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PEDRO SANCHEZ

**A contentious
path to
reconciliation**



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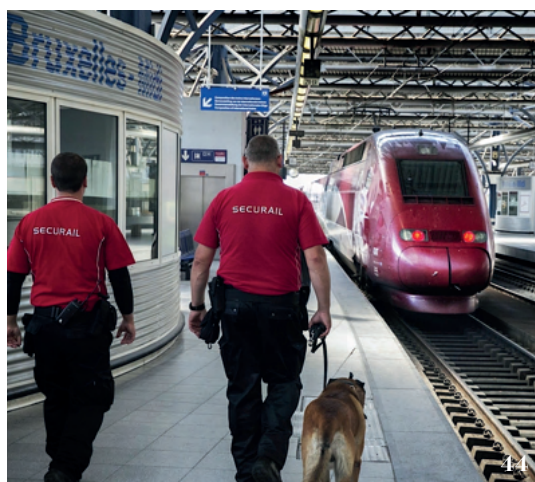
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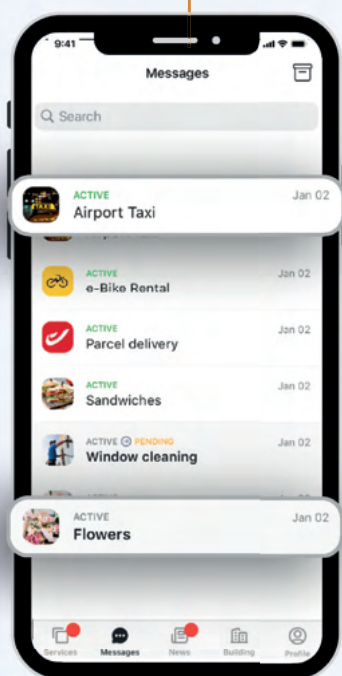
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Nikola Hendrickx

BANKERS OF DEATH ?

**EU cuts off then
reinstates development
co-operation money to
Gaza. But does it need
it anyway?**



© AL ARABY

Scene of destruction in the Gaza Strip
following Israeli strikes, October 2023



Olivér Várhelyi.

“Any crime which results in profit can be used to finance terrorism,” says Interpol on its Website. It goes on to list possible sources of funding that may be available to terrorists: low-level fraud, kidnapping for ransom, the misuse of funds from non-profit organisations, the illicit trade in commodities such as oil, charcoal, diamonds, gold, and narcotics. Have Hamas demanded money for the Israelis it took hostage on the 7th October? It’s certainly possible; they’re not “nice” people, nor are they considerate of human life or family values. Terrorists never are. At the end of the day it’s all about power: whoever has the biggest gun or the bomb with the greatest blast radius wins. Interpol believes that interrupting the flow of cash to those bodies engaged in terrorism may hamper their activities if it can be achieved, although it won’t end them. It’s at this point that the European Union becomes involved. Aid to the supposedly more impoverished parts of the world from the richer and more prosperous countries is a long-established norm. I’ve never been sure how much good this largesse does for those who have little or nothing, assuming any of it reaches them, but it generally makes the inhabitants of the rich donor countries feel better about themselves and allows them to revel in their own kindness and generosity. Oscar Wilde made the interesting observation that “a beggar hates his benefactor as much as he hates himself for begging”, so the “generous” giver should not expect much in the way of gratitude.

It was in 2022 that the EU announced €25-million in humanitarian aid to Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. That

may sound like quite a lot but the EU’s overall budget for 2023 was €1.211-trillion (€1,211,000,000,000). In that context, the €25-million (a mere €25,000,000) begins to look like pocket money. The plain fact is that more than two million Palestinian women, children, and men in the Occupied Territories and the Gaza Strip are in desperate need of humanitarian aid in some form. Not that this excuses or pardons or even explains the murderous attack on Israelis by Hamas in early October, in which many people of all ages were murdered, hostages were taken, and babes-in-arms had their throats cut or were – in some reported cases – beheaded by the attackers. Nothing explains that, but a great many Palestinians in Gaza have suffered over the years from what appears to have been Israeli indifference to their plight. I did not witness the Hamas attack, so cannot write from personal experience, and reports from both sides tend to be somewhat biased. As is so often the case, it seems, the hatred has a basis in differences of religion or the way of observing it. All too often, it seems, religious people seem to think they can best serve their god by slaughtering everyone with alternative beliefs, however slight the differences. At present, Hamas is looking to other Islamic countries for support against their old enemy, Israel, but so far not much has been forthcoming on a country-by-country basis; at least, not at the time of writing.

The EU initially voted in favour of taking economic action against Hamas and its friends, with EU Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi announcing that the European Commission is putting its full development portfolio for the region — €691-million in total — under review, with all payments immediately suspended. No more money for those suffering in the Gaza strip, at least not for the moment. It didn’t last, however, and later that decision was reversed, presumably because those suffering the effects most seriously were not the Islamic fighters of Hamas but ordinary Palestinian women and children. That’s the trouble with sanctions: they tend to be indiscriminate. Várhelyi’s announcement did not find favour with Spain, Portugal, Luxembourg, or Ireland,

while other member states also sounded alarmed. There was some confusion over Várhelyi's actual words anyway, but the European Commission announced that humanitarian aid (if not development aid) would continue. Neither the Commission, nor Germany nor Austria, differentiated between Gaza, which is ruled by Hamas, and the much larger West Bank, under the control of the Palestinian authority, headed by President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah movement. It is a rival to Hamas and generally less violent. Germany has – especially lately – emphasized its historic duty towards Israel in view of its responsibility for the Holocaust.

It's easy to blame acts of terrorism, including the Hamas invasion of Israel on 7th October, on the extremely poor rebelling against their condition. In fact, terrorism usually has little or nothing to do with people's incomes or living conditions. The former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan summed it up well: "The fundamentalist seeks to bring down a great deal more than buildings," he said, "Such people are against, to offer just a brief list, freedom of speech, a multi-party political system, universal adult suffrage, accountable government, Jews, homosexuals, women's rights, pluralism, secularism, short skirts, dancing, beardlessness, evolution theory, sex." The hatred towards Jews – all Jews – is built in, although the claim that the Jews "stole" Islamic land is historically questionable, anyway. After all, the region has been called "the Holy Land" for some 3,000 years, giving rise to Judaism, out of which came Christianity and later Islam. All preached love, but very few seem to have observed it, constantly fighting among themselves.



Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, and Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh in Algeria in 2022.

Oiling the wheels of terror

Hamas does not enjoy universal support among Muslims. Those who made a fortune didn't think Gaza was a safe place to keep it so invested it in Egypt, using partnerships with Muslim Brotherhood officials. They weren't all devoted to the fight for freedom or an Islamic state; the urge to make money was stronger. Hamas founder Ayman Taha paid \$700,000 (€655,000) for a luxury villa in Gaza but was later charged with being an agent for the Egyptian government. His murder (execution?) remains a mystery. Who did it and why? The Palestinian daily Al-Quds claims that he was executed by a Hamas firing squad for



Ayman Taha.

allegedly "maintaining contact with intelligence services in Arab countries", and specifically Egypt. Hamas claimed he'd died in an Israeli airstrike. He had been blocked by Egypt from entering Gaza because he was said to have been carrying \$11-million (€10.31-million). Where did he get it? If it was embezzlement, it was on a massive scale and would have been hard to carry, however big his pockets. The money was instead deposited in a bank in the Egyptian town of El Arish. Taha was arrested and later investigated by Hamas on charges of suspected corruption, and it was said that he had bought villas in Gaza with embezzled money, according to the Yemeni newspaper Al-Ayyam. He was subsequently held in a Gaza Strip detention facility for months. Hamas had stressed that the arrest was over "financial issues," adding that the detention was purely an internal matter, and not related to security issues.



Abu Marzuk.

Egypt is not happy with Hamas either, especially since the smuggling of petrol through the border town of Rafah. It was sold in Gaza at bargain basement prices while Egyptians were paying eight times as much for fuel. Another person who became rich while others suffered was Khaled Mashal, who was reported in Jordan to control \$2.6-billion (€2.43-billion), most of it safe inside Qatari and Egyptian banks. Some reports have alleged that a proportion of that money was siphoned off, too, subsequently

“disappearing”. It might help to explain Hamas’s alleged annual turnover of \$1-billion (€0.94-billion). Others in the Hamas hierarchies do quite well, too: Abu Marzuk: \$3-billion; Mahmoud Abbas: \$1.5-billion; Ismail Haniyeh: \$4-billion, and there are others. Even so, most Hamas fighters are still awaiting their salaries from Hamas, which claims to be “hard-up”, and ordinary citizens remain penniless.



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, right, greets the leader of the Palestinian militant group Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh at his office in Tehran, Iran.

There are also a number of projects in hand with links to Mashal, who claimed that the \$12-million (€11.23-million) stored in his safe in Damascus had been “lost”. I wonder if he has searched down the back of the sofa yet...? It’s a lot to mislay. Some sources claim that a project by Qatar’s Fadil real estate company is also linked to Mashal, while the Gaza Strip is the third poorest place in the Arab region, according to the World Bank. The poverty rate there stands at 38%. Most of the countries poorer than Gaza are in Africa. United Nations law is strict on the funding of terrorism. It is illegal for “any person to commit an offence within the meaning of this Convention if that person by any means, directly or indirectly, unlawfully and wilfully, provides or collects funds with the intention that they should be used or in the knowledge that they are to be used, in full or in part, in order to carry out an act which constitutes an offence within the scope of and as defined in one of the treaties listed in the annex; or any other act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, or to any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.” I think that covers all the bases, but terrorists don’t obey the law, of course.

I No end in sight

This is a conflict that has no possible end, other than the total destruction of one side by the other, which is clearly not going to happen (at least, most sensible people fervently hope not). Their friends wouldn’t allow it, even if some country was stupid enough to try. Israel and the Palestinian Authority both signed up to the 1993 Oslo Accords, under which both sides would enjoy self-determination with the ultimate goal of a two-state solution bringing peace, but that never really happened. The hatred remains red in tooth and claw, to use an old expression, and such is the vitriol in all the utterances made by both sides (Gaza and Israel) that it’s really not feasible to speak of “peace”. There isn’t any, and both sides blame the other, like badly-behaved kids in a school playground.



A rocket fired from Gaza into southern Israel hits Ashkelon, October 7, 2023.

Israel has been in existence for three-quarters of a century, but the Hamas attack on the 7th October was the bloodiest day of all. The Koran mainly encourages peace amongst its followers, but not always. Take as an example Chapter XVI, “The Bee”, where it is written: “And the day We shall raise up from every nation a witness, then to the unbelievers no leave shall be given, nor shall they be suffered to make amends. And when the evildoers behold the chastisement, it shall not be lightened for them, and no respite shall be given them.” It’s fairly remorseless stuff, to be honest, about how those who don’t believe in Islam are to be punished in God’s name for doubting, although the same chapter blames God for starting it all, rather surprisingly. “If God had willed,” continues line 95, “He would have made you one nation; but He leads astray whom He will, and guides whom He will, and you will surely be questioned about the things you wrought.” Be wary, then: you could face prosecution before a fairly uncompromising judge, it seems, merely for falling into a verbal trap set by God himself, it seems. None of that sits comfortably with what is written in my various books about the Abrahamic faiths.

Having said all that, it’s clear that Israel’s friends around the world (most importantly, perhaps, the United States) will not sit idly by while other countries or powers are supplying Israel’s enemies with weapons of mass destruction to be used against her. That’s why the US Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control announced in October its intention to sanction eleven individuals, eight organisations or entities and a ship based in Iran, along with Hong Kong, the People’s Republic of China, and also Venezuela, which have expressed support for Hamas and a willingness to provide vital supplies.

They are all accused of helping to enable Iran's (allegedly) destabilizing programmes for the development and production of ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The people named in the US sanction plans have, it's claimed, materially supported Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAF) or their subordinates in the production and proliferation of missiles and UAVs. At the time of writing, the fighting that began with the attack by Hamas had already claimed more than 4,200 lives.

The EU has been similarly thorough in cutting off ties with Israel's most dangerous enemies, freezing funds and cutting off economic resources, while maintaining the organisation on its list of persons, groups and entities involved in acts of terrorism. The EU's action comes as part of the reaction to UN Security Council Resolution 1373, originally adopted back in 2001. It hasn't all gone the way the many enemies of Hamas would like. According to a 2014 ruling by the EU's second highest court, Hamas should not be included on the European Union's list of terrorist organisations. The General Court of the European Union concluded that the EU had failed to provide adequate evidence to support its designation of the Palestinian movement, which controls the Gaza Strip, as a terrorist organisation. It said that the EU had relied too heavily on media and internet reports, as governments often do. It's called "populism". Of course, recent horrific events ensure that the attitude towards Hamas isn't purely based on media reports and have hardened some hearts against the organisation.

Money, murder and prayers

So, what is Hamas? It is a militant Sunni Islamist movement and one of the two major political parties in the Palestinian territories. It governs more than two million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, but it is best known for its armed resistance to Israel. In October 2023, Hamas launched a massive surprise attack on southern Israel, killing hundreds of civilians and soldiers and taking dozens more as hostages. Unsurprisingly, Israel declared war on the group in response and it has indicated that its military is planning a long campaign to defeat it completely. The group's name, Hamas, is an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya, which means "Islamic Resistance Movement". A large number of countries, mainly with links to the West, have



The Security Council establishing the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) to assist the work of the CTC and coordinate the process of monitoring the implementation of resolution 1373 (2001).

designated Hamas as a terrorist organisation, although some reserve that designation for its military wing only. Ironically, one of the principal backers of Hamas is Iran, which is mainly Shi'a Muslim, while the Palestinians follow the Sunni version of the faith. The split between the two branches is not so much doctrinal as political: should you choose the faith's leaders (the Sunni do) by electing them, or, like the Shi'a, insist on being led by one of Mohammad's descendants?

Dozens of countries have declared that Hamas is a terrorist organization. It receives material and financial support from Iran and it's been reported



Hamas's Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades.

that some of its top leaders are living – well hidden, of course – in Turkey. Hamas's rival party, Fatah, dominates the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and rules in the West Bank. Fatah, unlike Hamas, has renounced violence. Hamas, on the other hand, does not recognise Israel's right to exist and is pledged to destroy it, with the intention of replacing it with a wholly Islamic Palestinian state, "from the river to the sea", as they shout, meaning everything from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea, presumably with all the Israelis there killed. That's obviously not an idea that finds favour in the United States and much of the West. Meanwhile, Lebanon's Hezbollah movement would seem to be entering the fray, even though its leadership have warned that they're not fully ready to take on Israel, despite having traded shellfire across their border since the attack by Hamas. Hezbollah is more properly written as Hizb Allāh, which means "Party of God", although you might think that there's very little that could be described as truly "god-like" in any camp in the Holy Land. Israeli forces have been struggling to reach the gates of Gaza City's main hospital as part of their bid to take control of the northern part of the Gaza Strip. Patients there are dying for lack of fuel, but an offer from Israel to provide emergency supplies was rejected by the militants. A few more deaths, I suppose, is added propaganda for Hamas, who don't really seem to care much for human life.

Following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, with its Shi'a majority, and after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, a group of Lebanese



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Secretary-General of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah.

Shi'a Islam clerics formed Hezbollah with the intention of driving Israel out of Lebanon and establishing an Islamic republic in its place. Here we return to the so-called Six-Day War in 1967, when Israeli forces defeated Egypt and Jordan before turning their attention to Syria. With covering fire from the Israeli air force, Israel's military engineers constructed access roads up the Golan Heights, using them for an assault by infantry and armoured vehicles. Almost thirty Jewish settlements were established on the Heights, which Israel annexed in 1981. Talks continued on and off for years about who was in charge, with Turkey helping to restart them in 2008. Israel is still occupying the Golan Heights, which Hamas say they must return to Islamic control. The phrase "spoils of war" springs to mind, although a little generosity of spirit would be welcome from both sides.

