

THE ROBOTS ARE COMING

How Ukraine became the testing ground for AI-powered combat.

BY GIAN VOLPICELLI, VERONIKA MELKOZEROVA AND LAURA KAYALI | PAGES 14-16

By Paul Dallison

ANGELA MERKEL'S LITTLE BOOK OF CALM. Pour yourself a glass of something chilled, put your feet up, and prepare to dive into a book by one of the great European leaders; someone who generates respect and even a little fear among even her fiercest rivals. And after you've read Liz Truss' masterpiece, there's an Angela Merkel book on its way!

Merkel's long-awaited memoirs will come out in November. Despite repeated requests from this writer, it is not called "Angela's Ashes: How I Burned My Political Rivals." Rather, its title will be "Freedom: Memories 1954-

2021", which if you drop the dates sounds less like a political tome and more like a compilation album of b-sides and rarities by a post-punk band.

The book is a whopping 700 pages long. It will, according to

a statement from the publishers, answer the question: "What does freedom mean to me?"

"Freedom, for me, is finding out where my own limits are and pushing myself to those limits," she says. "Freedom, for me, is

to never stop learning, to never stand still, to continue moving forward." I think I also read that inside a greetings card.

Looking forward to her follow-up book: "Angela Merkel: Live, Laugh, Love."

Speaking of freedom, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been in Kyiv and took time out from diplomacy to join a band on stage in a basement bar in Kyiv. Strapping on a guitar, Blinken joined in on a version of Neil Young's classic "Rockin' in the Free World."

Before he began playing, Blinken told the audience: "You need to know, the United States is with you, so much of the world is with you and they're fighting,

not just for a free Ukraine, but for the free world. And the free world is with you, too." American folk music hero Woody Guthrie had "this machine kills fascists" written on his guitar, so perhaps Blinken was testing to see if sending Ukrainian soldiers a bunch of musical instruments might be more effective than tanks and bullets.

According to the Guardian, the Kyiv band – named 19.99 – were told before the gig that they would be performing with Young himself, and it was only at the last minute that they realized their guest member would be the U.S. secretary of state, which must have been a crushing disappointment.

DE-CLASSIFIED

This week in history

May 19, 1892: Napoleon created the Legion of Honour, the premier order of the French Republic. This week, Emmanuel Macron said he was stepping in after the country's birth rate hit its lowest point since World War II, and everyone admired his dedication to the cause.

WHO'S UP



Space eaters: A Michelin-starred chef from Denmark will be serving a fancy meal in the stratosphere. Let's hope

the menu includes something besides space-themed classics such as chocolate bars Mars, Milky Way, and Galaxy.

New books: Two women in their 80s were charged with criminal damage after the glass around the Magna Carta (a royal charter of rights agreed to by King John of England in 1215) was targeted at the British Library. The pensioners were acting on behalf of campaign group Just Stop Oil.

WHO'S DOWN



Map reading: Rap icon Flavor Flav is signing up to be the US women's water polo team's official hype man (and you thought there were ludicrous job titles on LinkedIn). Flav, a founding member of rap legends Public Enemy but lately a rent-a-celebrity, said he plans to watch the team at the Paris Olympics, adding another item to the list of reasons to avoid the Games.

Broadcasters: The organizer of the scandal-hit Eurovision Song Contest is facing another controversy after excluding the far right from a debate in the European Parliament. The European Broadcasting Union says far-right and hard-right groups will not be allowed to take part because they refuse to cover themselves in glitter and sequins.

CAPTION COMPETITION



"KEEP LOOKING UP, YOUNG MAN, IN CASE OF FALLING OLIGARCHS."

Can you do better? Email pdallison@politico.eu or get in touch on X @pdallisonesque



LAST WEEK'S WINNER
BY ADRIAN CARTER

"It's a bound first edition of the final report on French dumping of brandy and cognac into China."

Thanks for all the entries. Here's the best from our postbag — there's no prize except for the gift of laughter, which I think we can all agree is far more valuable than cash or booze.

BACKHANDED AWARD



THE 'TOILET CLEANER, I'M FLATTERED' AWARD FOR JOB OFFERS

From deep inside Donald Trump's campaign HQ (a McDonald's in Palm Beach) comes a yell: "This sounds like a job for Nigel Farage!"

Yes, the Brexiteer-in-chief could soon be working for the golfer-in-chief, with Farage saying he has a "firm job offer" related to Trump's U.S. re-election campaign.

In an interview with U.K. broadcaster Talk, former Brexit Party leader Farage — who has repeatedly flirted with a new gig stateside — said he's been offered the chance to "indirectly" help the Republican candidate's fresh bid for the White House.

"I do actually have a very firm job offer on the table from America, which is very, very tempting," Farage told Talk presenter Julia Hartley-Brewer.

"It's a confidential offer, obviously, but it would be very heavily involved with the election campaign," Farage said. "Obviously, who becomes president of America matters."

Trump and Farage have a long bromance. Trump described Farage as a "handsome guy" at a campaign rally earlier this year — and appeared via video at Farage's lavish 60th birthday celebration in April to congratulate the Brexiteer on a "truly remarkable sixty years on Earth."

THIS WEEK ON EU CONFIDENTIAL



UKRAINE ON THE BRINK:

As Russian forces continue their offensive against Ukraine's second largest city, Kharkiv, will Western help be too late to make a difference? This week's edition comes from the Copenhagen Democracy Summit, where host Anne McElvoy talks to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's head of office Andriy Yermak.

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THIS WEEK ON POWER PLAY



CAN PUTIN'S PROPAGANDA SKEW EU ELECTION?

In this episode, we discuss Russia's disinformation efforts to meddle in the upcoming European vote and the EU's response. Host Sarah Wheaton and her guests unpack some of the latest examples of the Kremlin's interference — such as the "doppelganger" campaign and AI-generated deep fake videos.

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POLITICO sky news

POLITICS AT JACK AND SAM'S

BY JACK BLANCHARD AND SAM COATES

Your essential listen on the week ahead in politics.

Two of Westminster's best-connected journalists – and friends – Jack Blanchard (POLITICO) and Sam Coates (Sky) give you the lowdown on what to expect in the coming week.

LISTEN NOW →



Palate cleanser

Insider tips from our newsroom on where to eat in and around the EU quarter.



DATO PARULAVA

Pure Veg India

Ravensteingalerij 15

No-frills buffet that just about satisfies Indian food cravings.

What's good? This place certainly lives up to its name, serving a full array of Indian food — without meat. Pure Veg India has it all: curries, veggie dishes, rice (both white and yellow), *samosas*, *naan*, *papadam* ... plus those doughy balls soaking in honey juice. Not to mention a full salad bar and a couple of chutneys to boot.

It's an all-you-can-eat buffet, so grab your *thali* (compartmentalized metal tray) and go to town. Nicely spiced (and spicy), you can wash it all down with a smooth mango *lassi* for a generally satisfying meal. There are plenty of vegan options as well, most of them clearly marked ... you can always ask the polite staff if you have any doubt.

What's not: Nearly all the dishes, including the seasoned salad, are a bit too salty. The *naan* can be somewhat gummy. And the overall concept is rather basic, and in that sense, a little lacking in inspiration.

Vibe: Utilitarian, with a dark (though clean) interior and minimal decoration. If the tray evokes jail, fret not — this is way more delicious than prison food.

Who's picking up the check? The buffet costs €14.95 — quite reasonably priced for as hearty a meal as you can handle.

Spotted: The standard commuter crowd, skewing young.

Insider tip: When the weather outside is inviting, get your buffet meal takeout and eat it in sunny Brussels Park, just up the steps.

Spotted: It's open pretty late, so catch up and eat your fill on the way home if you've skipped meals over a busy day at work.

How to get there: From Brussels central station, exit toward the European Quarter, go under the street, then up the stairs into Ravenstein gallery. Pure Veg India is about a third of the way down the hall on the right — just follow the coriander aroma.

— SONYA ANGELICA DIEHN

AGENDA

Thursday, May 16: Brussels Economic Forum.

Friday, May 17: International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia.

INFLUENCERS

European Commission: Stephen Quest has been promoted to director-general for human resources and security at the European Commission.

Diplomacy: Louise Wandahl Tavares is now fiscal attaché at the Danish Permanent Representation to the EU. She was previously with the Danish Ministry of Taxation.

Think Tanks: Valeria Tabelli became a junior researcher at the European Institute for Asian Studies, focusing on China, Southeast Asia and their relations with the EU.

CORRECTIONS

POLITICO is committed to correcting errors. To contact the newsroom regarding a correction request, please email editorial@politico.eu.

Lens

A weekly glimpse into a reporter's notebook, er, camera roll



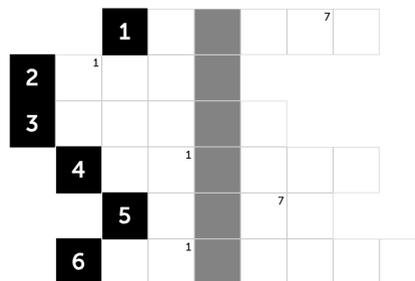
Week 18: Municipio, Trieste

Construction on the centerpiece of the Italian port city's local administration started back when Trieste was still an outpost of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1873. Facing out to the sea, the monumental building on the Piazza Unità d'Italia was designed in the eclectic style by local architect Giuseppe Bruni, who died shortly after it was completed.

Joshua Posaner, POLITICO's senior reporter, files a photo a week from his camera roll zooming in on the design and history of parliaments, town halls, ministries and the various buildings in which heads of government carry out affairs of state.

Brain teaser

Fill in the answers to reveal the top-secret EU treaty that is especially relevant today.



- 44th U.S. president
- Northern Spanish river
- Dominic Cummings has launched the ... Up Party
- Luxembourg commissioner under Prodi and Barroso
- Eurovision winner
- Armenian capital

Last week's answers: Tbilisi, Milken, Ecke, Malmo, Madonna, Dimas
Keyword = Second

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Print edition: €199 (excluding VAT) for one year. Subscribe at politico.eu/subscribe. Printed on recycled paper by Corelio Printing, Keestraat 10, B-9420 Erpe-Mere, in the coldest printing department of VJM - Groet-Bijgaarden, Brussels. © POLITICO. All rights reserved. Neither this publication nor any part of it may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of: POLITICO SRL. Dénomination sociale: POLITICO SRL. Forme sociale: SRL. Siège social: Rue de la Loi 62, 1040 Bruxelles. Numéro d'entreprise: 0526.900.436. RPM Bruxelles



EU ELECTION Playbook

from POLITICO

Your essential companion on the #EU2024 campaign trail.

Election season is upon us.

In June, Europeans will go to the polls to elect a new European Parliament and reshuffle Europe's policymaking ecosystem.

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Sign up today



SLOVAK PRIME MINISTER FICO SHOT

The populist leader was attacked after a government meeting in the town of Handlová, sparking condemnation from political leaders.

BY KETRIN JOCHECOVÁ AND DOUGLAS BUSVINE

Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico was fighting for his life Wednesday after he was shot multiple times following a government meeting.

As of press time, Fico's condition was life-threatening, according to his official Facebook account.

He was flown by helicopter to hospital for emergency treatment.

"At the moment he is being transported by helicopter to Banská Bystrica, because it would take too long to get to Bratislava due to the necessity of acute intervention. The next

few hours will decide," said the post.

The precise nature of Fico's injuries was not known, with conflicting reports emerging from local media.

The incident happened on Wednesday in the town of Handlová, central Slovakia.

Local media reported the premier was shot several times and then rushed away by his security detail into a car.

A woman at the scene was cited by news outlet MNT.SK as saying that she had heard three or four shots,

and saw Fico fall to the ground. A witness told Reuters he heard several shots and that a man had been detained by police.

