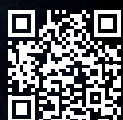


EUROPE DIPLOMATIC

MAGAZINE

FROM THE
HAGUE TO NATO

**Mark Rutte's path
to leadership**



November 2024

N°64

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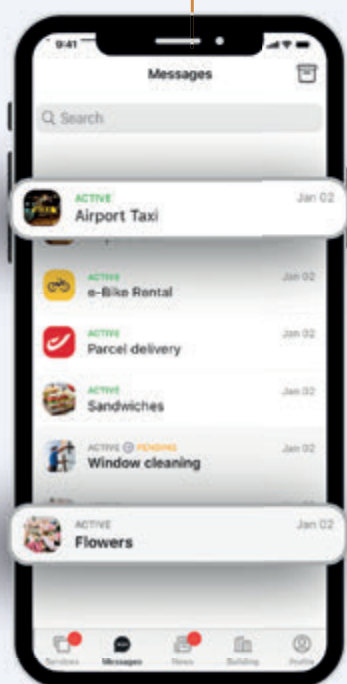
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FROM THE HAGUE TO NATO



On October 17, Marc Rutte presided over his inaugural NATO Defence Ministers meeting as Secretary General. This session was notable for its expanded format, which, for the first time, included partner nations Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, as well as the European Union

Mark Rutte's path to leadership

Mark Rutte, the newly appointed Secretary General of NATO, is taking on a crucial role at a defining moment in global politics. With tensions escalating around the world - especially due to the war in Ukraine and China's increasing assertiveness - NATO's mission of collective defence and security is more important than ever.

As the leader of this key military alliance, Rutte's vision and guidance will not only influence NATO's strategies but also impact the future of international security. In this article, we explore Mark Rutte's background, his leadership style, and the challenges and priorities that lie ahead in his new position.

In the heart of The Hague, on a Valentine's Day in 1967, a future political powerhouse was born. Mark Rutte, now a household name in Dutch politics, entered a world that combined tradition with ambition, embodying both the serenity and the quiet aspirations of a mid-20th century life in the Netherlands. His early years were steeped in the principles and rhythms of a quintessential middle-class family. His father was a textile trader, a profession that demanded not only business acumen but also an understanding of the social web that commerce weaves in society. This experience exposed the young Mark to the dynamics of trade and the importance of human connections within the business world.



Mark Rutte in 1988, as national chairman of the JOVD (Forum for Democracy Youth Organisation)

On the other side of the household, his mother, a dedicated schoolteacher, instilled in him the values of education and lifelong learning. Her passion for teaching and her commitment to nurturing young minds influenced Mark profoundly, fostering in him a respect for knowledge and the power of education to transform lives. The home was a crucible where the values of diligence, responsibility, and empathy were taught not through grand lessons but through everyday examples set by his parents.

But Rutte's journey from middle-class child to political kingpin wasn't a straight shot.

His academic path took a few twists and turns, starting at the Haagse Hogeschool (The Hague University of Applied Sciences), where he initially set his sights on a history degree. However, the allure of politics and societal dynamics soon drew him in a new direction.

Seeking intellectual challenge and prestige, Rutte transferred to the venerable Leiden University. There, he immersed himself into the annals of history, emerging with a master's degree and a toolkit of critical thinking skills that would serve him well in the

political arena. His time at Leiden wasn't just about burying his nose in dusty volumes, though. Rutte threw himself into the cut and thrust of student politics, honing the oratory skills that would later become his trademark.

As a member of the student council and various political organisations, Rutte soon became interested by public service and governance, and he gained a reputation for his articulate speeches and ability to connect with diverse groups; skills that would become hallmarks of his political career.

After completing his education, Rutte began his professional career in the private sector. He initially worked for Unilever, a multinational consumer goods company, where he gained valuable experience in management and corporate strategy. This experience in the corporate world shaped his pragmatic approach to governance, emphasising efficiency and results-driven policies.

Little did those early audiences know they were witnessing the birth of a political star. The skills Rutte cultivated in those formative years - his articulate speech, his knack for building bridges across ideological divides, and his deep understanding of historical and societal forces - would eventually catapult him to the highest echelons of Dutch politics. From middle-class roots to the corridors of power, Mark Rutte's journey is a testament to the enduring power of education, hard work, and political savvy.

| Political career

Mark Rutte's political career began in the late 1990s, marking a significant transition from the corporate sector to public service. His political journey took off in 1997 when he joined the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), a liberal political party in the Netherlands. He quickly rose through the ranks, serving in various capacities within the party. His early involvement included positions at the local level, where he engaged with community issues and developed grassroots understanding of Dutch politics.



State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment Mark Rutte interviewed by Dutch TV Nederland 3 in 2002



Mark Rutte, State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science, in 2006

In 2002, Rutte was appointed as the State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment in the Cabinet of Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende. In this role, he focussed on labour market reforms and policies aimed at increasing employment rates. His work involved negotiating with trade unions and employers, showcasing his ability to mediate and build consensus among diverse stakeholders.

In 2006, Rutte was elevated to the position of Minister for Education, Culture, and Science. During his tenure, he implemented significant reforms aimed at modernising the Dutch education system, emphasising the importance of innovation and quality in education. Rutte championed initiatives to improve teacher training and increase funding for educational institutions, navigating complex debates surrounding educational equity and access.

Prime Minister of the Netherlands

In October 2010, Rutte became the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, leading a coalition government composed of the VVD and the Party for Freedom (PVV). His ascent to the premiership was marked by a commitment to fiscal austerity, responding to the European debt crisis by implementing stringent budgetary measures. Rutte's government prioritised economic recovery, focussing on reducing the national deficit while promoting job creation and economic growth.

Throughout his tenure as Prime Minister, Rutte faced several significant challenges. His administration worked to stabilise the post-recession in the economy and implement policies that encouraged investment and entrepreneurship. His focus on tax cuts and regulatory reforms aimed to stimulate growth, helping the Netherlands emerge as one of the more resilient economies in Europe.

Despite his government facing criticism from various quarters, Rutte took a firm stance on immigration policies, advocating for stricter controls while promoting integration programmes for newcomers, balancing the need for security with humanitarian considerations.

Then, there came the COVID-19 pandemic. Rutte's leadership during this health crisis was



Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte sitting at Joe Biden's 'Resolute desk' in the Oval Office of the White House, during a visit to the US in January 2023

pivotal. His government implemented measures to manage public health while also addressing the economic fallout. Although administration faced scrutiny over its response, Rutte's emphasis on transparency and scientific guidance resonated with many citizens.

As the world grappled with the looming spectre of climate change, Mark Rutte's government took a decisive turn towards the green side of politics. In a move that surprised some and delighted others, the Dutch Prime Minister, once known more for his fiscal conservatism than his environmental zeal, emerged as an unlikely climate champion. Rutte's later terms saw him swap his trademark blue tie for a metaphorical green one, as he pushed the Netherlands towards ambitious climate targets that would make even the most ardent environmentalist sit up and take notice. Aligning with the European Union's Green Deal, Rutte's government didn't just talk - it acted by committing to slash emissions and boost sustainability across the board.

But Rutte's green awakening wasn't just about ticking boxes on an EU checklist. The PM seemed to have had a genuine "eureka" moment, recognising that climate change wasn't just an abstract threat, but a clear and present danger to the low-lying Netherlands. Suddenly, wind turbines and solar panels were as much a part of the Dutch landscape as tulips and windmills.

Of course, this being politics, Rutte's green crusade wasn't without its bumps and bruises. Balancing the demands of industry with environmental imperatives proved to be a high-wire act that would challenge even the most skilled political acrobat. But Rutte, ever the pragmatist, seemed determined to find a middle ground - a uniquely Dutch solution to a global problem.

Transition to NATO

After a decade as Prime Minister, Rutte announced his intention to step down, signaling a new chapter in his career. On 1 October 2024, he was appointed as the Secretary General of NATO, replacing Jens Stoltenberg with a role that will allow him to apply his extensive experience in governance to the international stage. In this capacity, Rutte is expected to leverage his diplomatic skills and understanding of European security dynamics to navigate complex global challenges.