Meanwhile, accusations fly back and forth over the bombing of a Gaza hospital, which killed many people. Israel still denies its involvement,



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The military Hezbollah forces.

placing the blame on Hamas and an accidentally misfired rocket (an accident in other words; missiles do sometimes misfire), while Hamas is still accusing Israel of deliberately targeting the facility. Meanwhile, yet again money raises its ugly head as a threat: fears are growing among Israelis and some Palestinians that, according to a controversial law aimed at rewarding Palestinians who murder Israelis in "nationalistic attacks", the Palestinian Authority may find itself obliged to pay out almost \$3-million (€2.84-million) per month in compensation to the families of the

many, many Hamas fighters who were involved in the attacks on Israel on the 7th October.

Women have always been important in any conflict, of course, and the European Parliament has announced that it will award the 2023 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to Jina Mahsa Amini and the Women, Life, Freedom Movement in Iran. The founder member was murdered in Iran in September 2022. She had been arrested by police in Tehran for allegedly ignoring Iran's strict laws on veiling and died in a Tehran hospital three days later, having suffered appalling physical abuse while in custody, presumably at the hands of people who had never read the Qur'an. MEPs agreed that further additional sanctions should be imposed on Iran and on its officials. The death has led to protests in Iran itself, but it seems unlikely that they will change anything there.

Meanwhile the people of Gaza are suffering. On 9 October 2023, Israel imposed a "total blockade" of the Gaza Strip,



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Mahsa Amini died in a coma on September 16, 2022.

blocking the entry of food, water, medicine, fuel, and electricity. Israel has warned Hamas that the blockade will not be lifted until the many Israeli hostages that were seized by the militants are released unharmed, although one elderly Israeli woman who was released has spoken of appalling mistreatment at the hands of her captors. As a result of the blockade, the only power plant in the Gaza Strip ran out of fuel on 11 October, which has resulted in electricity in Gaza being cut off. Subsequently, desalination plants that have been providing water have been shut down, completely stopping running water. This clearly affects adults and children alike in a way that threatens lives. Volker Türk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that Israel's siege of the Gaza Strip violates international law because of this, endangering the lives of civilians by depriving them of goods that are essential for their survival.

The blame game continues

According to Al Jazeera, the head of a hospital in the Gaza Strip has issued an emotional appeal calling for an end to Israel's bombardment following an air raid that doctors said killed several infants. "Look at these children. Who is killing these children," asked Yousef al-Akkad, director of European Gaza Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis, standing behind the bandaged and bloodied bodies of the toddlers. Doubt remains, however,

about exactly who was responsible for that attack. More recently, two large hospitals in Gaza City have had their electricity cut off as fighting between the militants and the Israeli Defence Forces intensified. Al Jazeera has also reported that Hezbollah is much better armed and prepared for war than in its last confrontation with Israel. Both sides have traded shells, and their last confrontation, in 2006, saw 1,100 Lebanese nationals and 165 Israelis killed. The war also destroyed or severely damaged some 30,000 homes, 109 bridges and 78 medical facilities, according to the International Committee for the Red Cross.

An expert on Hezbollah's military capabilities at the Atlantic Council, Nicholas Blanford, says the group can now field between 3,000 and 5,000 fighters, together with short range missiles with which to hit Israel.

There is also, of course, the issue of hostage taking, in this case an estimated 100 or more Israeli civilians, mostly women, children and the elderly, who were herded into the Gaza Strip by Hamas. There is a United Nations international convention against the taking of hostages. The Convention determines very firmly that taking hostages, regardless of the circumstances, is against international law. To quote from the UN treaty document: "Any person who seizes or detains or threatens to kill, to injure or to continue to detain another person (hereinafter referred to as the 'hostage') in order to compel a third party, namely a state, an international intergovernmental organisation, a natural or juridical person, or a group of persons, to do or abstain from doing any act as an explicit or implicit condition for the release of the hostage commits the offence of taking hostages ('hostage taking') within the meaning of the Convention." That's fairly explicit, I reckon, and it means that Hamas has undoubtedly broken international law. Bringing anyone in front of a judge (and what judge could it be?) is quite another matter and much more difficult. The UN is, however, adamant: "Considering that the taking of hostages is an offence of grave concern to the International Community and that, in accordance with the provisions of this Convention, any person committing an act of hostage taking shall either be prosecuted or extradited". Given what's been going on there, it's no surprise that the EU was applying sanctions, which is no longer the case. Unfortunately, they were likely to affect the innocent most of all, which is why they were cancelled.



Gaza refugees fleeing to Egypt

It is also being claimed by Susannah Johnston, a reporter for Focus on Western Islamism (FWI), that in the United States (and presumably elsewhere) millions of federal taxpayers' dollars have

been going to organisations controlled by militant Islamists, with the sums involved increasing year by year. Johnston alleges that California, for instance, has given thousands of dollars to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) which, she writes, was founded in 1994 by Hamas supporters. She wrote that the national executive director of CAIR, Nihad Awad, tweeted his support for Hamas immediately following its attack on southern Israel.



Nihad Awad.

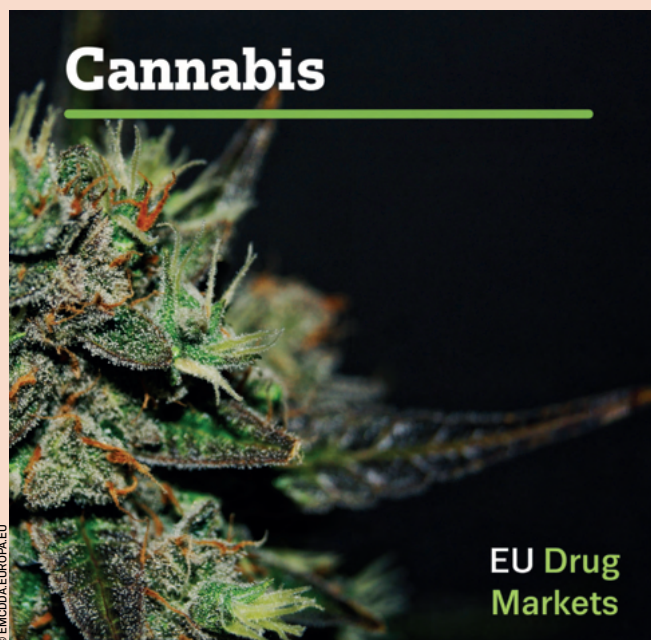
But, of course, he was not alone in doing so. Egypt, meanwhile, has opened the Rafah border crossing, allowing humanitarian aid to reach Palestinians in Gaza. At the time of writing, Israeli strikes on Gaza have killed at least 3,785 Palestinians, with a further 12,493 being wounded. Palestinian sources are also still insisting that the strike on the Gaza hospital that killed 500 people came from Israeli forces, although Israel denies it. Palestine's UN mission has accused the Israelis of "disinformation" and propaganda about the incident. As with all wars, there is such confusion that it's impossible to know who, if anyone, is telling the truth.

The European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for a "humanitarian pause" in shelling and bombing in order to let humanitarian aid reach Gaza. A similar move at the United Nations Security Council was vetoed by the United States, but the EU call for a pause, rather than a full ceasefire, has been condemned as being "too timid". Euronews reported one response from Vittorio Infante, Oxfam EU conflict expert: "While any window to bring in aid to Gaza safely should be seized at this catastrophic stage, this is not the real answer. We need a full ceasefire by all parties, and an end to the siege of Gaza. This is the only way to get enough humanitarian aid and life-saving assistance to civilians there." Causing the deaths of so many innocent civilians, especially women and children, can never be the solution to any conflict, however bitter and long-lasting, but that won't stop the fanatical from trying.

T. Kingsley Brooks

NEWS IN BRIEF

2023 EU DRUG MARKETS ANALYSIS FROM THE EMCDDA AND EUROPOL



New analysis highlights greater diversity of cannabis products, rising potency, and security risks posed by Europe's largest illicit drug market

Cannabis products are becoming increasingly potent and diverse, while collaboration between criminal groups is creating new security risks in Europe. These are among the conclusions of a new analysis — *EU Drug Market: Cannabis* — released by the EMCDDA and Europol.

The analysis describes the illegal European market for cannabis products, from production and trafficking to distribution and use. It also details the processes, materials and criminal actors involved at different stages and levels of the market.

Estimated to be worth at least EUR 11.4 billion annually, the cannabis market is the largest drug market in Europe. Latest estimates show that some 22.6 million adults in the EU (15-64 years) have used cannabis in the last year. In 2021, seized quantities of herbal cannabis and cannabis resin in the EU reached their highest levels in a decade, at 256 tonnes and 816 tonnes respectively. In addition, over 4.3 million cannabis plants were intercepted.

Most of the herbal cannabis found in the EU appears to be grown locally. The Western Balkan region remains a source, albeit less so than in the past. Some cannabis products, including herbal cannabis, are now smuggled into the EU

from North America. As for cannabis resin, Morocco is still the largest supplier to Europe, but there are signs that resin production within the EU may be on the rise.

Latest data reveal a significant increase in the potency of cannabis products. The average potency of herbal cannabis in the EU rose by about 57 % between 2011 and 2021, while the average potency of cannabis resin increased by nearly 200 % in the same period, raising additional health concerns for users.

EMCDDA Director Alexis Goosdeel says: 'Cannabis continues to divide public opinion and remains the subject of European and international debate. Today's analysis looks at the elements needed to support evidence-based policymaking and preparedness in this complex domain, where the scope of cannabis policies is widening and where products are becoming increasingly potent and diverse. Our new findings come at a time when decision-makers must address a vast array of challenges posed by Europe's largest illicit drug market, from the heavy carbon footprint left by cannabis cultivation, to health harms, corruption and violence on our streets'.

Europol's Executive Director Catherine De Bolle states: 'Cocaine seizures might be grabbing the headlines, but trafficking of cannabis is just as important a threat. The cannabis trade yields a staggering EUR 11.4 billion annually, which is still a minimum estimated value of the market. In addition to the impact on public health, the substantial illegal proceeds criminal networks obtain from trafficking cannabis fuel dire consequences — criminals increasingly veer into extreme violence to further their criminal goals and use these proceeds to fund other criminal activities and infiltrate economies and societies. This is just one of the reasons why our fight against criminal networks involved in cannabis trafficking should go hand in hand with efforts to mitigate the associated societal harms'.



EUROPEAN HYPERSONIC DEFENCE INTERCEPTOR TAKES OFF

The EU HYDEF project, which focuses on a concept definition for a European interceptor is supported with EUR 100 million from the European Defence Fund (EDF)

The threat spectrum is rapidly evolving and also in the context of hypersonic attack missiles. A truly European interceptor capability would lead to an enhanced protection of the European territory and its citizens as well as potential areas of conflict and crises in which Europe would operate. Additionally, such a European interceptor capability would contribute to NATO making it more resilient.

A well-balanced consortium, including 14 industrial partners, will study for the next 36 months different key aspects of the system of systems like the concept of operations, system requirements and interfaces, and the interceptor such as propulsion, guidance navigation and control, communications, aerodynamics, and effectors.

The European Commission has entrusted the management of this project to the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR) which, on 31 October 2023, signed with SMS - SISTEMAS DE MISILES DE ESPAÑA SL, as consortium coordinator, a Grant Agreement amounting to EUR 100 million from the EDF and, in parallel, an associated Linked Procurement Contract worth EUR 10 million on behalf of the EU HYDEF Participating States (i.e., Belgium, Germany, Norway, Poland and Spain).

DRONES TO TRANSPORT PERSONNEL AND MATERIALS TO OFFSHORE WIND FARMS



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Unmanned DLR superARTIS helicopter flying over a wind turbine

Maintenance teams and materials have to travel long distances to reach offshore wind turbines. Can drones take over transport tasks and relieve maintenance personnel? The German Aerospace Center (Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt; DLR) is investigating the possibilities and requirements together with the energy supplier Energie Baden-Württemberg AG (EnBW). In this context, an unmanned DLR small helicopter has now flown to a wind turbine and automatically communicated with it. Seven commercial drone manufacturers will follow up on the findings to further advance the technology developed at DLR. To this end, DLR and EnBW are organising the 'Offshore Drone Challenge' (ODC) in June 2024 at the National Experimental Test Center for Unmanned Aircraft Systems in Cochstedt.

The wake turbulence of wind turbines can strongly affect drones. The drone requires a lot of power to compensate for the air turbulence. "For automated use in a wind farm, the drone must therefore exchange information with the turbines," says Sebastian Cain from the DLR Institute of

Flight Systems, which is leading the project. It is important that the drone and the wind turbine 'understand' each other well. "The drone needs to find the optimum route autonomously. To do this, it needs data from the turbines and wind turbines may have to be stopped so that the drone can reach its destination safely." The interruption in turbine operation – and thus in power generation – needs to be as short as possible.

Communication between wind farm system and superARTIS successfully demonstrated

At the beginning of October 2023, the unmanned DLR small helicopter superARTIS took off at the EnBW wind farm in Schwienau (Lower Saxony). superARTIS included information on the operating status of the individual wind turbines, weather information and wake turbulence in the calculation of its flightpath. By means of communications interfaces, the aircraft announced its arrival at a wind turbine. A simulated control room approved the approach, and the controlled wind turbine was stopped. The aircraft was able to approach without danger. The turbine was then reactivated. Had the drone not received clearance, it would have automatically entered a holding pattern. For a realistic scenario, the researchers attached a payload to the aircraft. The test did not take place offshore but on land, to make it safer and easier to conduct the experiments. "However, the results can be transferred to offshore installations. The communication between the flying vehicle and the turbine was conceptualised for offshore operation and is being studied in simulations for this purpose," explains Sebastian Cain.

The flight test was an important intermediate step in the 'Upcoming Drones Windfarm' (UDW) project organised by DLR and EnBW. The aim of the project is to find out the conditions and necessary steps for the realisation of drone operations, initially for the transport of materials, and subsequently also for passenger transport. The project also includes the 'Offshore Drone Challenge' (ODC), where drone manufacturers and service providers will present suitable solutions. The stakeholders will be able to benefit from the current research results. Companies Anavia, Flowcopter, Flying Basket, HyFly, NEXaero, Unmanned Helicopters and Volocopter were selected and will now present their technologies in Cochstedt during June 2024.

"We will see several firsts in terms of the number and size of the aircraft," says Sebastian Cain. "In addition, they will all contribute to making the Offshore Drone Challenge a venue for drone demonstrations. It will also create a space for an exchange on technology, business and regulatory matters."

The Challenge in Cochstedt will focus on testing flight manoeuvres that are relevant to the operation and maintenance logistics for offshore wind farms. This includes software topics as well as design modifications to connect the 'drone' and 'wind farm' systems. The Challenge will be carried out on land, as this is significantly safer, simpler and more cost-effective than the subsequent application at sea. The seven drone manufacturers and service providers will be able to put their technologies to the test during the Challenge, which will be held over two days. The various stages include tasks such as picking up and setting down a load as automatically as possible or flying beyond line of sight.



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ECHA'S INVESTIGATION FINDS TOXIC CHEMICALS PRESENT IN CHILDCARE PRODUCTS

The European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) has found that substances causing cancer, genetic mutations or harming reproduction are present in childcare products, such as car seats, bibs and baby changing mats. Its investigation will help the European Commission to prepare an EU-wide restriction to limit these chemicals, with the aim of safeguarding children.

ECHA's investigation, drawing on information from 48 different sources, shows that substances which are carcinogenic, mutagenic or toxic for reproduction (CMR) may be present in childcare products (articles). Metals like cobalt and lead, along with phthalates like DEHP, are the most common CMR substances found in childcare products.

CMRs were most often found in items like car seats, bibs, products related to toiletries, and bedding and mattresses. Children may be exposed to these hazardous substances during use, for example through skin or oral contact, and are particularly vulnerable to the harm caused by chemical substances because of their small size, developing physiology and behaviour.

