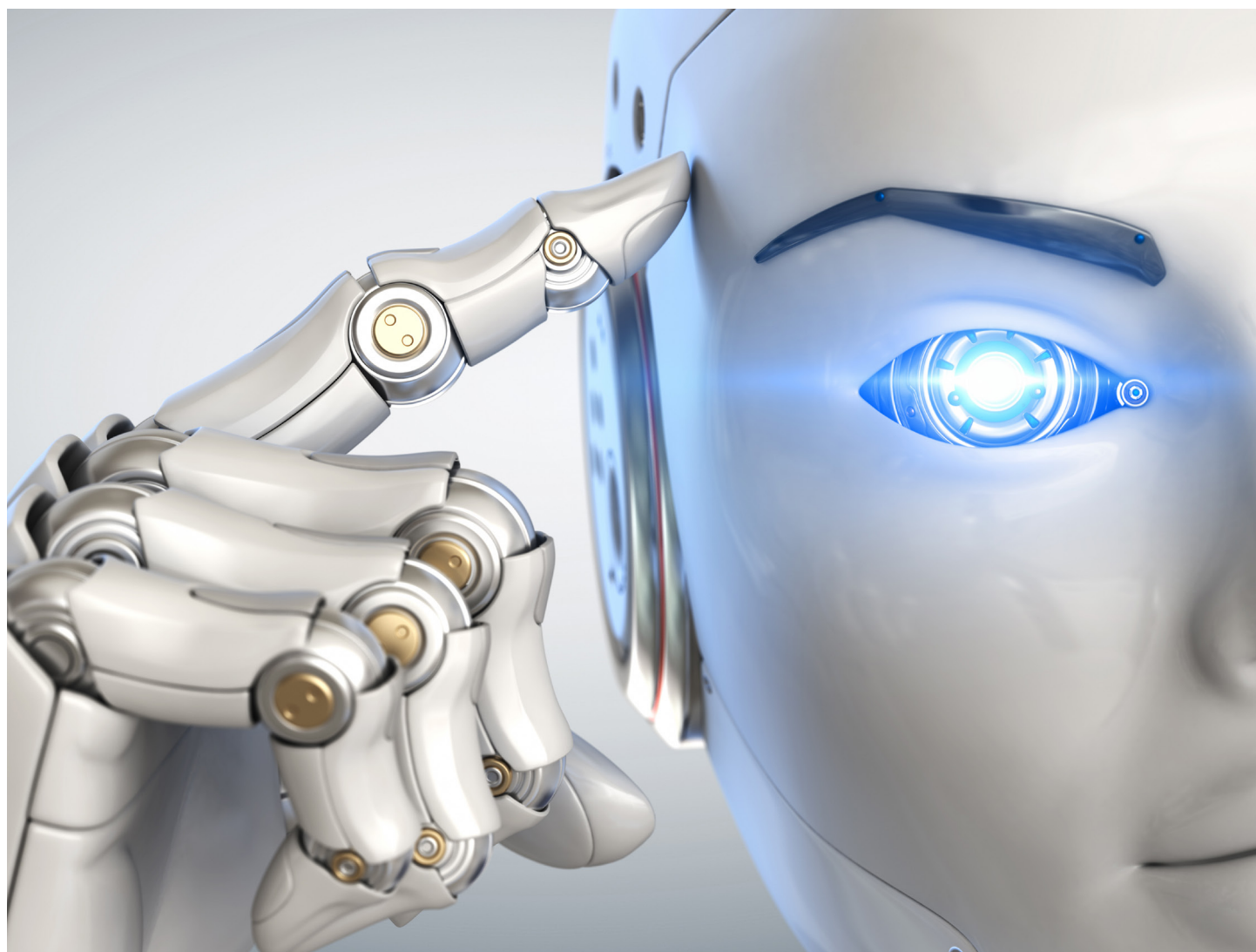
right direction between different political world views.

"Therefore we may see the provocative declarations of the tycoons dealing in AI as part of the power game they have the habit to play and an expression of their different worldview giving way to a more conflictual way to arrive at a compromise. In the EU juridical culture with the eminence of civil law is different and even more now after Brexit, than the one in common law regimes. It can be useful to read again the work of Donald Kalff and Andrea Renda, 'Hidden Treasures', edited by the Brussels Think Tank CEPS in 2019, trying to map Europe's

sources of competitive advantage in doing business whereby they put in number one of the hidden treasures the efficiency of EU contract law. In particular the issue of pre-contractual liability has been subject to a completely diverging treatment in civil law and common law systems.

They make the point that precisely this offers an advantage at times innovative enterprises operate on a project basis in the context of open innovation projects that often need tailor made coalitions of institutions and enterprises. Contractual schemes are essential and the availability of a well shaped legal framework

can significantly reduce transaction costs, facilitating partners by offering efficient default options and helping partners avoid detailed, complex negotiations in which typically the strongest parties have more resources and superior bargaining power. In previous articles we stressed the importance of avoiding errors in design. We get the impression this legislation realizes a balanced interaction of connectivity and disconnectivity but of course the proof of the pudding is in eating it. We'll first see what kind of legal pudding will finally be served and how it will be digested by us all.





Parliament reviews the pandemic: What we need to be ready for

By Pernille Weiss MEP, EPP, DK

When COVID-19 hit Europe, it had serious consequences and we were faced with a major challenge. This has been on my mind during the year I have spent as a member of the European Parliament's specialized committee on lessons learned from the coronavirus pandemic and recommendations on how to better prepare the EU for the next health crisis. All of this is summarised in the so-called COVI report.

MEPs have submitted more than 4000 amendments to the draft report. So, my 63 amendments don't take up much space in the overall landscape. However, even if they only represent a breadth of all the amendments, they are still important.

The report risks being forgotten among the many crises of our time. After all, there is a war in Ukraine, an energy crisis, and a climate battle that has not yet been won. However, this does not mean that we should forget to learn lessons from the pandemic we have experienced.

Because a new epidemic can develop into a pandemic again. Just as our increasing age and weight, declining population, resistance to antibiotics, and the prevalence of chronic, multimorbid, and co-morbid conditions



are spreading, pose potential health crises. In addition, investments in research and innovation generally shy away from the EU because the regulatory environment has become a jungle of bureaucracy and rules that either work against each other or simply do not make sense or add value. The EU can be a regulatory monster. We need to put an end to this if the Europe we know is to have a future.

Therefore, the COVI report must be taken seriously!

What I have emphasized in my input to the report represents good cooperation with experts with whom I have been in close dialogue. Some of them have participated in the committee's many consultations at my sug-

gestion. We all agree on that we need a high speed of investment in thorough analyses of what happened and what could have happened – and what must not happen again. We need much more effective communication and coordination on prevention, preparation, response time and vaccines. Chains of command and responsibilities also need to be much clearer and more logical. It sounds banal, but it is crucial.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control was poorly prepared in terms of competencies and funding. However, the EMA, the EU's medicines agency, stepped up a gear as the pandemic developed. We want to keep it in high gear. Fast-track authorization of vaccines and other equally important medicines

should be approved faster than in the past. Especially citizens with low vaccine response rates need it.

There need for much more multi- and interdisciplinarity in our healthcare systems. Furthermore, we need to consider, that knowledge about health is – and always will be – uneven between different groups of the population. This needs to be recognized.

Intensive care staff need to be up to date with the latest knowledge and research. In many areas, they weren't. As with most things in the health sector, this is a national responsibility. But it is also a shared duty to monitor each other better. This also applies to the number of intensive care beds and the amount of protective equipment. We must be able to produce enough ourselves, and every country must have its own stocks ready for use.

In addition, there are a lot of concrete things that can be done.

All health institutions and civil society, including cultural and sports organizations, must be much more involved than they were. In addition, the health industry's many small and medium-sized enterprises must be involved from the start, as they are often innovative and agile in responding to urgent needs and opportunities.

Moreover, the solution is not to simply close borders between countries during a pandemic. That saves no one and only hurts the economy. Right when we need it the most to generate money for unforeseen expenses. Supply chains must be kept open to ensure the production of essential groups of goods. In this context, a battle must be fought – again and again – to remove all unnecessary administrative burdens on business. Even in peacetime. In times of crisis, administrative burdens tend to grow like weeds and hit small and medium-sized enterprises doubly

disproportionately. This reflects a dangerous and systematic structure that stifles the desire to do business and thereby create jobs. The jobs that are needed to generate the economy for what we need during a sudden health crisis. On the contrary, small and medium-sized enterprises must be recognized. This can be done, for example, with advance payments for orders that need to be delivered quickly and on a large scale.

In my proposals for the report, I am, of course, once again emphasizing the importance of not threatening to abolish patent rights for vaccines, medicines, and the like. This will not boost production anyway. On the contrary, it will scare pharmaceutical companies away from the close cooperation on health, which the EU should always prioritize.

COVID-19 has provided us with valuable lessons. We must learn from them – if we are to preserve the Europe we know.

BRUSSELS

A Vision for a Democratic Türkiye in Europe

By Kader Sevinç

As the EU Envoy of the Turkish president frontrunner Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and the head of the Republican People's Party (CHP) Representation to the EU, I am filled with confidence about the future of a democratic Türkiye in Europe. With the upcoming pivotal 2023 elections on Sunday, our six-party coalition bloc, the Nation Alliance, has outlined



a roadmap for democratic transformation that will guide us toward a true European democracy.

Under the leadership of presidential candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the Nation Alliance coalition is committed to transforming Türkiye into a nation that upholds democratic values. As the second-larg-

est political family represented in the EU, the Party of European Socialists (PES) has expressed its support for Kılıçdaroğlu's pledge to fast-track the EU visa liberalization process for Turkish citizens. The PES sees Kılıçdaroğlu and the united opposition as a beacon of hope for democracy, human rights, freedom, cooperation, and bringing Türkiye closer to Europe.

Our coalition's vision encompasses various key elements. We aim to prioritize the democratization of Türkiye, strengthen ties with EU institutions and member states, swiftly complete the EU visa liberalization process for Turkish citizens, revitalize EU membership negotiations, and implement the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. Additionally, we aspire to enhance Türkiye's credibility as a NATO member, contributing to the security and stability of Europe amid geopolitical and economic uncertainties.

The Nation Alliance coalition, with its largest member, the CHP, is fully committed to meeting the EU's 72 visa liberalization criteria. Kılıçdaroğlu, as our frontrunner joint presidential candidate, has pledged to fulfill the remaining five benchmarks within the first three months of the new government. These benchmarks include measures to prevent corruption, align legislation on personal data and anti-terror laws with EU standards, establish an operational cooperation agreement with Europol, and provide effective judicial cooperation in criminal matters to all EU member states.

As European social democrats and progressives, we are delighted to have the CHP and Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership driving progress towards fulfilling the remaining critical criteria for visa liberalization. Türkiye is an essential partner for us, and we support any steps that bring the country closer to the fundamental values we share, as stated by PES Executive Secretary General Giacomo Filibeck.