His political career, characterised by a blend of pragmatism and liberal ideals, has prepared him for this pivotal role at NATO. Rutte's ability to forge alliances, manage crises, and advocate for collective security will be crucial as he steps into this leadership position, particularly in a world facing shifting geopolitical landscapes and emerging threats.

Mark Rutte's leadership style and political philosophy are integral to understanding his approach to governance and his role as Secretary General of NATO. His methods reflect a blend of pragmatism, liberal ideals, and a commitment to collaboration, which have shaped his political identity throughout his career.



Danish prime minister, Mette Frederiksen (left), Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte (centre) and European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen during the Leaders' Summit on offshore wind in the North Seas in 2022



NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte and Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv, October 2024

© PRESIDENT ZELENSKY

Challenges ahead for NATO

As Mark Rutte assumes the role of Secretary General of NATO, he faces a range of significant challenges that will test the alliance's cohesion, adaptability, and relevance in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape. The resurgence of geopolitical tensions, particularly with Russia, poses a critical challenge for NATO. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has heightened concerns about Russian aggression and its implications for European security. NATO must respond effectively to deter any further threats from Russia while supporting Ukraine in its defense efforts. Balancing military preparedness with diplomatic outreach is essential to prevent escalation and foster stability in the region.

Rutte will need to prioritise NATO's military readiness, ensuring that member states can respond swiftly to potential threats. This, of course, includes increasing defence spending, enhancing troop deployments in Eastern Europe, and conducting joint exercises to maintain operational readiness. While deterrence is crucial, Rutte will also have to explore avenues for dialogue with Russia, for finding common ground on security concerns that could help reduce tensions, and prevent misunderstandings that could lead to wider conflict.

Two days after his nomination, Mark Rutte visited Ukraine on 3 October, and met President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as air raid sirens were going off in the Ukrainian capital. With war raging on Europe's eastern flank, the incoming NATO chief didn't mince his words, pledging to bolster the West's backing of Ukraine in

its David-versus-Goliath struggle against Russian aggression. The new NATO head's vow comes at a critical juncture. With Ukraine's defenders digging in their heels against a seemingly tireless Russian war machine, the promise of continued Western support is more than just diplomatic rhetoric - it's a lifeline.



U.K. Defence Secretary, John Healey

© U.S. SECRETARY OF DEFENSE



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un inspecting a training base of the special operation armed force of the Korean People's Army in September 2024

On 17 October, it was President Zelensky's turn to come to Brussels and visit NATO headquarters, where the alliance's 32 defence ministers were holding a meeting. Zelensky came with a comprehensive strategy, presenting it as the definitive way to overcome Moscow after 32 months of intense conflict. His proposal not only seeks approval for the use of long-range Western weapons to target Russian positions but also requests a prompt invitation for future NATO membership.

U.K. Defence Secretary, John Healey expressed strong support for the victory plan, stating that it would allow Kyiv *"to approach future dealings with Russia from a position of greater strength. We are prepared to help expedite their progress towards NATO membership."* However, not everyone shared that level of enthusiasm. German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius told reporters, *"The victory plan from President Zelensky is on the table, but we cannot provide an answer at this moment, nor in the next few hours or days. What matters is that Ukraine will eventually be part of NATO."*

The new Secretary General of the 32-member alliance, initially raised some eyebrows earlier in the day by suggesting that another country might join NATO before Ukraine. However, he appeared more assertive alongside Zelensky during the pre-dinner press conference.

"We will ensure that Ukraine receives the resources it needs to continue fighting," Rutte stated, occasionally interrupting Zelensky to emphasise his commitment. *"Ukraine will become a member of NATO - there's no doubt about it."* He ended his speech on a high note, as far as Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukraine are concerned: *"I look forward to the day that Ukraine is here as a member of this Alliance. And until then, we will continue to do all that we can to ensure Ukraine prevails. This is vital for our shared security."*

In response, Zelenskyy flashed a rare smile. *"You see? We have unity,"* he remarked. *"Now we need 32 more!"*

I Emerging threats

On 16 October, the US expressed deep concern regarding the escalating threats posed by North Korea in the realms of nuclear weapons and missile development. These apprehensions have been amplified by North Korea's burgeoning military assistance to Russia amidst their ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The military official, speaking amidst growing tensions, highlighted the alarming nature of these developments, which are not only unsettling to the US but also to its NATO allies across the globe. However, despite these heightened worries, he refrained from confirming claims made by Ukraine and President Zelensky himself that suggested the deployment of up to 10,000 North Korean soldiers to the front lines, articulating a careful and measured stance in light of the complex geopolitical landscape.

Beyond traditional military threats such as those posed by Russia, North Korea, Iran and others, NATO faces a spectrum of emerging challenges, including cyber threats, terrorism, and hybrid warfare. The rapid advancement of technology has transformed the nature of conflict, requiring NATO to adapt its strategies accordingly. For example, cyber attacks are becoming increasingly sophisticated, targeting critical infrastructure and compromising national security. Mark Rutte will have to advocate for enhanced cybersecurity measures within NATO, ensuring that member states collaborate on intelligence sharing and defensive capabilities.

The threat of terrorism, both from organised groups and lone actors, remains a pressing concern, and NATO's role in counter-terrorism efforts must evolve, focussing on intelligence sharing, capacity building for partner nations, and addressing the root causes of extremism.

The Secretary General will need to address the challenges posed by hybrid warfare tactics, which combine conventional military force with cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic pressure. Strengthening NATO's resilience against such tactics will be vital for maintaining stability.

In addition to the traditional military threats posed by nations like Russia, NATO is increasingly confronted with a wide array of emerging challenges. These include cyber threats, terrorism, and hybrid warfare, all of which require the alliance to rethink and adapt its strategies. The rapid pace of technological advancement has fundamentally altered the landscape of conflict, making it essential for NATO to stay ahead of these evolving threats.

Cyber attacks have become more sophisticated and frequent, targeting critical infrastructure and endangering national security. In this context, Mark Rutte will need to advocate for strengthened cybersecurity measures within NATO. This includes fostering collaboration among member states to enhance intelligence sharing and defensive capabilities, ensuring that all allies are better prepared to respond to these digital threats.

Terrorism continues to be a significant concern, whether it originates from organized groups or lone actors. As such, NATO's approach to counter-terrorism must evolve. The alliance should focus on improving intelligence sharing, building the capacities of partner nations, and addressing the underlying causes of extremism to effectively combat this persistent threat.

Additionally, the Secretary General will need to confront the complexities introduced by hybrid warfare tactics. These tactics blend conventional military force with cyber assaults, disinformation campaigns, and economic pressure, complicating