The populist prime minister won a general election last September and has faced widespread criticism for polarizing politics in the central European nation with pro-Russian comments and a push to extend state control over the media.

There was an immediate outpouring of concern and condemnation from political leaders at the attack.



Posters accusing journalist Nino Zuriashvili of being "an agent sold for money," outside her office.

STUDIO MONITORI

POLITICAL THUG CULTURE GRIPS GEORGIA

Intimidation is a feature of daily life, even before a controversial new Kremlin-style law takes effect.

BY DATO PARULAVA AND GABRIEL GAVIN IN TBILISI

Gia Japaridze, a 50-year-old lecturer and former diplomat, was ambushed near his home in Tbilisi on the evening of May 8 by several people wielding sticks and what he believed was a baseball bat.

"I was born in the Soviet Union. I wasn't afraid of the Communists. They can't scare me either. I don't

have any doubts – I know that the government was behind this," said Japaridze, who needed stitches, suffered a concussion and received deep livid bruises across his back.

His assailants made clear they were targeting him because of his public opposition to a Russian-style law on "foreign agents" that Georgia's parliament approved on Tuesday.

Critics of the new law fear the government will use it to crack down on media, the opposition and civil society in this Caucasian country of 3.7 million people.

Tens of thousands of protesters have packed the streets, incensed that their government seems determined to scupper the country's prospects of joining the EU.

SEE GEORGIA ON PAGE 12



IRELAND HAS A NEW GROUP OF VOTERS: THE HOMELESS

In EU election, Dublin addresses a Continent-wide problem.

BY ALESSANDRO FORD
IN DUBLIN

For most of her young life, Keile Sheridan Odanza didn't care about voting. "I never thought I needed to," said the 24-year-old beautician from the port city of Waterford.

It wouldn't have mattered if she had: Sheridan Odanza was homeless. After a childhood spent moving between foster families, she marked her 18th birthday by being cast out on the street.

It took her years to find stable housing, watching as the homelessness crisis went from bad to worse. By the time she found fixed accommodation, a short-term lease run by a nonprofit organization, she wanted a say about the matter.

"The last election, we got false hope. We got told that they were going to solve the housing crisis, they were gonna do more houses," she said bitterly, condemning the ruling Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil coalition, who have dominated Irish politics since the 1930s.

"We need a proper government in charge that is actually gonna help."

In the center of Dublin, the pavements are peppered with rough

sleepers, the result of a stark housing shortage that has quadrupled the number of homeless people to almost 14,000 within a decade.

Until recently, these men and women were politically voiceless, ignored by candidates and absent from the electoral list.

Across most of Europe the rule is: no address, no vote.

That's different this time. On June 7, Ireland's homeless people will be casting their ballots in the EU election, the first such event since a reform in 2022 that allowed charities to provide unsheltered people with an address, which is necessary to vote. That isn't a place they can reside though, only vote from.

Still, activists and experts say this opportunity for homeless voters could force lawmakers to address a growing crisis at a time of spiraling housing and living costs, and thrust this demographic onto the European Union stage.

"The fact there is a homelessness crisis isn't even on the news. It's not 'trending' [and] that's why you don't hear what politicians are doing," said James Flanagan, a 20-year-old electrical engineer, who volunteers for Focus Ireland, the NGO organizing the campaign.

Flanagan's first memories are of sleeping in cars with his mother. When he was six years old, the two moved into NGO-supported housing while they waited for a council flat, spending the past 14 years there, only moving out in April.

"The homeless and housing crisis is the biggest problem in society in recent years and I want to use my vote to try to drive action on this issue," said Flanagan, a month into his role spearheading the nonprofit's registration drive, targeting the nearly 70,000 people in emergency and social housing, as well as the thousands more sleeping rough.

Catherine Keenan, a 53-year-old

grandmother, signed up to vote with her sons last month. "It gives me back a bit of power and a bit of hope that things will change," she said. After fleeing an abusive relationship and having two children taken into care, Keenan slept outside train stations, hospitals and a stone bench outside the local council.

"A lot of power was taken away from me," she remembered from her charity-owned flat in Dublin, where she cares for an adult son with autism. "But maybe if I vote they'll do something for me and my family, you know."

The charity won't reveal how many people have registered so far, but they're confident most of those that do will actually vote and are hopeful even a small turnout will force the issue onto the political agenda, particularly as the housing crunch gets ever tighter.

But that could be a tall order.

"It's [also] that thing of 'why would I bother when society rejects me?'" added Connor Roe, manager at Stanhope Green, the long-term accommodation that Flanagan just moved out of.

HOUSING HELL

Those hunting for a place to sleep in the Irish capital will regale listeners with nightmarish stories about flat hunting, from the multi-round application process and street-length queues for viewings, to the university lecturers camping in tents and that one colleague who was offered a bed for €650 per month – to be shared with a stranger.

In recent years, to compound both the homeless and housing issues, the government has been unable to manage a large influx of migrants and refugees who must also be housed, leaving some to set up encampments in the Irish capital.

"It's been allowed to become a runaway train, with vulture funds buying

a lot of the new builds," said Martin Leahy, a 48-year-old musician who has been protesting outside Ireland's senate every Thursday since April 2022. Facing possible eviction and likely homelessness, Leahy comes each week to play songs.

"Some peoples' misery, other peoples' gain. Enrich the rich and make them richer," he crooned, strumming his guitar. "They see property as opportunity, a business that'll make the sickness sicker. If they build too many houses, it'll drive down the price. It's cold economics to them. So there's no way to address it, it's not in their interest, we've seen it over time and time again."

It's an outlook rejected by Senator Mary Fitzpatrick, the spokesperson on housing for Ireland's centrist governing party Fianna Fáil, who stood a few hundred feet away from Leahy's one-man demo. Fianna Fáil has controlled the ministry of housing and local government since 2020.

"We've put in place a 10 year plan: Housing for All. The plan is to deliver 300,000 homes by 2030, to eliminate homelessness by 2030. It is backed in this government's [five-year] term with €20 billion in state funding," she said. "So it's huge: It's the biggest change to housing policy in decades [and] I don't know of any other European country that has taken such a significant initiative."

Ask civil society groups though and they'll tell you of the Fianna Fáil government selling off whole estates after the 2008 financial crash. That was followed by a decade of center-right Fine Gael, one of the two traditional main parties alongside Fianna Fáil, leaving housing provision to the private sector, even as Big Tech snapped up real estate and Airbnb decimated long-term rentals.

In January, then-Taioseach Leo Varadkar quietly admitted there was a deficit of around 250,000 homes, which would take years to resolve.

In the center of Dublin, the pavements are peppered with rough sleepers

PETER MACDIARMID/
GETTY IMAGES

Median house prices sit at €430,000 in Dublin, while rental apartments average €1,513 per month.

That made the Irish capital the third most expensive European city to rent in last year, behind only Geneva and London, according to an index compiled by The Economist. Adjusted for local wages, Dublin was the fifth least affordable city, following other notorious money burners like Budapest, Prague, Lisbon and Zagreb.

Many who spoke to POLITICO, both homeless and housed, are certain the issue will define the EU election - and the polls bear that out. Housing is the top issue identified by the Republic of Ireland's 5 million people, outpacing migration, cost-of-living and healthcare by a wide margin, according to the latest data by Ipsos.

"It's very important to talk about this, not in the way of 'oh, I'm a victim,' but [because] we need to take action on this," said Jenny Lopez, a 38-year-old homeless mother in charity-owned housing.

Most seem to agree with Sheridan Odanza, the beautician, who delivers her answer like a body blow. "I want to vote for a party that's gonna actually help solve the homeless crisis," she snapped.

Like the majority of her compatriots, this June she is backing a party that has never been in government, a once-radical alternative that is now the most popular force in both Ireland and the British territory of Northern Ireland.

"I'm voting for Sinn Féin," she said proudly, referencing the leftist party long kept at bay from mainstream politics for historic links to the Irish Republican Army and its use of violence in the Northern Ireland conflict that ran from the 1960s to 1990s.



EU ON NOTICE

European politicians have taken note.

Part of The Left group in the European Parliament, Sinn Féin are enjoying a remarkable run that has them polling at 28 percent, miles ahead of Fine Gael's 18 percent and Fianna Fáil's 15, according to POLITICO's Poll of Polls.

That is in large part down to the housing crisis and the reverberating repercussions of the 2008 financial

crisis and pro-business policies of the ruling coalition.

"Your government's failure to deliver the affordable homes needed to rent and buy is at the heart of the problem," thundered leader Mary Lou McDonald in parliament last week, while berating recently-appointed Taoiseach Simon Harris. She referred to a new survey showcasing that only 5 percent of people think the government is doing enough to

CHARLES MCQUILLAN/GETTY IMAGES

help renters, the bulk of the electorate.

Figures like these have bolstered support for Sinn Féin, with another poll finding that half of local council renters, over a third of those living at home with parents, and a quarter of private renters plan to choose them during the EU election.

"They want to stop the homeless [crisis]," insisted Sheridan Odanza, explaining that all her friends and family want to vote for them too.

Last month's Maastricht debate saw several would-be chiefs of the European Commission mention the issue, with The Left's lead candidate Walter Baier calling for a regulatory framework to limit platforms like Airbnb and for directives to enshrine the right to affordable housing and introduce country-by-country rental price caps.

"The housing crisis exactly is one of the examples of the unjust current system which we are in," the Austrian communist told audience members at the POLITICO-organized event.

There is increasing talk in Brussels of the need for a housing commissioner and housing policy wonks are increasingly being hired by the Berlaymont, according to Mike Allen, vice president of the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA).

"That [growing role] has also followed into homelessness," he said.

In March, Flanagan and Sheridan Odanza traveled to Brussels to speak about their experiences and were immediately appointed to the 'expert by experience' committee for the European Platform for Combatting Homelessness.

"I want to get it out to the whole world, especially the EU, that everyone deserves to vote and no one deserves to be homeless," reflected Flanagan.

EUROVISION DEBATE 2024



JOIN THE CONVERSATION!

On 23 May at 15:00 CEST, the Eurovision Debate between the lead candidates for the presidency of the European Commission will take place at the European Parliament in Brussels.

WATCH LIVE: social.ebu.ch/Eurovision-Debate

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#USE YOUR VOTE





SERVING THE VATERLAND: GERMANY DEBATES REVIVING CONSCRIPTION

Expanding the Bundeswehr to a force of 203,000 is easier said than done.

BY JOSHUA POSANER
IN BERLIN

Germany scrapped the draft in 2011, but Russia's war in Ukraine is forcing a rethink.

"I'm convinced that Germany needs some kind of military conscription," Defense Minister Boris Pistorius told an audience at Johns Hopkins University in the United States last week, calling the decision by former Chancellor Angela Merkel to end conscription a "mistake."

"Times have changed," he said.

While the idea of reinstating some form of national military service is gaining ground, doing so could require changing the constitution and raising billions to cover the extra costs of mustering, feeding, training, arming and housing

tens of thousands of new recruits.

Pistorius' team has spent weeks drafting proposals for how such a system could work, and officials say he plans to kick-start a public debate on the topic before the summer parliamentary recess.

On April 22, defense ministry planners presented a report with three options: Keeping the military as it stands but increasing efforts to boost recruitment; reactivating conscription for 18-year-old men, and selectively choosing up to 40,000 a year to serve, as is done in Scandinavia; or going all the way and making military service mandatory for all men and women.

"The ministry is currently clarifying whether general compulsory service or military service makes sense," said a ministry spokesperson, adding that while it "is not up to the ministry to decide whether there will be a return to conscription," the aim is to prepare the ground for a public debate.

Speaking in Stockholm on Tuesday, Chancellor Olaf Scholz said

there won't be a return to mass conscription.