Since 2008, the CHP has maintained a representative office to the EU in Brussels, actively contributing to the multidimensional communication channels of EU-Türkiye relations and the EU accession framework. We strive to maintain high-level contacts with the EU and actively participate in PES meetings, ensuring a constructive and meaningful engagement.

Sunday's elections in Türkiye present a historic opportunity for our citizens to elect a fully democratic government. Recognized as the most significant election in Europe in 2023 due to its potential impact on the Western world, it holds the promise of establishing a democratic and prosperous Türkiye that is respected internationally on its path to EU accession.

These elections will demonstrate that democratic means can peacefully bring about a change in an authoritarian government, even in the face of unjust conditions and ongoing oppression against the opposition. Türkiye, once again, has the potential to inspire nations fighting autocratic regimes. Let us not forget that

our Republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, inspired reformers across Europe and the world with his commitment to secularism and the will of the people, laying the foundation for the Republic of Türkiye.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that Türkiye's future lies within the European democratic family. Our vision, backed by the Nation Alliance coalition and the support of progressive forces in Europe, will pave the way for Türkiye to realize its full potential as a democratic and prosperous nation. By prioritizing democratization, upholding the rule of law, and strengthening our ties with the EU, Türkiye can bridge the gap between our shared values and aspirations.

The road to EU accession may present challenges but we are prepared to tackle them head-on. Our commitment to meeting the EU's visa liberalization criteria is unwavering, and we understand the importance of aligning our legislation with European standards. We are determined to combat corruption, protect personal data, and enhance our cooperation with Europol to ensure effective law enforcement.

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Furthermore, we recognize the significance of implementing the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. Respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms is not just a legal obligation but a moral imperative. By embracing these principles, Türkiye can strengthen its position as a reliable partner within the international community.

As we aspire to become a more credible member of NATO, we understand the crucial role we play in contributing to the security and stability of Europe. In an era marked by global uncertainty, our commitment to NATO's values and collective defense is unwavering. By actively engaging in regional and global security initiatives, we can foster stronger alliances and promote peace in a volatile world.

The upcoming elections in Türkiye present an opportunity for us to

showcase the strength of our democracy. Despite the challenges and obstacles faced by the opposition, we remain steadfast in our belief that the power of the people can overcome any adversity. By exercising our democratic rights, we send a powerful message to the world: Türkiye is a nation committed to freedom, justice, and equality.

We draw inspiration from the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, whose visionary leadership transformed Türkiye into a modern, secular Republic. His ideals continue to resonate today as we strive to build a society where diversity is celebrated, and individual rights are protected. Atatürk's influence extended far beyond our borders, igniting the aspirations of democratic activists around the globe. We stand proudly in his footsteps, advocating for a Türkiye that embodies the values he holds dear.

The path towards a democratic Türkiye in Europe may not be easy, but with determination, unity, and the support of our allies, we can overcome any obstacle. We invite the European Union to engage in constructive dialogue with us, recognizing that our shared values form the foundation for a strong and prosperous partnership.

In closing, we remain optimistic about the future of Türkiye as a democratic member of the European family. Through our unwavering commitment to democratic principles, the rule of law, and human rights, we can forge a path toward a brighter tomorrow. Let us seize this historic opportunity and work together to create a Türkiye that not only fulfills the criteria for EU accession but also serves as a beacon of democracy and progress for the world to admire.

 BRUSSELS

Leading the Future of Cannabis Policy

By Cyrus Engerer MEP, SD, MT

When exactly ten years ago, I joined the protests in Valletta over the more than ten-year sentence Daniel Holmes had received over the cultivation of five plants, little did I think that we were going to revolutionize conservative Malta's laws to become Europe's benchmark.

Not seeing other politicians from mainstream parties at the protest, it was not fathomable that a few years later, I would be working bang in the heart of all these



changes nationally, and also push Europe to move forward, from my seat in the European Parliament.

The cannabis topic was nothing but a taboo in the only European directly elected institution. Some movement started being made on medicinal use but most were not keen on uttering any word on personal use, until together with my team, we decided to hold the first Europe-wide online (Covid Times) conference, right from my tiny office in the European Parliament in Brussels, bringing together experts, activists, scientists, judges, police officers, and politicians to discuss a scientific-human rights approach to cannabis.

Since the Maltese Government had launched a consultation process to forge the way forward, we used the conference to submit our proposal for legalization, and hey presto, our submission ended up being the basis of the law proposed by Minister Owen Bonnici some months later. What I never expected was to attend the Cannabis Europa conference in London and listen to one speaker after another declaring that in Europe, within the current international and European law context, Malta's law is what all others should be based on, at least for the time being.

The reality of the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971, the European Union's Schengen Agreement of 1990, and the Union Law Framework Decision of 2004 put Member States in a tight spot. Many say that these legal texts do not

allow cross-border trade of such substances even when they are no longer "illicit" in the two Member States seeking to trade. This could obviously be tried in front of the European Court of Justice, but it seems that no State wanting to legalize cannabis use wants to take the risk of having to halt any step forward.

We got the cross-border debate going by daring what had never been dared before. We founded the interest group on cannabis in the European Parliament. Named "Legalise It", we immediately started discussing possible ways in which we could change Europe's laws in order to allow Member States to be able to legalize cannabis for personal use and be able to trade.

When contacted by a number of German representatives in the Bundestag to go through the current legislation at the European level and explain the Maltese model, I was always astonished at how Germany was keen on the cross-border trade of cannabis, citing the adverse climate in Germany for cultivation as one of the main reasons.

When proposing the Maltese model we always held back from trade. My office's belief was to curtail big Pharma and others from taking over the market and controlling it. We wanted those who wanted to make use of cannabis to be able to grow their own strains, as we believe is their human right. For those who do not have the space or the green fingers to grow their own plants, we envisaged the ability to pool

resources together with others and be able to grow the plant together in not-for-profit associations.

Symbolically, following Daniel Holmes's unjust sentence ten years earlier, we pushed for five plants to be the limit allowed per household, the law passed by parliament set the limit at four. Malta is the first European law to legalize the cultivation of cannabis for personal use in households, where adults can also carry up to seven grams with them in public.

It is for these reasons, and also for bypassing the trade challenge, that the Maltese model is seen by many as the one that fits in well with the current European legal framework. Hence, that was the reason why one speaker after the next at the Cannabis Europa conference in London, made reference to the Maltese law as the current best one and also why Germany has moved on to propose a law based on the same model.

As I stated during the conference in the panel discussing EU legislation, I believe that while being the model referenced by all, it is one that still needs to be strengthened and improved. When we proposed our "leftist" or "progressive" model, we did not take into account a number of realities that became apparent once the law was enacted – What happens to those traveling to Malta on holiday that is not registered as residents?

Should they still be constrained to

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purchase buds through the black market? Given Malta's optimal climate, shouldn't it take advantage of its geographic location and be able to export to countries like Germany, where the climate is unfavorable?

These questions and others need to be studied well and while remaining firm in the belief that a science-based human-rights approach to cannabis is ideal, this needs to at some point be

amended to ensure better legislation. To do so, we must first work on changing European laws.

It is in this context that our interest group in the European Parliament will continue lobbying for change. Our core values of freedom of movement, of our single market, and of liberty and human rights must lead to the changes needed. What sense does it make to live in Czechia and when crossing the border to Slovakia to vis-

it your family, you're suddenly a criminal ten minutes by car away from your home?

The time for change is now. The smallest Member State has so far taken the first big step forward. It's time for Europe to hold a serious discussion on the way forward, staying true to our values, and being guided by science, while safeguarding people's human rights.

📍 BRUSSELS

Putting the joke back on Putin is a matter of energy efficiency

By Morten Helveg Petersen MEP, RE,DK

Jokingly, EPBD was nicknamed the European Putin Bashing Directive, while we negotiated the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive in the European Parliament last autumn. As it turned out the joke is on us.

According to European think tank Bruegel, EU countries transferred 140 billion euros to Russia in 2022. Payments for the import of Putin's fossil energy leave a trail of blood deep into the battlefields of Ukraine.

Surely, the European Union managed to diversify its gas supply over the year, in large part to other authoritarian regimes. Yet, there are still no sanctions in place on gas supplies from Russia, which currently supplies well above 10 percent of EU gas imports. Instead, Russia cut flows to the EU. Decades after Russia asked us to enter, Putin made us crawl.



Enter energy efficiency. EU countries combined managed to save an impressive 19 percent in gas consumption in the period August 2022 – January 2023 compared to previous years. Gas sav-

ings were a critical part of the EU's emergency response to the energy crisis, and might well have saved us from a rioting Europe. In the next few years however, Europe's gas supply-demand bal-

ance will remain extremely fragile and exposed to external influences we cannot control: colder winters, low output from renewables, increased LNG demands in other parts of the world – or yet another authoritarian supplier, who decides to punish Europe.

But the energy we do not consume cannot be weaponized and turned against us, which is why Western security politics begs for an intense political focus on energy efficiency and its obvious advantages: energy efficiency reduces demand, puts less pressure on the electricity grid, and can be implemented much faster than we can deploy new wind and solar parks.

Or as the International Energy Agency puts it: “While there are many ways for countries to address the current crisis, focusing on energy efficiency action is the unambiguous first and best response to simultaneously meet affordability, supply security, and climate goals.”

In other words, we have nothing but good reasons to address energy efficiency with utmost seriousness. The necessary political focus is, however, nowhere in sight.

As we enter the final negotiations, the so-called triologue, between the European Parliament, The European Commission, and the Council of the European Union, the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive is certain to meet deep national resistance over energy renovations of Europe’s building mass, which, mind you,

accounts for more than 1/3 of Europe’s energy consumption.

Likewise, the EU, Norway, and the UK has allocated a staggering 750 billion euro to shield consumers from rising energy costs. It is a noble purpose with a dark downside: the majority of allocations are direct subsidies, which work to increase energy demand.

However, expert calculations demonstrate that if measures in the European Parliament’s position on the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive were effectuated, even with full utilization of the possible derogations, amounting to 22 percent of the building mass in each country, we would still save 47 billion cubic meter gas. That equals 3/4 of today’s gas imports from Russia.

When internationally renowned geopolitical magazine ‘Foreign Affairs’ recently provided a lengthy in-depth analysis of the turn of world events over the past 18 months, it rightfully highlighted energy policy’s new position as a high-level security policy instrument, and equally rightfully pointed to solutions for designing the future energy systems with respect to the boosting of renewables and the protection of infrastructure. Energy efficiency was not mentioned in a single word.

It is like an echo of the past. I have been in energy politics since 2014, and as long as I can remember energy efficiency has appeared as some distant cousin in the policy room, present, but somehow positioned in a corner

where its full potential never sees the light of day.

While energy efficiency appears unsexy and pales in comparison with a 300 feet tall windmill, another explanation may come closer to the reluctant implementation of energy efficiency measures. All countries derive taxes from energy consumption. Consequently, energy efficiency might be a red flag to Finance Ministers across Europe.