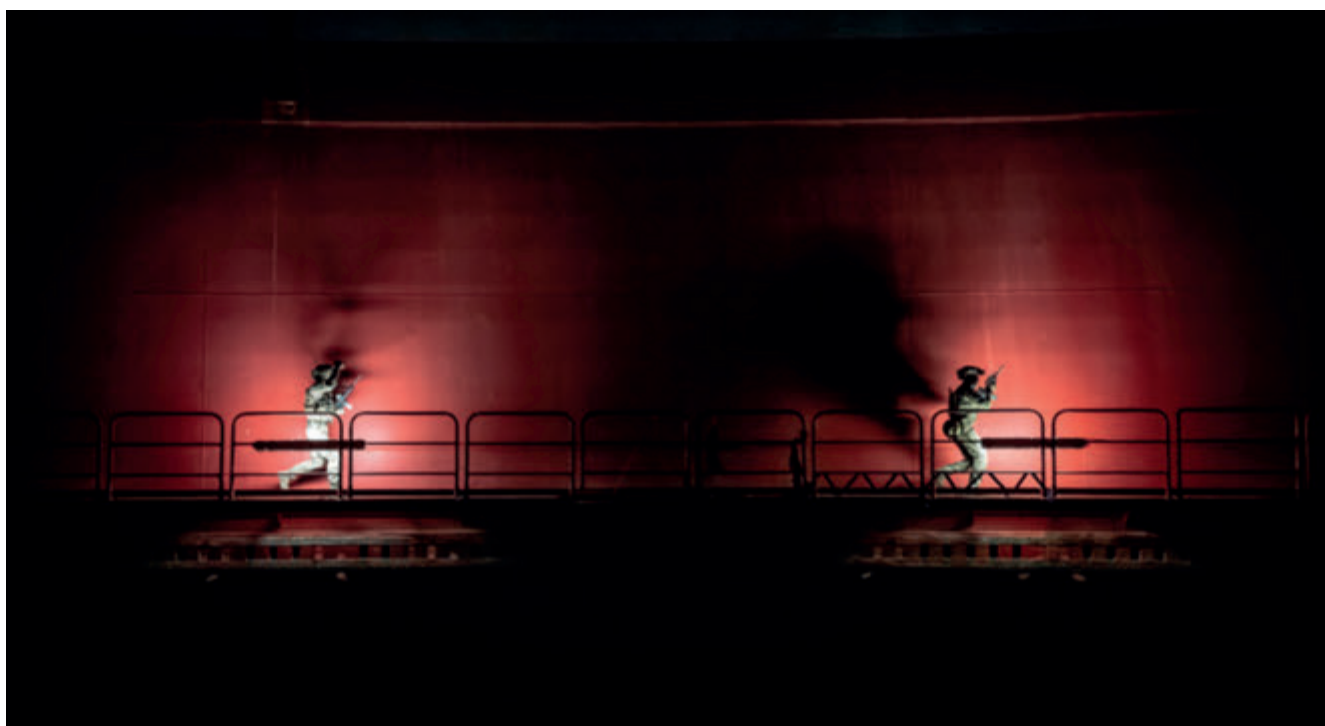
the security landscape. Strengthening NATO's resilience against such multifaceted approaches will be crucial for maintaining stability and ensuring the security of member states in an increasingly unpredictable world.

Internal cohesion and collaboration

Maintaining internal cohesion among NATO member states is crucial to the alliance's effectiveness. Divergent national interests and varying levels of defence spending can create friction and undermine collective action.

Rutte will need to encourage member states to meet the NATO guideline of spending at least 2% of their GDP on defence. This commitment is essential for ensuring that NATO remains a credible deterrent against threats. He may face challenges from countries with differing economic priorities, requiring diplomatic finesse to encourage compliance. Political divisions within member states can complicate NATO's decision-making processes. Rutte will have to work to foster a sense of unity and shared purpose among allies, emphasising the importance of collective defence and mutual support.

In an increasingly multipolar world, NATO must adapt its approach to security by fostering partnerships beyond its traditional member states. Engaging with non-NATO countries and



Exercise Nighthawk 21 brought together Special Operations Forces from 13 NATO Allies and partners to test their ability to work together through a series of complex counter-terrorism and hybrid warfare scenarios



© NATO

Secretary General, Mark Rutte (left), receiving the gavel from Jens Stoltenberg, 1 October

international organizations is critical for addressing global security challenges. Mark Rutte will probably need to prioritise strengthening partnerships with countries in the Asia-Pacific region, recognising the growing influence of China and the need for a coordinated response to its assertive actions. This

includes enhancing dialogue and collaboration with countries like Japan, South Korea, and Australia.

And then, there is the collaboration with organisations such as the European Union, the United Nations, and the African Union which can enhance NATO's effectiveness in addressing global issues.

Last but not least is the question of climate change and security. Climate change is increasingly recognised as a national security issue, with implications for resource scarcity, migration, and geopolitical instability. Mark Rutte may look at possibilities to incorporate climate considerations into NATO's strategic framework, as well as advocate for a comprehensive understanding of how climate change exacerbates existing security challenges. This includes preparing for humanitarian crises resulting from extreme weather events and addressing the potential for conflict over dwindling resources.

In conclusion, it can be said that Mark Rutte's appointment as NATO Secretary General comes at a time of unprecedented challenges and opportunities. His extensive political experience, pragmatic leadership style, and commitment to multilateralism position him well to navigate geopolitical tensions and emerging threats, to maintaining internal cohesion and fostering global partnerships. His leadership will be crucial in shaping the alliance's response to an evolving security landscape. By prioritising military readiness, political unity, and innovative approaches to security, the Secretary General can help ensure that NATO remains a relevant and effective force for stability and peace in the 21st century.

James Lookwood

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NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium

NEWS IN BRIEF

BMW WILL LAUNCH THE FIRST HYDROGEN-POWERED PRODUCTION MODEL IN 2028



With 45 years of experience in hydrogen and more than 20 in fuel-cell technology, the BMW Group is a pioneer in alternative drive technologies. As the energy transition continues, hydrogen has tremendous potential as a fuel of the future. Storable and transportable, it can be used in all kinds of ways. So, alongside electrical battery power, sustainably sourced hydrogen offers a further potential technology for sustainable individual mobility. That's why the BMW Group is advocating not just for a better-developed charging grid but for an infrastructure of hydrogen filling stations as well.

After successfully testing the BMW iX5 Hydrogen pilot fleet worldwide, the BMW Group is now preparing for series production of vehicles with hydrogen drive systems in 2028 on the basis of the jointly developed next-generation powertrain technology. The series production models will be integrated into BMW's existing portfolio, i.e. BMW will offer an existing model in an additional hydrogen fuel cell drive system variant. As FCEV technology is another electric vehicle technology, the BMW Group explicitly views it as complementing the drive technology used by battery electric vehicles (BEV) and next to plug-in hybrid electric vehicles (PHEV) and internal combustion engines (ICE).

BMW iX5 HYDROGEN – A PILOT PROJECT FOR H₂-POWERED CARS.

For the BMW iX5 Hydrogen, the BMW Group developed the world's most powerful passenger-car fuel-cell system and a special, dedicated battery. Together, these two elements enable consistently high speeds and an electric output of 295 kW (401 hp) in total. Find out more about the development, production and workings of the BMW iX5 Hydrogen from our video.

TESTING WORLDWIDE.

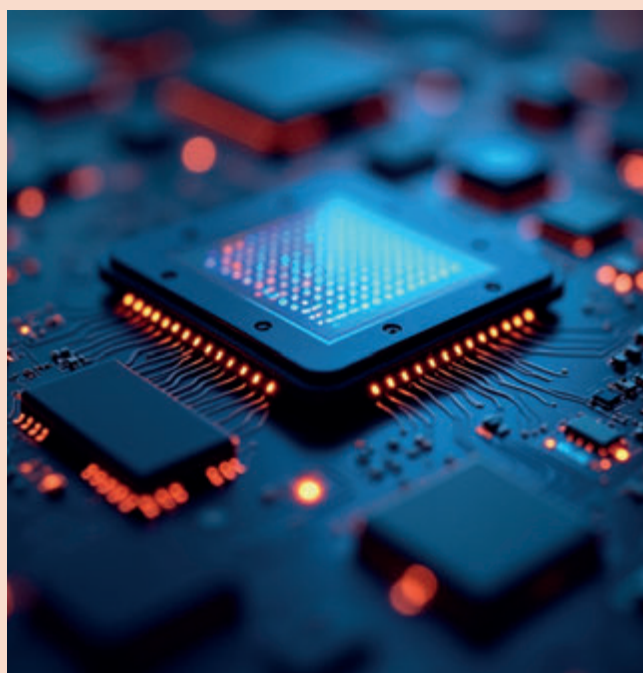
Since 2023 the BMW iX5 Hydrogen has been out on the road in various parts of the world to demonstrate the technology and test it in different weathers and terrains. Hot-weather tests have exposed the vehicles to temperatures of up to 45°C as well as sand, dust, various inclines and fluctuating levels of humidity – and they performed impressively throughout.

Hydrogen technology has also proven suitable for everyday use in extreme sub-zero temperatures, the fuel-cell drive performing just as well as a conventional combustion engine. Full system output is available within moments of the car starting, and not even the coldest conditions are enough to compromise range.

The pilot fleet is still on the road in Europe, Japan, Korea, China, the US, and the Middle East. Through the pilot fleet, the BMW Group gained essential insights for further development of the fuel cell technology, but already demonstrated the everyday usability of hydrogen-powered mobility.

CHIPS JOINT UNDERTAKING AND REPUBLIC OF KOREA INITIATE GROUNDBREAKING SEMICONDUCTOR COLLABORATION

Chips Joint Undertaking has announced a strategic collaboration with the European Union and the Republic of Korea to advance semiconductor research, development, and innovation. This partnership aims to foster technological advancements, enhance supply chain resilience, and secure a leading position in the global semiconductor industry.