"That wouldn't work anymore," he said. "There were many more soldiers, there were much more barracks, there was much more infrastructure that was built for this purpose."

It's part of a broader rethink of the military forced by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the worsening security situation.

During the Cold War, Germany spent about 4 percent of GDP on defense and had a military of 400,000 along with 2,500 heavy tanks. Now it has around 180,000 troops and is only hitting NATO's 2 percent spending target for the first time in years thanks to a special €100 billion fund that is likely to be exhausted by 2028.

READY TO SERVE

Returning to the draft is part of a broader military rethink. Pistorius has put forward a new military doctrine that aims to turn the Bundeswehr into a force that can "wage war" and is better suited to

territorial defense.

He's spent recent months surveying other national models of conscription.

Sweden has attracted his interest. There, only a few 18-year-olds are asked to serve, making military service a prestigious undertaking. The same happens in Norway, while in Denmark, women will be conscripted in future as part of a gender-neutral selection process.

But the politics of rolling back Merkel's decision are fraught.

Germany's constitution would need to be changed for general conscription to be introduced, requiring a complicated two-thirds majority in the Bundestag.

Sara Nanni, the Greens spokesperson for security policy, told *Die Welt* of the need to have a "discussion about our country's defense capability." FDP defense spokesperson Alexander Müller, however, said: "The FDP parliamentary group rejects compulsory service or military service. We are prepared to discuss all models for increased and more successful recruitment that are based on the voluntary nature of career choice."

Earlier this month, the opposition Christian Democrats backed a proposal to reintroduce conscription – put forward by the party's youth wing – as part of their own program.

Russia's war on Ukraine is shifting public opinion: A poll by a public broadcaster showed that a majority support the return of national service.

While debate is likely to rage through the summer, the reintroduction of some form of a draft will almost certainly be a question for the government that emerges following the next federal election in 2025.

PLUGGING LEAKS

The Bundeswehr wants a force of 203,000 soldiers by 2031, but is having a hard time keeping existing troops from quitting.

"The question is not just about recruitment, but about retention," said Christian Mölling from the German Council on Foreign Relations, who has been tracking the conscription debate. "How do you persuade people in 2024 that it is a good idea to stay with the armed forces?"

Moreover, a return to conscription is only one step in restructuring the armed forces.

Remaking a military from a small professional force of volunteers into a much larger one based on the draft requires that everything be revamped, from training methods and military doctrine to handling and usefully employing thousands of conscripts

Eva Högl, an MP from the SPD who serves as parliamentary coordinator for the armed forces, estimates it will cost €50 billion to modernize barracks and facilities to help make serving in the armed forces attractive to both fresh recruits and experienced soldiers.

Then there are the broader societal implications of dragging young people away from education, traineeships and the civilian workforce.

"I don't think people have started to really think about the cost of conscription," said Guntram Wolff, a senior fellow at the Bruegel think tank. He pointed to the price of developing infrastructure to recruit, register, train, feed and house conscripts, but also the missing labor in an already aging society.

"There are acute shortages in the labor market and young cohorts entering a year later on available a substantial drag on available labour supply," Wolff said.

The Bundeswehr wants a force of 203,000 soldiers by 2031, but is having a hard time keeping existing troops from quitting.

ALEXANDER KOERNER/GETTY IMAGES

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HOW TURKEY BECAME PUTIN'S 'PIT STOP' FOR SELLING FUEL TO THE EU



Moscow bagged €3 billion through a sanctions loophole that allows Turkey to relabel Russian gas and ship it to the EU.

BY VICTOR JACK

On a balmy spring day last May in southern Turkey just 60 kilometers from the Syrian border, a tanker the length of two football fields pulled into the Toros Ceyhan terminal ready to pick up fuel.

Loaded with 150,000 barrels of gasoil – a fuel largely the same as diesel – the ship then departed on a three-day journey toward the Motor Oil Hellas refinery in southern Greece.

Ostensibly, the fuel was Turkish; Athens insists it doesn't accept Russian-labeled cargoes, in compliance with an EU prohibition. But new research and reporting shows the shipment was likely just that: Russian oil hidden with new markings.

That's part of a much broader trend, according to research from the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) and Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) think tanks, as well as independent reporting from POLITICO. Russian oil, it seems, is arriving en masse to the EU via Turkey.

And it's all legal. The scheme is

possible because of a workaround in Brussels sanctions that allows "blended" fuels into the EU if they're labeled as non-Russian. It's a lucrative loophole, with research showing it generated up to €3 billion for Moscow from three ports alone in the 12 months after the EU banned Russia's fuels in February 2023.

"Turkey has emerged as a strategic pit stop for Russian fuel products rerouted to the EU, generating hundreds of millions in tax revenues for the Kremlin's war chest," said Martin Vladimirov, a senior energy analyst at CSD.

The workaround illustrates the creative ways Russia is circumventing EU sanctions to protect its fossil fuel trade, which makes up almost half the Kremlin's budget and offers a vital lifeline for its military campaign. Last year, POLITICO revealed Moscow won another €1 billion from a separate EU sanctions loophole in Bulgaria, while the G7's signature measure to limit Moscow's oil trades to \$60 per barrel has largely failed.

That ballooning trade comes as relations sour between the EU and Turkey over its Russian overtures – even as the country makes minor moves to align with U.S. sanctions.

Since the war began, Turkey has offered to become a gas hub for Moscow, while slurping up large volumes of its oil.

The latest revelations are prompting calls for action as EU countries discuss the bloc's 14th Russia sanctions package.

"We must tighten our clamps and

find ways to prevent the circumvention of sanctions," Estonia's Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna told POLITICO. "Third countries, especially our NATO allies [like Turkey], should align with our sanctions as much as possible."

ADDING FUEL TO FIRE

Before Moscow's invasion, the EU relied on Russia for a quarter of its crude imports and 40 percent of its diesel purchases – something that changed drastically after the bloc agreed to a blanket ban on both products in 2022.

Around the same time, Turkey began quietly increasing its own imports of fuels from Russia, while also

ramping up its fuel exports to the EU.

Over the last year, the numbers have nearly matched, the research reveals. Between February 2023 and February 2024, Turkey boosted its Russian purchases by 105 percent compared to the previous 12 months. In that same stretch, Turkey's fuel exports to the EU jumped by 107 percent.

That doesn't mean every fuel cargo arriving in the EU from Turkey is Russian. Turkey has refineries that can process almost 1 million barrels of crude per day. And Turkish firms are also likely reselling some non-Russian fuel to the EU.

But the geographical situation of several Turkish ports, combined with import-export data, strongly indicates that considerable amounts of Russian fuel has simply been repackaged and passed on.

The southeastern port of Ceyhan, for example, has limited road and railway connections to refineries, giving it few means of receiving large fuel deliveries other than through the tankers docking at its piers.

Between February 2023 and 2024 the port took in some 22 million barrels of fuel, 92 percent of which came from Russia – triple the amount it imported from Moscow the year before. During that same period, 85 percent of the port's fuel exports went to the EU.

Together, that suggests much of the Russian fuel coming in was being flipped onto the EU market under a different label.

It's not the first time the port has come under scrutiny. In March, Global Terminal Services, which runs another export terminal nearby, said it would no longer accept Russian imports as it came under pressure from U.S. sanctions.

But Toros hasn't taken such precautions and continued to import Moscow's fuel, including last May's gasoil shipment. In total the terminal received 1.4 million barrels of Russian fuel from February 2023 to 2024 – nearly all of the 1.5 million barrels it brought in during that time. Over those 12 months, it also sent 1.6 million barrels to the EU, comprising the vast majority of the 1.9 million barrels it exported.

That makes it "very likely" the terminal is reexporting Russian fuel to the EU, said Viktor Katona, lead crude analyst at the Kpler data analytics firm. He noted that Toros' higher export volumes can be explained by small volumes coming from a nearby refinery or fuel already in storage.

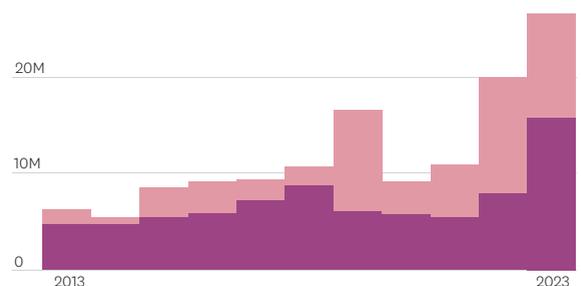
It's a similar story at two other ports: the western Marmara Ereğlisi facility and the southern Mersin site.

Both showed similar annual spikes in their Russian imports – twofold in Marmara Ereğlisi and threefold in Mersin – that coincided with a jump in exports to the EU.

While both ports are better connected to nearby refineries and im

Ramping up russian oil purchases

Volume of imports of Russian oil and refined fuels into Turkey during the last decade, in tons of refined fuels and crude oil.



Source: CSD analysis of COMTRADE data

Giovanna Coi/POLITICO

port more non-Russian fuel than Ceyhan, the data still reveals “a significant possibility that Russian oil products are being reexported,” said Vaibhav Raghunandan, an analyst at CREA.

The owners and operators of the three Turkish terminals – Ceyhan’s Toros Terminal, Mersin’s Turkis Enerji and Marmara Ereğlisi’s OPET – didn’t reply to detailed questions from POLITICO and repeated requests for comment.

‘TURKISH DELIGHT’

Largely responsible for this dynamic are two players: Turkey and the EU. Part of the problem lies in the tests Brussels uses to ensure sanctions compliance.

According to EU rules, cargoes containing Russian fuel mixed with products from elsewhere “could be subject to the sanction depending on the proportion of the Russian component.”

Usually, that share is defined by whether the fuels have undergone “substantial transformation” – becoming an entirely new product – which the data suggests has not happened across all Turkish ports.

A European Commission spokesperson declined to comment on specific cases, while arguing it was up to the bloc’s countries “to implement and enforce EU sanctions.”

Greece’s customs authority told POLITICO it carries “out appropriate controls both at the customs clearance stage and afterwards,” and that “to date, no violations have been detected.”

But in practice what is being tested is a document stating where the cargo comes from, called a “certificate of origin,” according to Katona, the analyst. Importing fuels with Russian documents is mostly illegal under EU

law – but Turkey’s simply rebranding old cargoes with a new, Turkish certificate, is not.

A case in point is Toros Ceyhan’s gasoil shipment. The Motor Oil Hellas refinery, which received the cargo, said it “does not buy, process or trade Russian oil or products,” and that “all its imports are certified of non-sanctioned origin,” implying it had documents from elsewhere.

That suggests Ankara has “instilled new life into something that was already ... straightforward but now has reappeared – as a Turkish delight,” Katona said, showing how “sanctions can be very easily circumvented.”

For Turkey, poor compliance with Brussels sanctions makes sense if the country feels it has nothing to lose with the EU, said Amanda Paul, a senior analyst and Turkey specialist at the European Policy Centre think tank.

With Ankara’s efforts to join the bloc at a standstill, “there doesn’t seem to be very much hope that this relationship is going to improve,” she said, while adding that imports and reexports of cheaper Russian oil have “been very beneficial for Turkey” as the country combats sky-high inflation and a plummeting currency.

Turkey’s energy ministry didn’t respond to a request for comment.

For some in the EU, that behavior goes a step too far.