Yet, the only red flag of importance should be those concerning our security and climate targets. Energy efficiency is key to both, yet it is an underexploited political tool. It is, however, a potential nightmare for Putin, and if we are in the business of putting the joke back on him, energy efficiency needs to be put to better use across Europe as soon as possible.



 BRUSSELS

Why is Europe still creating obstacles for the defense industry?

By Tomáš Zdechovský MEP, EPP,CZ

Europe can no longer do without its own effective defense. No sensible person will question that we need a sufficiently robust defense industry to achieve this goal. Whether we like it or not, the defense sector is crucial to ensuring the safety of all of us.

Despite this pretty obvious conclusion defense industry still faces several obstacles. Why? Because it fell out of favor with Europe in the past, similar to nuclear energy. Although the overall perception shifts, this industry remains to be seen as “unsustainable” or socially harmful.

Restrictions in the name of “sustainability”

Already the ancient Romans comprehended that if you want peace, you must prepare for war. But in recent European history, many have not lived by this truth. They even created a dangerous illusion that a state of peace could be so self-evident that we can safely ignore security because if armed conflicts occur somewhere, it is far away from us.

In the summer of 2021, a few months before the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the Platform on Sustainable Finance, an advisory group of the European Commission, even proposed to classify the arms industry in the taxonomy for sustainable economy



somewhere on par with gambling or the tobacco industry.

Even in January 2022, a few weeks before the outbreak of open conflict, there was talk of classifying arms production as partially socially harmful activities.

War in Ukraine and the Beginning of Sobriety

February 24, 2022, sobered many people up harshly. The prevailing attitude slowly began to shift. People started to understand that labeling the defense industry as harmful would mean a complete departure from common sense. Unfortunately, more than a year after the conflict erupted, problems still persist.

Let's take banks. They have long liked to use the term ESG, which stands for “environment,” “social,”

and “governance,” expressing consideration for the environment, social responsibility, and a responsible approach to company management in the provision of their services.

However, this attitude creates especially for smaller defense companies serious problems. In the eyes of banking institutions, they have not and will not be able to meet any of the three mentioned criteria.

While European legislation does not explicitly reject defense companies in this regard, on the other hand, the environmental taxonomy, a system for classifying economic activities of the European Commission perceived as sustainable investments, does not directly mention the defense sector as sustainable either.

It's up to the banks

This leaves investors and financial institutions in an interesting position. They must decide for themselves whether or not to include the defense industry in their “green” or “responsible” investment portfolios. Since several years, it has been an unspoken truth that sooner or later, the defense industry will become incompatible with sustainable financing; the persistent attitude of many banks is therefore not surprising at all.

Given this de facto exclusion, a fairly understandable easiest and least risky option for many financial institutions was to ban defense industry stocks from sustainable investment funds for security reasons. Some banks still hesitate to finance defense projects out of fear of possible rating deterioration.

Problems persist

The European arms industry, including those in the Czech Republic, has increased production

due to Russian aggression in Ukraine and is now producing at total capacity. This brought hope among many in the defense industry that the approach of banks would change.

While the change is happening, it is very slow. Representatives of smaller arms companies, in particular in the Czech Republic, continue to complain that they encounter various obstacles. While some banks provide loans to arms manufacturers, others are unwilling to lend and all and thus enable companies to produce more weapons and ammunition due to their internal rules.

Alternatively, banks offer way more expensive loans for operations or investments to arms companies. The problem is not only that they refuse to finance arms manufacturers but even to lead their accounts because it goes against their ethical codes that do not support arms production. In one case, a bank refused to open an account for a smaller company when it found

out they were producing military equipment.

Change on the horizon

There are still disadvantaged companies that arm forces of European countries and contribute to our security despite quite dubious “green” or “moral” considerations in this case.

The European Commission is already preparing changes that will make their financing a little easier. The change must come as soon as possible. I consider it absolutely absurd that a year after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the defense industry in Europe still has such a complicated position.

The security of Europe is at stake. The following words, which have been said in various ways many times, apply: Without weapons, there will be no security, and without security, the mentioned sustainability cannot exist. By throwing sticks in the wheels of the defense industry, Europe is cutting the branch it is sitting on.

BRUSSELS

Ready, set, go: no more polluting cars and vans by 2035

By Sara Cerdas MEP, SD,PT

The European Union (EU) has reached an agreement: by 2035 only zero-emission cars will be sold in our continent.

The new regulation, called ‘CO2-standards for cars and vans’, will gradually reduce CO2 emissions from cars and vans until they are completely decarbonised

in 2035, in line with EU climate goals. The CO2 cars legislation agreement is the first act of the Fit for 55 packages.

We now have an improved regulation that will positively impact the EU and keep us on the right path to reaching climate neutrality,

trying to stop the trajectory of the climate emergency that we are experiencing, while leaving no one behind.



There is an urgent need to act in the transport sector, which currently contributes to around 25% of the EU's total emissions, with 70%



coming from the roads, which justifies why all new cars must be zero emissions by 2035. The decision requires investment in charging infrastructure and raw materials for the transition and, not least, in workers in the sector, in their adaptation, training and reconversion to jobs in an industry that wants to be sustainable. The regulation gives clarity to the industry and guides its direction, as is already happening all over the world. It is a small step in the myriad of measures that we have to take.

Considering that the useful life of a car is from 10 to 15 years, it

will guarantee the renewal of the current fleet for less polluting cars, which will make it possible for us to reach climate neutrality in 2050 – a goal to which the EU has committed in the European Climate Law.

This agreement was not easy: it resulted after months and months of intense negotiations in the main European institutions, being at risk many times. From the Parliament side, where I was involved as a shadow rapporteur from the S&D group, we faced the opposition of the right-wing, showing all their conservatism and ideological duality.

They showed total contempt for the Environment, for current generations, who already suffer from cancers caused by air pollution, in addition to all the disastrous impacts of climate change; and for future generations, who will have to receive the legacy we left on this planet. The proof is the votes against the regulation and the uninformed narrative.

It is important to demystify some of the points addressed. The historic step we took only regulates new cars, imposing certain intermediate targets that will guide the industry, until 2035, with the ultimate goal that the current fleet is replaced by clean cars. The proposal represents a breakthrough in technological terms. We want to promote more innovation, more technologically sustainable solutions that represent an improvement in the lives of our citizens, above all through the reduction of air pollution.

Thinking about today and now is a narrow vision and today's myopia will be tomorrow's blindness.

The objective of the 'CO₂-standards for cars and vans' regulation is that in 12 years, with less polluting cars, we will breathe cleaner air; and in 27 years we will slow down the warming of the planet.

Ready, set, go: no more polluting cars and vans by 2035 equals a small step towards breathing cleaner air, slowing down the warming of the planet, and protecting everyone who lives on it!

 BRUSSELS

The EU must speak with one single voice

By Hilde Vautmans MEP, RE, BE

The visits to China by European leaders in the last weeks should have been a display of a strong and united Europe. It proved to be anything but. Years ago, Henry Kissinger asked himself: 'Who do I call if I want to call with Europe?' Now our citizens and China's political leaders ask themselves: Who is talking for Europe?

Only in the last six months, German Chancellor Scholz, Commission President Michel, Spanish Prime Minister Sanchez, French President Macron, Commission President von der Leyen, German Minister Baerbock, they all visited China. Our High Representative Borrell also planned to go. They all delivered their own specific message. Instead of going to China one by one with different messages, they should decide on one message for Europe and then go together! Only then, Europe will be strong enough to talk to China.

As European leaders delivered contradictory views on the EU's China policy and the urgent situation in the Taiwan Strait, China did not take their concerns seriously. In the same week when European leaders visited China, the Chinese army simulated missile attacks on Taiwanese cities with over 100 warplanes and ships, and China sentenced two prominent human rights defenders. Instead



of condemning Putin's brutal war of aggression in Ukraine, China's defence minister is meeting his Russian counterpart in a latest display of close Moscow-Beijing relations. Clearly, if we act divided and do not speak with one single voice, the EU is ineffective and not credible on the international stage.

The European Union cannot afford this lack of strategic vision during a critical time for EU-China relations. More than ever, the Chinese Communist Party's ambitious political agenda and assertive foreign policy prove to be a threat not only to our liberal order, but also to our European interests and values. China's stance on Ukraine and on the sovereignty of Taiwan will affect the securi-

ty and prosperity of our citizens.

More than ever, we need a common strategic vision

The European Parliament has in fact set out such a strategic vision. When Parliament approved my rapport on a more assertive EU-China strategy, it was very clear. The EU should be less naive in dealing with China. China is a partner, but also a systemic rival and a competitor. Therefore, we called for a common European response. Because only if the EU acts with one common policy, one common strategic vision, and delivers one common message, can we defend our European values towards an assertive China.

Since the adoption of the report, China has only reinforced its in-

EU POLICY TALKS

ternational assertiveness and its more aggressive domestic policy. It continues to buy influence and control over resources in third countries, with infrastructure investments by pouring money into regimes that trample on human rights. It has dismantled the democracy of Hong Kong and continues to repress the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. On Taiwan, China has made more and more aggressive statements about overturning the status quo. Even within Europe, China furthers its political agenda. Its operation of illegal police stations in 13 Member States, the threatening of former China correspondent Marije Vlackamp, and the spreading of fake news on the war in Ukraine uncovered by EUvsDisinfo are only some examples.