AI GENERATED IMAGE

In a groundbreaking decision, the EU and the ROK have selected four jointly funded projects that focus on heterogeneous integration and neuromorphic computing technologies. These projects are designed to leverage the strengths of both regions, fostering collaboration between research institutions and innovation players.

The selected projects, which are co-funded by the Chips JU under Horizon Europe and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF), include:

1. **ENERGIZE** - Developing brain-like circuits using two-dimensional materials to create energy-efficient AI systems.
2. **NEHIL** - Creating a laser-based radar system (LIDAR) that integrates various technologies for precise distance measurement.
3. **HAETAE** - Developing photonic brain-like chips that efficiently process AI tasks and can adapt to new functions.
4. **VITFOX** - Enhancing visual data processing AI by using ferroelectric materials to save power and improve performance.

These initiatives reflect the EU and Korea's commitment to advancing next-generation AI semiconductors and autonomous driving technologies. The total investment for these projects is approximately €6 million from the EU and a similar amount from the NRF over the next three years.

The Chips JU, along with the NRF and European Commission, will closely monitor the progress of these projects and seek additional opportunities for collaboration. This partnership not only aims to advance semiconductor technology but also to establish a robust network of cooperation among leading researchers and institutions from both regions.

About Chips Joint Undertaking:

Chips Joint Undertaking supports research, development, innovation, and capacity building in the European semiconductor ecosystem. Launched by the European Union Council Regulation No 2021/1085 and amended in September 2023 via Council Regulation 2023/1782, it contributes to reinforce the competitiveness and resilience of the semiconductor technological and industrial base, engaging a significant EU, national/regional and private industry funding of nearly €11 billion. The Chips JU is funded by the European Union, Chips JU Participating States and the Private Members.

EUROPEAN DEFENCE INDUSTRY PROGRAMME: AUDITORS CALL FOR A MORE ROBUST DESIGN

- **The proposed European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) aims to increase the bloc's defence readiness and buttress its armaments industry**
- **Auditors call for a sturdier policy design and a better balance between objectives, budget and timeline**
- **Accountability arrangements must be clarified and strengthened**

The European Court of Auditors (ECA) calls for a more robust design of the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) and a better balance between the policy objectives, proposed budget and timeline. The auditors highlight the risk that the suggested €1.5 billion in spending along with the 2-year implementation period may not square with the ambitious objectives of strengthening the EU's defence industry readiness and contributing to the industrial base for the defence of Ukraine.

Faced with the return of high-intensity warfare on the European continent, the EU has moved defence much higher up the agenda. The EDIP proposal is intended to be the first step in implementing the European defence industrial strategy. The aim is to strengthen the European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB), in particular to ensure the timely



availability and supply of defence products, while at the same time contributing to the recovery, reconstruction and modernisation of Ukraine's defence capacity.

The auditors highlight the risk that the proposed financial envelope of €1.5 billion may not be commensurate with the programme ambitions. They point out that the Commission did not assess how much EU budgetary support would be necessary to implement the proposed policy instruments. They also warn that the EU's resources could be spread across a wide array of projects that may not have a measurable impact at EU level. For this reason, it will be important to define milestones and targets to reflect the achievements that can realistically be expected by the end of 2027. What is more, complementary implementing provisions may be needed to provide a robust basis for the EDIP's implementation and the targeted allocation of funds. Lastly, to reap the full benefits of the EU's budgetary support the Commission should consider complementing the current defence industrial strategy by means of a long-term funding strategy for the EDTIB under the EU's next multi-year budget.

The auditors call for the programme's accountability arrangements to be clarified and reinforced, including in regard to the ECA's audit rights, which must be upheld. This is important because of the complexity of governance arrangements around defence, in particular where programmes are not managed directly by the Commission or in parts where execution is entrusted to the Ukrainian authorities.

There is no fixed financial envelope for the Ukraine Support Instrument, which is part of the proposal. The member states have agreed to use the profits generated by investing frozen Russian assets for the purpose of supporting Ukraine; a percentage of the resulting revenue could be channelled to the Ukraine Support Instrument. However, there is a risk given the unpredictability of the amount and timespan of funding from this source.

The proposal also confers new responsibilities and rights on the Commission to ensure the security of supply of defence products. The auditors stress that the effective functioning of this mechanism will ultimately depend on the member states' willingness to cooperate.

REMIT BREACH: SPANISH ENERGY REGULATOR FINES NEURO ENERGÍA Y GESTIÓN €1+ MILLION FOR ELECTRICITY MARKET MANIPULATION

The Comisión Nacional de los Mercados y la Competencia (CNMC) has imposed a €1,081,502 fine on Neuro Energía y Gestión for manipulating the Spanish electricity market between 23 August 2022 and 15 March 2023.



This penalty comes under the REMIT Regulation (EU) No 1227/2011, which prohibits market manipulation and seeks to protect the integrity and transparency of the EU's wholesale energy markets.

In its decision, CNMC found that Neuro Energía y Gestión had breached Article 5 of REMIT, specifically Article 2.2.a.i by:

- Issuing and withdrawing non-genuine orders to be in an advantageous position to execute cross-border sales with France.
- Manipulating the market by providing false or misleading signals as to the supply, demand, and price of wholesale energy products.

The investigation revealed that Neuro Energía y Gestión, in 125 trading sessions, issued and withdrew non-genuine orders using the digital certificates of 34 other market agents. The goal was to control the offer processing queue on the continuous intraday electricity cross-border sales contracts with France.

ACER welcomes this decision by CNMC, which seeks to promote the transparency and integrity of the Spanish electricity market.

The European Union Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER) was established in March 2011 (Third Energy Package legislation) to foster cooperation among the EU's energy National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs) and help ensure that a single European market for electricity, and similarly natural gas, functions well. ACER's headquarters are in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

The Spanish National Markets and Competition Commission (CNMC) is the body that promotes and ensures the proper operation of all markets in the interest of consumers and corporations.

It is a public body with its own legal personality. It is independent from the Government and subject to parliamentary oversight. It went into operation on 7 October 2013.

EUROPOL SUPPORTS LATVIA IN DISMANTLING MAJOR SYNTHETIC DRUG LAB NETWORK

The Latvian State Police (Valsts policija) in collaboration with Europol, has successfully dismantled a large-scale clandestine laboratory involved in the production of synthetic drugs across the European Union. The illegal laboratory was a key site for synthetic drug production in Europe, highlighted by its repeat appearance in multiple investigations across Europe.

Europol worked closely with Latvian partners to identify and track the criminal network responsible for the production and distribution of synthetic substances, including synthetic cathinones and other high-risk drugs.

The operation, which culminated in coordinated raids across Latvia in the beginning of October, resulted in the arrest of eight individuals suspected of involvement in the production. Among the arrested were key figures within the organisation.

Seizures during the action

- Over one tonne of finished synthetic drugs;
- Over 38 000 litres of various chemical liquids, including precursors and base substances for the production of synthetic drugs;
- Laboratory equipment and various items related to drug production;
- 5 vehicles – 3 passenger cars and 2 lorries;
- Several mobile phones, SIM cards, routers, a laptop, and other items relevant to the investigation.



Inspectors dismantling drug laboratory

To support the Latvian authorities, Europol deployed its tactical laboratory dismantling team to Aluksne, close to the Russian border, to assist in taking the laboratory down. There, Europol provided full operational support to quickly and accurately identify the drugs and chemicals on site. This rapid identification was essential in securing crucial evidence.

Dismantling such clandestine drug laboratories is a priority for Europol in its fight against the production and distribution of illicit drugs across Europe. These clandestine facilities pose a significant threat to public safety, not only due to the harmful substances they produce, but also because of the environmental and health risks associated with their illegal operations. By targeting these laboratories, Europol and its partners aim to disrupt organised crime groups' supply chains. This effort is a critical component of Europol's broader strategy to combat drug trafficking.