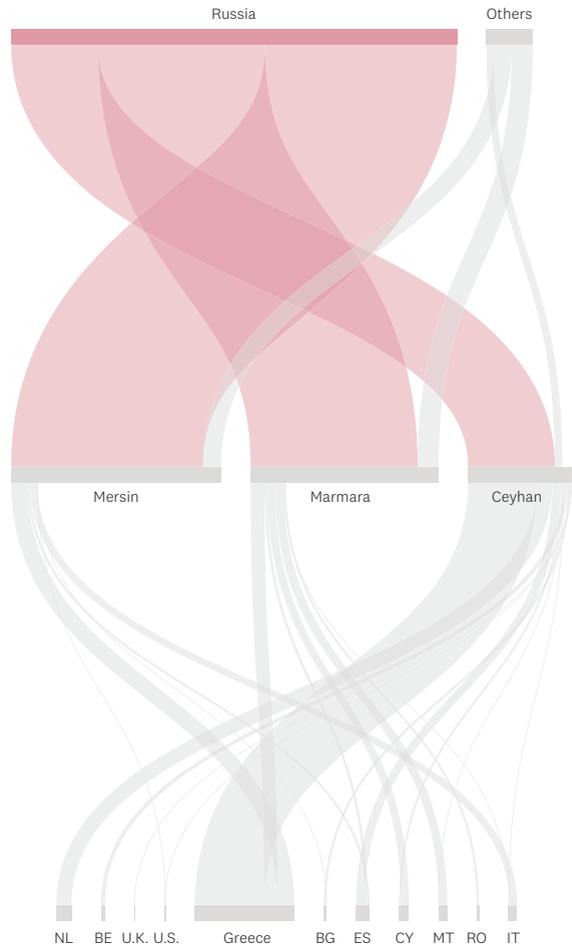
As countries discuss Brussels’ latest sanctions package, “let’s fix [this] in there,” said one EU diplomat, granted anonymity to speak candidly. Capitals “could discuss” tightening rules on Russian fuel imports from non-EU countries and sanctioning Turkish exporters, they added.

“The whole purpose of sanctions with Russia is to cut down the revenues of Russia to wage war – the more we can do, the better.”

Loophole effects

An EU sanctions workaround allows countries to buy “blended” fuel as long as it’s labeled as non-Russian. Analysis from CREA and CSD shows that Russia might be exploiting this loophole by shipping relabeled fuel to the EU via Turkish ports.

The chart shows the volume of seaborne oil products exported from Russia and elsewhere to the EU via three Turkish ports between February 2023 and February 2024, in tons.



Source: CREA
Giovanna Coi/
POLITICO

POLITICO
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Georgia

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

Brussels had feared the new law would precede a brutal crackdown on dissent – but violence and intimidation against the opposition is already spiking, even before the law takes effect.

Speaking to POLITICO at a protest on Tuesday, Japaridze's brother, opposition politician Zurab Japaridze, said he would not yield to violence because the country's democratic future was at stake.

"We can either be on the path to Europe or on the path to Belarus," he said.

Zurab Japaridze also said a group of men had attempted to attack him on three occasions since the foreign agent law began to draw resistance. During one attempt he fired a gun in the air to deter his assailants.

IN SOMEBODY'S CROSSHAIRS

Nino Zuriashvili also ran afoul of the growing political menace.

The founder of investigative outlet Studio Monitor, one of the outlets that faces being branded as a foreign agent, Zuriashvili received a call last week from an unknown number. The voice on the other end of the line insulted her because of her opposition to the bill. Dozens of other protesters and prominent activists say they have

faced similar threats.

A few days later, when Zuriashvili arrived at her office, she was greeted by dozens of flyers bearing her face plastered across the walls outside, accusing her of being "an agent sold for money" and calling the investigative outlet an "anti-Georgian agency."

"This was a very unpleasant feeling. It meant that I was in somebody's crosshairs," she told POLITICO.

She found similar posters near her house. Her car was also vandalized, spray-painted with penises and graffiti calling her an "agent sold for money."

"It just made me realize that I was right all along," she said. "The government is creating groups to oppress us. We are waking up in Russia. We will fight this war to the end. Georgia will not become Russia."

Dimitri Chikovani, a member of the United National Movement opposition party, was attacked by a group of unidentified men near his house on May 8 – the same night as the attack on Gia Japaridze. CCTV footage shows five men beating him relentlessly as he exits his car. He ended up in a hospital with multiple injuries to his face and body.

Chikovani blamed the ruling Georgian Dream and the enigmatic oligarch who founded the party and now serves as its honorary chairman, Bidzina Ivanishvili.

"The attackers and the interior ministry serve the same lord" he said, adding that despite the launch

of a formal investigation, he was sure police won't take his case seriously.

GEORGIAN DREAM DATABASE

The governing Georgian Dream party shows no sign of trying to dial down tensions.

Playing to conservative supporters, and brushing off criticism from the EU and U.S., the party says the new law is needed to stop foreign influence from undermining traditional values.

"If we bow to these Soviet-style foreign directives, in the future they'll just as successfully demand us to reject laws on family values and protection of minors, to adopt same-sex marriage, to legalize drugs," Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze said on Monday.

As for the beatings, Justice Minister Rati Bregadze claimed the pro-EU protesters themselves were to blame for carrying out assaults against their own supporters. "If anybody benefits from such a mess, these are the people behind these protesters," he said.

Meanwhile, Parliamentary Speaker Shalva Papuashvili has threatened to crack down on the demonstrators – announcing plans to create a database of those he says are "involved in violence, illegal activities, intimidation and blackmail or approve of such behavior."

The database would be published online to name and shame those accused of transgressions. Critics see it as yet another move to discredit the

Georgian Dream has been warned by its U.S. and EU partners that adoption of the bill will harm Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

government's opponents.

Georgian Dream did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

On Tuesday, as the Georgian parliament voted 84-30 in favor of the bill, thousands gathered outside the legislature in central Tbilisi to drown out proceedings with a chorus of whistles, vuvuzelas and banging pots and pans. Riot police dispersed the crowds with water cannons and a sonic weapons. Authorities arrested dozens, deploying tear gas against peaceful protesters, and have been accused of beating detainees.

At the edge of the rally, several men in black, wearing masks, accosted journalists and bystanders, taking pictures of those present in an apparent bid to intimidate them. Asked by POLITICO to identify themselves and explain their side of the debate, they remained silent and continued to photograph attendees.

Georgian Dream has been warned by its U.S. and EU partners that adoption of the bill will harm Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

U.S. State Department Assistant Secretary Jim O'Brien warned of potential sanctions after Tuesday's vote.

"If the law goes forward, out of conformity with EU norms, and there's undermining of democracy here, and there's violence against peaceful protesters, then we'll see restrictions coming from the U.S. These tend to be financial and travel restrictions on the individuals responsible for these actions and their families."

VON DER LEYEN MAKES FOREIGN INFLUENCE A KEY CAMPAIGN TOPIC

Commission chief says Europe is not ready to deal with meddling from foes like Russia.

BY CLOTHILDE GOUJARD
IN BRUSSELS

As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is turning foreign interference into a key campaign issue as she seeks a second term.

Less than a month before the European election, von der Leyen called for more forceful action to counter foreign meddling and to protect European democracy, in a campaign speech in Denmark on Tuesday. She gathered European commissioners on Wednesday to warn for an impending deluge of disinformation and hacking attacks.

"Do we want a strong Europe that fights for our values and our democracy? Or, on the other hand, do we let our democracies be hijacked by the proxies and puppets of authoritarians?" von der Leyen asked in her speech at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit.

She promised to set up "a European Democracy Shield," if reelected for a second term, to fight back against foreign meddling.

EU cybersecurity and disinformation officials expect a surge in online falsehoods in the 20 days prior to the European Parliament election on June 6-9, when millions of Europeans elect new representatives. Officials fear that Russia is ramping up its influence operations to sow doubt about the integrity of elections in the West and to manipulate public opinion in its favor.

Von der Leyen, a member of Germany's Christian Democrats (CDU), is running for a second term as head of the EU executive in an election that is likely to see a rise of far-right parties across the bloc.

Authorities in the Czech Republic, France and Germany have called out Moscow for its propaganda operations, which range from fake news websites with anti-EU and anti-Ukraine narratives, to alleged payments to some European politicians for peddling Russia's line.

Some far-right members of the European Parliament – including one of von der Leyen's fiercest competitors in June's election, the top candidate for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party Maximilian Krah – are currently under investigation for alleged corruption and espionage for Russia and China.

EU institutions and member countries in recent weeks have started holding regular crisis meetings to tackle foreign interference target-

ing elections. The meetings were triggered in late April under a European response mechanism previously used for coordination during the Covid pandemic and natural disasters.

In a note shared with EU commissioners ahead of Wednesday's meeting and seen by POLITICO's Brussels Playbook, Vice President Vera Jourová warned that disinformation is expected to accelerate as June's election approaches.

"Disinformation is on the rise, cheaper to produce with artificial intelligence and more widely distributed through social media," the note said. "There is no silver bullet here," it said, adding that the best solution is in nurturing "digital and media literacy, supporting dedicated Civil Society Organisations, and supporting strong independent media."

RUSSIAN WORRIES

Russia has previously tried to sway major elections including in the United States in 2016 and 2020 and in the European Union in 2019, according to analyses by intelligence agencies and EU institutions.

Two years after Russia invaded Ukraine, however, Moscow's military aggression and recent sabotage and espionage operations have Europe even more worried. China's growing assertiveness is also prompting jitters: The United Kingdom and Belgium have accused Beijing in recent weeks of targeting elected officials.

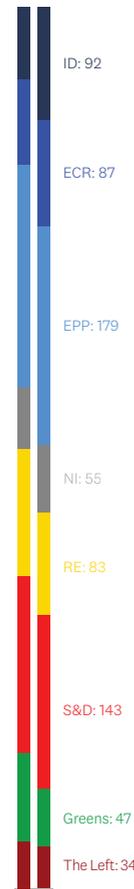
With the European election campaign focusing heavily on defense, von der Leyen has portrayed herself as an experienced and safe candidate who is determined to protect European democracy.

Researchers have found that Russian disinformation campaigns can also get a boost from often far-right political networks in Europe. "We see Russian propaganda and disinformation coming from local actors that genuinely align with the positions of Russia, especially in Western Europe," said Tommaso Canetta, fact-checking coordinator for the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO).

"For example, it's coming from the far-right because they see in Putin a champion of anti-woke culture, a de-

Poll data

Current MEPs at the European Parliament (left) and projection (right).



Source: POLITICO Research & Analysis Division
Arnau Busquets Guàrdia/POLITICO

fender of Christianity and so on and from the far left because he opposes American imperialism," Canetta said.

Von der Leyen's 2019-2024 Commission proposed and adopted new tech laws to improve oversight of how social media platforms police content – including preventing the spread of falsehoods – and to force tech firms to label potentially deceptive artificial intelligence-generated content like deepfakes.

The European Commission started enforcing its content moderation law, the Digital Services Act (DSA), in 2023. Large online platforms such as Meta, X and TikTok now must clamp down on disinformation and coordinated manipulation campaigns, especially during election campaigns, or face fines of up to 6 percent of their global revenues.

The Commission has also required major companies to detail how they are reining in AI-generated content. And it recently opened an investigation into Facebook and Instagram's handling of disinformation from Russia and other foreign countries.

But still, von der Leyen said Europe wasn't sufficiently protected and organized to face foreign meddling. Von der Leyen also flagged a rise in cyberattacks, including on her own electoral website.

Videos, photos and recordings generated by AI to impersonate public figures, including politicians, have previously spread in Slovakia, the U.K. and the U.S. They have not yet surfaced in European elections, according to fact-checkers.

The plan von der Leyen pitched for her second term includes setting up a European disinformation unit to detect, coordinate and share analysis from other national agencies, along with potentially new rules to tackle new technologies like AI deepfakes.

A strategic communications unit within the European External Action Service, the bloc's diplomatic service, is currently in charge of monitoring and analyzing disinformation. EU countries are also preparing to set up joint response teams to focus on hybrid threats, including sabotage and information manipulation.