A common response

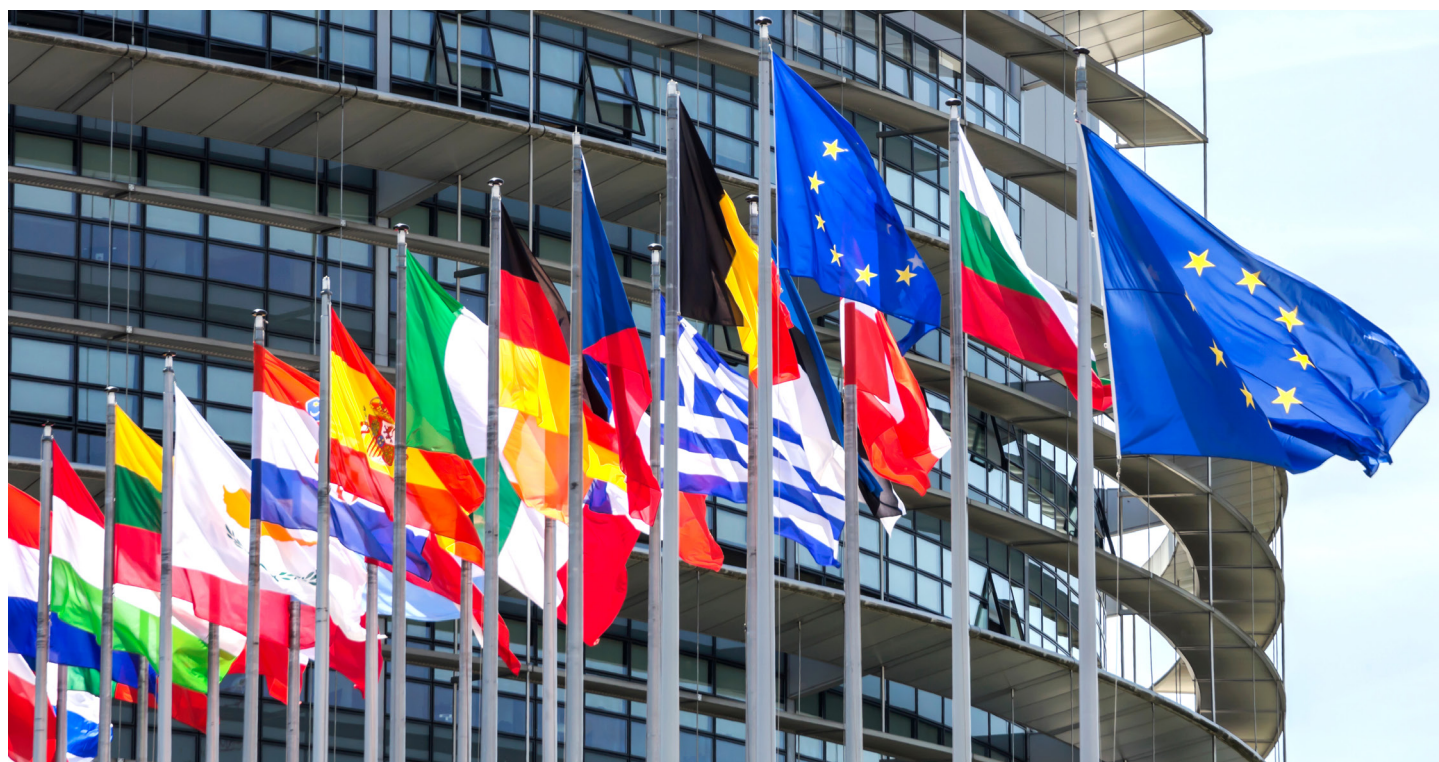
In the face of these major challenges, we cannot be played by the Chinese Communist Party's

divide-and-rule tactics. Because we can only defend our European values and interests if we act united. I am convinced that there is however a broad consensus within the EU on key substance. We will not accept Chinese military support for Russia's brutal war in Ukraine. We will not accept the use of force in the Taiwan Strait. We will not turn a blind eye to systematic human rights violations within China. However, we remain open to cooperate with China on global challenges such as climate change. China is simply too big to ignore in our fight against global warming as it emits a third of the world's greenhouse gases.

In the economic field, we must build up our strategic autonomy. This means decreasing our dependencies and vulnerabilities in fields such as critical raw materials. If Russia's war in Ukraine has taught us anything, it is that Europe cannot rely on countries

that don't share our values. Let us not make the same mistake twice. Europe dangerously depends on China for the critical materials that are essential for our green and digital transitions and products such as electric cars, solar panels and chips. For 98% of our rare earth supply and 93% of our magnesium supply, we rely on China. If strategic autonomy is to be more than just a theoretical concept, we must rapidly reduce our dependencies

Underpinning this common response, we must ensure consistent messaging. We can only credibly defend our European values and interests, if we speak with one single voice. EU-representatives and Member States must therefore end their internal bickering on China-policy. Because the truth is simple: Europe cannot afford the luxury of being divided on China. There is too much at stake.



📍 BRUSSELS

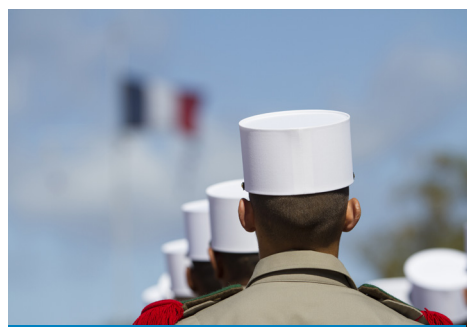
France Considers Establishing a Defence Industry Reserve Corps

By Aleksandar Srbinovski

France, renowned for its strong military tradition and commitment to national security, is now contemplating the creation of a defence industry reserve corps.

This initiative aims to bolster the country's defence capabilities by tapping into the expertise and experience of professionals from the defence industry. With potential benefits ranging from enhanced operational readiness to increased innovation, the proposed reserve corps has garnered considerable attention and support from various stakeholders.

The new defence bill (Loi de programmation militaire) will allocate funds to the army and future defence equipment purchases from 2024 to 2030.



Strategic Move

Recognising the evolving security landscape and the need for adaptable defence forces, France aims to leverage the talents of individuals working within the defence industry. The proposal



suggests that qualified personnel, including engineers, technicians, and strategists, would be recruited from defence companies, research institutes, and related organisations to form the reserve corps.

These reservists would remain affiliated with their respective companies or institutions, but would be called upon to serve their country during times of national crisis or in support of ongoing defence operations.

Benefits of a Defence Industry Reserve Corps:

1. **Rapid Mobilization and Augmented Readiness:** By establishing a dedicated reserve corps, France can tap into a pool of highly skilled professionals who are well-versed in cutting-edge defence technologies and strategies. This

reservoir of talent can be rapidly mobilised during emergencies or military engagements, ensuring a swift response and enhanced operational readiness.

2. **Knowledge Transfer and Collaboration:** The inclusion of defence industry experts in a reserve corps enables the transfer of knowledge, expertise, and best practices between the public and private sectors. This collaboration could lead to the integration of civilian advancements into military applications, fostering innovation and efficiency within the defence sector.

3. **Cost-Effectiveness:** The reserve corps model offers a cost-effective solution for the government. Rather than maintaining a large standing force with extensive training and infrastructure re-

EUROPE

quirements, France can tap into the existing capabilities and resources of the defence industry. This approach optimises the allocation of financial resources while maintaining a high level of readiness.

4. Flexibility and Adaptability: In an era characterized by rapid technological advancements, the ability to adapt quickly is crucial for any defence force. The reserve corps concept allows France to tap into a diverse range of expertise and experience from professionals who are at the forefront of innovation within the defence industry. This flexibility ensures that the country remains prepared to face emerging threats and challenges.

While the establishment of a defence industry reserve corps offers numerous advantages, it also poses certain challenges and considerations. Clear guidelines and protocols would need to be established to ensure the smooth integration and coordination of reservists with the regular military forces. Additionally, legal frameworks must be developed to safeguard the interests of both the reservists and their respective companies or institutions. Proper training and periodic exercises would be required to ensure the reservists are prepared to seamlessly integrate into military operations.

The proposed establishment of a defence industry reserve corps

in France represents an innovative approach to enhance national security and defence capabilities. By capitalizing on the expertise and knowledge of defence industry professionals, the country aims to improve its preparedness, operational readiness, and innovation within the defence sector. While challenges exist, proper planning and coordination can help overcome these hurdles, ultimately strengthening France's defence posture. As the proposal moves forward, it will be interesting to see how this initiative develops and if other nations consider adopting similar strategies to harness the potential of their defence industries.

BRUSSELS

Illicit Flows through Balkan Airports: A Growing Concern for Law Enforcement

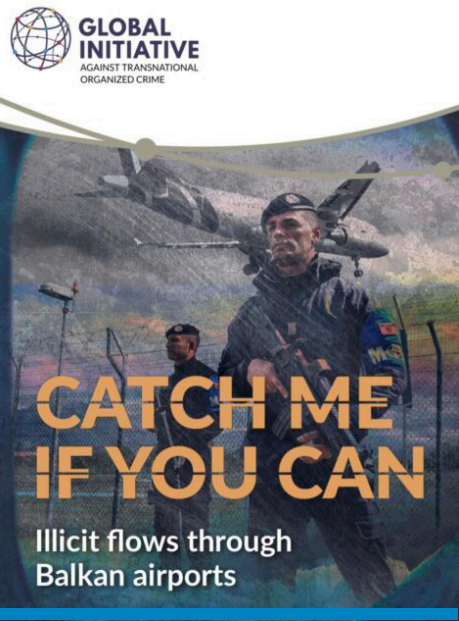
By Sarhan Basem

Law enforcement officials in the Balkans are sounding the alarm over an increase in illicit flows through the region's airports. According to a new report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, airports in the Balkans have become key transit points for a range of illegal activities, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, and money laundering.

The report highlights the vulnerability of the Balkans, which has long been a transit point for illicit flows between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The re-

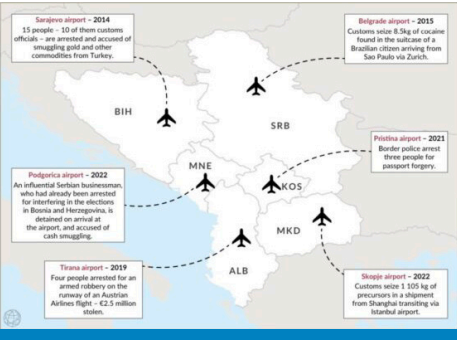


gion’s strategic location, porous borders, and weak law enforcement make it an attractive destination for criminal groups seeking to move drugs, people, and money across borders.



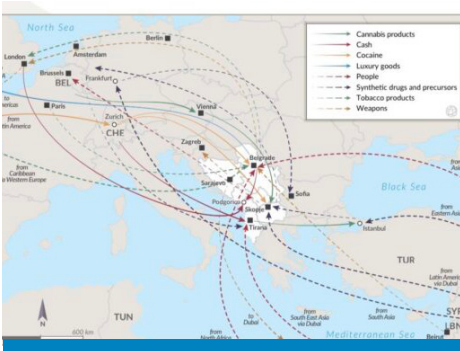
The report identifies several key factors contributing to the rise in illicit flows through Balkan airports. These include the growth of low-cost airlines, which have made air travel more accessible to a wider range of people, including criminals. The lack of effective

screening measures at some airports has also made it easier for criminals to smuggle illicit goods and money across borders undetected.



The report recommends a range of measures to address the problem, including improving cooperation between law enforcement agencies in the region, enhancing the capacity of airport security personnel, and strengthening legal frameworks to enable more effective prosecution of those involved in illicit activities.

The report also calls for increased investment in community policing and social programs to address the root causes of criminal activity, such as poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion.



Law enforcement officials in the Balkans have welcomed the report, calling for greater international cooperation to tackle the problem. “The rise in illicit flows through our airports is a serious concern for law enforcement in the region,” said one official. “We need to work together to strengthen our ability to detect and disrupt these activities, and to address the root causes of criminality in our communities.”

As the Balkans continue to face a range of security challenges, including terrorism, organized crime, and political instability, addressing the problem of illicit flows through the region’s airports will be a key priority for law enforcement and policymakers in the years ahead.



Maybe the Primaries Are a Non-Story

By Lincoln Mitchell

Last month Joe Biden formally announced that he was running for reelection. Despite frequent media speculation about whether he would seek a second term that began before he even got elected president, Biden was always going to run for reelection. The process of running for president is so arduous and requires such an enormous ego, that the kind of people who become president are not the kind of people who decide that, on balance, one term is enough. This was even truer for Joe Biden who has been running for president on and off since the late 1980s.