GENERAL COURT UPHOLDS SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA



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On October 2, 2024, the General Court (a constituent court of the Court of Justice of the European Union, seated in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg), delivered three rulings (Cases T-797/22, T-798/22, and T-828/22), affirming the 2022 prohibition on legal services to the Russian Government and entities as necessary and proportionate. The Court ruled that these measures do not breach the right to a fair trial under Article 47 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

In response to Russia's escalated aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the Council of the European Union implemented restrictive measures, including a prohibition on providing legal advisory services to the Russian government and entities based in Russia. This prohibition aimed to increase pressure on Russia to end its war. Several Belgian Bar associations, lawyers, the Ordre des avocats à la Cour de Paris, one of its members, and the Association Avocats Ensemble (ACE) challenged this prohibition in the General Court of the European Union, arguing that it lacked proper justification and infringed upon fundamental rights such as access to legal advice, professional secrecy, lawyers' independence, rule of law values, and principles of proportionality and legal certainty.

The General Court dismissed these actions, affirming that the prohibition does not violate the fundamental right to effective judicial protection, which includes the right to legal advice and representation. The court clarified that the prohibition applies only to legal advice unrelated to judicial, administrative, or arbitral proceedings and does not cover advice given to natural persons. Therefore, it does not interfere with legal advice linked to judicial processes or the independence of lawyers in such contexts.

Regarding exemptions from the prohibition, the General Court ruled that these do not inherently interfere with the protection of lawyers' professional secrecy. However, it emphasised that Member States must ensure that the implementation of exemption procedures respects the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The court acknowledged the crucial role of lawyers in upholding the rule of law but noted that this role can be subject to restrictions justified by the EU's general interest objectives, provided these restrictions are not disproportionate or intolerable and do not undermine the essence of lawyers' tasks in a democratic society. The court found that the prohibition, with

its exceptions and exemptions, pursues general interest objectives without compromising the fundamental role of lawyers.

In summary, the General Court upheld the validity of the prohibition on providing legal advisory services to the Russian government and entities, stating that it does not infringe upon the fundamental right to legal advice related to judicial proceedings and is proportionate to its aims.

These rulings underscore the importance of adhering to fundamental freedoms and principles, even in challenging circumstances.

COMMISSION ADOPTS €1.8 BILLION SUPPORT PACKAGE TO UNDERPIN MOLDOVA'S ECONOMIC GROWTH PLAN ON ITS PATH TO THE EU



© EUROPA EU / DATTI BENDO

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission and Maia Sandu, President of Moldova

The European Commission has adopted a Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova worth €1.8 billion and underpinned by a Reform and Growth Facility for the period 2025-2027. The Plan, which is the largest EU financial support package since Moldova's independence, will boost Moldova's economy, bring the country closer to EU membership by accelerating reforms, and provide significant financial assistance.

The Moldova Growth Plan is based on three pillars, aimed at: **1. Increasing financial assistance** over the next three years through a dedicated **Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova**, based on the upcoming Reform Agenda and of discussed priority investments needs with Moldova, the Facility could support, for example:

- New roads, bridges and rail infrastructure, such as the Chisinau ring road, advancing the connection Odesa-Chisinau-Iasi and bridges over the Prut river.
- Energy Security by completing a new electricity powerline & starting to build two more, linking Moldova to the EU electricity grid.
- Energy subsidies
- Healthcare by starting to build two new well-equipped hospitals in Cahul and Balti.
- The integration of Moldova in the EU's 'roam like at home' area and bringing broadband internet to remote areas of Moldova.
- Improved access to financing and support for 25 000 businesses, including small family businesses.

2. Enhancing access to the European Union's single market.

The Moldova Growth Plan proposes immediate steps that Moldova can take to reap the benefits of the single market in five key areas, once the required standards are met:

- i. free movement of goods and integration in supply chains;
- ii. facilitation of trade and transport connections;
- iii. integration into the EU energy market and decarbonisation;
- iv. integration into the Digital Market;
- v. access to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA).

3. Supporting Moldova's socio-economic and fundamental reforms.

Moldova is undertaking reforms for socio-economic development, building on key economic growth drivers: economic competitiveness; economic resilience, including infrastructure and energy; economic governance; social capital; and the green transition. The reforms will attract foreign investment, improve the business environment, support small and medium sized enterprises, improve skills and qualifications, strengthen trade and exports thus boosting economic growth and increasing the economic convergence with the EU. Payments will follow upon the delivery of the pre-agreed reforms.

Economic convergence is an essential element in preparing candidate countries for EU accession and for joining the Single Market. Integration with the EU's single market has been the main driver of economic growth for all countries that previously joined the EU.

The European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: *"Europe stands firmly by Moldova's side – today and every step of the way on the path to our Union. We can start bringing the Moldovan economy closer to ours already now. Today I'm in Chişinău to present a support package with the potential of doubling the size of the country's economy in a decade. To do so we invest in jobs, growth, services and infrastructure – from new hospitals in Balti and Cahul to the road from the capital to Odesa. We open the doors to our Single Market to Moldovan companies. And we support Moldova's reform efforts."*

Next steps

It is now for the European Parliament and the Council to examine the European Commission proposal for the Growth Facility for Moldova. Once adopted, Moldova will be invited to submit its Reform Agenda outlining the key socio-economic and fundamental reforms it intends to undertake to accelerate growth and convergence with the EU.

REVAMPING AIRPORT GATE STRATEGIES

Gate allocation for incoming and outgoing aircraft at airports is a surprisingly intricate task.

Dr. Joseph Doetsch, a quantum computing expert at Lufthansa Industry Solutions, points out that, for example, with 15 gates and 10 aircraft, there are over 570 billion possible combinations. Smart gate assignments can minimise taxi times and reduce congestion, which means less waiting on the tarmac and lower fuel consumption, leading to fewer emissions.

Gates are usually assigned when flight schedules are published—sometimes up to a year in advance—but adjustments are made a month, a week, and even on the day of the flight. These assignments can, of course, be influenced by a number of factors, such as:

- Airlines needing proximity to their lounges
- Flights with many connecting passengers
- Budget carriers opting for cheaper remote stands

- The aircraft's origin and type
- Expected runway and gate availability

Last-minute changes, like flight delays, can complicate matters further, often necessitating rapid gate reassignment that frustrates passengers.

Surprisingly, many airports still rely on basic technology for gate allocation.

According to a survey by AeroCloud, a venture capital-backed technology business serving airports, airlines and ground handlers across the UK, Europe and the United States, 40% of airport executives use Excel or Word to manage operations, including gate assignments.

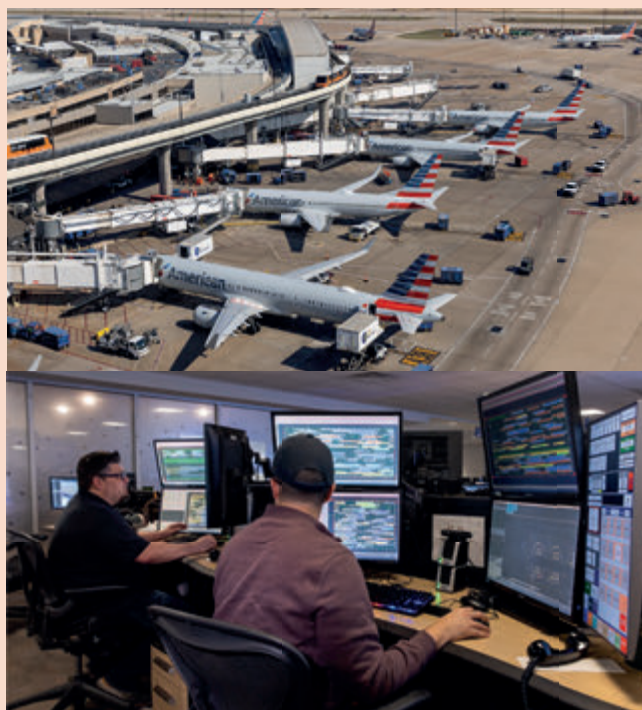
Designed to streamline and optimise airport operations, AeroCloud's comprehensive solutions help airports operate efficiently and cost-effectively. Their cloud-native intelligent Airport Operations System (AOS) uses predictive AI and machine learning to make the jobs of airport operations, IT and commercial teams easier.