ECHA's report provides elements to support the European Commission in the preparation of a potential future restriction. These include information on how childcare articles are defined, what the restriction could cover, potential derogations, recommended concentration limits and timeframes for implementation. The report also includes views from ECHA's Enforcement Forum on how feasible it would be to enforce such a restriction.

The report will now be sent to the European Commission, who will use it to prepare a draft restriction proposal under REACH Article 68(2). This procedure allows the Commission to prepare a restriction proposal without involvement of ECHA's scientific committees.

Background

The purpose of ECHA's investigation is to support the European Commission in preparing a restriction under the REACH Regulation to protect children from exposure to CMR substances in childcare articles. It focused on substances that have a harmonised classification under the Classification, Labelling and Packaging (CLP) Regulation as a CMR in category 1A (*known* human carcinogen, mutagen or reproductive toxicant) or 1B (*presumed* human carcinogen, mutagen or reproductive toxicant).



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Special European police units from different countries.

During the investigation, ECHA organised two public calls for evidence and a consultation on the draft report. The Agency contacted 233 different stakeholders to inform about the work and considered their feedback.

OLYMPICS 2024 SECURITY TOPPED UP

Europol has signed an agreement with France to support the host country of the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games in strengthening security at this major global event. With this agreement, Europol will further facilitate operational information exchange and international law enforcement cooperation during the games.

The agreement covers several important arrangements designed to ensure the security and success of the event. This includes increasing operational preparedness, developing special channels for swift cooperation during the event, and enhancing strategic foresight to anticipate and confront complex situations quickly and efficiently.

During the event, Europol will deploy a special team to assist with security arrangements at the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Europol's experts will work in close cooperation with the Central Section for Operational Police Cooperation (SCCOPOL) of the Department for International Operational Cooperation within the French Ministry of the Interior, as well as with experts from INTERPOL also specially deployed to step up security at the event.

Law enforcement cooperation is crucial for ensuring safety at major international events. Europol's Operational Centre has provided support to a number of major international events, including the G20 Summit in Germany (2017), the



G7 Summit in Taormina, Italy (2017), Amsterdam Gay Pride (2017), the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship, the FIFA World Cup 2022 and the Rugby World Cup 2023 in France. The Operational Centre manages the constant flow of data between Europol and its partners on a 24/7 basis, making it the gateway of all operational information and intelligence channelled through the Agency.

FDA GRANTS MARKETING AUTHORIZATION OF FIRST TEST FOR CHLAMYDIA AND GONORRHEA WITH AT-HOME SAMPLE COLLECTION

The decision opens the Pathway for Other Tests for These Infections with At-Home Sample Collection

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has granted marketing authorization to LetsGetChecked for the Simple 2 Test. This is the first diagnostic test for chlamydia and gonorrhea with at-home sample collection to be granted marketing authorization. Prior to today's authorization, the only cleared tests for either condition were used with samples collected at the point of care, such as a doctor's office. The Simple 2 Test is available over-the-counter (OTC) and is intended for use in adult patients ages 18 years and older. It is the first FDA-authorized test with at-home sample collection for any sexually-transmitted disease other than HIV.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Sexually Transmitted Infections Surveillance Report, chlamydia and gonorrhea are the first and second most common bacterial sexually transmitted infections (STI) in the United States, and the rate of these STIs is steadily increasing, with an estimated 1.6 million cases of chlamydia and more than 700,000 cases of gonorrhea, in 2021 alone. Typically, both infections can be easily treated, but if left untreated, both infections can cause serious health complications for patients, including infertility. Expanding the availability of STI testing can help patients get quicker results and access to the most appropriate treatment, ultimately helping to curb the rising rates of STIs.

The Simple 2 Test which uses vaginal swabs or urine specimens, as appropriate, can detect the presence of the bacteria *Chlamydia trachomatis* and *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*, which cause chlamydia and gonorrhea, respectively. The test is a direct-to-consumer test that can be purchased without a prescription. The user activates the collection kit online and fills out a health questionnaire for a health care provider to evaluate. The individual collects the specimen at home using the provided collection kit, which is then sent back to the designated laboratory for testing. Results are delivered online, with follow-up from a health care provider in cases of positive or invalid test results.

The Simple 2 Test includes the Simple 2 Home Collection Kits that were validated for use with the cleared Hologic Aptima 2 Combo Assay. The FDA also evaluated data from LetsGetChecked demonstrating lay users can safely use the kit and have a general understanding of the results and any necessary follow up actions and validated their home collection kits with the intended test.

The risks associated with the test are mainly the possibility of false positive and false negative test results. False negative test results can result in delays to effective treatment, progression to disseminated disease, and spread of infection to other persons throughout your community. If exposed to a person with either gonorrhea or chlamydia, CDC guidelines indicate that you should be treated by a healthcare provider with antibiotics, regardless of the test result. False positive results could lead to an inappropriate diagnosis of, and unnecessary treatment for chlamydia and gonorrhea, respectively. This could lead to psychological distress, delay in receiving a correct diagnosis as well as the expense and risk for side effects from unnecessary treatment.

The FDA reviewed the Simple 2 Test under the FDA's De Novo premarket review pathway, a regulatory pathway for low- to moderate-risk devices of a new type. Along with this De Novo authorization, the FDA is establishing special controls that define the requirements related to labeling and performance testing. When met, the special controls,



in combination with general controls, provide a reasonable assurance of safety and effectiveness for tests of this type. This action creates a new regulatory classification, which means that subsequent devices of the same type with the same intended use may go through FDA's 510(k) premarket process, whereby devices can obtain marketing authorization by demonstrating substantial equivalence to a predicate device, which may save a developer time and expense compared to other review pathways.

IAEA AND ICAO TO ENHANCE COOPERATION ON TRANSPORT OF VITAL RADIOACTIVE MATERIALS

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) have agreed to enhance their cooperation around the transport of radioactive materials by air, notably to improve the efficiency and speed of these shipments that are vital for cancer care and other medical uses around the world.

In a joint statement, IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi and ICAO Secretary General Juan Carlos Salazar underscored that the agreement also “highlights the importance of adherence to the IAEA safety standards for the safe use of radioactive materials and to ICAO standards for global civil aviation safety and security.”

The agreement builds on the cooperation between both UN bodies on matters of common interest that began in 1960.

Nuclear medicine is based on access to radiopharmaceuticals for a variety of diagnostic uses and specific therapies. Getting radiopharmaceuticals from the manufacturer to hospitals and medical clinics depends on fast and reliable transport, including by air. Over 10,000 hospitals worldwide use radioisotopes in medicine, mostly for diagnosis.



“The IAEA’s role in ensuring the safe transport of radioactive material by air is essential in the carriage of short-lived radiopharmaceuticals and other crucial radioactive materials,” remarked ICAO Secretary General Salazar. “ICAO welcomes the heightening of our collaboration in this vitally important area of mutual interest.”

IAEA Director General Grossi said: “It is very important that the work the IAEA and ICAO undertake in developing and strengthening the implementation of international standards is complementary. The IAEA greatly values ICAO’s long-standing contribution to the development and review of IAEA safety standards. We can work even more closely together in other areas of common interest, such as in reducing denials of, and delays in, shipment of radioactive material by air.”

The agreement encompasses the development and review of relevant IAEA safety standards and the harmonization of best practices globally, with the IAEA and ICAO collaborating to collect and analyse associated information.

Raising stakeholder awareness through education, training, and outreach are also foreseen, including around emergency preparedness.

Radiation research and information exchange towards

radiation protection in civil aviation, especially regarding cosmic radiation exposure to flight crews, is a further focus of the agreement.

The joint statement highlights that the “stronger mutual cooperation will create a conducive environment for countries to harness the benefits of the peaceful uses of nuclear technology in meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals,” and helps set the stage for deeper collaboration in the near future.

NCI AGENCY PARTICIPATES IN NATO’S LARGEST AND MOST COMPLEX COMPUTER-BASED EXERCISE

Recently, Exercise Steadfast Jupiter tested the Alliance’s proficiency and readiness to respond to threats on land, at sea, in the air, in space or in cyberspace.

Steadfast Jupiter is NATO’s most ambitious, complex and largest computer-based exercise, designed to train and evaluate 24 different NATO Command and Force Structure Headquarters. The exercise took place in 27 different locations across Europe and North America, and saw the participation of nearly 7,000 civilian and military personnel from 17 NATO and partner countries.

The exercise provided an excellent opportunity to test NATO’s responsiveness, command and control, and defence posture in a highly challenging multi-threat environment. It also demonstrated NATO’s capability and readiness to defend the Alliance and train NATO’s warfighting skillsets, using a multi-domain, multi-joint operational area scenario based on an Article 5 crisis simulation.

The NCI Agency (NATO Communications and Information Agency) supported the exercise from eight different locations through its CIS Support Units (CSUs). The Agency’s CSUs provide onsite support to NATO and NATO countries to ensure all communication networks remain operational and secure. For Steadfast Jupiter 2023, Agency experts provided participants with support from



Landschaft italienischen Charakters” (Landscape of Italian Character) by the Austrian painter Johann Franz Nepomuk Lauterer.

Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Moreover, nearly 100 NCI Agency service matter experts provided dedicated support from the Agency's headquarters in The Hague, the Netherlands and Mons and Braine l'Alleud, Belgium.

Sponsored by Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and directed by the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC), this exercise is designed to reinforce NATO's deterrence and defence posture, providing a unique opportunity to demonstrate the Alliance's commitment to the principle of collective defence.

STOLEN 300-YEAR-OLD PAINTING RETURNED TO GERMAN MUSEUM BY THE FBI

The odyssey of a small painting through history - from Bavaria to Chicago (and back):

The painting "Landschaft italienischen Charakters" (Landscape of Italian character) by Austrian painter Johann Franz Nepomuk Lauterer (1700-1733) had been missing from the collection of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen for more than 70 years. Having



From left: FBI Chicago Special Agent Timothy O'Brien; FBI Chicago Special Agent David White; Dr. Bernd Ebert, head of the Dutch and German Baroque Painting Collections at the Alte Pinakothek Museum; FBI Chicago Special Agent Benjamin Milligan; FBI Chicago Special Agent Benjamin Milligan.

disappeared after World War II, it resurfaced in Chicago where it had been offered by the descendants of an American soldier. It was identified as one of the 700 lost pieces of art which had been filed in the Lost Art database by the



Hewa Rahimpur.

Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, and with the help of the FBI, the painting was retrieved. At a ceremony held at the German Consulate General in Chicago.

Markus Blume, the Bavarian State Minister for Science and Arts said in a press statement: "I am delighted that an art treasure that was believed to have been lost is coming back to Bavaria: the return of the painting by Johann Franz Nepomuk Lauterer to the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen is not only an act of historical justice, but also an expression of the appreciation of our cultural heritage. In particular, I would like to thank the American FBI and all those who participated in the return of the painting on the American and German sides."

MAN WHO LED SMALL BOATS CRIME NETWORK RESPONSIBLE FOR SMUGGLING 10,000 TO THE UK JAILED

A man who was arrested by the National Crime Agency has been jailed for 11 years for leading a small boats people smuggling network believed to have been involved in smuggling around 10,000 people to the UK.

Hewa Rahimpur, aged 30 and originally from Iran, was directing the network from his home in Ilford, east London, sourcing the boats in Turkey and having them delivered to locations in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands.

He would then direct other members of his criminal organisation to take them on to the northern French coast, from where migrants would be transported.

Rahimpur was detained by NCA officers in Wanstead Park on 4 May 2022, as part of a joint investigation involving the NCA and Belgian authorities.

The investigation started following the seizure of a number of boats and outboard motors, found by Belgian police in the back of two cars near the Belgian-French border in October 2021.

Phone analysis showed the drivers had been in contact with a UK-based phone number, engaging in message conversations about boat movements and locations for delivery.

The NCA was able to attribute the number to Rahimpur, tracking him down to east London where he was detained pending extradition.

His arrest triggered a Europe-wide operation to bring down other members of the network, which led to arrests in the UK, Germany, France and Netherlands in July 2022.

In Germany 60 inflatable boats and hundreds of life jackets which would have been used by the gang were seized.

In July 2022 a UK court ordered that Rahimpur should be extradited to Belgium to face trial in Bruges. There, prosecutors accused him of being engaged in 'systematic human smuggling' using small boats, charging migrants between £3,000 and £6,000 to make the crossing.

A judge in the Belgian city of Bruges found him guilty and sentenced him to 11 years in prison.

Another 19 people were convicted alongside him and handed jail terms of between 30 months and eight years.

NCA Deputy Director of Investigations Craig Turner said: "Hewa Rahimpur's network was, at the time of his arrest, one of the most prolific criminal groups involved in small boat crossings, playing a part in transporting thousands of

migrants to the UK.

“Bringing him to justice required the co-operation of law enforcement across Europe. It demonstrates the NCA’s determination to do all we can to disrupt and dismantle these dangerous people smuggling gangs, who treat human lives as a commodity to be profited from while exploiting the UK border.

“And our work is continuing – the NCA alone currently has around 90 investigations ongoing into high-level organised immigration crime, including those using boats and HGVs.

THALES ALENIA SPACE UNVEILS PROJECT TO DEVELOP SPACE SMART FACTORY, ONE OF THE LARGEST FACILITIES OF ITS KIND IN EUROPE



- **At the Tecnopolo Tiburtino hub in Rome, Thales Alenia Space’s all-digital factory will employ advanced technologies for the production of satellites**
- **The factory will be built thanks to an important investment by Thales Alenia Space and co-funded by the Italian Space Agency (ASI) through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) funds**
- **It will make intensive use of digital and Industry 4.0 technologies**
- **The factory will feature the Space JOINTLAB, an innovative and collaborative space with SMEs and research centers**
- **Total surface area 21,000 sq.m, 5,000 sq.m of reconfigurable clean rooms, 1,900 sq.m of office space and co-working areas, 1,800 sq.m of technical support areas**

Thales Alenia Space, a joint venture between Thales (67%) and Leonardo (33%), has unveiled its project to build the Space Smart Factory, one of the largest digital and reconfigurable facilities of its kind in Europe. The facility will form part of a system of interconnected space factories in Italy, employing advanced technologies to build satellites of different sizes for various fields and applications.

Over €100 million is being invested in the Space Smart Factory, including funding from the Italian Space Agency (ASI) through the PNRR.

This new state-of-the-art facility will be located at Rome’s technology hub, the Tecnopolo Tiburtino, which already houses 150 companies, mostly small and medium enterprises. Designed by EOS S.r.l., the factory will be built by CBRE | Hitrac, a global leader in critical infrastructure technologies and services spanning the full lifecycle of advanced technology systems.

Leonardo Global Solutions (LGS) provided support for the real-estate transaction, ranging from the purchase of the land and management of invitations to tender to the construction process, which is currently underway.

Site preparation and pre-fabrication planning began at the end of September with the aim of being operational by mid-2025.

The Space Smart Factory will employ automation and digital processes to offer high production capacity for advanced satellites, both in the microsatellite and small satellite sector, including the PLATINO and Nimbus satellite families, and for quick turnaround of innovative, modular, high-performance platforms for high-revisit constellations.

Featuring state-of-the-art digital technologies, the Space Smart Factory can be reconfigured to suit different production requirements. It will be equipped with highly versatile and flexible clean rooms to support integration and testing of a wide range of satellites of different type and purpose such as Earth-Observation, Navigation, and Communications. It will be a true digital hub using advanced technologies at all stages of satellite construction, i.e. design, assembly, integration and testing, including numerical modeling and Digital Twin, virtual and augmented reality technologies, and simulators integrated with the supply chain and automation (robots and cobots).

Another key element will be the Space JOINTLAB, a dynamic and innovative collaborative area designed to accommodate a multitude of functions geared toward the education and training of the new space professionals, as well as the development of innovative ideas and products, in partnership with R&D institutions, universities, startups, suppliers, SMEs, and other national and local industry partners.

The project is underpinned by sustainable architecture, especially energy saving, including extensive use of renewable energy.