Like most presidents, Joe Biden will not face a real primary challenge from within his own party. The last incumbent president who had a reasonably strong primary opponent was Jimmy Carter back in 1980. Thus far the only other Democratic candidates are Marianne Williamson, who is still very much a fringe candidate, and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., who would be even more of a fringe candidate if he were not part of a family that, 55 years after Bobby Kennedy was assassinated, is still Democratic Party royalty. In other words, barring an extreme health crisis, Biden will be the Democratic nominee in 2024.

The Republican primary looks a little different, sort of. There are already several announced candi-



dates including Nikki Haley who has served as Governor of South Carolina and Donald Trump's Ambassador to the United Nations, Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina, right-wing radio personality Larry Elder and anti-woke warrior Vivek Ramaswamy. Additionally, politicians like Governors Chris Christie and Chris Sununu, as well as former Vice-President Mike Pence may run as well. All these people have something in common. They will not be the Republican nominee in 2024.

There are two other candidates Donald Trump, and Ron DeSantis, who are essentially the only relevant Republicans in the race. Trump now has a substantial lead and looks, if not quite a lock to be the nominee, then a very strong favorite. DeSantis is polling an increasingly distant second in most polls but is still well ahead of the rest of the field. If Trump stumbles

badly or has a major health crisis, DeSantis will almost certainly be the nominee.

This all raises a question for the American media and political elite. Will they (we) be able to move away from endless horserace analysis about both parties and recognize both the high likelihood of a Biden-Trump rematch and the real stakes that race holds for the US? The general election should be reported on deeply and thoroughly, but the long nominating process is extremely unlikely to be an important story in 2023 and 2024.

The first primaries and caucuses will be in early January of 2024 for the Republicans and a month later for the Democrats. The default setting for the media is to cover the process extensively, and have it dominate the news between now and when we know

who the nominees are. The problem in this cycle is that we already pretty much know who the candidates are. The only real horserace stories that could emerge in the next six to nine months would be a health crisis for either of the elderly frontrunners or a dramatic and unexpected collapse in political support for Donald Trump. Treating the primaries not as an exciting horserace but as a boring formality would be the appropriate media approach, but old habits are hard to break, particularly when they can be lucrative habits for news outlets.

If the horserace is covered extensively and is the top political story for much of the next year inevitably other stories and themes will be pushed to the side. The most glaring example of this is that over the last eight years or

so, the most important overarching political development in the US has been the capture of the Republican Party by its most extreme and most anti-democratic wing, and the threat to democracy that continues to rise. Over the last few years, particularly since January 6, 2021, we have seen better, if still somewhat sporadic, attention paid by some of the media to that development.

Endless articles about the increasingly narrow needle Mike Pence or even Ron DeSantis needs to thread to get the nomination, both take away from the larger story and situate today's Republican Party in the context of its more rational past, thus obscuring the reality of what the party has become. Similarly, treating Kennedy and Williamson as candidates with a chance of becoming presi-

dent, rather than the gadflies they are means there are less resources to cover, and I know this sounds crazy, but substantive issues, like what the legislature and the executive are doing to address problems like gun violence, climate change or wealth inequality.

The ongoing crisis of American democracy, the impact of major legislation around infrastructure and climate change passed in the first two years of Biden's presidency, and countless important stories at the state and local level are much more relevant to the American people than Larry Elder's latest poll numbers or whether Biden wins the South Carolina primary by 40, rather than 50, points. It would be great if the media focus over the next year or so would reflect that.

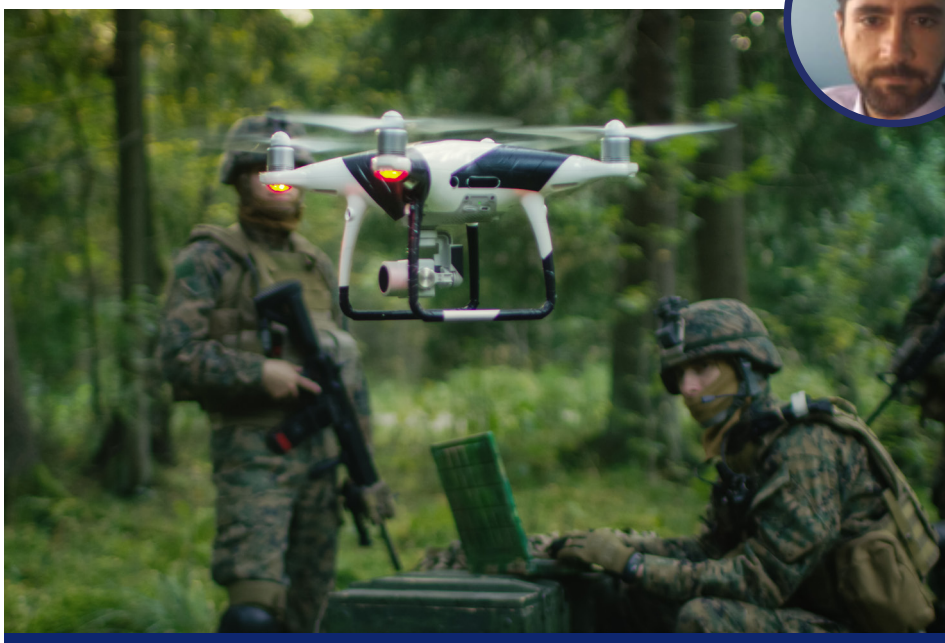
ATHENS

Killerdrones, Slaughterbots and Democratic Warfare

By Angelos Kaskanis

The Russian president's office announced on 3 May that its air defences shot down two drones. Unverified footage circulating on the internet appears to show smoke billowing over the Kremlin, while another video shows a tiny explosion above the site's Senate building, as two individuals appear to climb the dome.

What once seemed to be a futuristic scenario, of autonomous or AI-driven drones that can carry out political assassinations, is already taking place already. Both nations and companies have al-



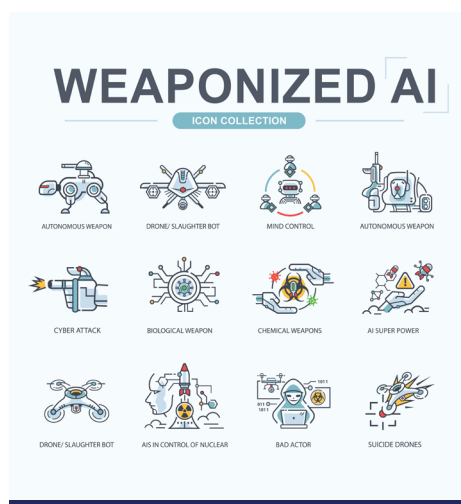
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ready been preparing for this outcome for several years.

Slaughterbots is a 2017 arms-control advocacy video that depicts a fictional near-future scenario in which swarms of low-cost microdrones utilize artificial intelligence and facial recognition software to slaughter political opponents based on pre-programmed criteria.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has denied that his country carried out an alleged drone attack on the Kremlin, which Russia says was an attempt on President Vladimir Putin's life.

The question now is how Russia will respond to whatever transpired on Wednesday morning. Some officials have already called for harsh measures. Russian generals have repeatedly warned of strong retaliation for any attacks on Russian territory.



However, it is uncertain whether Russia has the capability to carry out substantial retaliatory strikes, or whether this episode would result in any significant escalation on the Ukrainian battlefield.

Sophisticated Assassins

On 3 January 2020, an Iranian major general, Qasem Soleimani, was targeted and killed by a US attack drone near Baghdad International Airport in Iraq while on his way to see Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi.

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), sometimes known as drones, have grown in popularity in recent years due to their capacity to perform a wide range of activities in a variety of industries. Drones are becoming more frequent in the skies, from monitoring wildlife to delivering items. Drones, however, are not only used for benign causes. Some drones have been created particularly for military use, and the ethical implications of these “killer drones” have aroused major concerns.

US officials justified the Soleimani strike as necessary to prevent a “imminent attack,” but later clarified the legal justification as being taken “in response to an escalating series of attacks...to protect US personnel, deter Iran from conducting or supporting further attacks...and to end Iran’s strategic escalation of attacks...”

These autonomous killing machines are programmed to target and murder victims without the assistance of humans. Small, palm-sized autonomous drones using facial recognition and shaped explosives can be programmed to seek out and eliminate known individuals or classes of individuals.

They have become more pop-

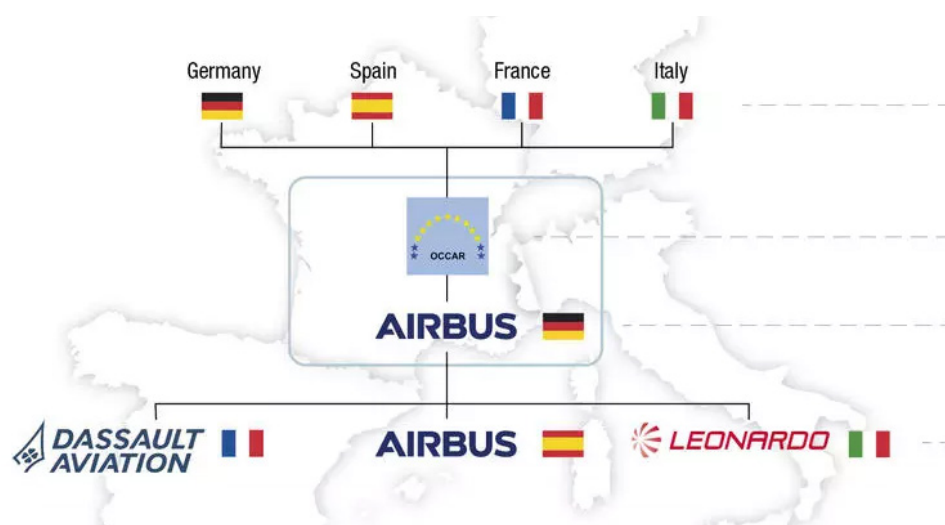
ular in modern combat, as they have been utilized in both targeted executions of suspected terrorists and ordinary military operations.

Killer drone proponents say that they are a more effective and efficient way of conducting military operations. They contend that utilizing drones to carry out targeted executions lessens the danger of civilian casualties while also reducing the risk to military troops. They further claim that drones can be taught to obey stringent ethical criteria and that they can be used to carry out tasks that human soldiers would find impossible.

European drone market

European major military powers realised the capabilities of these devices, and have raced to not be left out of the drone market. Customers are not entirely on the same page. Each country envisions a distinct purpose for the drone: Paris needs a weapon to be deployed in Africa’s Sahel region, while Berlin aims to have an advanced surveillance system safeguarding its own borders.

The programme, managed by the international armaments agency OCCAR (Organisation Conjointe de Coopération en Matière d’Armement), promotes European cooperation in the field of security and defence and confirms the initiative to rely more on multinational armament projects. Development, procurement, and operation will be carried out collaboratively, saving money and increasing efficiency. The Euro-



drone could thus succeed in the Euro Hawk project, which failed miserably.

The aim is to conduct the first flight in 2026 and deliver the first aircraft in 2029. Eurodrone is not

a common European project, but rather an agreement between four countries.