Mark Scott contributed reporting.

POLITICS

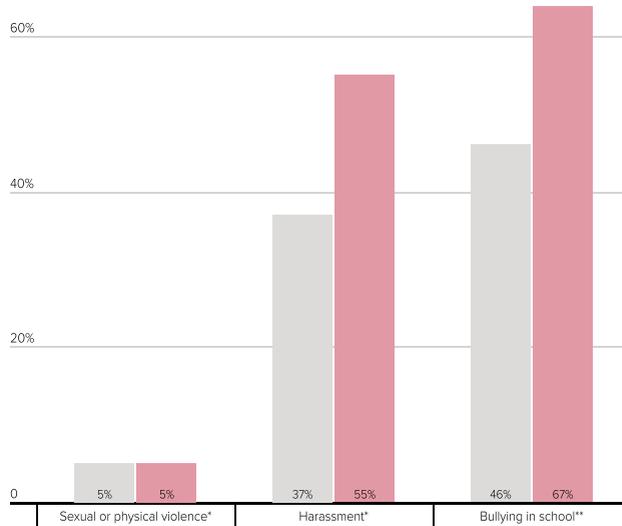
Violence against LGBTQ+ people rises

Europe is failing to protect LGBTQ+ people from rising violence, according to new data released this week, despite some legislative progress, said rights groups. The latest assessment published by LGBTQ+ advocacy group ILGA-Europe found that Poland, Italy and the Czech Republic are particularly trailing in efforts to protect groups. In part, those countries lack comprehensive laws or policies against hate speech and hate crime on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. ILGA's report shows little improvement between 2019 and 2023 when it comes to

addressing hatred and violence against LGBTQ+ communities. The number of LGBTQ+ people who experienced hate-motivated violence, including physical and sexual attacks, in the five years preceding the survey increased from 11 percent in 2019 to 14 percent in 2023. Harassment also rose, according to the survey, which found that 55 percent of LGBTQ+ people experienced harassment in their daily lives in 2023, jumping from 37 percent in 2019. This trend was apparent in younger groups the report also noted that bullying at school is also on the rise.

Violence against LGBTQ+ people in the EU

Share of LGBTQ+ people surveyed by the EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights in 2019 and 2023 who, in the previous 12 months, experienced at least one instance of ...



Sample sizes for the 2023 survey: 98,272 people aged 15 or older in EU27 countries who self-identify as LGBTQ+ (49,040 for bullying in school). The survey was carried out in June-August 2023.

Source: FRA, EU-LGBTI II (2019) and EU-LGBTI III (2024)

Giovanna Coi/POLITICO

PRO BRIEF

CENTRAL BANKER

UK unemployment edges up

Britain's labor market cooled slightly again in March with joblessness ticking up, but wages continued to grow solidly, defying expectations of a slowdown. Average earnings excluding bonuses rose by 6 percent on an annual basis between January and March. Growth including bonuses was 5.7 percent, above the 5.3 percent forecast by analysts and also unchanged from last month's figure. The data from the Office for National Statistics suggests that British workers are seeing their salaries grow at a steady clip, putting a wrinkle in the Bank of England's plans to get inflation under control.



COMPETITION

Booking.com named digital gatekeepers

Travel website Booking.com was named as digital gatekeeper under the EU's Digital Markets Act, the first European tech platform to get the label, the European Commission said May 13. The company will now need to comply with digital competition rules by November that may require it to change how it runs its online business in Europe. The Commission said the Dutch-based hotel reservations company is an "important gateway between businesses and consumers" in the digital economy. The company had already said it surpassed monthly user thresholds of 45 million last year.



DEFENSE

Putin makes Nikolai Patrushev his aide

Vladimir Putin's ousted security chief Nikolai Patrushev will instead serve as the Russian president's aide, according to a decree published by the Kremlin. The announcement came amid Putin's post-inauguration reshuffle of the Russian defense ministry, and as his forces intensify their barrage of Ukraine. Putin had earlier replaced his Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who had held the post for 12 years, with Andrei Belousov, an economist who has never served in the Russian military. Shoigu, in turn, was named secretary of Russia's Security Council, replacing user thresholds of 45 million last year of Putin's closest confidants.



ENERGY AND CLIMATE

Countries up pressure on grid construction

EU countries are asking Brussels for more help to rapidly overhaul their electric grids, a document obtained by POLITICO shows. The bloc's 27 members want the European Commission to present an "implementation agenda" to accelerate power network construction and ease cross-country electricity trade. They're also requesting more coordination on the long-term buildout of power infrastructure and are pressing the European Investment Bank to up its grid financing. EU energy ministers are expected to sign off on the draft document, dated May 9 and still subject to change, at a meeting in Brussels at the end of the month.



MOBILITY

Brussels denounces Brenner traffic limits

The European Commission on May 14 said Austria is improperly restricting the free movement of goods by limiting trucks using the Brenner Pass. "The Commission finds that the Austrian measures lack consistency and therefore cannot be justified in their entirety," said the Commission's reasoned opinion. The Italian ministry of infrastructure said the opinion provided "great satisfaction" and that Rome will now prepare legal action against Austria in the Court of Justice of the European Union. The Brenner Pass is one of Europe's main north-south trade routes, which is key to the EU's economy.



COMPETITION

Epic's Fortnite targeted by Dutch fine

Games developer Epic was fined €1.1 million by Dutch regulators for pressure-selling tactics to get kids to buy items while playing battle game Fortnite. The Netherlands' Authority for Consumers and Markets (ACM) ordered the company to stop using expiry timers that entice children to buy items and texts such as "get it now" or "buy now" which it said formed a "dark pattern" that is aggressive commercial behavior. ACM board member Cateaukje Hijmans van den Bergh said "children were pressured into making purchases by playing on their vulnerabilities."

TRADE

Solar firms quit project after EU probe

Chinese-owned bidders dropped out of a Romanian solar power contract just 40 days after the European Commission started investigating whether they were unfairly funded by foreign state subsidies. It's the second time an EU probe has claimed a scalp and led a Chinese bidder to withdraw from a government tender. Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton cheered on the companies' move to pull out, saying Europe's massive investments in solar panels "should not come at the expense of our energy security, our industrial competitiveness and European jobs."

ENERGY AND CLIMATE

EU releases guidance on renewables rollout

The European Commission on May 13 published new guidance to help accelerate the expansion of green energy across the EU as the bloc scrambles to meet its 2030 climate goals. The EU executive issued new recommendations on speeding up permits, set up a platform to coordinate green energy project auctions and gave fresh guidelines for how the bloc's governments should assign geographical areas to quickly build out renewables. The EU has agreed to increase the share of renewables in its overall energy mix to 42.5 percent by 2030 — up from 23 percent in 2022.

TECHNOLOGY

Commission to quiz microchips industry

The European Commission will question semiconductor manufacturers and customers about legacy chips and how dependent they are on Chinese supplies it said May 13. "The EU will conduct targeted surveys with suppliers and users of key sectors," the Commission said in a statement, adding it has the aim to have "preliminary results" by the end of the summer. Legacy chips have emerged as a new geopolitical hot topic for both the U.S. and EU because of fears that Chinese firms are dominating production with the help of government subsidies.

HEALTH CARE

No deal yet in WHO pandemic talks

Talks on a pandemic agreement ended without a deal on May 10, with negotiators set to try one more time to find a breakthrough before the World Health Organization (WHO)'s assembly on May 27. "We will see what miracles we can perform," said Roland Driecq, co-chair of the committee organizing the talks. Negotiators were unable to reach consensus on the most difficult issues, including intellectual property rights and the sharing of pathogen data. The WHO has set a deadline of May 2024 to conclude a deal, which is supposed to be adopted at the World Health Assembly.

THE ROBOTS ARE COMING.

How Ukraine became the testing ground for AI-powered combat.

BY GIAN VOLPICELLI,
VERONIKA MELKOZEROVA
AND LAURA KAYALI
IN KYIV



On a sunny, balmy Tuesday in late April, a line of cars formed outside a military proving ground near Kyiv, their passengers eager to catch a glimpse of the future of warfare. As the drivers waited to enter, hosts of maybugs swarmed overhead. Above them buzzed bigger, robotic competitors: military drones crisscrossing the sky.

The grounds were full of techies and soldiers, gathering on a field scarred by Russia's foiled assault on Kyiv to test-drive their latest innovations. Among them was a Ukrainian startup called Swarmer. Registered in Delaware and with offices in Romania and Poland, it had something special to demo: drones that use artificial intelligence to work together as a coordinated swarm.

It took about 20 minutes for Swarmer's team of five engineers to prepare the drones for their mission: to find and destroy two targets hidden somewhere in the field. Usually, drones need pilots equipped with video-game-style controllers and goggles to see through their cameras. For this test, Yaroslav Sherstyuk, a former Ukrainian army officer, planned to run three reconnaissance drones and two larger bombers. "I will be in charge," Sherstyuk said. "But that only takes pushing three buttons."

He indicated the targets on a map, pushed start and leaned back in his chair. Two reconnaissance drones zoomed off. "Each of them decided on the best trajectory on their own, based on a possible terrain relief or other possible obstacles we pointed out on the map," said Sherstyuk, watching their progress on his screen. The two bombers followed. Only the last, small drone stayed back.

The bombers found their targets. Sherstyuk approved the attack, then hopped on a phone call with his son while the drones carried out the strike. The last drone whirred forward. "It's checking whether the bombers destroyed the target," Sherstyuk said. "Command usually demands destruction or damage confirmation, so it's doing that."

Mission accomplished, the drones floated back to Sherstyuk. Swarmer's team toasted the demo's success with alcohol-free beer.

As its war against Russia drags on, Ukraine is emerging as a testing ground for cutting-edge warfare, including drones and other vehicles capable of carrying out parts of their mission on their own. Serhii Kuprienko, Swarmer's 39-year-old founder and chief executive, thinks his swarms might be deployed this year. "We have already passed the first combat tests," he said.

By allowing a single pilot to control multiple drones, Swarmer aims to alleviate the manpower shortages that have put Ukraine's armed forces on the back foot in recent weeks. Using artificial intelligence, or AI, the company's drones will react autonomously to changing circumstances and communicate with each other to orchestrate a sortie.

"AI-powered drones can do in seconds what would take a human several hours, simply because we are slow to process a large volume of information," Kuprienko said. "The swarm is effective because one experienced drone pilot can work effectively with dozens of drones at the same time."

He stressed that the decision to attack a target would always be made by a human. Still, he couldn't resist making the Arnold Schwarzenegger-sized sci fi reference that inevitably looms over any conversation about AI-powered combat robots.

"My goal," he said, "is to make a proper version of the Terminator that will protect us and help our army."

UKRAINE TURNS TO AI TO MAINTAIN ITS DRONE ADVANTAGE

Technology has been the linchpin of Ukraine's fightback from the very moment Russian tanks rolled over its borders in February 2022. Demography – Russia's population of 144

million versus Ukraine's 38 million – made Moscow's preponderance in manpower and materiel unmatched. There was no fighting fire with fire. You had to douse it with bits.

Drones – military-grade or cheap hobbyist models – epitomize that strategy. On the battlefield, they are ubiquitous, scanning the ground to spot targets with ammo-saving precision, dropping grenades or ramming kamikaze-style into Russian vehicles, gear and troops. Telegram, a laxly moderated social network popular in Russia and Ukraine, is awash with videos of Ukrainian drones rigged with explosives fluttering around Russian soldiers and tanks like angry, deadly mosquitos. Russia has also leaned heavily on drones, both imported from allies and domestically produced.

Drones have broadened the buffer zone between Ukrainian and Russian combatants from a couple of kilometers to as much as 20 km, Ukraine's Deputy Minister of Digital Transformation Alex Borynyakov told POLITICO. "Anything you put in this 'gray area', it can be destroyed by drones," he said.