The Space Smart Factory leverages Thales Alenia Space’s proven strengths as a European leader in government and commercial space projects – like the Galileo Second Generation constellation, the new ROSE-L and CIMR satellites for the Copernicus program, and the IRIDE constellation – as well as the best and brightest from academic centers like Polytechnic University of Milan, Sapienza University of Rome and world-class global organizations like Accenture, a leader in digital and process innovation for the aerospace sector.



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PEDRO SANCHEZ

A contentious path to reconciliation

There was a seismic shift in Spain's political terrain on 22 June 2023, when Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez embarked on a daring and controversial journey. With the stroke of a pen, he granted amnesty to nine Catalan separatist leaders, unleashing a maelstrom that sent the entire country into turmoil. These leaders, who had previously been convicted of sedition and rebellion for their involvement in the 2017 Catalan independence plebiscite, were at the centre of a polarising decision aimed at easing tensions and promoting dialogue between the central government and the Catalan separatist movement. However, following this bold move, a storm of indignation arose in a large part of the Spanish population and political spectrum, raising doubts about the way forward.

A deep-rooted divide



Carles Puigdemont.

The question of Catalonia's independence has been a source of intense debate for centuries, characterised by deep cultural, linguistic and historical divides between it and the rest of Spain, and tensions over Catalonia's autonomy within Spain have ebbed and flowed for decades. Catalan nationalism saw a strong revival after Francisco Franco's death in 1975 ended nearly four decades of dictatorship that had suppressed Catalan culture and identity. In 2006, proposed reforms to devolve further powers triggered massive demonstrations in Barcelona.

In 2017, these divisions reached a boiling point when the Catalan government, led by separatist Carles Puigdemont, organised a unilateral independence referendum, despite its legality being challenged by the Spanish Constitutional Court. The Spanish government responded by invoking Article 155 of the constitution, dismissing Catalonia's government and directly

controlling the region with force. The police was deployed to suppress the vote, which led to violent clashes with numerous injuries. This pivotal moment in history is a stark reminder of the deep-rooted complexity of Catalan aspirations for self-government and the challenges of navigating this delicate political landscape.

As the aftermath of the referendum unfolded, Puigdemont and fellow separatist leaders chose to flee the country, seeking refuge from impending prosecution. Meanwhile, nine other individuals faced a different fate, as they were apprehended, accused of sedition and rebellion, and brought to trial.

In 2019, the verdict was delivered, declaring them guilty, and they received sentences ranging from nine to 13 years behind bars. Oriol Junqueras, the former vice president of Catalonia, received the longest sentence for sedition and embezzlement. Eight other people, including former members of the Catalan government, Carme Forcadell, former speaker of the Catalan government and Jordi Sanchez and Jordi Cuixart, two leaders of separatist grassroots groups were also sentenced to between 9 and 12 years in prison. This chapter in the history of Catalan independence underscores the far-reaching consequences and legal ramifications that unfolded as a result of their actions, leaving an indelible mark on the course of their lives and the wider political landscape.

These sentences caused outrage in Catalonia and were seen as disproportionate, despite the leaders clearly breaking the law. Spain became polarised as never before over the national question.

Four years on, the wounds of 2017 remained deep and tensions unresolved.

Sanchez assumes power amid deadlock

In the wake of the Catalonia crisis, Spain witnessed a storm of early elections in the final months of 2015 and early 2016. However, the political landscape remained turbulent as no party managed to win a majority and the centre-right parties stubbornly refused to give Pedro Sanchez of the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party) the authority to form a government. As a result, the country found itself in an unsettling political limbo for eight months, without the basis for a stable government.



Outgoing Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy (right) after his defeat in a no confidence vote, congratulating new Premier, Pedro Sanchez.

Then, in a shrewd political move that took his opponents by surprise, Sanchez staged a masterful manoeuvre in June 2018. With a surprise vote of no confidence, he dethroned Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy of the PP (People's Party) and claimed the throne of a caretaker government. However, Sanchez encountered a labyrinth of obstacles as soon as he ascended to this new-found leadership position. The fragmented party system proved to be an arduous battleground, hampering his ability to negotiate support for his government and navigate the treacherous waters of budget approval.

In this complicated web of challenges, Sanchez found himself at a crossroads. Searching for a solution to the territorial conflict plaguing the nation while struggling with his own political dilemma, he presented a delicate strategy. He chose the path of appeasement to allay the hopes of the Catalan nationalists. With this calculated approach, Sanchez wanted to find a way to reconcile the territorial divide and at the same time consolidate his own political position.

In a daring political chess move, Sanchez reached out to the Catalan parties and offered them a series of concessions designed to integrate their influence into the government structure. With a nod to co-operation, he initiated talks and appointed strategically important ministerial officials who won their support. The most daring stroke of the brush, however, was the opening of a long-closed door - the possibility of pardoning the once-convicted leaders of the separatist movement. It was a gesture of goodwill, a controversial move that would shape the history of his entire time in office and leave an indelible mark for better or worse.

Over time, this bold strategy became the thread that ran through the convoluted patterns of Sanchez's tenure. It whispered in the corridors of power, stirring tempers and sparking fierce debate. Some hailed it as a symbol of reconciliation, a beacon of hope to bridge deep-seated divides, while others saw it as an act of betrayal, a compromise of justice and integrity. The scope of this controversial decision would test the limits of his leadership, cast a shadow over his legacy and forever link his name to the complex Catalan question.

Sanchez rolls the dice

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez knew that the odds were stacked against him as he gazed into the abyss. His government was hanging on to power by a thread and threatened to fall into oblivion at any moment. Desperate times called for desperate measures if he hoped to turn the fickle wheel of fortune in his favour.

As Spain's interim leader, once again on the brink of the throne, he knows that the game is always risk and reward. But his latest move at the negotiating table was his wildest poker game yet - all in, do or die.



A massive demonstration against the amnesty in Madrid, Spain.

But his latest gamble has provoked a strong backlash across the Spanish population, including within his own party, and raised the alarming spectre of a nation on the brink of division. It has also sparked widespread protests across the country. On 12 November, thousands of citizens took to the streets of Madrid to protest peacefully, organised by the Popular Party and the far-right Vox party. These demonstrations have been going on for days, with hundreds of people gathering in front of the PSOE headquarters in Madrid.

Following the large-scale demonstration, loudspeaker vans roared through the streets of Madrid, chanting "*Sanchez, traitor*" and "*We will stop the coup*". Santiago Abascal, the leader of the far-right Vox party, vehemently condemned Sanchez's amnesty measures, describing them as "*regime change by the back door*" and initiating a lawsuit before the Spanish Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, thunderous debates raged in Spain's Congress of Deputies as furious opponents hurled bolts of venom and fury. But when the votes were finally counted, Sanchez emerged unscathed from the wreckage and secured an absolute majority through his skillful manoeuvring.

Though the PSOE celebrated surviving the political storm, receiving the support of 179 of the 350 Spanish MPs after a heated and acrimonious debate, dark clouds still loomed. While the PSOE saw the result as proof of the triumph of democracy over negativity, its success came at a significant cost as it relied heavily on the support of smaller regional parties, including Catalan and Basque nationalists. As fractious minorities now held the balance of power, could unstable unity survive the coming chaos?

There are precedents: despite their lead when they took power in the July election, divisions appeared in the PP leadership that would prove fatal. While the support of the up-and-coming Vox party sounded like a victory, discord was brewing beneath the surface of their turbulent alliance.

Beating the odds, but at what price?

Sanchez and his left-wing 'Sumar' alliance knew that they needed an ace up their sleeve to gain the upper hand. By giving in to the demands of the Catalan separatist parties 'ERC' (Catalan Republican Left) and the hardline 'Junts' (Together

for Catalonia), they cobbled together a coalition that held all the trump cards.



© JUNTS CAT
A pro Catalonia independence demonstration in Barcelona.

A draft amnesty law now aims to acquit hundreds of people who have been caught up in the networks of rebellion over the last ten years. But Sanchez's sudden change of heart after promising such leniency has caused a storm of indignation among his opponents.

The PP and Vox are sharply attacking Sanchez and accusing him of hypocrisy for throwing his principles overboard to save his own skin. They accuse him of bowing to the divided factions and prioritising party affiliation over his patriotic duty to the divided nation.

As the backlash intensifies, Sanchez's risky move threatens to tear his government apart before it has even really begun. Only time will tell whether playing the independence card will secure him control - or whether it will be the ace that sends the whole deck of cards around him up in flames.

Santiago Abascal, the leader of Vox vehemently condemned Sanchez's amnesty measures, describing them as *"regime change by the back door"* and initiating a lawsuit before the Spanish Supreme Court.

The leader of the People's Party, Alberto Nuñez Feijóo, made serious accusations against Prime Minister Sanchez. *"It is only one man's selfish thirst for power that is driving us onto the streets today,"* shouted Feijóo, taking direct aim at his rival. *"We Spaniards will never accept our highest office becoming a bargaining chip to be sold to the highest separatist bidder."* Feijóo, who roused the crowd to storms of enthusiasm, vowed to fight Sánchez's betrayal of the nation at every turn. *"New elections must be called immediately,"* he demanded.

There were violent clashes between police and far-right extremists outside the PSOE's Madrid headquarters and loudspeaker vans roared through the streets, chanting *"Sanchez, traitor"* and *"We will stop the coup"*. To make matters worse, the Catalan separatist party 'Junts' has warned Sánchez that he cannot count on their unconditional support during his upcoming term in office.

Complex coalitions are nothing new in Spain's parliamentary process - success often depends on the skilful balancing of fragile factions. And while Sanchez brought together the minority blocs that won a majority, their combined votes surpassed those of past regimes.

But it was the shadowy support that Sanchez actively courted that set alarm bells ringing across the country. By aligning himself with secessionists whose sole aim is to jeopardise unity, he put himself at risk of treason.

Although backroom deals build many governments, Sanchez's covert deal was of a more controversial kind, inflaming passions never before seen on all sides of this volatile issue.

Pedro Sanchez's latest gamble has provoked a strong backlash across the Spanish population, including within his own party, and raised the alarming spectre of a nation on the brink of division. It has also sparked widespread protests across the country.

The People's Party (PP) called on the European Union to intervene, and the far-right Vox party accused Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez of staging *"a coup d'état in capital letters"*.

While political storms were brewing at home, Spain's turbulence took centre stage in Brussels. The powerful EPP group in the EU Parliament sounded the alarm and called for an urgent debate during the November plenary sitting.

EPP chairman Manfred Weber denounced Sanchez's actions as *"the beginning of lawlessness"* and joined forces with Spanish delegate Dolors Montserrat. Their letter states: *"The amnesty agreement risks undermining the separation of powers and silencing the voice of the judges,"* reflecting the fears expressed in the Spanish courts.

With the EPP able to rally like-minded groups from across the spectrum, it seemed certain that the group would put the showdown on the schedule. As Brussels prepared to intervene in the domestic unrest, Sanchez was fighting on two fronts.



Santiago Abascal.

Sanchez braces for turbulent second term

While emotions ran high on all sides, Sanchez defended his controversial measures in front of hostile MPs at his investiture. *"Today, in the name of peace, we have the chance to leave the conflicts of the past behind us,"* he declared in the midst of a rising storm.

"This amnesty will show mercy to those caught up in the maelstrom of rebellion - political rivals whose aims I oppose,"



Manfred Weber.

but also ordinary citizens caught up in a riot they did not cause themselves". But the opponents rejected this argument and spoke of betrayal of sacred oaths. Undaunted, Sanchez stood firm. "Far from weakening our foundations, this proves the power of the Constitution to override past transgressions and reunite the entire Spanish people under its protection".

While the debates threatened to tear Congress apart, the Prime Minister remained determined to steer a calm course through the chaos. But could even the long arm of the law hold back the tidal wave before it crashed over the kingdom with unbridled force as anger boiled up on the edges of the country?

Apart from the political unrest, which is unlikely to subside, the amnesty agreement raises considerable legal concerns. The agreement between Sanchez and Puigdemont's 'Junts' party has been almost unanimously disapproved of by judicial authorities and associations, particularly with regard to the proposed establishment of parliamentary committees of enquiry to investigate so-called "lawfare", i.e. the use of the judiciary to persecute political opponents. Judges and Spanish lawyers see this as an unjustified interference by the legislator in the competences of the judiciary, an opinion that is also shared by international legal experts.

While the amnesty spares Puigdemont another exile and lifts the ban on rebel leaders, Sanchez and his supporters are trying to cast a wider net. They are demanding that schoolteachers, civil servants and even heroic firefighters and officers involved in the unrest also be pardoned.

But the separatists may be sensing an opportunity to regain lost footholds and are excited at the prospect of reprising former roles. And for the opponents, such returnees only promise to rekindle the embers of past divisions and reopen barely healed wounds.



The president of the People's Party, Alberto Nuñez Feijóo (left), with Pedro Sanchez.

Even those in favour of pardons secretly concede that capitulating to the renegades risks further inflaming passions that are already at boiling point.

With tensions threatening to boil over again, only time will tell whether this act of mercy will calm tempers - or whether it will prove to be the spark that sets Spain's political powder keg ablaze once more.

Alberto Nunez Feijoo had previously criticised Sanchez sharply for agreeing to an amnesty that would also include Carles Puigdemont, the leader of the 'Junts' party and former president of Catalonia, who fled to Belgium after the 2017 independence referendum to avoid arrest.

"You are the problem," he stated. "You and your broken promises, your lack of moral principles and your pathological ambition. Spain will be condemned to division as long as you are in charge. Your tenure in office as prime minister will be characterised by the unrestricted return of Puigdemont to Catalonia. History will not forgive you."

Even among supposed allies, there was a threat simmering beneath the surface. When Sanchez conjured up visions of Spanish unity, 'Junts' responded with a chilling warning that travelled through Congress like a winter wind. "Do not tempt fate, Mr Prime Minister, or test our wavering loyalty. Our support comes only on a case-by-case basis...it is not unconditional".

The veiled threat sent shivers through Sanchez's fragile flock and showed that independence movements keep their teeth even when on a leash. How long would it be before the minority rulers, relying on the whims of such wayward factions, dissolved their unstable union altogether?

While domestic discord raged, a different tone prevailed beyond Spain's borders. Amid the howls of outrage from the PP and Vox, Pedro Sanchez found unlikely allies among normally neutral politicians.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz was the first to extend an olive branch and offer swift respect. A short time later, there were also favourable words from the highest level in Brussels, when Council President Charles Michel supported the embattled prime minister's survival in the chaos.

Their approval allowed a glimmer of hope to shine through the gathering political storm clouds. But at home, there were no signs that the opposition's outrage would subside any time soon.

With foreign factions backing Pedro Sanchez while dissent at home soared to new heights, Spain appeared to be navigating turbulent translations between the international arena and its own fractured landscape in the difficult times ahead.

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SHRINKING VIOLETS

**The problem with
being too afraid
of criticism**

My mother used to refer to people who took offence too easily as “shrinking violets”. I have also come across the same expression being used to describe exceptionally shy people. In the case of China and its government, I don’t think anyone could seriously describe them as being unusually shy, but they certainly respond quickly and with rather harsh measures towards anyone who dares to voice any criticism, or even the hint of criticism. Like Caesar’s wife, they must be above suspicion. At least, that’s what Caesar himself is supposed to have said (according to Plutarch) to justify his divorce from his wife, Pompeia, whom he suspected had possibly (only possibly) encouraged the lustful intentions of another man, Publius Clodius Pulcher. He had certainly had his eyes on Pompeia and was subsequently arrested. Caesar also divorced his wife, just to be on the safe side, saying that his wife must be above suspicion. In other words, even the suggestion of wrongdoing, let alone any actual misbehaviour, is not to be tolerated. Unsubstantiated allegations would be enough. Sensitive lot, those Romans. In Caesar’s case, it didn’t do him a lot of good in the long term, since he fell victim to a conspiracy by his supposed “friends” that ended both his rule and, indeed, his life. Shakespeare’s unequalled play about Caesar’s assassination shows his friend Brutus as having been the only honest conspirator, doing what he did reluctantly and for the sake of Rome; no empty, untrue charges of misconduct there. In modern-day China’s case, that suspicion seems harder to justify.