Since Brussels is not able to impose itself on the states and there is no clear framework, except for

citizens, each state is likely to decide on its own about the use of the drone. Others will use it for extended surveillance and to assist the police and border guards' patrols. Others will use them in regions outside Europe where armed conflicts occur. One thing is certain, as the context is not clear, the only one affected is European Democracy.

Drones are here to stay, despite the debate surrounding their deployment. As technology advances, we should expect to see more and more autonomous killing machines on the battlefield. Society must decide how to govern their use and ensure that they are used responsibly and ethically.

BRUSSELS

Human rights abuses in Pakistan prompt calls for EU trade policy review

By Martin Banks

The EU has been urged to review its trade policy towards Pakistan due to an alleged rise in human rights abuses in the country.

The demand was made at a conference in Brussels on 8 May organized by Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF).

Moderator Willy Fautre, director of HRWF, a respected Brussels-based rights group, opened the event and outlined a range of concerns, including alleged abuses against women and young girls in the country.

He described it as "an appalling situation" which demanded "urgent" action by the EU and the



WORLD

broader international community.

Women, he asserted, were “still treated as second class citizens” in the country, especially when it came to job opportunities and education.

In Pakistan, the literacy rate for women is just 45 percent compared with 69 percent for men.

There was a “vicious circle” of gender-based violence, he told the event.

Another speaker, Jose Luis Bazan, an expert on asylum, raised concerns in particular about the country’s blasphemy laws. He explained why the blasphemy laws were an acute problem for religious minorities in Pakistan and for the international human rights community.

He also said there had been a “worrying trend” in violence against religious groups.

The Pakistan National Assembly has “further tightened” its strict blasphemy laws by extending the punishment for those found instigating religious sentiment.

A unanimous bill passed by the Pakistani assembly will increase more severe punishments and fines for those convicted under it.

This has escalated concern among human rights activists and observers.

Bazan also joined other speakers, including Fautre, to call for a review of EU-Pakistan trade relations. This has been largely backed by MEPs.

In April 2021, the European Parliament called on the European

Commission and the European External Action Service to immediately review Pakistan’s eligibility for GSP+ status in the light of continued human rights abuses in the country, drawing particular attention to its highly controversial ‘Blasphemy Laws.’

The GSP+ (Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus) provides wide-ranging tariff preferences for imports to the EU from vulnerable developing countries to support poverty eradication, sustainable development, and their participation in the global economy as well as reinforce good governance.

Eligible countries like Pakistan can export goods to the EU market at zero duties for 66 percent of tariff lines. This preferential status is conditional on GSP+ countries demonstrating tangible progress on the implementation of 27 international conventions on human and labour rights, environmental protection, climate change, and good governance, the conference heard.

GSP+ has been beneficial for Pakistani business increasing their exports to the EU market by 65% since the country joined GSP+ in 2014.

The European Single Market, with over 440 million consumers, is Pakistan’s most important destination. Pakistan exports worth about €5.4 billion in items such as garments, bedlinen, terry towels, hosiery, leather, sports, and surgical goods.

The EU regularly sends monitoring missions to assess the situa-

tion on the ground.

Another conference participant, Manel Mselmi, who advises MEPs on international affairs, spoke passionately about women’s rights and an alleged rise in cases of forced marriages, both of which she said gave cause for concern.

It was claimed that girls as young as 12 had been “abducted”, forced to convert to Islam, and “married off.”

Meanwhile, on 9 May, Pakistan’s former prime minister Imran Khan was arrested outside the High Court in the capital, Islamabad. Khan was appearing in court on charges of corruption, which he says are politically motivated.

Footage showed dozens of paramilitary forces in armoured vehicles detaining Khan after he entered the court compound, before driving him away. He was ousted as PM in April last year and has been campaigning for early elections since then.

General elections are due to be held in the country later this year.



📍 WASHINGTON

CNN Shows Its Hand for 2024

By Lincoln Mitchell

Like most Americans I did not watch Donald Trump's Town Hall on CNN last week, but, like many Americans, I saw some of the videos and read some of the commentaries in the following days, including Anderson Cooper's absurd rationalizing of CNN's decision to give Trump a platform to spew his fantasies, lies, and hate.

The Town Hall was, among other things, a charade. It was highly curated with a very friendly crowd and a host who was either unwilling or unable to stand up to Trump. Accordingly, the specifics of what Trump said are not important, because the fact that the event occurred is a warning sign about how the media will treat Trump during the 2024 campaign. That made the event a victory for Trump.

The Town Hall was an early sign that CNN will not be able to resist the newest iteration of the Trump show because of the lure of what Trump can do for their ratings is too tempting. In other words, all signals are pointing to CNN once again treating Trump like a normal candidate who happens to be running away with his party's presidential nomination.

Trump is indeed the heavy favorite to be the GOP nominee in 2024, but to make decisions about covering Trump based only on that is to ignore a much bigger and uglier reality. Trump was



deeply complicit in an attempt to destabilize the US by disrupting a free and fair election, has made no effort to conceal his fascistic agenda should he win the election, has recently been found in court to be a sexual assaulter, and has consistently embraced bigotry of all kinds. Despite all that, CNN is treating him like he is Mitt Romney in 2012.

Every time a media organization amplifies Trump's voice and allows him to dominate the conversation, they contribute to the chipping away of American democracy. If Trump is given a platform on CNN or a comparable media outlet, it should be to interrogate him about his criminality, support for insurrection, and efforts to disrupt American democracy, not to take softball

questions from friendly voters.

Like most major networks and news platforms, CNN knows how to cover a normal presidential election because there is a familiar pace and recognizable landmarks. The election begins 22 months or so before polls close as candidates skirmish for positions in one or both parties. Yet to come are the primary debates, the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary. Then, a winnowing of the field of potential nominees, followed by more primaries, a Super Tuesday, and the emergence of nominees. From there, there will be new speculation about vice-presidential selections, conventions, general election campaigns, debates, clever ads and then the election. Every presidential from 1976 through 2012

WORLD

followed this pattern with some minor variations, but we have not had a normal presidential election in either of the last two cycles, and 2024 is not looking like one either.

The coming 2024 election will be the third that does not follow this old pattern. It is understandable, perhaps, that organizations like CNN did not react quickly enough in 2016, but by now they should have recognized the new reality that recent American presidential elections have pitted a flawed Democratic candidate against Donald Trump who seeks to destroy American democracy. That is the big story of this election, just as it was in the two previous presidential elections. To ignore that is media malpractice.

American political habits and traditions are deeply engrained in the media, political elite, and in the minds of voters, particularly older voters. This is why so many Americans, even those who

vehemently dislike Trump, have such a difficult time processing the extent to which the party he has taken over threatens American democracy. Accordingly, actions like CNN's decision to treat Trump like an ordinary candidate are very impactful because they further a narrative that many, including that of some of Trump's opponents, desperately want to believe. But that narrative is simply no longer true.

The media will be tested repeatedly in the next 18 months as they seek to balance the need to cover the election with the necessity to remain focused on the major stories of democratic rollback and the danger a Republican victory represents. Some of this is easy. Horserace coverage of minor Republican candidates who have little chance of winning, even if they happen to be the former vice-president of the United States, is unhelpful. It is similarly misleading to suggest the Re-

publican primary is more competitive than it is, or that Trump is the only GOP candidate who is a danger to American democracy. Ron DeSantis, who is still second to Trump in most polls, may be a more competent and less colourful than Trump but has an equally, perhaps even more, authoritarian vision for the country.

On balance, the media has a difficult needle to thread. They cannot ignore Trump entirely. Voters have the right to know about the background, positions, and plans of major candidates. Similarly, voters have the same right to know about the scandals, missteps, health issues, and other foibles of Joe Biden, even if his election is essential for the preservation of American democracy. CNN and other major media outlets must provide that information to voters, but that can be done without wilfully downplaying the reality of who Donald Trump is and what he and his party represent.

BRUSSELS

Russia's Tanking Economy: Sanctions Begin to Bite?

By Sam Vaknin

A mere four months into 2023, Russia's entire forecast annual budget deficit is used up, conceded its beleaguered Ministry of Finance on May 10. The target of 2% of GDP in terms of shortfall now looks like a pipedream.

Federal revenues shrank by a whopping 22% compared to the same period in 2022. The gov-



ernment's intake amounted to slightly less than 12 billion USD per month, according to Moscow Times.

Compared to the same timeframe last year, the energy (oil and gas) sector endured a devastating plunge of 52% in its revenues during these months, to less than a total of 30 billion USD.

The meager 5.5% increase in income from the other, non-energy, sectors of the economy – a paltry 72 billion USD – could not offset this precipitous drop.

In the meantime, Moscow spent a mind-numbing 145 billion USD in the first four months of this year.

The ineluctable result: a budget

deficit of 45 billion USD, one of the largest ever in the history of the country.

Russians would be surprised to learn that the economy is in trouble. Military manufacturing and explosive state spending camouflage the true dismal state of affairs.

Nor did inflation rear its ugly head yet. But the central bank's ability to cut rates will now be severely hampered, confronted by fiscal haemorrhaging.

But the situation is bound to get much worse if energy prices remain depressed. The government's attempts to rein in spending are laughable in the face of the military debacle in Ukraine.

Sanctions are beginning to bite as well.



Consider the agricultural sector: Russian Agricultural Bank (Russkolkhozbank) was booted from the SWIFT system; there is a ban on exports of agricultural machinery and spares to Russia; insurance of Russian ships and cargo is restricted as is access to many ports; the pipeline pumping ammonia from the Russian city of Togliatti to the Ukrainian



port of Odesa is turned off; and the accounts of Russian fertilizer companies are frozen.

So, the two pillars of Russia's defiant response to Western sanctions are crumbling: surging public spending and spiking oil revenues.

When the USA and the EU imposed a price cap of 60 USD per barrel of Russian oil, Putin laughed it off. He is laughing no more. It proved to be surprisingly efficacious in cutting into Russia's proceeds.

Calling a halt to the war in Ukraine might actually make matters worse as military-industrial production winds down and soldiers are demobilized and rejoin the civilian workforce.

The only way out of this conundrum is a sharp rise in the prices of energy products in Eurasia's markets.

Fears of a global recession, struggling sectors of the econ-

omy in China (real estate) and in the West (banking), as well as a still stubborn inflation all portend ill as far as this scenario is concerned.

But, ironically, the aforementioned price cap, coupled with OPEC+ (including Russian) production cuts can deliver this salvation by the end of this year.

The adversaries of the Russian kleptocracy should not celebrate yet, though. Putin's incentive to hang on to power via repression at home and military aggression abroad would be only buttressed as he is cornered into a nosediving, solipsistic economy.

Regrettably, for numerous reasons, regime change should be ruled out as a strategic goal at this stage: both the West and Russia are not ready for it.

But there are calls for innovative solutions to this quagmire, incentivizing prosocial behaviors rather than penalizing antisocial ones.

 BRUSSELS

Belgium and Texas: A Few Vignettes ‘From Below’

By Jack Gaioni

Belgium declared its independence from the Netherlands in 1830 and was recognized internationally the following year. Not long after, thousands of miles away and across the ocean, Texas declared its independence from Mexico.