In addition to a range of Passenger Processing Solutions, AeroCloud Optic, their industry-first passenger track and count solution, is revolutionising airport operations across the globe.

However, investments in more advanced systems are generally on the rise. For example, American Airlines has implemented a machine-learning system called Smart Gating at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport. This system can assign gates in just 10 minutes—compared to four hours previously—reducing taxi times by 20% and saving about 1.4 million gallons of jet fuel each year.

Meanwhile, Lufthansa is exploring quantum computing to tackle gate allocation challenges. Unlike traditional computers, quantum algorithms can quickly find optimal gate assignments, even in large airports. Initial trials suggest that these solutions could cut average passenger transit times by nearly 50%.

With rising airport capacity pressures, these advanced techniques could help optimise existing resources, minimising the need for physical expansions and improving overall efficiency in air travel.



Smart Gating helps team members at American's Hub Control Centers assign gates to thousands of aircraft every day

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UK TRADE MISSION VISITS KYIV TO DEEPEN INDUSTRY TIES



© MOD CROWN

Trade mission agrees key requirements for Ukraine's future equipment and capability needs.

A UK trade mission, formed of representatives from the Ministry of Defence, Department for Business and Trade, and the defence trade association ADS, visited Ukraine to hold meetings with Ukrainian Government and industry representatives.

It is the latest step in the growing relationship between the UK's defence industrial sector and Ukraine's, following the signing of a major agreement in July which will enable Ukraine to harness the power of UK industry by drawing on £3.5 billion worth of export finance to purchase further military capabilities.

The cross-government group, led by the Minister for the Armed Forces, travelled to Kyiv, where the trade mission visited the Ukraine Defence Industrial Forum to take part in a series of meetings and forum discussions.

Whilst there the minister discussed the UK's steadfast support for Ukraine as long as it takes, the ever-growing relationship between the UK and Ukraine's defence industry and the government's pledge to continue to boost investment into our own industry which will in turn support Ukraine's fight.

Agreements were made with Ukrainian officials on their requirements for complex weapons and land systems support during the event, which provides a signal to UK industry as to the types of equipment they most need and for which the MOD will now contract with UK industry on Ukraine's behalf.

Minister for the Armed Forces, Luke Pollard MP said:

The UK's support for Ukraine is ironclad. We continue to lead the way in providing military aid, but our support is much broader than simply providing equipment. Our flourishing defence industrial relationship symbolises the work happening across Government and the private sector to ramp up and speed up our support.

By deepening our ties with Ukraine's defence industry, we are expanding our industrial capacity, while boosting Ukraine's own capabilities. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine, and we will provide support for as long as it takes.

The MOD already placed contracts with Thales for air defence missiles and Sheffield Forgemasters for artillery gun barrels forgings, in order to warm up industry in preparation for further orders. Future orders are in the pipeline and will be funded by Ukraine, drawing on their own reserves and the £3.5 billion of

United Kingdom export finance made available by the UK to support Ukraine's war effort.

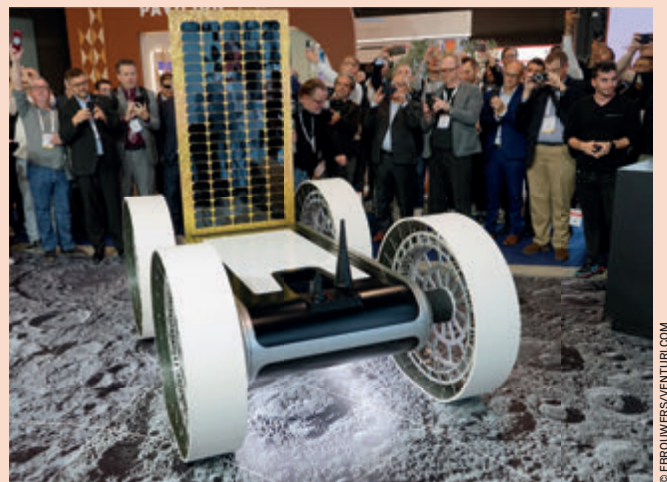
Task Force HIRST is the UK cross-government team incorporating MOD, DBT and UK Export Finance to stimulate UK industrial production and international collaboration in support of Ukraine, including collaboration with Ukrainian companies.

Last week, the Defence Secretary confirmed the Government is delivering on its commitment to speed up and ramp up deliveries of support for Ukraine, surpassing its pledge to deliver 12 AS90 artillery guns within 100 days of taking office.

A total of 16 units are now on course to be delivered, with 10 already provided, and six more to follow in the coming weeks.

VENTURI SPACE AND VENTURI ASTROLAB INTRODUCE LUNAR ROVER TO ADDRESS GROWING DEMAND TO DELIVER SMALL PAYLOADS TO THE MOON

Venturi Space, which invents, studies, designs and manufactures mobility solutions capable of handling the extreme environmental conditions found on the Moon and Mars, and Venturi Astrolab, Inc. (Astrolab), the designer, manufacturer, and operator of multi-purpose rovers for the Moon and Mars, announced their collaboration to produce a lunar rover, designed to respond to the growing number of institutional, businesses and scientific organizations in the U.S. and European markets, that are seeking access to the Moon for smaller payloads. A development prototype of the rover was unveiled today in Venturi Space's exhibition booth at the 75th International Astronautical Congress here.



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Known currently by its internal name FLIP (FLEX Lunar Innovation Platform), the rover uses the same technology used by Astrolab's FLEX rover, which was introduced in 2022. Just as with FLEX, Astrolab is responsible for the overall design and manufacturing of the rover. Specifically, the company has developed the vehicle's actuators, chassis, launch mount and release, avionics, solar panel, communications system, flight and ground software. As is also the case with FLEX, this rover relies on three key technologies when it comes to facing the extreme conditions of the lunar South Pole: proprietary materials for

cryogenic conditions, hyper-deformable wheels and batteries as well as the related testing systems and fabrication processes. Those have been designed and developed by Venturi Space within its facilities in Monaco, Switzerland, France, and the United States. Astrolab is leading and conducting the vehicle's integrated testing and operations, from its headquarters in California.

This rover is a key step in Astrolab's rapid spiral development approach for FLEX: design-build-test-fly cycles that demonstrate increased capabilities and incorporate lessons learned during development and qualification testing.

The rover has a mass of a half ton, a payload capacity of 30 kg, and has been designed to be compatible with the growing number of medium-class lunar landers now entering the commercial space market. In addition, the rover offers customers opportunities to perform technology demonstrations and commercial exploration as well as gather valuable science data. It also features critical components, subsystems, and processes common to the core platform used by the FLEX rover.

"For 25 years, we have been pioneers in the field of high-performance electric terrestrial vehicles. This expertise now allows us to offer viable and efficient solutions, in the long term, to face 'the hell' of the lunar South Pole. Our batteries and hyper-deformable wheels can withstand temperature variations of more than 300°C, aggressive solar radiation, and 180 hours of nights under -180°C. To say that I am proud of my Team is an understatement!" said Gildo Pastor, President of Venturi Space & Venturi.

"This rover offers customers many of the same payload space configurations as the larger FLEX rover we are using on our upcoming commercial mission, Mission One. This continues a goal we set for ourselves when we introduced the FLEX in 2022," said Jaret Matthews, founder and CEO, Astrolab. "We want to set the standard for lunar logistics. Just as there are standard sizes of shipping containers used in intermodal shipping on Earth, we seek to do the same on the Moon."

US\$ 1 BILLION IN NEW AND REAFFIRMED FUNDING COMMITMENTS ANNOUNCED FOR WHO'S ONGOING INVESTMENT ROUND

In a powerful demonstration of high-level support, the World Health Organization (WHO) received nearly US\$ 700 million in new funding commitments from European countries, foundations and others, and another US\$ 300 million in reaffirmed commitments.

Announced at the WHO Investment Round Signature Event at the World Health Summit in Berlin hosted by Germany, France, and Norway, the commitments highlighted the urgent need for investments in the Organization's mission to improve health outcomes worldwide.