Reinhard Bütikofer.

China decided to take action against three members of the European Parliament and two others in tit-for-tat retaliation after the EU sanctioned four Chinese officials for human rights abuses. That was back in 2021 and Beijing was swift in its response, singling out Reinhard Bütikofer, Miriam Lexmann, and Ilhan Kyuchyuk for the inevitable retaliatory sanctions. The EU had accused the four Chinese officials of human rights abuses against the Uyghur people, while Beijing accused those it targeted for its vengeance of actions that could: “severely harm China’s sovereignty and interests and maliciously spread lies and disinformation”. The three Europeans are barred from entering Chinese territory and face restrictions if they try to conduct business there.

Let’s take a look at them; there are others as the numbers continue to rise in response to Beijing’s paranoia. Reinhard Bütikofer represents Alliance 90/The Greens in the European Parliament, which is part of the Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) and he was first elected to the European Parliament in 2009. Miriam Lexmann is from Slovakia and represents the Christian Democrats, sitting with the European People’s Party group (EPP), as does German



Miriam Lexmann.

EPP member Michael Gahler, who sits in the Interparliamentary Alliance on China. Ilhan Kyuchyuk, from Bulgaria’s Turkish minority, sits with the Renew Group, formerly known as the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. Like me, he was horrified by Britain’s decision to leave the EU, especially as the vote to do that was won by a tiny majority and many people in Britain then and now have criticised and condemned it.



Ilhan Kyuchyuk.

Of course, scepticism about politicians and their state beliefs is only natural. After all, as Britain’s Second World War leader Winston Churchill famously said: “A lie gets half way around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.” Having spent a lifetime reporting on politics, I remain amazed that anyone believes politicians are ever telling truth. As another political commentator once said: “One of the reasons people hate politics is that truth is rarely a politician’s objective. Election and power are.” That quotation came from Cal Thomas, a journalist, writer and political commentator, mainly during the 1970s, who worked for NBC and Fox News, among others. Incidentally, he was vociferously opposed to Islamic immigration, so he would have found common cause in some respects with Beijing and with Jerusalem. He was also rather right wing in many of his views, as well as being anti-Islamic. But he was right on the money with his opinion of most politicians’ overall aims and motivations. China imposed the sanctions because it wanted to punish people for believing in democracy, but the affair really serves



Pictures from the « The Xinjiang Police Files » a cache of data hacked from police computer servers in the region and passed to the BBC show what appear to be drills in a Uyghur re-education camp.

to demonstrate how little Beijing understands how real politics works. Rather than disadvantaging the sanctioned people, it has drawn public attention to the affair and to what they had said to merit Beijing's annoyance.

Don't do it again (or we'll make you famous and popular!)

The EU has, of course, hit back. Four Chinese party and regional representatives, as well as an organisation from Xinjiang province against the Uyghurs, will be subject to an EU asset freeze, a travel ban, and also a ban on receiving EU funds under any circumstances. It's in connection with alleged large-scale detentions of Uyghurs as well as other abuses for which Chinese officials stand accused. It's not the first time, of course, and China seems convinced that its sheer size and military power mean it does not have to abide by any of the norms that bind most countries in their international relations. What they have never realised is that their punitive actions have the opposite effect to what they actually want, turning what they find to be slightly annoying writers of articles into national heroes. Clearly, the Chinese don't understand that.

We have to ask ourselves what exactly upset the MEPs so much that they spoke out in a way that so offended Beijing. The Uyghurs – an estimated 11.8 million of them – live in the extreme northwest of China, a long way from Beijing, and China has long been accused of human rights abuses against them, although the acts have not only been against Uyghurs; China is accused of systematic abuses against all its minorities. At a school provided for Uyghur children in Turpan there is a notice on the gate forbidding the use of

their native tongue. They must use Mandarin Chinese, referred to on the notice as Guoyu, although in a nod to civility, it does say “please”. Teachers who have fled China after being forced to teach in camps, using only “standard Chinese” – essentially Mandarin – as used by the Han people, so the children effectively get a monolingual education. As for the camps themselves, they have been described as “cramped and unhygienic, with students getting little more than just enough food to keep them alive, whilst sitting through “indoctrination” classes, with the aim of turning them into fully-fledged Chinese citizens. China has put the various Mosques effectively out of use by severely damaging them. The Uyghur are Islamic in their faith but the Chinese do not approve. United Nations research into the treatment by China of the Uyghurs has concluded that this has included arbitrary detention, forced labour, the suppression of religious practices, political indoctrination, forced sterilization and contraception, as well as forced abortion.



Hëytgah Mosque, Kashi.

A case brought by the International Criminal Court, however, was dismissed on the grounds that the alleged crimes were committed solely against “Chinese nationals” (something the Uyghurs might dispute) and on the territory of China. China is not a signatory to the statute on human rights, so can, presumably, do what it likes to people it considers – whether they like it or not – to be Chinese citizens. What's more, the between 2015 and 2018, the birth rate in the mainly Uyghur regions of Hotan and Kashgar fell by more than 60%, while the birth rate across China as a whole only fell by less than 10%. In

2019, the birth rate in Xianjiang fell by an additional 24%. The United Nations has referred to China's actions in the province as "crimes against humanity" but has not gone as far as to call it genocide. Any country behaving that way, however, must have been acting inhumanely and with great cruelty.

Ethnicity matters, it seems

Perhaps the Chinese feel free to act in this way because ethnically the Uyghurs are Turkic and not closely related to the Han majority in China, although they're the second largest ethnic group living there. Some ten million people living in China view Uyghur as their native language, despite China's apparent attempts to stamp it out. The Uyghurs lay claim to their original home area, Xinjiang, but so does China's Han government. China rejects criticism from anywhere else concerning its treatment of the Uyghurs. "Xinjiang-related issues are purely China's internal affairs, and no external force has the right to interfere," a government spokesperson said. Of course, under that sort of logic any country could simply exterminate sections of its population and dismiss criticism as "interference in its domestic affairs". I understand that Adolf Hitler did so when criticised for seeking to exterminate Jews. China is wrong there: gross violations of rights can be criticised, although Beijing leans heavily on those countries that do so, dismissing mentions of particular acts of discrimination or cruelty as "lies and disinformation".

In his disturbing but beautiful poem "The Past", translated by



Tahir Hamut Izgil, prominent Uyghur poet, filmmaker, and activist.

Joshua L. Freeman, Uyghur poet Tahir Hamut Izgil, summed up present-day Uyghur existence like this:

*"When children asked, When will we be grown up
Their mothers said, When the sun shines on a Thursday
When youths asked, When will we be happy
Their elders said, when a camel tail touches the earth
The sun never shone on a Thursday, a camel tail never touched the earth."*

I include that poem in this article, despite the fact that its inclusion may upset Xi Jinping. China claims it has established



Ikrām Nurmehmet.

what it calls "hard-won social stability" across Xinjiang, but that, of course, is a lie. What it means is that it has effectively silenced critics. For instance, in 2023 the Chinese authorities imposed a life sentence on Rahile Dawut, an internationally recognised Uyghur ethnographer, accusing her of "endangering state security", which would be a clever thing to achieve through science writing. Another Uyghur academic, İlham Tohti, an economist, is also serving a life sentence for his intellectual output. It's thought that some 500 Uyghur intellectuals are now behind bars. That will leave only the less well educated people who are still outside of China's prisons to run the country. With the Uyghur community, Chinese government actions are verging on the ridiculous. Take the case of the film maker Ikrām Nurmehmet, who was arrested at his home in May and taken to Xinjiang's capital, Ürümqi, where he has since been held on pre-trial detention without being told what he's accused of. The Chinese government, never a fan of trial by jury, seems to have abandoned even the pretence of fairness. Although he was born and raised in Ürümqi, he actually lives in Beijing with his wife and young child, or did prior to his arrest. China is certainly no safe place for people working in the creative industries. The concepts of justice and fair play were abandoned there long ago.

Take the case of the Falun Gong, a discipline involving slow exercises and meditation, with more than a nod towards Buddhism. Many of its disciples or adherents have been arrested by the fiercely atheistic state with a view to "correcting" their beliefs through forced labour and (it's alleged) torture. Growing in popularity through the 1990s, it was proscribed in 1999, when Beijing swore to "eradicate" it. In 2006 claims emerged that thousands of Falun Gong practitioners in Chinese prisons had been killed so that their organs could be harvested for transplant surgery. The Falun Gong's main beliefs are based on "truthfulness, compassion,

forbearance”, none of which are easy to find in Xi’s China. In fact, the Falun Gong are being persecuted for having any beliefs at all, however innocent and admirable. Oddly, of course, the founder of modern China, Mao Tse-tung had survived terrible hardships during the famous Long March, when Mao and his people were forced to kill their horses and pack animals for food, although over dinner he told the British journalist and writer Robert Payne that his most enduring memory was “the cold, the terrible cold”. He was asked by one guest what he believed to be the most extraordinary thing he’d seen along the way. “Some fish in a river near Tibet,” he told Payne and the other diners. “We waded out, and the fish came streaming toward us. They were not afraid, because there had never been any fishermen in the river.” That same lack of fear through a lack of experience no longer works with China’s human population, however. Perhaps Xi wishes it did. But the Falun Gong practitioners are, in the main, ethnically Han Chinese; the Uyghurs are clearly not. It would appear that Xi and his ministers would prefer a homogenised population, which nature on its own seems unable to provide whereas abject cruelty can, at least partially.

Meanwhile, just to keep their hands in practice, China’s revamped military force, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), which is also the world’s largest force, has warned that it’s prepared to go into Taiwan with all guns blazing. That would seem to suggest the opposite meaning to that of its name. It’s not there to “liberate” the people but to threaten and enslave them into doing whatever its leaders want. Perhaps it should be renamed the PSA – the People’s Subjugation Army. It’s also rather doubtful that it can justly be called “the People’s” either, when it is very clearly under the control of the largely anonymous politicians and apparatchiks who run the place. Poor old Mao would have hated it.



Chinese President Xi Jinping.

I Don’t follow the leader

Michael Burleigh summed it up very well in an on-line article for the UK’s “i” newspaper: “American and British hawks are giving themselves the vapours about yet another ‘axis of evil’ active in our world. This one is said to consist of Russia, Iran, China and North Korea, notwithstanding obvious differences between, respectively, a rogue imperial



Miloš Vystrčil.

state, a revolutionary Shiite theocracy, a vast Asian economy ruled by Communist tycoons, and an East Asian curiosity under the weird Kim dynasty.” China’s principal hate-figure in the EU is Bütikofer, chair of the European Parliament’s delegation for relations with China. Wang Yiwei, director of the Centre for European Studies at Renmin University of China, with whom Bütikofer shared many public debates, said in an interview with the Global Times that Bütikofer has turned into an anti-China “vanguard” and “China should have sanctioned him long time ago.” In China’s view, Bütikofer is also one of those overseas politicians behind the riots in Hong Kong who actively interferes in its affairs. He supported the illegal “Occupy Central” movement in 2014. In September 2019, Bütikofer visited Hong Kong to meet leading anti-China and separatist activists such as Martin Lee Chu-ming and Joshua Wong Chi-fung, according to media reports and he has pledged his support for Taiwan’s wish to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Beijing views that as interfering in China’s internal affairs. It also takes a dim view of his support for Taiwan’s independence ambitions.

In 2018, Bütikofer wrote a letter to China’s Ambassador to the EU, Zhang Ming, about China’s opposition to Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil’s planned trip to Taiwan. Zhang said in a written reply that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the Chinese territory and that matters happening in Taiwan are China’s internal affairs. In other words, keep your nose out.

China carefully maintains friendly relations with both Iran and Russia but seems unwilling to invest in either, in any meaningful way. On the issue of Gaza and the ongoing war between Hamas and Israel, China has said it favours a 2-state solution, although it does nothing to assist in achieving that. It has condemned Israel’s bombing of civilians, although not the

Hamas attack that has led to the recent increase in violence. China is on record as saying that “its business is business”, and it certainly wants to protect its oil imports from Saudi Arabia and Iran, not to mention the trade it conducts with Arab states, believed to be worth \$430-billion (€408-billion). It’s also important for China’s “Belt and Road” initiative. However, there is evidence of a clear attempt by China to destroy its Uyghur community.

The methods reported include deliberately harming those held in detention, the prevention of Uyghur births by such measures as sterilisation and abortion and even the forced transportation of Uyghur children to other parts of China. A legal opinion published in the UK said that: “On the basis of the evidence we have seen, this Opinion concludes that there is a very credible case that acts carried out by the Chinese government against the Uyghur people in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region amount to crimes against humanity and the crime of genocide.” China, of course, denies any wrongdoing, whilst also arguing that its an internal matter for China and therefore nobody else’s business. More than a million people are being held in China’s various detention camps, with the claimed purpose of “re-education”, which presumably means indoctrination, although the Chinese authorities prefer to call it “transformation through education”. The few Uyghurs who have got away have claimed that female detainees are systematically raped night after night to ensure they produce Han (or at least partially Han) children. One witness said

that Chinese men would queue up each evening and select the women who most appealed to them. Some of the men were policemen. The concerns of Bütikofer and others are very real. But if, in the fullness of time, there are no truly ethnically Uyghurs left, people like Bütikofer will have no further cause for complaint, will they?

Former US President Donald Trump once assured Xi that the education camps were “exactly the right thing to do.” Why? Because a trade deal was under negotiation, and that took precedence over human rights in Trump’s view, it seems. Whatever religion people may espouse, the main object of worship would seem to come with dollar signs. But the Uyghur people continue to produce poets, even in exile or prison. The final verse of the poem “No Road Back Home”, by Purhat Tursen, translated by Joshua L. Freeman, sums up the Uyghur condition and is widely quoted even today in Uyghur society:

*Like the waters of the Tarim
we began in this place
and we will finish here
We came from nowhere else
and we will not leave for anywhere
If God made humanity
God made us for this place
If man evolved from apes
we evolved from the apes of this place.*

At the end of the day, we can remain confident that the Uyghurs will still be Uyghurs when China’s current politicians are long forgotten. Whatever Xi Jinping may say or wish, they will never become Han Chinese, certainly not at heart.

T. Kingsley Brooks
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Uyghur poet and novelist Purhat Tursen.

THE EU JOINS THE SPACE RACE

**An advanced new
satellite network is
being put in place**

“Time and space are not conditions of existence, time and space is a model for thinking.” That’s what Albert Einstein said and, let’s face it, he should have known if anyone ever did. However, Europe has, it would appear, been slow to think much about space. At last, that is changing, with the IRIS2 project. IRIS2 is set to be a constellation of satellites designed to enhance communication possibilities, especially for governments and business users, as well as making sure of high-speed Internet broadband, hopefully eradicating dead zones where connections are difficult. In our modern world it’s vital that communications are fast and reliable, and as anyone who has tried to get in touch with someone over the Internet will know only too well, that’s not always easy, or even possible. The hope is that with IRIS2 in place such difficulties will be consigned to the past. Like everyone else, the EU has an increasing need for a secure and reliable communications infrastructure. The European Parliament has approved a budget of €2.4-billion, with the money coming from member states via the European Space Agency (ESA), as well as from industry, but the European Commission reckons the total cost will come to around €6-billion, with the public sector contribution from 2023 until 2027 of around €2-billion at current prices. The Commission says that when it comes to the provision of commercial services, the private sector is poised to invest in order to develop and deploy related infrastructure. If it all comes together and works as it’s supposed to, we all stand to benefit. Probably.

The requirement for such a system was highlighted by Ukraine’s need for satellite telecommunications because of its unwanted war with Russia and Europe’s inability to supply such facilities. Regarding that unprovoked conflict reminds me of another quotation from Einstein: “Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I’m not sure about the former.” Setting that aside, we cannot forget the vast satellite constellation created by the American billionaire Elon Musk.