Their pivotal role was officially acknowledged in February 2024, when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy launched a new branch of the military: the Unmanned Sys-



tems Forces, entirely dedicated to working with aerial, ground and sea drones. Days later, his government announced that Ukraine was on track to manufacture more than a million drones by the end of 2024.

Even if the recently announced inflow of U.S. ammo helps Ukraine diversify its approach, drones are not going away. "Once additional artillery is available again, the Ukrainians will use [commercial drones] less," said Torsten Reil, co-CEO of the pan-European AI defense company Helsing, which works with the Ukrainian government. "[But] midterm, we will see a development of much more capable drones, strike drones, that will complement and mirror artillery in terms of their effect."

The challenge for Ukraine is that Russia has recognized the disruptive power of the technology and turned to electronic warfare – deploying vehicles covered in dish antennas to jam the radio frequencies relied on by Ukrainian drone pilots. "Russia has jamming stations every 10 kilometers at the front line, so Ukraine's previously successful drone-based approach doesn't work as well as it used to," Reil said.

In addition to cutting off drones from their pilots, jamming can interfere with navigation systems like GPS. Worse, the Russian technology

can work out the location of drone pilots – who in many cases need to remain within line of sight of their vehicles – and tag them for artillery strikes. Concerns about jamming and other types of electronic warfare have contributed to reluctance in Washington to providing Kyiv with American-made Reaper spy drones.

To try to maintain its edge, Ukraine has launched an effort to restyle itself as a tech accelerator in the field of drone warfare, working with local and Western companies to develop countermeasures and test them and deploy them on the battlefield.

At the forefront is a government program called Bravel, a joint venture encompassing six ministries modeled on the U.S.'s Defense Innovation Unit (DIU), a Department of Defense outfit tasked with facilitating military deployments of commercial technologies.

"Everyone was like: 'Let's build Ukrainian DARPA,'" said Bornyakov, referring to the Department of Defense's military research agency. "But DARPA is more about complex theoretical innovations." Bravel is focused on developing solutions that can be rolled out, stat.

Roughly a year after its launch, some 700 inventions that went through Bravel's program were approved for use by the Ukrainian

Armed Forces; around 40 have found their way to the front. Once a working prototype is identified, government certification can be obtained in as little as 21 days, Bornyakov said.

Bravel supports startups working on medical technologies, logistics and cybersecurity, among other areas. But its top priority is unmanned systems. "The goal [is] that robots, not humans, should fight on the battlefield," Bornyakov said.

Given the Russian jamming, achieving that goal often boils down to one thing: AI, the use of vast troves of data – images, text, audio, video, radio signals – to teach drones to act on their own. Reconnaissance drones use image-recognition to do away with GPS or spot and identify camouflaged military targets. Explosive kamikaze drones can be trained to forge on even if they lose contact with their pilots.

"AI can help lock in on targets and then automatically – without communication, or in conditions of suppression by the enemy's electronic warfare systems – make it possible for the drone to hit the target," Ukraine's deputy prime minister and technology chief Mykhailo Fedorov said in an interview in a high-security government building in April. He said that 10 companies active in Ukraine are developing AI technology to help

drones close in on their targets.

The technology on offer may fall far short of Terminator-style robots: In Ukraine, the call to engage with a given target still lies with a human decision-maker. But for how long?

"If you think of AI as drones autonomously and independently making some decisions to strike or not to strike something, there is no such thing yet," said Fedorov. "But I think that there is a certain future for it."

In an interview with the Associated Press in 2023, he was more explicit: Autonomous killer drones, he said, are "a logical and inevitable next step."

THE FUTURE OF WARFARE IS BEING WRITTEN IN UKRAINE

Just how much of a difference AI is making on the battlefield is a matter of some debate. Jim Acuna, a former Central Intelligence Agency officer and the founder of the Baltic Ghost Wing Center of Excellence drone pilot school in Estonia, is skeptical. "It's all wishful thinking, it's not a reality," he said.

Autonomous weapons systems still don't make sense from a "cost-benefit analysis" perspective, said Franz-Stefan Gady, an associate fellow at the International Institute of Strategic Studies think tank. "None of these platforms currently are at a stage where they can genuinely be deployed at scale, consistently, and without a huge support infrastructure."

Technologists, unsurprisingly, have a different take. "If you zoom in, it'll look like pilot projects," said Louis Mosley, vice president for Europe for the U.S. artificial intelligence giant Palantir, which works in Ukraine. "But when you zoom out, you can see that this is now the way the war is being fought."

Peter W. Singer, a defense analyst and author of 2009 bestseller "Wired for War," sees the war in Ukraine as playing a similar role to the Spanish Civil War, which served as a dress rehearsal for new techniques and technologies ahead of World War II. Modern tank warfare and aerial bombing – as captured in Pablo Picasso's dramatic oeuvre "Guernica" – were arguably forged in the Spanish crucible.

"There's a bit of debate in defense circles that in Ukraine, yes, you've got drones but also trenches and cannons, so nothing's really changing," Singer said. "That's like looking at Spain in 1936 and saying, 'They are still using rifles' and ignoring that they are bringing together these new technologies like aerial bombing."

As Ukraine and Russia fight, Singer said, "everyone else is watching and learning. And they're not watching and learning about trenches, but about the use of drones and AI and how it's being brought together," he said.

Ukraine has attracted dozens of Western defense and technology companies eager to test – or advertise – their offerings in a live-fire situation. "If companies want to do something in the field of defense innovations, they have to be in Ukraine," said Bravel's Chief Operating Officer Natalia Kushnerska. "Ukraine is definitely the most dynamic innovation ecosystem in the world."

One of those companies is Quantum-Systems, a company that has deployed 400 reconnaissance drones in Ukraine, with a contract to deliver 800 more and eventually build a factory in the country, according to its CEO Florian Seibel, who accompanied Germany's Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck on a mission to the country last month.

The company has made waves as far away as Silicon Valley: German-American billionaire Peter Thiel is an investor and Seibel met emissaries from the

At left, a drone pilot practices near Kyiv. At top, a soldier attaches a grenade to a drone. At center, Ukrainian servicemen and women train with drones. At bottom, a drone pilot near the front lines.

GENYA SAVILOV, ARIS MESSINIS, SEAN GALLUP/ AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES AND OLEG PETRASYUK/EPA

venture capital firm Sequoia just before sitting down with POLITICO in his office, a squat, drone-filled building in an industrial park outside Munich.

Quantum-Systems' drones are expensive, at €200,000 each, but they use AI to overcome electronic warfare with preloaded maps and landmarks to navigate a GPS-denied environment, and machine vision to flag foes. "You can completely take operators out of the loop," Seibel said.

While Quantum-System's drones only work as spotters, Seibel said the Ukrainian experience convinced him to form a new company called Stark Defense to develop autonomous weapons with full-strike capability. "If we don't want our kids to fight Chinese war robots in the future, we have to get going and work on robots ourselves," he said. Crucially, he added, Stark's systems will be "capable of operating without a human in the loop."

He acknowledged that this was a controversial approach. "We will prepare the grounds so that it is possible, but in the end, it's not my decision," he said. "If the decision of the German government is that we cannot have autonomous weapons with no human in the loop, well, then this will not be used."

Stark is still, to a certain extent, in "stealth" mode – recruiting, seeking venture capital investment – but it would theoretically be able to deploy its products on short notice, he said. "We will deploy whenever we think it's ready to be viable, and whenever the Ukrainians decide to," he says.

Has the company already tested its drones in Ukraine?

"Maybe," Seibel said.

AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS: 'THE OPPENHEIMER MOMENT OF OUR GENERATION'

Among the people watching what's

happening in Ukraine are those seeking to prevent the technology from ever coming to fruition. In late April, delegates from 143 countries joined activists, academics and at least one journalist in the caryatid-graced hall of the Hofburg imperial palace in Vienna to attend the biggest ever conference on autonomous weapons systems.

Above a bust of the 19th-century Emperor Franz Joseph, a screen displayed digital images of autonomous drones devastating cities with firework-like effects. Nearby, a blueish cut-out of Austria-born Schwarzenegger's Terminator fixed visitors with glowing red eyes and a skeletal steel grin.

"This is the 'Oppenheimer moment' of our generation," Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg told the assembled audience. "Autonomous weapons systems will soon fill the world's battlefields ... Technology is moving ahead with racing speed, while politics is lagging behind."

He ceded the floor to Jaan Tallinn, an Estonian tech entrepreneur who has warned against the dangers posed by AI. The risk that comes with autonomous weapons (or killer robots, as their critics call them) is of a "suicidal arms race" to more autonomy, he said. Mass killing will become a mechanized, easy affair. AI-controlled drones will be deployed in assassinations or by terrorists targeting civilians. "When you opt for speed, you give up control," Tallinn said.

For Anthony Aguirre, the executive director of the Tallinn-backed think tank the Future of Life Institute, the problem is not so much what is taking place in Ukraine right now – but what will happen when powerhouses like China and the U.S. get in the game. "If you end up with half a million drones in a shipping container able to go out and kill roughly half a million people

– that's a WMD," he said.

The solution, Schallenberg said in an interview after the event, is "a legally binding international instrument" – a treaty banning fully autonomous weapons whose actions cannot be predicted or explained (AI algorithms are notoriously opaque) by their operators.

Alexander Kmentt, the Austrian diplomat who organized the conference, said that the goal is to ban "weapons designed in a way that they could not be used in accordance with international humanitarian law."

The Austrian foreign minister acknowledged that many countries, including the United States and Russia, oppose the initiative and made that clear during the conference.

Last summer, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks announced the Pentagon is seeking to build thousands of "attributable, autonomous systems" able to "overcome [China's] biggest advantage, which is mass." In early May, the Secretary of the U.S. Air Force Frank Kendall took a ride in an AI-controlled F-16, an early version of what the service hopes to be a fleet of 1,000 unmanned warplanes, with the first deployed by 2028. The U.S. Marines are reportedly testing rifle-equipped robotic dogs capable of scanning a battlefield for targets before requesting permission to attack.

In early 2023, France's Defense Innovation Agency put out a call for tenders for two national efforts to develop kamikaze drones, some of which will be delivered to Ukraine in the coming months. And on Thursday, the Bundestag is expected to begin discussion on a motion entitled "Building a Drone Army."

China too is developing AI-augmented drones. Its military has test flown drones that were capable of

carrying an assault to its explosive conclusion after they were cut off from their operators. On the other side of the Taiwan Strait, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen has said she had drawn "great inspiration" from the use of autonomous weapons in Ukraine and pledged to close the drone gap with Beijing. Iran and – of course – Russia are also working to integrate AI into their fleets.

"The fact that maybe not everybody would agree at the very beginning is maybe an obstacle, but not an excuse," said Schallenberg. He pointed to earlier treaties on landmines and cluster munitions as examples of rules that, while not backed by everyone, including the U.S., established a baseline of decency. "Countries that do not abide by the rules – even if they've not ratified the treaty – now feel obliged to explain themselves," he said.

For Singer, the military futurist, the Rubicon on autonomous weapons has already been crossed. "Autonomy was this big red line, and we crossed it without a lot of hullabaloo," he said.

"If your vision of the future is using more robotic systems at the end of a long leash – a physical wire or wireless ... The enemy is going to cut that wire through electronic or cyber warfare," he added. "Then you will have the option of either doing nothing about it – or going for more autonomy."

Ukraine's delegation at the Vienna conference did not make a statement, but Fedorov told POLITICO he did not believe in "quick decisions to limit such technologies, because they are actively developing and there is still no stable experience of how they can have a negative impact."

"I am sure that the question of limiting the use of AI should be resolved," he said. "After our victory."