France and Belgium were the first and only two European nations to recognize Texas's independence. Each country exchanged ambassadors. Belgium had an embassy in Austin while Texas had an official residence in Brussels.

For a short while the two newly independent nations traded. Texas exported cotton, corn, and wheat while Belgium exported beer, tea, munitions, and firearms.

While this trade was short-lived and not exactly monumental during the course of history, human stories remain. What follows is an account of a few these stories, which researchers and historians call “histories from below.”

These accounts do not take on the seminal “big-picture” events or the action of great men or women, but rather tell the lives of ordinary people and their experiences.

Utopia in Texas

Waves of revolution swept across Europe in the mid-1800s. Social change was in the air. In



France, The Paris Commune and The French Revolution of 1848 were the result of widespread social, economic, and political crises. Discontent with political leadership led to demands such as republicanism, constitutional governments, and universal human suffrage.

One of the chief architects of dissent was a man named Victor Considerant. His utopian socialist philosophies and his leadership role in the Paris Commune uprising against Louis Napoleon, forced into Considerant into exile in Belgium.

While in exile in Brussels, Considerant found no shortage of

like-minded sympathizers. The Frenchman forged a community of followers who believed that social ownership of the means of production is best achieved through a voluntary surrender of property. Collectively this community planned to emigrate to Texas where they intended to form a communal experiment or in Considerant's words, a “colony of utopian socialists”.



In 1855 nearly 200 colonists (mostly Walloon) left Belgium for the Galveston, Texas. There, they walked 400kms to their intended land: a colony they called “La Reunion.” Right from the start, events did not go well.

The colonists spoke a different language and believed in a different social and political ideologies. Unbeknownst to them, the Belgians brought skill sets which did not bode well on the wild Texas frontier. The Belgians were watchmakers, weavers, brew-masters, and shopkeepers as these skills were ill-suited for wild frontier environment. Bad weather, Indian raids, heat, insects, drought, financial difficulties spelled the beginning of the end for the Belgians. Within two years the utopian socialist colony La Reunion dissolved.

Entrepreneuring farmers

Other Belgians came to Texas during this era as well. Herman Van Daele, for example, grew up on a farm near Liedekerke, Belgium. Moved by the spirit of adventure to live in Texas, he bought a 20-acre (9 hectares) plot of land with no water source.

By chance he met up with another Belgian named Adolph Baetan who had the money to drill a well, but not enough capital to buy land. Collectively they teamed up to start a dairy farm and vegetable market and sold their water, which was a very valuable commodity, by the barrel. The Van Daele and Baetan Truck Farm became the gold standard for supplying the regional Texas frontier with dairy,

fruits, and vegetables.

Peter Hooge and his brother came to central Texas to work on the railroad. Together they were frugal, enough so to rent a 25-acre plot (10 hectares) that profitably yielded fruits and vegetables. Eventually they earned enough money to send for their father and five siblings.

While the older members of the Hooge family worked the fields, oldest sister Stephanie took care of the younger sibling’s education. She taught them basic education and catechism and soon expanded her work to include other children from a growing Belgian community.

Her “school” was a one room schoolhouse that became a chapel on Sundays. Stephanie named the chapel St. John Berchmans after a 17th century Belgian saint. All services were held in Flemish. Later the church would be used as headquarters for the Belgian-American Club, a cultural association still active today. Stephanie Hooge’s memory is kept alive today at the St. Stephens Church (named for her) which is in fact, a rebuilt version of the old St. John Berchmans Church.

Octave Van de Walle left his family farm near Lokeren, Belgium destined to raise vegetables somewhere in Texas. Another Belgian named Charles Persyn had the very same idea. In a fertile area near San Antonio, these Belgian farmers developed 800 acres (330 hectares) of productive farmland. They became known for their superior radishes and are credited

with introducing cauliflower (previously unknown) to the San Antonio area. These two farming families started a dynasty of growers, processors and truck farmers that serve state-wide markets today.

Belgian on the frontier

Anton Diedrick arrived in Texas with a strange story. While walking down a street in Antwerp, Belgium, he witnessed a murder. The killers forcefully kidnapped him and sold him as an “impressed seaman”, a popular practice which enslaved men to service at sea. Anton was a virtual prisoner at sea but managed to jump ship at the port of Galveston, Texas.

Speaking only Flemish he was befriended by two U.S. Army recruiters who couldn’t understand his language but sensed he was Dutch. They recruited him into the Army and renamed him “Anton Dutchallover.” He would go on to become a frontier scout, a shotgun stagecoach rider, and a sheep farmer in West Texas, an area with a hostile climate, renegade Indians, and bandits. Dutchallover loved the lifestyle and his relatives still live in the area.

These vignettes by no means tell the entirety of the relationship between Belgian and Texas. Taken one at a time, each story did little to alter the greater narrative of that historical arc. Yet they add colour to the narratives which are sometimes historically reported as black and white. These backstories should be thought of not as a substitute for, but as a supplement to that bigger picture.

📍 BRUSSELS

In Brussels, we embrace the differences and celebrate unity

By Spyridoula Grammatikou

Exploring Brussels reveals a captivating sight: people hailing from diverse corners of the globe. The city's various neighborhoods, each with its own distinct cultural essence, contribute to an environment of rich diversity, driving Brussels to its esteemed position as the world's second most cosmopolitan city.

As a newcomer in Brussels, I had my first experience with the vibrant tapestry of cultural diversity. Brussels has many ethnic neighborhoods, and each one has a story to tell.

With representation from approximately 184 nationalities, Brussels emerges as one of the most racially and ethnically diverse areas globally. Nearly 40% of its residents are foreign nationals, highlighting the city's inclusive and multicultural character.

I was wondering how people from diverse backgrounds come together, sharing, and embracing each other's culture. So, I asked Marian. She is a Mexican student at the VUB, and she is a board member of the WeDecolonizeVUB, a student-led project aiming to create space for racialized students and deconstruct Western-dominated worldviews.

What is the vision of WeDecolonizeVUB? Why did you decide to create this small diverse community within the university?



WeDecolonizeVUB started as a response to the lack of diversity and decolonial practices within the university. The university environment was predominantly characterized by a white, male, and Euro-centric perspective. To bring about a more diverse atmosphere, there was a strong need to deconstruct these existing structures and create space that acknowledges and celebrates the ethnic diversity that already exists within the university community.

How do you actively embrace and celebrate the diversity and multiculturalism within your community?

WeDecolonizeVUB creates an open and inclusive space for everyone through a range of diverse activities. Our university library is

our physical space and, also, our safe place. We welcome people from different backgrounds and really listen to them and their needs. The library is filled with books written by authors from diverse racial backgrounds. There are books for everyone, fiction, and non-fiction. Actually, the library is built by the student, so it's what the students want. We usually organize book clubs and discuss a book and its topic.

We, also, organize events, that go along with our mission and vision. The gatherings work as a platform to talk about different topics. For example, recently, we organized an event centered around the intersection of Islam and gender. And I am glad because many people joined.



Do you encounter any challenges in your efforts to inspire more students to join your purpose?

Within our WeDecolonizeVUB team, we don't face any problems. I've personally learned to appreciate the people who come to support us. We've gotten pretty good at handling sensitive topics without causing unnecessary conflicts. Of course, not everyone may be a fan of what we do. People say that we exaggerate, we are crazy! But there is a community within the university that values that.

I don't know if I can speak for everybody but if there are some who don't feel comfortable with us being here, it speaks more about them. We just create space for us to exist, as we are.

Inclusivity and rainbow flags

Brussels is a vibrant city where people embrace their sexuality, feeling liberated to express themselves and proudly show their

true colors. In particular, Belgium has achieved an impressive second-place ranking with a percentage of 76% in a recent assessment.



In the context of inclusivity and the LGBTIQ+ communities, I had the opportunity to chat with Rémy Bonny, the executive director of Forbidden Colours, an organization dedicated to LGBTIQ+ advocacy and support in Brussels, with a particular focus on the European Union.

Forbidden Colors has played a pivotal role in raising political awareness regarding anti-LGBTIQ+ initiatives through media platforms. They have brought attention to critical cases, including the anti-LGBTIQ+ propaganda law in Hungary, the anti-LGBTIQ+ education reform in Poland, and the urgent needs of LGBTIQ+ individuals seeking refuge amid Russia's conflict with Ukraine.

How do you manage to help people all around the world, not just in Belgium?

The most important thing is to keep contact with people on the ground and all of this, because,

of course, we are here in Brussels, which is a bubble, as you know. We need to make sure that we leave our ivory tower from that time and actually go to the Member States, go to talk to people living there, in countries like Hungary. But even in a country like Belgium, there are also communities here where being LGBTQ is still very, very difficult. In comparison with Hungary, we do the average, we can live a very much better life. But there are also certain communities with religious backgrounds and so on where it is much more difficult to be openly a member of the LGBTQ+ community. That's why we always say, and that's part of our job as well, is while we do a lot of the EU high-level advocacy, at the same time we do fundraise and fund projects all around the European Union that are very, very grassroots. I can give you a few examples of that. Last year, we financed the Budapest Pride Parade. Another project is in Poland, another country where there have been quite some difficulties with LGBTQ equality over the last decades. There we finance, for instance, a school project and it's called an LGBTQ plus school ranking. This project has been going on for the last five years. Now we see that there is even evolution in the schools.

If you're here in Brussels and never leave your ivory tower or your office in Brussels, you will never really understand what the demands of your community actually are. That's the innovative thing that we want to bring is we are going to visit our partner organizations in the member states several times a

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year and of course, we cannot go to every single country and every single organization. But we do prioritize a few countries, of course.

Belgium is really high on the LGBTIQ+ ranking scale, but there are some initiatives like the "gender ideology" introduced by the far-right party. What is your answer to those anti-LGBTIQ+ movements?

First, I think we need to be more communicative, as the LGBTIQ+ community. In the last two years, we saw improvements in the ranking scale, and we celebrate our victories. But we didn't pay atten-

tion to those initiatives. Those ideologies spread around Europe. We saw that in Hungary, Poland, Italy, and Belgium.

We need to create more visibility; The Pride is a part of that. Unfortunately, I see that other organizations are comfortable, and they did not campaign for our rights anymore. They lay back and work behind the scenes. However, I think that we achieve anything working behind the scenes. I think we can achieve more if we are outside on the streets demanding. Also, is important to talk to people because nobody was born anti-LGBTIQ+.

Having attended Pride events on both the western and eastern sides of Europe, what notable differences have you observed between the two in terms of their rankings and overall experiences?

The difference is that in the west side of Europe. It is a party. However, on the other side is a protest. It is the only day in the year that we are safe, we can party. We can protect each other. That's why this day is important to us, because not only we can make a statement, but also, we are safe to show our true colors.