An artist's impression of SpaceX's Crew Dragon spacecraft separating from the Falcon 9 rocket during the in-flight abort test.

Musk's SpaceX company has put around a thousand satellites into orbit some 550 kilometres above the Earth, which is only around half the altitude of most artificial satellites. The plan is known as “Starlink”, and it comprises so many satellites, in fact, that some people have expressed fears over the risk of possible collisions. Musk has said all along that his aim is to provide communication possibilities with the most remote parts of the planet (want to make a phone call home from Antarctica?). Nobody need ever fear that they're not being served or that they cannot contact others ever again! According to the website “Space.com”: “A Starlink satellite has a lifespan of approximately



Thales Alenia Space is one of the enterprises that will lead the European consortium in the Iris2 satellite constellation programme.

five years and SpaceX eventually hopes to have as many as 42,000 satellites in this so-called ‘megaconstellation’.” One single SpaceX Falcon rocket managed to launch 143 satellites on board a single vehicle recently and it’s been estimated that Earth could soon have a million satellites whizzing around up there. But with such relatively short life spans, they will need frequent replacements. Even so, Europe clearly has a lot of catching up to do. Meanwhile, Musk’s SpaceX team is planning 144 launches in 2024 alone, which means twelve each month, or one every two and a half days. The company plans simultaneously to increase its launch rate, driven by the desire to have satellites that can connect directly with mobile phones: the “direct-to-cell facility”, as it’s been dubbed, working in conjunction with T-Mobile. SpaceX has also vastly improved its ability to track down and recover used launch vehicles, too, so that they can be refurbished and reused, representing an enormous saving financially.

Taking up more space

So, will there be room up there for another competitor in the satellite communications business? As it is, Amazon has also entered the fray, with its Project Kuiper plan to launch yet another constellation of satellites. From the EU’s perspective, IRIS2 means a more general, non-affiliated provider than the Musk operation or Project Kuiper could be, both being rooted in big business. IRIS2 is also supposedly non-political, enjoying (if that’s the right expression), the support of the Renew Europe political grouping, which describes itself as a Liberal pro-European political group, with membership widely spread among the member states. The group hopes that by providing new services in the space sector it will help to foster “a completely new ecosystem of start-ups and SMEs as well as the emergence of innovations and new services in the European space sector”, and additionally helping innovations and new services in the sector. MEP Christophe Grudler of France’s Mouvement Démocrate, who is also



Christophe Grudler.

the Rapporteur on the EU secure connectivity programme pointed out how Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine had given the whole plan impetus. "With the war, Ukraine needed satellite telecommunications, but the EU didn't have something to offer," he said. "Ukraine should not have to rely on the whims of Elon Musk to defend their people." We must ask ourselves if this new plan will change things; he thinks it will: "With, IRIS2, the EU will have its own telecommunications constellation, able to offer secure communications to European governments and allies." But, as I said earlier, the EU will have some serious catching up to do, if it's to play with the big boys, however confident Christophe Grudler may sound. He told journalists: "I'm proud that this constellation will also set a worldwide example in terms of sustainability, as we requested." It all sounds very promising, with him adding: "Now is the time to build these new European satellites and prepare them for launch."

We should not forget, of course, that this isn't the EU's first venture into space. Europe's very own GPS system, employing its Galileo satellites, is used by some two billion mobile devices around the world. The EU also has its Earth observation Copernicus satellites up there, not to mention the European Space Agency's Gaia mission, which is still discovering new facts about our galaxy and how it formed, so this new project will be far from the EU's first venture in terms of space research. We're all space people these days. The old competitive nature of it all seems to have back-pedalled slightly. I still remember the excitement in April 1961 when Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man ever to fly in space. It was just before my 13th birthday, and I was delighted. I was similarly thrilled when Alan Sheppard, an American Astronaut, followed him into space in May of that same year. He was followed, of course, by John Glenn, an American and the first man to orbit the Earth. There were many more, but nobody and nothing exceeded the excitement generated in 1969 with Neil Armstrong took his "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind" by stepping onto the surface of the Moon. Nor will they, I think. It was just too important and thrilling. Where next? Venus is a fiendishly hot and deadly place where

humans cannot go, while Mars is just a bit too far away and would require the carrying of vast stocks of food and drinking water, there seeming to be none there that's easily accessible. Whatever those strange people who claim to have seen UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects) or say they've been visited by aliens may post on-line, any alien races there (there aren't any really, I don't think) may be unimpressed by our tentative steps into space exploration. After all, as astronaut Buzz Aldrin said, "There may be aliens in our Milky Way galaxy, and there are billions of other galaxies. The probability is almost certain that there is life somewhere in space." It just hasn't chosen to pop by for a cup of coffee and a quick 'hello', it seems." I'll keep the coffee machine handy in case they do, though. We should, perhaps, recall the words of the American astronaut, Scott Carpenter, who wrote that: "At no time when the astronauts were in space were they alone, there was constant surveillance by UFOs". Nobody bothered to wave at them, it seems, nor to film them, which is odd. So next time we go out for a walk after dark, maybe we should look up at the sky, wave your hand and say: 'Hi, guys'." But bear in mind that if they're out there, the aliens are unlikely to speak English (or Chinese, or Russian, Congolese, or Brazilian). Maybe that wave will be enough (unless in their sign language it means "please attack us viciously"). Only joking.

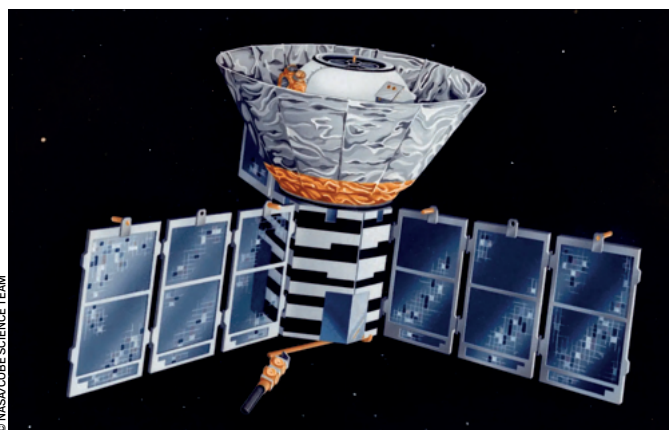


Buzz Aldrin addressing the 2016 Cloud Summit in Phoenix, Arizona, USA.

Things change, eventually

The plain fact is that space is simply huge. Earth's sun and its local retinue of planets, moons, and other lumps of circling rock (which includes us, of course) travel around the centre of our galaxy at the impressive speed of 250 kilometres per second, but even so, it takes some 200-million years to complete one circuit of the Milky Way galaxy. Everything about space is bigger and takes far longer to reach, even for light waves, than mere humans can comfortably comprehend. You think you know the shape of the various constellations up there (such as the Plough, for instance, also known as "the Big Dipper"), but in a few years – say 100,000 years, for instance, which is nothing in galactic terms – it won't look the same at all: its familiar seven stars will have moved off in different directions from each other and may not form any recognisable shape at all. It's now known that our Milky Way has swallowed whole galaxies in the past (quite a long time ago,

however; possibly as far back as some ten billion years) and will continue to do so in the future. A lot of smaller galaxies revolve around our galactic core and in the fullness of time (admittedly a very long time) they will merge with our galaxy and with our neighbour, the Andromeda galaxy, which is currently a round 2.5 million light years away from us, and new stars are forming in its dust clouds constantly, if somewhat unobtrusively. Exciting times lie ahead but it seems very unlikely that any of us alive today will live to see it. Even so, we do know a lot more than we did. For instance, NASA's COBE mission has revealed that the many, many galaxies out there are not spaced evenly but in random-seeming clumps. I'm not sure how that helps us to make sense of the cosmos but knowing more is always better than knowing less.



Artist's impression of the COBE (Cosmic Background Explorer) spacecraft.

The Commission points out, however, that no astronomy-related applications are foreseen within the IRIS2 programme, although the European Space Agency Gaia mission has discovered additional data on some 1.8-billion stars and also on globular clusters, which include some of the universe's oldest and most interesting and even venerable objects. "In Omega Centauri, we discovered over half a million new stars Gaia hadn't seen before – from just one cluster!" said lead author Katja Weingrill of the Leibniz-Institute for Astrophysics, Potsdam (AIP), Germany, who is a member of the Gaia collaboration.

Even so, with so many satellites already zipping around up there, you may wonder why we need more. The European Commission is very clear on that point: "The new Satellite Constellation named IRIS2, is the European Union's answer to the pressing challenge of tomorrow, offering enhanced

communication capacities to governmental users and businesses, while ensuring high-speed internet broadband to cope with connectivity dead zones." There's more to it than that, of course. The European Commission again: "The system will support a large variety of governmental applications, mainly in the domains of situational awareness (such as border surveillance), crisis management (which includes humanitarian aid, of course) and connection and protection of key infrastructures, such as secure communications for EU embassies." The Commission seems to believe the network will pay for itself in the long run: "On the commercial side, it will allow mass-market applications, including mobile and fixed broadband satellite access, satellite trunking for B2B (Business-to-Business) services, satellite access for transportation, reinforced networks by satellite and satellite broadband and cloud-based services." It would seem that the EU believes, if you'll excuse the pun, the network will really take off, although it's not planned to put it into service until 2027.

I Twinkle, twinkle

According to a European Commission press release, we are now moving into what it calls "a new digital era", which means that our economy and our security will depend increasingly on secure and resilient connectivity. By the way, the IRIS name is an acronym for "Infrastructure for Resilience, Interconnectivity and Security by Satellite" (hence the two "S"s). The Commission has pointed out that cyber and other hybrid threats to our security and success are multiplying, so the EU has come up with a plan to develop state-of-the-art new connectivity systems that can support a wide variety of government applications but also help with crisis management when emergencies occur without introducing any new restrictions or, indeed, dangers in terms of spying by hostile forces. In the Commission's own words, through





With 12 000 satellites, China's G60 Starlink is the second megaconstellation project set to rival the American SpaceX and European Iris2 programmes.

its use of new technology and the EU's existing agencies, IRIS2 should support "the economic and societal growth of the EU while supporting social cohesion through the reduction of the digital divide". It may also make your mobile phone and Internet connections more reliable, which can only be a good thing, I imagine. The Commission also says that "dedicated payloads on-board the envisaged system are expected to improve and expand the capabilities and services of other components of the Union Space Programme."

The EU's satellites certainly wouldn't feel lonely up there, even if they were to be capable of such feelings. China, for instance, is developing a similar constellation of satellites, but the EU is understandably uneasy about handing such power (as well as access to communications) to a country whose intentions may be suspect. Another option is the UK's "One Web" network, but apart from having left the EU (not its brightest decision in my personal view), it may not have the necessary capacity to run a reliable global service, or one that is sufficiently large to look after Europe alone. SpaceX launched its first two experimental satellites for its Starlink network in February 2018.

There's a lot of competition to use the endless resources of space. Endless it may be, but even so low-Earth orbits will place some of the satellites close enough to each other for interference to occur. The UK's communications regulator, Ofcom, has already highlighted the risk in a report. It seems that some of the existing licences already issued to SpaceX and OneWeb may have to be amended in order to require co-ordination

of use. Otherwise there could be a risk of what are called "in-line events", in which some satellites accidentally come into line with one another. The one nearer the receiver dish could – in theory – mask the one behind it and block its signal.



OFCOM offices at Riverside House, Bankside, London.

The Commission has stressed the growing importance of "secure and resilient global space connectivity". To ensure this resilience, and to avoid creating new technological dependencies, the Commission has proposed a new programme on secure connectivity, especially to ensure what it calls the "security-and-safety-critical missions and operations managed by the EU and its member states, including their national security actors and EU institutions, bodies and agencies". It should also help to reinforce the competitiveness of EU industries. "IRIS2 will entail the development of a multi-orbital constellation of satellites," says the Commission, with notable enthusiasm, "Such a constellation would provide ubiquitous high-speed broadband in Europe and the rest of the world,

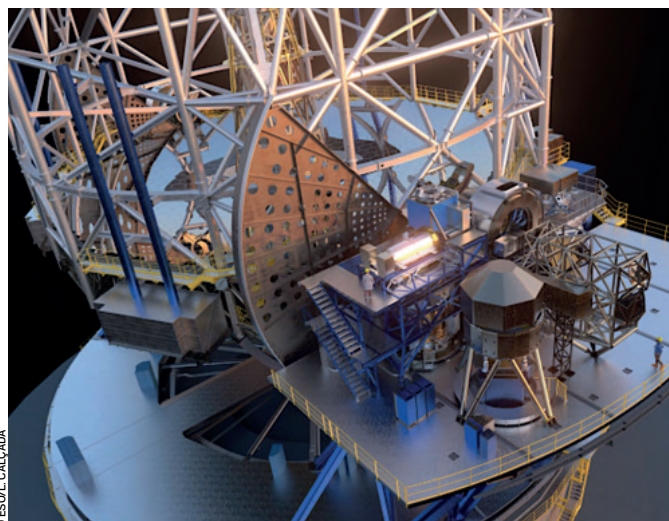
and reliable, secure, and cost-effective connectivity to support governmental and commercial secure communications.”

With so many actors involved already in the provision of new satellite communications, do we need yet another, even one bearing the EU’s emblem? I asked the Commission if IRIS2 is really necessary or if it is simply to ensure that the EU remains firmly on the map where space is concerned?

In other words, is it a primarily practical or political undertaking? “IRIS², the new infrastructure for Resilience, Interconnectivity and Security by Satellite,” came the reply, is a “flagship programme that pursues the objective to provide critical services to European public authorities and citizens, such as reliable, secure, and cost-effective connectivity for governmental and commercial communications, as well as ubiquitous high-speed broadband availability throughout Europe. This will allow Europeans to be and to remain connected.” Indeed, the entire project doesn’t seem to have a negative aspect, at least at first glance. However suspicious we may be of Elon Musk or the Chinese, here comes Europe with a safe and politically neutral alternative. “By promoting forward-looking opportunities,” the Commission spokesperson continued, “it will enhance Europe’s strategic autonomy and resilience by means of a new satellite infrastructure, technological leadership, and geopolitical influence, including in the Arctic and Africa.”

It is not in the stars to hold our destiny (shakespeare)

As I said, it all looks hugely positive with no downside at all. Well, there is a downside, if you’re an astronomer, according to Scientific American magazine. “Rachel Street felt frightened after a recent planning meeting for the Vera C. Rubin Observatory,” it reported. “The new telescope, under construction in Chile, will photograph the entire sky every three nights with enough observing power to see a golf ball at the distance of the moon. Its primary project, the Legacy



An Artist impression of ESO's Extremely Large Telescope (ELT). It shows the telescope structure and one of the platforms for the scientific instruments.

Survey of Space and Time, will map the galaxy, inventory objects in the solar system, and explore mysterious flashes, bangs and blips throughout the universe.”

And all those satellites, put up there by Elon Musk, the Chinese, the EU and others could block some of the view and interfere with the observations, creating what the magazine calls “bogus stars”. Some serious astronomers are now talking about making their observations as early as possible, before the spread of artificial satellites clogs up the view. For Scientific American, this is a very serious issue that will have to be addressed, sooner rather later. “As low-Earth orbit fills with constellations of telecommunications satellites,” the magazine informs us, “astronomers are trying to figure out how to do their jobs when many cosmic objects will be all but obscured by the satellites’ glinting solar panels and radio bleeps.”