The challenge for Ukraine is that Russia has recognized the disruptive power of the technology and turned to electronic warfare.

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UKRAINE'S INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISTS FACE INTIMIDATION

While the level of corruption in the country may be on the decline, it's far from over — and pressure on reporters is only mounting.

BY JAMIE DETTMER
IN KYIV

"I RAN INVESTIGATIONS FOR 15 YEARS BEFORE THE WAR, and it was always hard and risky. But I think it's worse for journalists now," said Ukrainian reporter Yuri Nikolov, editor and co-founder of the anti-corruption investigative project Nashi Groshi (Our Money). "They use different intimidation tactics to try to deter reporters and then, of course, they can always threaten to ship you off to the front lines," he added with a rueful guffaw. For a man at the end of death threats, he remains remarkably upbeat.

Last year, Nikolov published several stories alleging graft in the Ukrainian military. The focus of his exposé was on defense procurement and the highly inflated prices of food and catering services for the country's combat troops — he found suppliers were allowed to charge three times the average retail price for food.

Nikolov's groundbreaking investigation on the shady procurement contracts prompted public uproar and led to the resignation of the country's deputy defense minister. It also contributed to the resignation of then-Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov later in the year.

But for all the clear-out, according to Nikolov, intimidatory pressure on Ukraine's investigative journalists is only mounting — despite Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's January statement that "any pressure on journalists is unacceptable." And while the level of corruption in the country may be on the decline, it's still far from over.

Since his stories came out, Nikolov's been the target of harassment and denounced on social media by anonymous government supporters questioning his loyalty. Then, in January, the intimidation went further, when "two guys in camouflage came and banged on my apartment door," he said. They terrified his ailing mother, who was there alone at the time, and plastered the door with notes accusing him of being a traitor, provocateur and draft dodger.

A video of the incident was later uploaded to a Telegram channel supportive of Zelenskyy.

In the same month Nikolov's apartment was targeted, a video was uploaded to YouTube showing camera operators from Bihus.Info, an independent news site that also reports on corruption, partying and taking drugs at a hotel outside Kyiv on New Year. Intercepted phone conversations between the outlet's staffers discussing buying cannabis were also posted, accompanied by the tag line "Can you trust their investigations if they are doing them under the influence of drugs?"



Denys Bihus, the site's founder, fired some staff in response, but his biggest worry was how the recordings were obtained, by whom and for what purpose. He later accused the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) of being behind the surveillance operation, which agency boss General Vasyl Malyuk subsequently acknowledged was true. Malyuk said the SBU's Department for the Protection of National Statehood had engaged in the illegal wiretapping, and he'd already dismissed the head of the department.

"We are aware that we are protecting a democratic Ukraine, in which the strengthening of national statehood is one of the key priorities, the implementation of which should ensure, among other things, the unhindered work of the mass media and guarantee them a sufficient level of security," he said in a statement.

But according to Nikolov, the media's still being obstructed, hindered and pressured in different ways. Reporters find themselves quickly dubbed Russian agents, draft dodgers and enemies of Ukraine on pro-government Telegram channels. "These channels are very close to the office of the president," he claimed.

But there are even bigger risks. Nikolov explained that one journalist he knows volunteered early on, securing a job with an information unit as a press coordinator. The post gave him the opportunity to publish his pieces in top-tier Ukrainian publications, but one of his columns "wasn't liked by the people in power, and he was transferred to a combat unit. He was at risk of being deployed to Avdiivka," he said. "We didn't make any noise about it because if we had, he certainly would

"You can be a patriot. You can want Ukraine to win this war and still be a journalist ... Journalists should also understand they've got a job to do."

YURI NIKOLOV,
EDITOR AND CO-FOUNDER OF
NASHI GROSHI

ILLUSTRATION
BY VAHFRAM
MURADYAN FOR
POLITICO

have been sent there."

Nikolov's also worried that some reporters and outlets are censoring themselves, seeing patriotism as trumping journalism — something he struggled with himself before publishing his first piece on the food contracts.

"Look, you can be a patriot. You can want Ukraine to win this war and still be a journalist," he told POLITICO. Sat in a café in downtown Kyiv, discussing what it's like to be an honest reporter during wartime, he said: "Journalists should also understand they've got a job to do. It's not bad for Ukraine to be transparent and to have proper journalism happening. I want us to have more air defenses and more weapons for our troops — that's what the money should be spent on, not lining people's pockets."

In some ways, corruption has been hard-boiled into Ukraine, with graft blighting the country since it secured independence in 1991. It reached a crescendo during the tenure of Viktor Yanukovich, president from 2010 until his ouster in 2014, with theft, bribery, corruption in public procurement and rigged energy prices on an industrial scale. They're estimated to have embezzled as much as \$37 billion — although the first post-Maidan revolution government claimed it could have been as much as \$100 billion. The proceeds were stashed in bank accounts and companies in Austria, Latvia, Cyprus, Italy, the Netherlands and Britain via a complex money-laundering machine.

Graft is no longer on that scale now, Nikolov reckoned. But like others, he thinks the intimidatory tactics being employed against journalists are reminiscent of the Yanukovich era.

In some ways, however, the direction of travel with anti-corruption efforts is heartening. "When it comes to state spending, things have got better. But there are still problems with procurement contracts, and we have a problem with bribery and kickbacks and, for example, with the police, state security service, custom officers, tax inspectors demanding money for problems to go away and facilitation," he said.

Take the defense ministry — prices for food supplies have dramatically decreased, but Nikolov argued those responsible are still entrenched within the ministry's bureaucracy. "The prices may have been pushed down but the mafia hasn't been pushed out, and they're biding their time," he said.

Others who closely monitor anti-corruption efforts agree that things have improved since Yanukovich's ouster, with progress made during the presidency of Petro Poroshenko and since Zelenskyy took office. A 2018 report by the Kyiv-based Institute for Economic Research and Policy Consulting said reforms — including more transparent government procurement and the energy sector's deregulation — had reduced grand corruption by approximately \$6 billion, about 6 percent of Ukraine's GDP. According to the report, the shadow economy also dropped from an estimated 43 percent of GDP in 2014 to 33 percent in late 2017.

The introduction of ProZorro, a transparent electronic system for public procurement, has helped overall. A new High Anti-Corruption Court has been working smoothly as well, convicting 157 government officials since 2019, according to court records. Zelenskyy has also cut the country's oligarchs down to size, with Ukrainian authorities indicting Ihor Holomoisky — one of the country's most prominent oligarchs — on a number of corruption charges last year. "There's no question Ukraine has made great strides combating corruption," argued Adrian Karatnycky, the author of "Battleground Ukraine: From Independence to the War with Russia."

So far so good, agreed Daria Kaleniuk, executive director of the Anti-Corruption Action Center NGO. "We're on the right track," she said. Even defense ministry procurement has been cleaned up — though it's hard to tell when it comes to the prices paid for lethal weapons, as they don't have to be entered on ProZorro for reasons of state security. "Old-school forces will try to prevent change from happening, but it's our duty to make sure that doesn't happen," Kaleniuk said.

And Nikolov is certainly doing his best to make sure such forces don't win out — but they still have a kick.

Jamie Dettmer is opinion editor at POLITICO Europe.

Europe's cultural identity, that's what we're fighting for

In the last three decades, we've enjoyed the luxury of not having to ask ourselves what it is we stand for. But those times have passed.

BY JAN JAMBON

ONE OF THE MANY APOCRYPHAL STORIES about Winston Churchill took place just after he'd become prime minister of Great Britain, as the Blitzkrieg was still raging in France and the war's outcome for Allied forces seemed uncertain at best. Isolated in his belief that Britain would repel the Nazis and ultimately prevail, Churchill presided over an unruly Cabinet meeting, where he was advised to relocate British assets to safer locations in the vast empire: The minis-

tries to Australia, the monarch and his family to Canada, the treasury to the Caribbean ...

Churchill refused it all, calmly but decisively. Until, that is, someone suggested they at least evacuate the museums and transport the precious artworks to Canada. He banged his fist on the table: "Then what would we be fighting for?" he asked.

Dutch-Italian writer Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer recalled this story during the conference on "Culture, Heritage and Identity in Europe," which I organized in April as president of the EU Culture Council. And however historically dubious the tale may be, the fact that we retell it again and again to convince ourselves of the value and worth of culture, speaks for itself.

At the end of the day, when all the economic, technocratic and political arguments for European construction have been made, we ask ourselves: When push comes to shove, is this what we will be fighting for? The answer is probably no.

Even the late Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission and a great advocate

for European integration, noted that one doesn't fall in love with an internal market, a euro symbol or any other piece of legislation. There must be something more – something that unites us all, however diverse the peoples of the Continent are. And we all know that there is.

As an economic and political structure, the EU's constructed upon rather technocratic foundations. And though extremely effective in their execution, EU policies never seem to spark much enthusiasm from their millions of beneficiaries. On the contrary, the bloc can hope for popular apathy at best, outright hostility at worst. And yet, the majority of Europeans identify themselves as just that: European.

There is a European identity that crosses borders. An identity that expresses itself in hundreds of distinct cultures, that transcends the boundaries of time and space and connects every European – from Ireland and the British Isles to the trenches of Ukraine, from the ancient times until today.

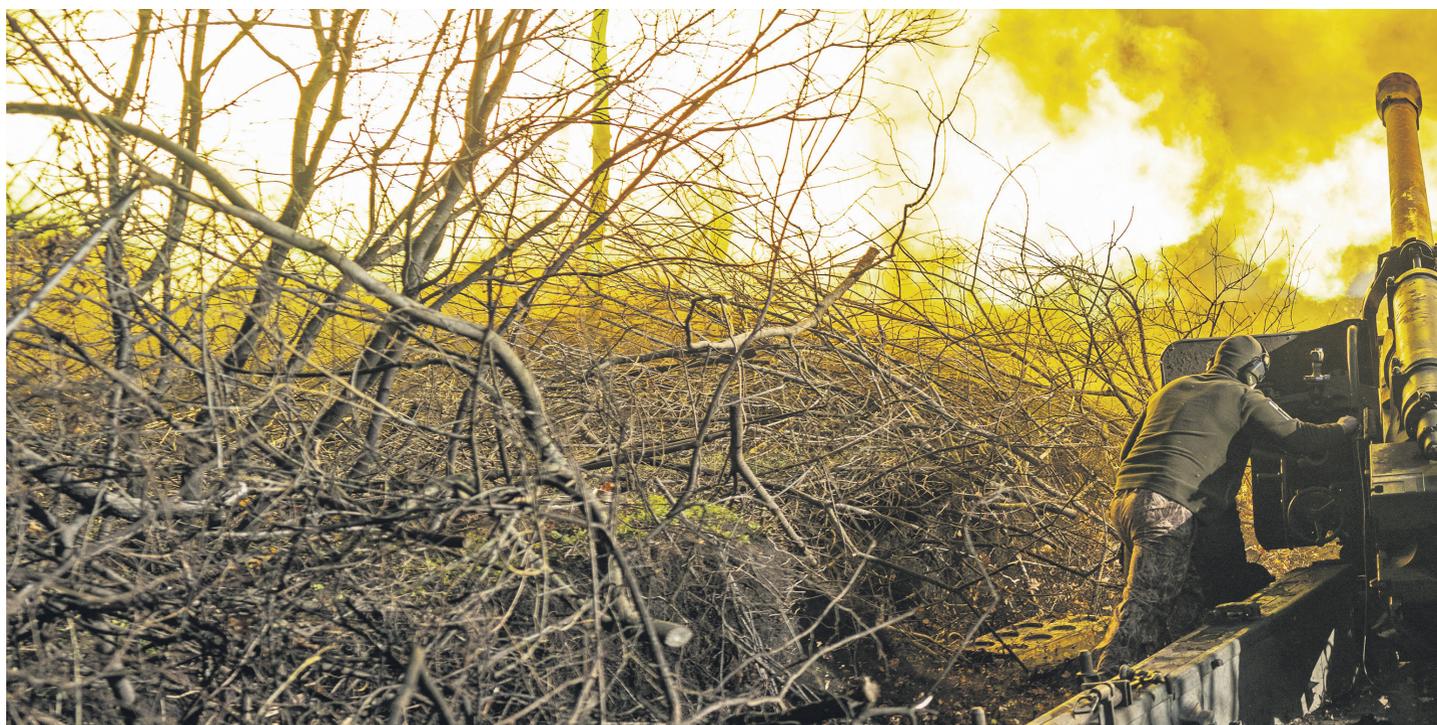
Europe isn't just the haphaz-

ard result of a chain of historical coincidences. I firmly believe that underneath the European ideal lies a metacultural framework, which arose out of three foundational traditions that, over time, resulted in what we now call a European culture.