The world's global health strategy, WHO's Fourteenth General Programme of Work 2025-2028, was approved by WHO's 194 Member States at the World Health Assembly in May. The Organization's first ever Investment Round, also launched at the Assembly, aims to ensure that WHO has the predictable, flexible, and resilient funding it needs to effectively partner with countries to implement the strategy.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz; the Prime Ministers of Estonia (Kristen Michal), Montenegro (Milojko Spajić),

and Norway (Jonas Gahr Støre); government Ministers and representatives of Germany, France, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK); Wellcome CEO John-Arne Røttingen; European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen; Gates Foundation Chair Bill Gates; and Gavi CEO Sania Nishtar were among leaders making commitments or speaking in support of WHO during the high-level event.

Federal Chancellor Scholz said Germany was committing nearly US\$ 400 million of funding to WHO over the next four years, including more than US\$ 260 million in new voluntary funding.

Global health foundation partners and CEOs made pledges including Wellcome, with a US\$ 50 million commitment, and the Institute for Philanthropy, Resolve to Save Lives, and the World Diabetes Foundation each committing or recommitting US\$ 10 million.

The WHO Foundation's CEO Anil Soni announced a US\$ 50 million commitment to the Investment Round, which includes part of a US\$ 57 million pledge from Foundation S and Sanofi to support WHO's global health agenda, and at least US\$ 30 million in contributions from other philanthropic and private sector partners, including new commitments from Boehringer Ingelheim and Novo Nordisk.



© WHO

Governments and partners have already been making significant pledges to the Investment Round, including 16 African governments so far, and in Berlin the Minister of Health for Mauritania, speaking on behalf of the African Union, reconfirmed support for a successful outcome to the Investment Round. Announcing plans to pledge or continue funding WHO were France, Spain, the UK, and the Gates Foundation.

The event marked a milestone in the Investment Round engagement process which will culminate at next month's G20 leaders' Summit, chaired by Brazilian President Lula da Silva. The Summit will be a moment for leaders to pledge additional resources for WHO, further advancing global health equity.

The event in Berlin, moderated by Isabelle Kumar, former news anchor, ended with a musical finale by Quire, symbolizing the unity and determination of all participants to work towards a fully funded WHO, capable of addressing the world's most pressing health challenges.



AI GENERATED IMAGE

MOSCOW'S EYES

**Russia's
intelligence grip
on Europe**

“Since March 2017, MI5 and the police have together disrupted 43 late-stage attack plots,” said the head of Britain’s intelligence and counter-terrorism service, MI5. Speaking at a meeting in London, MI5 Director General Ken McCallum said: “Some of those plotters were trying to get hold of firearms and explosives, in the final days of planning mass murder. Our vital work together has saved numerous lives.” It’s reassuring to know that the murderous plots were thwarted but also worrying that they existed at all. But they do, and they are on the increase. It’s no means all about Russia, either. McCallum said that his agents, together with the police, have dealt with twenty “potentially lethal” plots backed by Iran 2022 and he’s worried that Iran’s range of targets could expand if middle eastern conflicts worsen. He’s concerned that Israel’s on-going conflicts with groups that have Iran’s backing, such as militant Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Yemen’s Houthi rebels could lead to an increase in attacks in Britain. McCallum told his audience that the number of state-threat investigations by MI5 has increased by 48% over the last year, with Iran, Russia and China being chiefly responsible. With so many different parties involved, dealing with the threat has become far more complicated than it used to be.

Russia, of course, still seems to have ambitions to rule the world and hostile activities by its numerous agents seem to be one of Moscow’s chosen means, using such methods as arson, sabotage and other such means, so people in the UK have good reasons to be grateful to MI5. After all, if Putin “ruled the world”, recalling that song from the musical, “Pickwick”, Everyday would not be the “first day of spring”; it would be more likely to be the first day of a nuclear winter. McCallum told his audience that when it comes to acts of terrorism, 75% of the work today involved Islamist extremists, with the other 25% being plotted by far-right groups. You may think it’s because of the terrorists’ devotion to their cause, but McCallum said that many of them don’t understand their own leaders’ points of view. “We’re encountering more volatile would-be terrorists with only a tenuous grasp of the ideologies they profess to follow.” Most of the terrorist groups have little or no connection with each other, said McCallum, which makes it harder to track them down. Meanwhile, the various terrorist groups and their generally violent but ill-informed followers seek to capitalise on areas of global conflict, convinced that whatever cause is being fought over will help to justify their own murderous intentions.

Since Russia mounted its illegal invasion of Ukraine, more than 750 Russia diplomats have been expelled from Europe. European authorities have also been refusing diplomatic visas to those known to have connections with that country’s secret service, which has, according to McCallum, led to Russia using proxies from private intelligence operatives and criminals to conduct their espionage work.



MI5 Director General Ken McCallum

As a result, it has become less professional. Additionally, there has been a sharp increase in Iranian involvement in terrorism and spying activities. McCallum had a warning for those attracted to serving Iran or Russia: “If you take money from Iran, Russia or any other state to carry out illegal acts in the UK, you will bring the full weight of the national security apparatus down on you. It’s a choice you’ll regret.”

I Watching the Watchers

Spying is nothing new. The ancient Egyptians employed secret agents as part of their rivalry and mutual struggle with Greece and Rome. They developed codes in which to conceal their messages, along with places to hide those messages at home or about their person. That way, it was very hard for those seeking to intercept such communications to find the hidden messages and even harder to understand what they were saying if they found any. It was always a dirty business, and it still is, although it holds a certain bleak fascination for those of us not involved in the dirty world of espionage. There have been quite a few spies in fiction, with by far the most famous (at least in the West) having been James Bond, of course. Strangely, the others, however successful the books about their activities proved, are less well remembered. It’s probably all part of the art of staying under cover, as practised by spies down the ages. Even some of the most successful fictional spies are not well-known. Len Deighton’s book about spies and spying, “The Ipcress File”, doesn’t name the heroic protagonist at all. Now, with all the tensions in the world, espionage is coming back into the limelight, even if it is mostly kept hidden and out of sight.

Now we come to Europe’s deep concern about the “шпион”, which is Russian for spy (and is pronounced “shpion”, I believe, with the plural, “шпионы”, pronounced “shpionen”). Like every nation, of course, Russia has used spies – secret agents – for centuries and is still doing so. The activity is often portrayed in fiction as a rather romantic, exciting sort of occupation, sometimes conducted in nightclubs and bars, in the company of exotic and provocatively dressed members of the opposite gender. As I’m sure you’ve guessed, this is a false impression. Very false indeed. It’s still a job that people do, presumably willingly, if not under duress.

According to the Financial Times (FT), talking about that former spying capital of Europe, Vienna, “There are still more than 180 accredited Russian diplomats in



Vienna, Austria

Vienna, and at least a third of them are known to be using diplomatic cover for intelligence-gathering activities.” That certainly gives one food for thought. “Many more are now operating in the country illegally thanks to its lax policing and surveillance of espionage,” says the FT. Fears about Russia’s secret intelligence gathering operations in Europe are growing, and it’s no longer a concern about the growth of Communism, of course. Nobody could seriously describe President Vladimir Putin as a Communist, but then again, he’s not a diplomat either, nor much of a politician. Now the spying is being done, it seems, purely for money, and there is apparently quite a lot of it happening.

Of course, Russia is not the only country interested in espionage. It’s probably true to say that every country in the world shares that interest, to a lesser or greater degree. It’s not so long since German authorities arrested a Chinese national who had been working for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, securing information on the transportation of military equipment and of people linked to Germany’s arms industry. She was accused of sharing this information with a far-right German member of the European Parliament who had already been accused of spying for China. She and the MEP were accused of passing on information concerning negotiations and decisions involving the European Parliament, while monitoring Brussels and Strasbourg about the activities of Chinese dissidents. The MEP accused of involvement has denied all knowledge of any spying within his parliamentary office, of course. McCallum drew attention to MI5’s operations against Russian aggression: “Earlier this year, the last remaining Russian military intelligence officer was expelled from the UK, and diplomatic accreditation removed from a number of sites. We’ll keep bearing down.”



Frankfurt Police

Spying for China is one thing, but European authorities are more disturbed by alleged incidents of spying for Russia. McCallum drew his audience’s attention to Britain’s economic relationship with China, which leaves MI5 concentrating on co-operation and the disruption of any attempts to harming or coercing people of Chinese heritage. Back in the summer, German state police arrested three people in Frankfurt who, it was claimed, were on Moscow’s spying payroll.