Since the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1 back in October 1957, continuous launches, mainly into low-Earth orbit, have ensured that we are now constantly surrounded by more than 5,400 artificial bodies encircling the planet for various reasons, some of them in the name of research, some as means of communication and connectivity and some for purposes the people who launched them would prefer that we do not know. More than half of those up there now are part of Musk’s Starlink project. The prospect is dismal for those trying to learn more about our universe and our solar system. Take, for instance, the Rubin Observatory, due to start its work in 2024 at a construction cost of \$700-million (€663.2-million) which finds itself especially seriously threatened by what could be tens of thousands of orbiting satellites. Scientific American explains: “The observatory’s planned Legacy Survey of Space and Time will use an 8.4-meter telescope combined with a 3.2-gigapixel digital camera—the largest ever built—to capture 1,000 images of the sky every night for a decade. Each image will cover 9.6 square degrees of sky, which is about 40 times the area of the full moon.” The intention is to track down near-Earth objects that could pose a threat, like the giant asteroid that put an end to the dinosaurs (except the birds) and to the cretaceous era. The observatory’s operators have warned that the rapid deployment of ever-more artificial satellites could “blind” the telescope, like the full beam headlights of oncoming cars when you’re driving at night. We could all be joining the ground-shaking sauropods and sharp-toothed theropods in eternal extinction. Archaeologists of the distant future may come across our remains and after decades of research conclude that we had become extinct because of our insatiable desire to talk to one other, or to watch television.

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THE PASSPORT

**From mediaeval
safe conducts
to contemporary
biometrics**

There is so much to see and learn in the world. Different countries, different cultures, different languages. Travelling is a fun and educational experience that broadens your horizons, but you cannot travel without a passport, that all-important document that identifies you as a citizen of the world. So, when did we start using them, what was the reason and who came up with the idea?

You might think passports are a recent invention, a product of the 20th century. But passports have a long and ancient history; they go back to the times of old civilizations, where people used different kinds of travel documents or 'safe-conduct letters'. These early papers had similar functions to modern passports, such as securing the safety and protection of travellers in foreign lands.

In ancient Rome, officials issued documents known as *tesserae hospitales* and *tesserae hospitalitatis* to foreign diplomats and messengers. These documents, whose names can be translated as "*hospitality tokens*" or "*guest tokens*" provided safe passage and protection while travelling through Roman territories. They were typically written in Latin and carried the seal of the issuing authority. While not exactly the same as modern passports, these *tesserae* served a similar function in allowing individuals to travel safely. In the early history of Rome, outsiders could often enter the city only if they possessed such a document.

One of the oldest records of a travel document is found in the Hebrew Bible. It tells the story of Nehemiah, an official of King Artaxerxes I of Persia, who wanted to travel to Judea at around 450 BC. After asking the king for permission, he was given a letter "to the governors beyond the river", signed by the king. This letter helped him travel safely through those lands.



Letter of safe conduct issued in the name of the King of Poland, Casimir IV (15th century).

In the Middle Ages in Europe there were many feudal lords, monarchs and city states, and they issued different types of letters "of protection". These documents guaranteed travellers safe passage through different territories, and were very important for merchants, diplomats and pilgrims, as they protected them from being delayed, robbed or harmed on their journeys.

The concept of safe conduct in Europe continued to evolve over time as various rulers issued letters of protection to foreign visitors. In those chaotic times marked by wars, violence and robberies, these documents were much valued as they protected travellers from being captured or injured.

From 'safe-conduct' to passport

Even the mediaeval form of the passport had an "international" aspect. Many of these travel documents were written in Latin,

which was the common language for official and diplomatic correspondence in the Middle Ages, which made it possible for these documents to be understood by officials in different regions and nations throughout Europe.

Mediaeval travel documents contained essential information such as the name and identity of the traveller, the purpose of the journey, the intended destination or itinerary, a request for safe passage and protection, and the seal or signature of the issuing authority. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that while these mediaeval travel letters fulfilled comparable objectives to modern passports — namely, facilitating safe travel and protecting individuals — they did not have the standardised format, advanced security features and global recognition that modern passports have today.



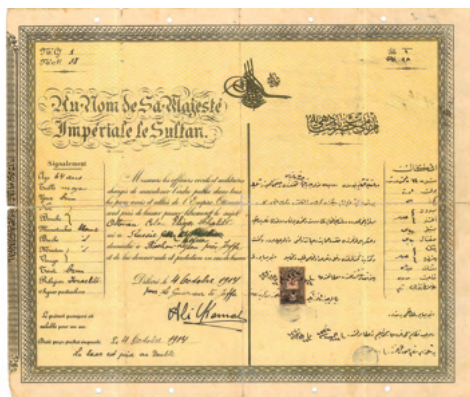
English Pilgrims leaving Canterbury, ca 1458.

During the Middle Ages, the issuance of travel documents was a multifaceted affair, varying from region to region. In different territories and under different rulers, there were a variety of customs and procedures for issuing letters of protection. These letters were of particular importance to pilgrims embarking on a journey to venerated sites such as Jerusalem or the famous sanctuary of Santiago de Compostela on the Way of St James. In the folds of these documents, pilgrims found comfort because they guaranteed them passage through various realms and protected them from the spectre of disaster.

However, as the horizons of international travel and trade expanded, an urgent need arose for standardised travel documents that could cross borders and find universal acceptance. Thus began the gradual transformation of mediaeval passports into the modern passports we know today. This transformation was accompanied by the harmonisation of document formats, the introduction of sophisticated security measures and the conclusion of international agreements. These developments ensured that these documents became widely recognised and established as valued protectors of today's travellers.

I Historic foundations

The 18th century was a crucial turning point in the history of the passport, as it gradually became a recognised and official travel document. In this era, decisive milestones were set that established the modern passport system. The term “passport” itself has its roots in this period, derived from the French expression “passe port,” meaning “to pass through a port”. Originally, passports were associated with the idea of ensuring safe passage through ports, a symbol of safe passage through maritime areas.



Turkish Ottoman passport issued in 1914.

In the 18th century, passports were particularly important in the fields of diplomacy and the military. They served as an indispensable tool for diplomats and military personnel who went to foreign countries to establish their identity and assert their privileges. In this era, European states sought to issue standardised travel documents for their citizens travelling abroad.

These early passports bore the marks of hand-written artistry and contained important details about the traveller, including his nationality and the purpose of his journey. They were issued by a variety of authorities, from monarchs and governments to local officials, resulting in a lack of uniformity in design and format. The passport landscape of this era was a mosaic of different styles and structures.

While passports were initially intertwined with the diplomatic and governmental spheres, they gradually found application among other groups such as merchants seeking safe passage for trade, scholars seeking knowledge in foreign lands, and explorers seeking new frontiers. They began to rely on passports to navigate unfamiliar territories, and so, the use of passports extended beyond land, as the concept sailed the oceans and reached western shores for the first time. The United States, a young nation just emerging from the Revolutionary Wars, quickly embraced the idea of passports as their importance aligned with the values of a newly founded country.

I Entering the modern era

The American Revolution is a pivotal chapter in the history of passports, ushering in a new era in the issuance and use of travel documents in the nascent United States. Prior to the Revolution, British colonials residing in North America did not possess passports in the modern sense. Nevertheless, they relied on a number of documents to prove their identity and purpose of travel.



American passport issued in 1815, bearing the signature of future US President, John Quincy Adams.

These documents, usually issued by the colonial authorities, took a variety of forms and contents. As tensions between the American colonies and the British government escalated in the years leading up to the Revolution, it became increasingly important for American colonists to prove their identity and protect their interests, especially when travelling abroad. This need was particularly pronounced among merchants and seafarers, who depended on such documents to navigate the intricate webs of trade and commerce.

During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress recognised the need for official travel documents, which led to the issuance of passports to American citizens. These early American passports were predominantly handwritten and contained important information about the holder, including their occupation and destination.

During this period, American passports were used primarily by diplomats, couriers and private citizens travelling overseas in the service of the revolutionary cause. Respected figures such as Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and John Jay, who were diplomats and representatives of the Continental Congress, relied on passports when participating in important negotiations with foreign governments such as France and the Netherlands. These diplomatic efforts were aimed at securing vital support for the American struggle for independence.



Passport issued to Albert Einstein, 1913.

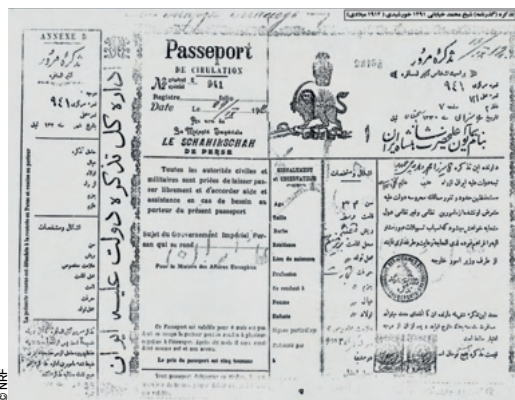
Some European countries, especially those that supported the American cause, honoured American passports and treated their holders as

official envoys of the United States. This action was an important step in making the new nation respected and recognised in the world. It was also a great success for the passport as a valid means of proving who you are and where you travel around the world.

The passport today

The passport became increasingly popular in the 19th century, and after the Napoleonic Wars, at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, diplomats and consuls were given some privileges and rules for issuing and accepting passports. The formats of passports also became more uniform in the 19th century, and printed papers replaced handwritten ones. These passports usually contained the holder's name, physical description, occupation, nationality and other details. Governments began to use special passport designs and watermarks to prevent forgery. In Britain, passports became a standard document issued only to British nationals in 1855. It was a simple, single-sided paper document produced by hand, and it was one of the first versions of the passport as we know and use it today. Later, in the second half of the 19th century, some countries began to include photographs of the passport holder in their travel documents.

These photos made passports more secure and helped prevent identity theft. Along with passports, visa systems were introduced in the 19th century, which were issued by foreign governments to allow people to enter their country. The idea of visas worked in tandem with passports to control the movement of foreign people. As European powers expanded their empires in the 19th century, the demand for travel documents increased as European citizens travelling to distant colonies often needed passports and visas.



Persian passport issued in the name of Ahmad Shah, in 1912.

In 1914, the world plunged into a great war and a new chapter of history was written in blood. After the First World War, everyone needed

passports and official papers to prove who they were. During the war, passports were used for military purposes and to restrict the movements of enemy persons, and after the war the world was still reeling from the horrors and it was hard to trust other countries. The League of Nations and later the United Nations helped to standardise passport formats and travel regulations to promote international cooperation.

After the turmoil of the Second World War, the passport underwent a remarkable metamorphosis and took on a contemporary form similar to the one we use today. The establishment of standards for machine-readable passports was a breakthrough that led to increased security measures and simplified immigration procedures. In the post-war years, however, embedded in the icy embrace of the Cold War, passports turned into instruments of ideological conflict; eastern bloc countries issued special travel documents to their citizens in secret, severely restricting their freedom of movement and subjecting them to strict controls. While for some, the passport became an instrument of population administration that cast a shadow over personal freedoms. Yet amidst this paradoxical landscape, there were also those who recognised the passport as a gateway to freedom and a way to explore nations around the world without restriction.



Passport visas and entrance stamps.

In 1985, a defining moment occurred with the signing of the historic Schengen Agreement which ushered in an era in which passport-free travel between numerous European countries became possible. At the beginning of the 21st century, marked by cutting-edge technologies, our passports underwent a further evolution. They became digital marvels and contained biometric chips placed inside them. These advanced passports protected personal data and used the power of facial recognition to take security measures to unprecedented levels.

Today, with borders standing like sentinels for security, passports have reached their pinnacle: they embody our identities and serve as faithful companions on our global journeys. The history of the passport is a testament to ever-changing international relations, profound security concerns and the unceasing drive to enable seamless global travel.

From the ancient convoy letters that promised safe passage to the modern biometric passports that navigate our interconnected world, this remarkable document has evolved to serve multiple purposes. In today's world, passports have become an indispensable tool to ensure personal identification when travelling. For many, it is unimaginable - and often impossible - to embark on a journey without them.

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GARE DU MIDI

From iconic train station to the dark underbelly of Brussels

The years following independence were a time of profound change and progress for Belgium. Infrastructure played a decisive role in the general development of the country. Between 1835 and 1840, the Belgian railway network was expanded and new lines were built in the south of the country. Bogards Station, inaugurated on 18 May 1840 in the city centre, just 400 metres from the Grand Place was the first railway station on the Brussels - Tubize (later Paris) line.

However, the increase in rail traffic soon led to the decision to move the station from the city centre to the municipality of Saint-Gilles, where it was renamed Gare du Midi (Brussels South Station) and inaugurated on 6 November 1869. Built in the neoclassical style, the station is the work of Auguste Payen (1801-1877), one of the first architects commissioned by the Belgian State Railways in 1841. The original station consisted of three main buildings arranged in a U-shape around a hall with a glass roof. The façade with a series of Corinthian porticoes and arcades had a large arch at the entrance, which was decorated with bas-reliefs and statues.



Gare du Midi in 1928.

The Gare du Midi was to become the second major railway station in Brussels, alongside the Gare du Nord on the other side of the city, which had been inaugurated 23 years earlier by King Leopold I. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the Gare du Midi and the Gare du Nord were separate, but the constant increase in traffic led to the idea of linking the north and south with a common railway line.

Work on the north-south link began in 1911, but was not completed until 1952 due to the two world wars. In 1949, the former Gare du Midi was demolished with minimal consideration given to its historical value, to make way for a new building in the modernist style. The architects Adrien and Yvan Blomme, together with Fernand Petit, designed the new building with a square clock tower. The modernised Gare du Midi was officially inaugurated on 4 October 1952. The building complex comprised a railway station, a station road, a mail distribution centre and several administrative buildings.

In 1992, the rear section of the station was demolished again to make way for an extension that served as the terminus for the new TGV high-speed train. Today, the Gare du Midi is the largest railway station in Belgium with 22 tracks, including two terminals for Thalys and Eurostar trains. With more and more travellers arriving every year, the station has been extensively modernised and now offers shops and cafés for day tourists.

Brussels-South station, served by Thalys, Eurostar, TGV Brussels-France, ICE and Inter City trains, is now the ideal

starting point for journeys to France, Germany, the Netherlands, Luxembourg or Great Britain. As a high-speed railway station in Brussels, it offers convenient and fast connections to the entire Belgian network. Additionally, since 1988, the station has been served by both the metro and a pre-metro networks.



Eurostar Terminal, Gare du Midi, Brussels.

Nowadays however, there has been a constant stream of complaints from tourists and locals alike regarding the increasing levels of filth and crime at Gare du Midi and its neighbourhood. As the station is one of the main gateways for tourists into the city, the public's dissatisfaction and the growing concern of the authorities are quite understandable.

Many tourists have openly complained about the strong, foul odour surrounding the station and the general feeling of insecurity and lawlessness in the area, which is not very welcoming for newcomers to the city. Especially at night, the situation seems to be even more problematic. People living on the streets and beggars roam around, committing various crimes and robberies because they are in desperate need of money, mostly for alcohol and drugs. This is just one of the recent cases that made headlines earlier this year: one morning in January, a man was stabbed to death with a butcher's knife in the railway station. The French-language news channel RTL reported that the attacker stabbed his victim while he was screaming. Fortunately, a French police officer who was there and two security guards intervened and brought the man



Belgian Interior Minister, Annelies Verlinden.

to the ground. The victim, who was lying in a pool of blood, was promptly rushed to hospital.

In the area there are frequent smashed windows and break-ins of cars, looting of small shops and an alarming rise in drug dealing involving increasingly younger people. Although there are police patrols, they are often understaffed, making effective monitoring and enforcement difficult.

Gare du Midi, despite being frequented by tens of thousands of people, presents a desolate scene that urgently requires drastic measures to address the intolerable situation. Police data, recently disclosed by Interior Minister Annelies Verlinden, has revealed that between 2018 and 2022, the Gare du Midi has become a significant crime hotspot, witnessing approximately 10 offences occurring there on a daily basis. Recent official police figures show that around 150 armed robberies were committed at or near the Gare du Midi last year and a total of around 3,500 crimes, including theft, extortion and drug offences. Many believe that the actual figures are much higher.

The number of offences and misdemeanours recorded in the Gare du Midi area is well above the average for other Belgian cities. With 3,447 offences in 2020 and 3,320 in 2021, there were almost as many offences as in all railway stations in 13 Flemish cities, including Antwerp and Ghent, put together. (Source: De Standaard).