BRUSSELS

Smuggling of antiquities threatens North Macedonia's cultural heritage

By Aleksandar Srbinovski

North Macedonia's geographic position at the crossroads of historical civilizations makes it an attractive destination for people seeking to steal and traffic

artifacts from archaeological sites. Organized groups operating in North Macedonia are believed to have good connections with foreign

dealers who sell the stolen items on European black markets. There is also thought to be a growing market in Asia for artifacts stolen from North Macedonia. Independent investigative research suggests that over 100 000 items have been taken from historical sites in North Macedonia and transported around the world.



Several incidents over the past decade demonstrate the threat posed to the rich cultural heritage of this Balkan country by illicit trafficking in cultural property.

Most recently, in December 2022, 12 people were arrested in North Macedonia for being part of an organized criminal group involved in the theft of antiquities. The case, made public by the Interior Ministry on 13 December 2022, revealed that the criminal group had allegedly operated for a long time around the towns of Prilep, Strumica, Probishtip, Negotino, Kumanovo, Sveti Nikole, Kavadarci, and Kocani. The police operation resulted in the seizure of various archaeological artifacts, including coins, metal objects,

and figurines, in addition to metal detectors, weapons, and ammunition.

The December arrests followed an incident in October 2022 in which four Ukrainians were arrested on suspicion of illegally digging for artifacts at one of North Macedonia's richest archaeological sites – Isar, located near the village of Marvinci in the south.⁵ According to the official police statement, the suspects were arrested after officers caught them digging at the protected site, which features remnants of a temple and a stadium designed in the ancient Roman style. Two metal detectors, shovels, and several excavated objects were found with the suspects.

In 2021, the public prosecutor's office charged eight people with illegally digging to extract items of cultural heritage. The accused, who were caught digging in unauthorized exploration and excavation locations on registered and unregistered archaeological sites near Skopje, Makedonski Brod, Kichevo, and Veles, face between three and five years in prison. The investigators found artifacts hidden in the homes of the accused and unveiled a network of collaborators from Greece, Turkey, Albania, Croatia, Serbia, and the US, who sold the artifacts to interested buyers.

Trafficking in cultural property has long been a problem for law enforcement in North Macedonia. In 2010, the authorities arrested 48 people, including local politicians and archaeologists, in a nationwide operation against the illegal antiquities trade. Between then and 2014, the police carried out several major operations to expose artifact smugglers. The operations 'Phalanga' and 'Apollo' brought down a network of organized crime schemes that, in addition to illegally procuring archaeological and historical objects, were offering icons for sale that had been stolen from churches. Investigations also showed that the suspects had used highly sophisticated equipment to locate metal objects buried in graves. According to official reports, the police found two highly valued icons, nine archaeological figures, three brooches, six pieces of jewelry, 17 coins, and two ceramic vessels, as well as several pieces of equipment, including scanners



and metal detectors, maps and sketches of archaeological sites, and weapons and ammunition.

As operations 'Phalanga' and 'Apollo' revealed, religious art from North Macedonia's churches is also being targeted for trafficking. There are some 20 000 icons from Macedonian churches and monasteries that have been trafficked out of the country into private collections around the world. For example, in 2009, six icons of St John the Theologian Kaneo of inestimable value were taken from Ohrid and returned by INTERPOL, only to be stolen again and never found. Icons stolen from the monastery of St Naum, just south of Ohrid, are also still missing.

In 2014, the Serbian daily Blic reported that more than 10 valuable religious objects had been stolen from churches in North Macedonia over the previous decade. The paper cited Ohrid-based curator Milcho Georgievski, who pointed out that artifacts stolen from Macedonian church-

es and archaeological sites are being sold at secret auctions in Western Europe and ending up in private collections. The process of restitution or return is practically impossible.

Nevertheless, the police continue with attempts to prosecute traffickers and recover artifacts. In 2021, Macedonian police reported 160 stolen archaeological objects and icons to the INTERPOL base. Some of the icons and items that were reported stolen have been published on the Interior Ministry's website.¹¹ Also in 2021, police arrested a group of eight men in North Macedonia accused of participating in multiple illegal excavations across the country with the aim of selling antiquities abroad. According to the official report, police raided homes and other premises linked with the suspects at 10 locations in the southern town of Bitola and the north-western town of Tetovo. They seized a large number of artifacts, including ancient figurines and jewelry, as well as firearms and metal detectors.



The serious problem of the illegal artifact and cultural heritage trade in North Macedonia appears to be part of a global trend. According to the Assistant Director-General for Culture at the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the illicit trade reportedly represents five percent of the estimated €45 billion antiquities market. The substantial value of the artwork and antiquities market, which has skyrocketed since the 1990s, can be attributed in part to technological development, with buyers and sellers now connecting online, as well as increased globalization that allows greater communication and ease of travel.¹⁴ Growing interconnectivity has also helped criminals explore the dark side of finding and collecting artifacts and cultural heritage. This trend, according to UNESCO, is ongoing, not just in established cultural heritage sites but also in places 'where we didn't know antiquities existed.

At the same time, the issue of stolen cultural property is gaining greater international attention. For example, in late 2022, the 11th Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) adopted a resolution on the traf-

ficking of cultural property, which is not specifically covered by the convention and its protocols. The resolution focuses on strengthening crime prevention and criminal justice responses to protect cultural property and calls on member states to categorize trafficking in the cultural property as a serious crime (as defined by the UNTOC) to facilitate international cooperation. The resolution also requests that states take measures to raise public awareness, mount media campaigns, and build institutional capacity.

These two things – public awareness and international cooperation – are essential for disrupting the illegal artifact trade in North Macedonia. A lack of awareness and neglect of cultural heritage accompanied by weak institutions enables criminals to exploit opportunities that are often overlooked or even facilitated by law enforcement and government ministers due to corruption or poor governance. Combating trafficking in cultural property, therefore, requires a multi-sectoral approach, involving civil society; the criminal justice system; the private sector (particularly those involved in logistics, IT platforms, and auction houses); and historians, archaeologists, and

government agencies responsible for protecting cultural heritage.

Given that the illegal trade in cultural artifacts is not occurring in a vacuum, but rather makes use of existing organized crime routes, the response should be holistic and 'glocal'. This would involve attempts to understand specific local conditions and to strengthen local resilience, while analyzing the ecosystem in which this crime operates, including the transnational enablers, drivers, and networks.

Finally, the issue should be seen and addressed within the broader context of disrupting illicit economies. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – currently chaired by North Macedonia – working with INTERPOL has observed that the illegal trade in cultural goods is sometimes linked to the illegal arms trade, human trafficking, and migrant smuggling. Similarly, UNESCO has taken the position that the illicit trafficking of cultural property contributes significantly to the funding of terrorism, organized crime, and money laundering. In 2017, the UN Security Council formally recognized that threats to cultural heritage are a major security issue that the international community has a direct responsibility to protect against. Given the security dynamics in the Western Balkans regarding organized crime, international terrorism, and ongoing geopolitical competition, the region should make addressing the illegal trade in artifacts a priority.

📍 BRUSSELS

Meta vs. EU: Battle of the Gaslighters

By Sam Vaknin

The European Data Protection Board (EDPB) has just overruled a decision by the Irish Data Protection Commission (DPC) and announced that Meta, owner of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp is fined 1.2 billion euros over violations of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), now celebrating its fifth anniversary.

Since May 2018, regulators have possessed the right to fine a company up to 4% of its annual turnover for serious violations.

Many hi-tech behemoths – Meta and Apple included – based their operations in tax-friendly Ireland. Little did they know that its ferocious privacy watchdog would wipe out any tax savings they might have gained with this tax-sheltering move.

Meta did not take steps to mitigate, let alone eliminate “the risks to the fundamental rights and freedoms” of its users, explicated the Irish Data Protection Commission, though Meta acted in good faith and, therefore, did not deserve to be fined.

Meta was also given 5 months to “suspend any future transfer of personal data to the US” and 6 months to terminate “the unlawful processing, including storage, in the US” of users’ data.



Meta threatened in the past to withdraw from the EU altogether, but is unlikely to do so as it awaits the implementation of a new agreement on data flows between its two main markets.

A similar “Privacy Shield” pact, though, was annulled in 2020 by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). The tribunal left intact data transfers founded on standard contractual clauses (SCCs), but even this vestige was struck down by the Irish authority.

Still, EU regulators produced an alternative in December 2022 (the Data Privacy Framework or DPF) and Joe Biden reciprocated by issuing an executive order intended to reassure the EU and its denizens of safeguards in place

to maintain the integrity of transferred data.

Alas, this morality play has no saints in it. Both parties are gaslighting each other – and the public at large.

Meta sports a stubbornly abysmal and scandal-ridden – almost contemptuous – record when it comes to the protection of the privacy of its users’ data.

The EU, on the other hand, is opaque, indecisive, and capricious in its trans-Atlantic data transfer policies which have been mired in a perpetual state of regulatory uncertainty.

The solution is a bilateral body. The EU and the USA should set up an independent organization to take care of the storage of us-

ers' data and its disposal by all the technology companies in strict accordance with all relevant laws and regulations on both sides of the pond.

Chinese walls can guarantee commercial interests the same way accounts are handled in investment banks and brokerage firms.

But there is a much more fundamental problem: a digital philosophy divide between the USA and the EU and not only regarding access to information of all kinds.

The USA regards users' data as commercial raw material and as evidence in both civil and criminal cases. Data, therefore, belong to enterprises, with access granted to the state as needed.

In contrast, the EU considers data to be the property of individuals to dispense with as they please.

Yet, the EU's position is somewhat disingenuous and untenable. Users do explicitly trade their personal information for the free use of a variety of services online. Law enforcement agencies should be able to access users' data subject to court orders in any jurisdiction.

To hamper the free flow of data of any kind is to undermine the foundations of and fragment the Internet and other digital utilities and networks. It is too high a cost.

Data privacy is an elusive and illusory mirage and the GDPR is a pretentious piece of political theatre with little impact in the real

world. Idealism and activism have their place, but not when they are rendered grandiose, destructive, and self-delusional.

Moreover: the EDPB's ability to overrule a local regulator with intimate knowledge of affairs is worrying. Meta was not invited to appear in what amounted to an appeals process. If it fell victim to an internal EU turf war, it would seem.

Meta was also singled out of thousands of other technology companies with identical data transfer practices. This oversight smacks of a political PR stunt, not justice. It is especially egregious when data transfers to the likes of China continue unabated and largely unchallenged.



**GENERAL
DATA
PROTECTION
REGULATION**



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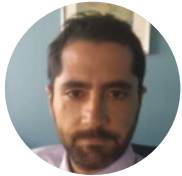
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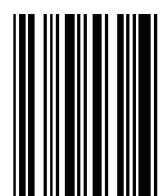
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BrusselsMorning

Have a seat

You have to give me some time, European quarter. I feel a bit displaced next to all your huge, monotonous, important buildings. Don't get me wrong.

I can see your efforts. The street art, the trendy bars, the colourful chairs in the public space. But honestly, they disappear into thin air.

Quote & Photo credit: An Devroe



'So where did all the lumps and bumps on buildings go? The shadows, the textures, the three-dimensionality, the high points of light.'

Heatherwick, Thomas, "The rise of boring architecture -- and the case for radically human buildings", TED Talk, July 2022

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