The first is the birth of our political thinking in ancient Greece – especially the conception of democracy in Athens. The idea that each citizen has the right to speak their mind, cast their vote and take office originated in this grand old city. And generations of political thinkers have turned to Athens as an inspiration for democracy as rule of the people, by the people, for the people.

However, Athenian democracy was fundamentally flawed. Rule by unchecked popular opinion resulted in polarization, demagoguery and political instability that, in turn, led to the decay of democracy and eventually tyranny.

This brings me to our second tradition of Roman statesmanship. Rome was never a democracy – not in the Athenian sense nor in



THE WAY THE WEST IS AIDING UKRAINE WILL NOT BE ENOUGH TO WIN

Autocrats see restraint and caution as signs of weakness; they see strength in resolve.

BY MARK T. KIMMITT

AFTER SIX MONTHS OF DEBATE, THE U.S. finally passed its supplemental aid package for Ukraine a couple weeks ago. But while the ammunition may soon reach front-line troops, the truth is, if the U.S. and its allies don't change how they support the war, it will probably be too little, too late.

Two years ago, respected

military analyst Seth Jones had noted the Russian army was collapsing. But in a sharp reversal of fortunes, he now expresses a far more worrisome view that the Ukrainian army is "in an increasingly perilous position against their Russian invaders." And while it's still too early for discussions of defeat, Jones correctly observed that "Without a clear U.S. strategy and the sustained supply of Western weapons, intelligence and training, Mr. Putin could prevail."

Such a strategy would require at least three elements to slow and reverse Russia's advance: First, the

U.S. administration and its NATO allies would have to loosen the restrictive rules of engagement they've placed on Western-supplied equipment, allowing Ukraine to employ said equipment to its full potential. Britain has already eased the rules of engagement, but the restrictions others impose, preventing Ukraine from cross-border attacks and from attacking the crown jewels of the Russian deployment, such as the Black Sea fleet, must end.

Concern over Russian escalation has allowed the West to talk itself into inaction and self-deterrence.

But if Israel's response to last month's Iranian drone and missile attack has demonstrated anything, it's that a strong response – not self-deterrence – is the best way to confront totalitarian threats.

Autocrats see restraint and caution as signs of weakness; they see strength in resolve.

Second, it's time to take greater risks with U.S. and Western military stocks. While the supplemental allows U.S. President Joe Biden to dip into existing inventories of weapons and ammunition, a vast amount of ready and lethal equipment remains held back for other worldwide contingencies, training and testing. This stockpiling of resources is completely understandable, as commanders across the globe want to ensure they are, as General Paul LaCamera – the U.S. commander in South Korea – always reminds his troops: "ready to fight, tonight."

Yet, failure in Ukraine could encourage the very war our soldiers in places like Korea stand ready to fight. Adversaries such

our modern understanding of the concept. But for much of its history it wasn't the oligarchic regime we make it out to be either. The popular classes were a major political power and they played a decisive role in the Roman decision-making process on numerous occasions. However, they were kept in check by a complex set of rules that assured the state wasn't torn apart by private political interest. Roman thinking about citizenship, community and freedom – however narrow in its application – brought us the rule of law we consider sacred today.

And this leads to the value and dignity of each individual human being, which we owe to a third foundational tradition: Judeo-Christian heritage. Our basic human rights have become so self-explanatory and evident that we've forgotten just how revolutionary they were. Our modern understanding of morality, and its codification as universal human rights, grew out of teachings such as the meek shall inherit the Earth, turning the other cheek and loving thy neighbor.

In a process that's lasted over 2,000 years, Europeans have been constantly reinterpreting and negotiating these traditions in a cultural dialogue that's resulted in the democracy, rule of law and individual liberty we hold so dear. Of course, this process wasn't without its faults – our history is tarnished by shortcomings and imperfections. Still, however flawed our predecessors may have been, they kept the ideal alive and strove to better themselves. And the driving force behind this was a cultural understanding of Europe – not a political or economic one.

Our heritage and cultures all reflect this ongoing historical process, which will never conclude as long as the idea of Europe remains.

Even today, we're still involved in a cultural debate that addresses these foundational traditions; current artistic practices are still vastly influenced by them – even if critical in their approach – and although we seem to have abandoned the classical education system that was very much based on them, every European has a notion

of these traditions.

One need only take a stroll through cities like London, Paris, Prague or Berlin to understand how we were inspired by a greatness that encouraged us to go beyond ourselves. We can see the passion of past generations burning in cathedrals, statues, squares and bridges – wherever we are in Europe. But instead of worshipping the ashes, it's down to us to pass on the flame.

The EU has always shunned the debate on culture and identity. Not only because it's an exclusive competence of member countries – as I believe it should be – but primarily because it's considered a divisive factor rather than something that unites us. Many bureaucrats in the Berlaymont recall in terror the 2004 debates about the reference to Christianity in the failed European constitution. However, it's my conviction that the time has come to talk about identity.

That's why last Monday, I hosted the informal meeting of the bloc's ministers of culture at the Antwerp Museum of Fine Arts to discuss the

Our heritage and cultures all reflect this ongoing historical process, which will never conclude as long as the idea of Europe remains.

role of culture, heritage and identity in Europe – precisely because I'm convinced we must invigorate our multicultural framework now more than ever.

The EU has enjoyed a long period of prosperity, peace and security – a period where there were few external threats to the Continent itself, and internal upheavals and economic crises didn't pose an existential threat to the bloc. But times have changed. We're now engaged in a strategic competition with China, uncertainty envelops the Atlantic alliance and Russia's regime is an outright military menace that challenges the stability of European democracies.

In the last three decades, we've enjoyed the luxury of not having to ask ourselves what it is we stand for. But those times have passed. And, unfortunately, it's once again time to pose the Churchillian question: What are we fighting for?

Jan Jambon is the minister-president of the government of Flanders and the Flemish minister for foreign affairs and culture.



as North Korean leader Kim Jong Un take note of U.S. hesitancy to back friends and allies – so does China as it peers across the Taiwan Strait. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy needs more ammunition, and commanders like LaCamera should see the consequences to their own missions, should Ukraine fall to Russia – even if the cost comes out of their inventories.

Overall, U.S. Army officials note that the current risk in supporting Ukraine is “manageable,” but it's time to take a bit more risk and dip further into those stockpiles to stave off potential defeat. Winning wars is expensive, but not nearly as expensive as losing them.

Additionally, while dipping into these stockpiles should be a temporary expediency, the war has unmasked a major problem in war-fighting logistics. Even if the supplemental had been passed in October of last year, we now know that the U.S. military production base – and that of its European allies – is too small to support even

a mid-sized conventional war like Ukraine. A second war would be disastrous.

For example, though herculean efforts have doubled the production of U.S. artillery rounds to 28,000 per month, Russia fires, on average, 10,000 rounds per day. Russian President Vladimir Putin's own program to increase military production is in full force, stunning analysts with its rapid expansion, now said to be the leading sector of the Russian economy. Russian units on the Ukrainian front lines may be enduring horrific casualty rates, but it's not from a lack of logistics.

Finally, the U.S. administration needs to provide far more leadership to inspire the West to stay in this fight. Democracies are impatient, and other world events often switch focus. Already, Gaza and the potential for a regional war in the Middle East, the upcoming U.S. presidential election and the trials of former President Donald Trump are diverting attention from the deteriorating situa-

tion in Ukraine.

The Biden administration must remind the American people, at every opportunity, of the costs of failure in Ukraine. And that focus must also include a major information campaign to address the serious imbalance in manpower in this war – Russia currently has a 3-to-1 advantage in available military manpower. So, while Ukrainians know they face an existential threat, Russia faces no such dilemma.

And though it's well known that opposition faces heavy consequences in Putin's Russia, there are still significant opportunities to create dissent against the forced conscription needed to make up for Russia's extraordinary casualty rates. The West has been subjected to Russian propaganda and psychological warfare for years now, but we have an equally robust set of tools – and it's time to use them fully.

In Ukraine, the current war of attrition favors Putin's strategy. It's a costly grinding down of

Concern over Russian escalation has allowed the West to talk itself into inaction and self-deterrence.

men, material and morale, and Ukraine's recent setbacks mustn't be allowed to precede a full Russian counterattack in late spring or summer. Putin remains convinced, as Tolstoy once wrote, that “time and patience are my strongest warriors.” But this cannot be the season that maxim proves correct.

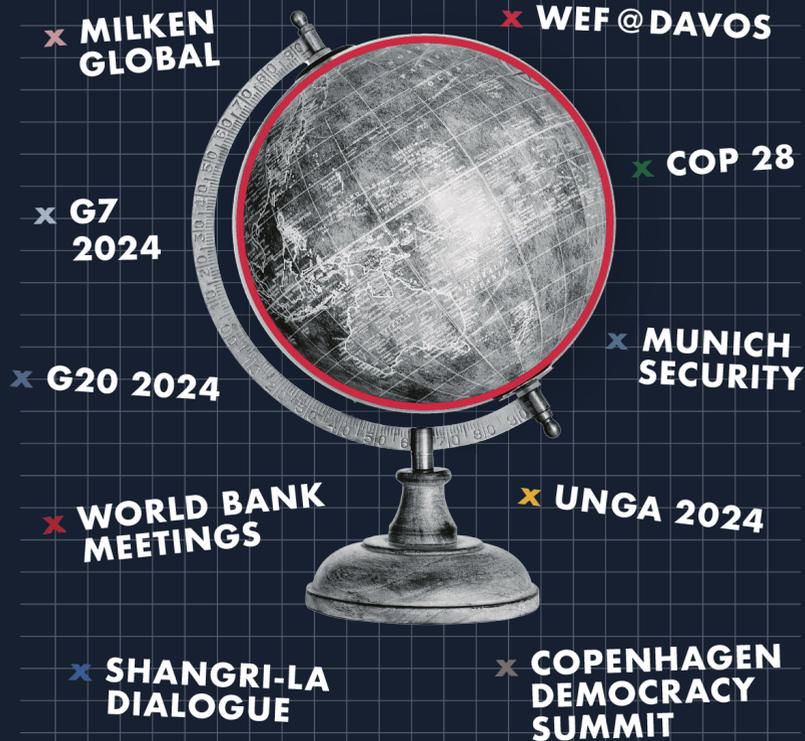
A congressional supplemental was necessary, but it isn't enough to reverse the deteriorating situation in Ukraine. It's time to loosen the handcuffs we've placed on Zelenskyy and let him use the weapons and equipment we provide. It's time to take risks with our war-time stockpiles and give Zelenskyy what his soldiers need. It's time to remind this country of what Putin tells his country every day – that a loss in Ukraine is a threat to our own security.

It's time to take off the gloves.

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