In a recent move, Sophie Dutordoir, CEO of the National Railway Company of Belgium (SNCB), made an appeal to politicians through an open letter addressed to Brussels Minister-President Rudi Vervoort, Minister of Mobility Georges Gilkinet, Interior Minister Annelies Verlinden, as well as Jean Spinette and Fabrice Cumps, respectively the mayors of Saint-Gilles and Anderlecht municipalities. In the letter, she sought their assistance in resolving the “dramatic situation” at the Gare du Midi.



Sophie Dutordoir, CEO of SNCB, the Belgian National Railway Company.

In the letter, she explained that the SNCB did not have sufficient resources to solve the problem on its own and called for the urgent involvement of the authorities. There are numerous responsibilities between the federal government,

the regions, the municipalities, the SNCB and the police.

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo has decided to deal with the problem of insecurity at the Gare du Midi himself and to appoint a coordinator for the urgent measures required. The Prime Minister's Office has brought together various authorities for talks to find a common solution and provide a federal response to these persistent problems that tarnish the international image of the Belgian capital. During a recent police operation targeting security issues both inside and outside the station, approximately sixty individuals were apprehended. Simultaneously, extensive cleaning efforts were undertaken on the sidewalks, resulting in the removal of a substantial quantity of diverse waste from the premises.

The fact that the situation at the Gare du Midi, which has been ongoing for several years, has recently become the centre of attention is mainly due to an article in ‘Het Laatste Nieuws’, Belgium's largest daily newspaper. The article gave a harrowing account of a family with children who arrived at the train station late at night after returning from a trip abroad via Charleroi airport, with the Gare du Midi being their only connection point to Brussels through a bus ride. During the hours they had to wait for their connecting train, they were exposed to a series of violent crimes, causing them genuine concern for their safety. The family's testimony, including detailed information and video recordings, was featured on the newspaper's website. Since then, the Gare du Midi has garnered significant attention in the headlines, particularly in the northern region of the country.

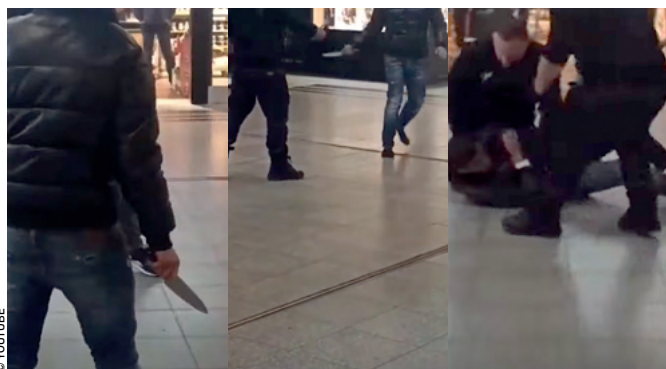


Belgian police patrol in a Brussels railway station

The feeling of insecurity at the Gare du Midi can be partly attributed to factors such as poverty, homelessness and drug dealing. However, it is important to note that the problems go beyond the station itself. According to the Federal Police, crime has increased by 20 per cent overall in recent years, with the problems at the Gare du Midi being much more pronounced.

In response to public pressure, the federal government presented an action plan in August 2023 that sets out 22 concrete measures, based on three main pillars in order to restore security in and around the Gare du Midi. The introduction of new infrastructure around the building was announced, including the establishment of a police station either on the site or in the immediate vicinity. A ban on alcohol consumption within the site was also proposed, as well as plans to reinforce CCTV coverage and surveillance in and around the station.

According to a joint press release from the Belgian Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior, the task of restoring security at the Gare du Midi in Brussels will be overseen by the national crisis centre. The main priorities include combating criminal and illegal activity in and around the station, tackling homelessness, combating drug addiction and improving cleanliness in the area.



An individual threatening police officers with a knife at the Gare du Midi. He was subsequently apprehended.

Under the coordination of the National Crisis Centre (NCCN), the federal, regional and municipal authorities and the SNCB have committed to working more closely together to keep the situation under control and improve it as quickly as possible. The 'Crisis Centre' will coordinate everything without replacing the relevant services and authorities. Its role is limited in time, and only until the habitability and safety plan has been fully developed.

However, the police unions are quite cautious and have no great expectations of the recently announced measures. They pointed to various problems, many of which have been brewing for years and which cannot be fully resolved by the recently announced measures. At the same time, they emphasised that efforts must not slacken when public attention and pressure wane.

Vincent Houssin, vice-president of the VSOA/SLFP police union, said in an interview in September 2023: *"The police are destitute and the problems have been neglected for years. If we clean up Brussels South, we only risk shifting the problem to other regions. There are other problematic railway stations in Belgium. We have been hearing for years that the situation in Brussels-North is unbearable. Just last year, a colleague was stabbed to death there, but that hasn't changed much. We need more resources, infrastructure and staff, there is a shortage of at least 2,500 employees"*. (Source: BX1.be)

The members of CORES (Brussels Regional Security Council) have also called for the rapid implementation of measures to receive asylum seekers, which should lead to a reduction in the number of people present in the areas in question.

As a result of all these efforts and measures, people have recently noticed some improvement in the situation, depending on the time of day and in terms of police presence. However, the feeling of insecurity remains, especially in the early hours of the morning when people roam the streets and pickpockets are out and about.



Gare du Midi (Brussels-South) railway station entrance.

There is a consensus among all that the safety of citizens should be the top priority for authorities. At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that major cities around the world grapple with the issue of high crime rates, particularly in the vicinity of central stations where people from all walks of life converge. Tourists, in particular, are often targeted by pickpockets in such areas. Unfortunately, acts of naivety and carelessness often result in negative outcomes for individuals.

However, it is absolutely unacceptable to feel fear when crossing a station at certain times or to be the victim or witness of an attack in the city centre. Such incidents are not only detrimental to tourism in Brussels, but also to the city's image as the heart of Europe. It is imperative that swift and decisive action is taken to bring about meaningful change.

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Agents of 'Securail' (the security service of the SNCB) on patrol in the Gare du Midi.

TIMELESS CHIC

STANDOUT FASHION AND BEAUTY TRENDS

WRAPPING IT WITH A TOUCH OF ELEGANCE

Stay one step ahead
with your Christmas
shopping and surprise
every recipient on your
list with this selection
of 9 exceptional gifts.

Whether you're looking for the perfect gift for your bestie, your cherished partner or a family member whose collection knows no bounds, these Christmas gift suggestions will infuse the holiday season with an extra dose of magic.



© BUREAUBRUTAL.COM

Elevate his/her style and personalise their smartphone case with customised initials or other meaningful symbols.



© RAY-BAN.COM

Experience the innovation of Ray-Ban Meta Smart Glasses, which allow you to seamlessly enjoy audio, capture memorable moments and livestream with your phone safely in your pocket.



© LONGINES.COM

Spoil those with a penchant for tasteful timekeeping with a sophisticated timepiece that effortlessly combines elegance and functionality.



© UGG.COM

Beneath its cozy, slipper-like appearance, the Ugg Tazz emerges as the most fashionable winter shoe of the moment.



© BURBERRY. SPOTTED ON SEPHORA.FR

This aromatic, woody fragrance for men features juniper, black pepper, cedarwood and sparkling bergamot. The gift set includes the 'Hero' eau de toilette, and a shower gel.



© GIVENCHYBEAUTY.COM

Embrace the spirit of the holiday season by presenting a Givenchy fragrance gift set for women. This set features the seductive L'Interdit Eau de Parfum Rouge, accompanied by Le Rouge Deep Velvet lipstick.



© POLÈNE-PARIS.COM

The French Polène bags have taken the internet by storm with their remarkable blend of affordability and quality. Of particular note is the "Cyme" tote bag, adorned with graceful waves, pleats and curves. This versatile bag can be carried in two different ways: as an open basket, or a flower-like closed bag, with the sides tucked in.



© SPOTTED ON SEPHORA.CO.UK

Unveil the NUXE "Pink Fever" set and pamper your skin with an unforgettable beauty ritual. This exquisite collection contains the famous Huile Prodigieuse® Florale, accompanied by a Micellar Water and a nourishing Lip Balm.



© SWAROVSKI.COM

This enchanting necklace adds a bright pop of colour to your outfit and lifts your spirits. The carefully crafted, gold-plated necklace showcases an array of Swarovski Zirconia cuts in seven eye-catching and vibrant colours.

TIMELESS CHIC

STANDOUT FASHION AND BEAUTY TRENDS

50 SHADES OF GREY

Long considered a discreet hue teetering on the edge of monotony, grey is now reinventing itself as a versatile and sophisticated shade. Here are 3 compelling reasons to wear it as a recurring choice.

1. Fashionistas as a source of inspiration

A quick look at Instagram, TikTok or Pinterest reveals the prevailing trend: jumpers, hoodies, oversized blazers, coats, accessories... Grey is omnipresent everywhere and appears in various shades in the outfits of fashionable young women.

The most die-hard enthusiasts call it #groufit to describe a monochrome outfit, grey from head to toe.



© INSTAGRAM @YA



Straight-leg leather trousers

© LOULOU STUDIO, SPOTTED ON FARFETCH.COM



© ARNET.COM

Cable-knit wool jumper

2. Grey is easy-going

Grey thrives in the ready-to-wear fashion world, especially in comparison to affordable black and white garments, which often fade or appear lacklustre after just a few washes.

Gray complements a variety of skin tones and pairs well with various other colours, including those that may appear mismatched with black, such as navy and pastels.

This season's star colour combination is undoubtedly burgundy and grey, as revealed by fashionistas on Instagram.

3. Grey has an infinite array of shades

Slate, charcoal, silver, ash, smoke, iron...there are countless shades of grey in the autumn/winter collections.



© CELINE.COM

Medium « Triomphe » belt in taurillon leather



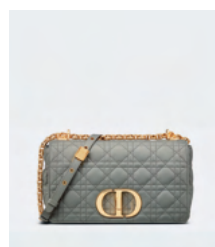
© POLO RALPH LAUREN, SPOTTED ON FARFETCH.COM

Belted-waist wrap coat



© PRADA.COM

Brushed leather pumps



© DIOR.COM

Stone grey, supple cannage, calfskin bag



© GUCCI, SPOTTED ON MYTHERESA.COM

Reversible wool scarf

BOOKS



| Charles III

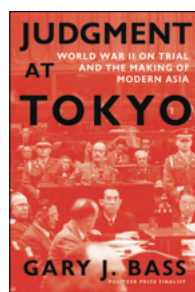
By Robert Hardman

By acclaimed royal biographer Robert Hardman, *Charles III* is a brilliant account of a tumultuous period in British history, full of intriguing insider detail and the real stories behind the sadness, the dazzling pomp, the challenges and the triumphs as *Charles III* sets out to make his mark.

How would – or could – he fill the shoes of the record-breaking Elizabeth II? With fresh debates about the monarchy, political upheavals and a steady flow of damning headlines unleashed by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, Charles could not afford to put a foot wrong. Hardman draws on unrivalled access to the Royal Family, friends of the King and Queen, key officials and courtiers plus unpublished royal papers to chart the transition from those emotionally charged days following the death of the late Queen all through that make or break first year on the throne.

This book also reveals how Charles III is determined to move ahead at speed, the vital role played by Queen Camilla, the King's relationships with his sons and the rest of his family, his plans for reforming the monarchy and how he is taking his place on the world stage.

Charles III is a fascinating portrait of a hard-working, modern monarch, determined to remain true to himself and to his Queen, to make a difference, to weather the storms – and, what's more, to enjoy it.



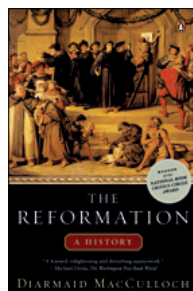
| Judgment at Tokyo

By Gary J. Bass

In the weeks after Japan finally surrendered to the Allies to end World War II, the world turned to the question of how to move on from years of carnage and destruction. For Harry Truman, Douglas MacArthur, Chiang Kai-shek, and their fellow victors, the question of justice seemed clear: Japan's militaristic leaders needed to be tried and punished for the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor; shocking atrocities against civilians in China, the Philippines, and elsewhere; and rampant abuses of prisoners of war in notorious incidents such as the Bataan death march. For the Allied powers, the trial was an opportunity to render judgment on their vanquished foes, but also to create a legal framework to prosecute war crimes and prohibit the use of aggressive war, building a more peaceful world under international law and American hegemony. For the Japanese leaders on trial, it was their chance to argue that their war had been waged to liberate Asia from Western imperialism and that the court was victors' justice.

For more than two years, lawyers for both sides presented their cases before a panel of clashing judges from China, India, the Philippines, and Australia, as well as the United States and European powers. The testimony ran from horrific accounts of brutality and the secret plans to attack Pearl Harbor to the Japanese military's threats to subvert the government if it sued for peace. Yet rather than clarity and unanimity, the trial brought complexity, dissents, and divisions that provoke international discord between China, Japan, and Korea to this day. Those courtroom tensions and contradictions could also be seen playing out across Asia as the trial unfolded in the crucial early years of the Cold War, from China's descent into civil war to Japan's successful postwar democratic elections to India's independence and partition.

From the author of the acclaimed *The Blood Telegram*, which was a Pulitzer Prize finalist, this magnificent history is the product of a decade of research and writing. *Judgment at Tokyo* is a riveting story of wartime action, dramatic courtroom battles, and the epic formative years that set the stage for the Asian postwar era.



| The Reformation

By Diarmaid MacCulloch

The National Book Critics Circle Award-winning history of the Reformation—from the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Christianity*.

At a time when men and women were prepared to kill—and be killed—for their faith, the Protestant Reformation tore the Western world apart. Acclaimed as the definitive account of these epochal events, Diarmaid MacCulloch's award-winning history brilliantly re-creates the religious battles of priests, monarchs, scholars, and politicians—from the zealous Martin Luther and his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the polemical John Calvin to the radical Ignatius Loyola, from the tortured Thomas Cranmer to the ambitious Philip II.

Drawing together the many strands of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and ranging widely across Europe and the New World, MacCulloch reveals as never before how these dramatic upheavals affected everyday lives—overturning ideas of love, sex, death, and the supernatural, and shaping the modern age.



| Two Roads Home

By Daniel Finkelstein

"Hair-raising... includes not just Hitler's depredations but Stalin's too—a double measure of evil."—*The Wall Street Journal*.

An epic and uplifting World War II family history of resistance that spans Europe, telling of two happy families uprooted by war, their incredible suffering under Hitler and Stalin, and the near-miraculous survival stories of the author's mother and father.

"Moving and important."—Robert Harris, author of *Act of Oblivion*.

In *Two Roads Home* beloved British journalist Daniel Finkelstein tells the extraordinary story of the years before his mother met his father—years of war and trials they barely survived.

Daniel Finkelstein's grandfather was a German Jewish intellectual leader who tolled an early warning of the impending Holocaust and became an archivist of Nazi crimes. He relocated his family to safety in Amsterdam, where they knew Anne Frank. But in those years safety was an illusion: Anne Frank famously went into hiding and Daniel's mother, Mirjam, also still a child, was sent to Bergen-Belsen with her mother and sisters.

Finkelstein's father, Ludwik, grew up in a prosperous Jewish family in Poland where his father, Dolu was a patriotic hero of the Great War. But when Stalin took control, Dolu was deported to Siberia and Ludwik and his mother were sentenced to forced labor in Kazakhstan, starved and housed in a stable in freezing conditions.

Two Roads Home is a page-turning account of the narrow escapes, forged passports, ingenuity, bravery, and luck that allowed Mirjam and Ludwik to survive the war and find each other. Using their personal testimony, letters sent to Siberia, a diary written in Belsen, and years of historical research, Daniel Finkelstein tells what happened to two families, one the victim of the Nazis, the other of the Soviets. A tale of deliverance and triumph over evil, *Two Roads Home* will profoundly touch all who read it.

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**THE FUTURE
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**SOCIÉTÉ
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