The three came from Ukraine, Armenia and, of course, Russia. It was alleged by the German Federal Prosecutor’s office that the trio had travelled to Germany on behalf of a “foreign secret service” (for which, read “Russia”, of course) in order to garner data on a Ukrainian citizen staying there. The three were arrested in Frankfurt, the financial hub of Germany, by Hesse State Police. They were seized while investigating a café where their target was thought to have been seen (clearly not quite the sexy nightclub of the imagination). It was the latest in a series of arrests of alleged Russian and other foreign agents. Back in April 2024, two German-Russian citizens with dual nationality were seized for allegedly scouting out potential targets for sabotage. It’s not the first such incident: a high-ranking officer in Germany’s own secret service was still on trial at the of writing, charged with passing top-secret information to Russian spies. Those supposedly spying for China were said to have been gathering technical information about German military technology. In each case, German political figures were also implicated.

War! What is it good for? ask Putin

Russia’s spying activities are being taken very seriously in the West. In September 2024, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, NATO, called together Russia experts from its various member states to assess the scale of the problem and to try to work out what to do about it. Chaired by Acting Deputy Secretary General, Bors Ruge, they agreed that Russia remains the “most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security”. Those taking part in the gathering pointed out that Russia seems determined to “fundamentally reconfigure the Euro-Atlantic security architecture” and they agreed that the threat Russia poses will persist in the long term. If you lived next door to Putin you would need to keep your curtains firmly closed. “NATO is the essential transatlantic forum for consultations on all matters related to our individual and collective security,” Ambassador Ruge told participants. “We will continue to consult on hostile Russian activities and co-ordinate national and allied responses.” Allies participating in the meeting expressed their



Acting NATO Deputy Secretary General, Bors Ruge

deep concern over what they referred to as Russia's "hybrid actions" which constitute a threat to allied security. Hybrid actions are those involving non-state actors (sometimes referred to, strangely, as "little green men") to carry out military actions such as cyber-attacks, political assassinations, the spread of disinformation and so on in a clandestine way using completely deniable participants. It's a dirty way to fight a war.

The meeting also discussed recent hostile acts by Russia, including sabotage, acts of violence, provocations at Allied borders and violations of Allied airspace, instrumentalization of irregular migration as well as malicious cyber activities and disinformation campaigns. However, the meeting restated the members' determination to support Ukraine, regardless of President Putin's hostility and threats. They also pointed out that the delivery by Iran of ballistic missiles to Russia represents a serious escalation in Tehran's support for what they described as "Russia's illegal war". Iran's action here clearly has nothing to do with religion. New sanctions were proposed, although I suspect that what Kiev would really like most is more weapons of its own to use against Russia's unprovoked attacks and also against Russia itself.

Needless to say Putin is pulling no punches in his determination to create a full-scale war with the West. He has warned NATO alliance leaders that if the current restrictions on Ukraine's use of long-range Western missiles were to be lifted he would consider it "an act of war" (as if his invasion of Ukraine was a friendly act). Judging by his rather strange announcements so far, it would seem that a full-scale war is exactly what Putin wants, although he may fear that the West will hold back from committing to such aggression in order to retain peace. The West clearly doesn't want a full-scale war, but Putin, perhaps, does, for some reason. He has said that the missile issue, if his demands are not met, would mean that he would consider the United States and all of Europe to be legitimate targets for Russia's military hardware. We don't know if that could include the use of nuclear

weapons, but Putin is not a man to hold back, and his threats seem real enough. Would he follow through with it? We cannot know, because playground bullies (and he certainly resembles one) tend to threaten but then shy away from engaging in the act itself unless no-one is watching.

He may feel justified in using nuclear weapons against Europe's cities, docks and airfields, even if history never forgives him. Meanwhile, the chances of Europe allowing Ukraine to use long-range weapons to strike deep into Russia have been increasing, albeit slowly and cautiously. On a recent visit to Kyiv, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken seemed to suggest that the White House was seriously considering lifting the existing restrictions. However, we mustn't forget America's looming presidential election, which could see everything change.

Russia, too, seems concerned to combat spying. Six British diplomats recently had their accreditations revoked by the FSB, Russia's security service, for allegedly spying on Russia, although no evidence was offered. Britain described the allegations as "completely baseless", but that happens every time any country makes such an allegation.

Russia has been accused of getting its secret service agents involved in Britain's departure from the EU, stationing them in Ireland with the express aim of undermining relations between London, Dublin and Brussels. Putin has always disliked the EU. Ireland's own intelligence services were said to have been monitoring the activities of a senior Irish politician who met with a high-ranking Russian intelligence officer not far from Dublin. The politician in question is said to have promised to do "whatever he could to assist" the spy, whilst simultaneously establishing relations between Moscow and the paramilitaries of Northern Ireland during a delicate stage of the Brexit talks, despite him having no obvious ideological links to such groups. The current Irish Taoiseach, Simon Harris, has refused to reveal the politician's name, but Russia has an unusually large embassy in Dublin. Harris didn't deny the Russian espionage link, saying to the press: "It shouldn't come as any surprise to any of us."

Harris also confided that Russian intelligence activities had been increased since the invasion of Ukraine began. At the time, Ireland expelled four Russian diplomats who had been accused of recruiting moles from within Ireland's political and business communities. Russia retaliated by banning large numbers of Irish politicians from travelling to Russia, a move that caused much laughter in Dublin's corridors of power, which may have surprised and disappointed Putin. No Irish politicians or business people wanted to go there anyway, it seems.



Embassy of the Russian Federation, Dublin, Ireland

© FACEBOOK



Simon Harris

“Russia seeks to distort public opinion,” Harris told the publication POLITICO, “and is active in relation to that across the world. Ireland is not immune from that.” Several people were accused of being members of Russia’s military intelligence agency, the GRU, and actively engaged in espionage, including the Russian agent Prokopiev, who is said to have recruited the Irish politician.

He was one of four Russian embassy staff expelled from Ireland in 2022, although POLITICO alleges that Prokopiev continued to communicate with and seek to influence the politician involved by means of a female agent sent occasionally to Dublin as part of a “honeytrap” operation. POLITICO has said that the anonymous politician sits on the opposition benches, mainly occupied by left wing members, but it didn’t name him.

It also wrote that the MEP had defied police orders to end links with the Russians, saying he had been sought out and recruited to establish contacts with paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, especially with so-called “loyalist” extremists on the British Protestant side of Northern Ireland’s political battlefield.

Russia remains a factor in Irish politics, however peripherally. Prior to the Invasion of 2022, many on the left of Irish politics,

such as members of Sinn Féin, had remained faithful to Moscow’s anti-Ukraine position. The invasion, when it came, changed that and the Irish Republican Party deleted from its on-line websites more than a decade of pro-Russia and anti-NATO messages. Even so, some left-wing Irish parliamentarians continue to accuse the EU and NATO of being overly aggressive towards Russia. And as we know, Russia is just a peace-loving country with no overseas ambitions at all, isn’t it?

I Secrets for Sale?

Putin has questioned Ukraine’s ability to deliver long-range missiles to Russian targets without outside assistance, which is a sort of oblique threat to any country thinking of providing such assistance. He will doubtless be interested in the call from the US Congress to give Ukraine the go-ahead to attack targets in Russia. But of course, unlike Putin, Biden doesn’t want a war, and neither do most people in the West. It’s probably also true to say (although Putin may deny it) that most Russians don’t want a war either. Few sensible people do, but those with the ambition to broaden their horizons by pushing back frontiers see it as one way to achieve that end and take control of foreign countries.

GERMANY AS RUSSIA’S ESPIONAGE PLAYGROUND



The Lubyanka building (former KGB and now FSB headquarters) in Moscow

Throughout the Cold War, partitioned Germany served as a focal point for the Soviet intelligence agency, the KGB. It collaborated closely with the Ministry of State Security of the GDR and maintained a significant centre in Berlin-Karlsborst, which oversaw and coordinated KGB operations across Europe. Post-German reunification, the networks of the Foreign Intelligence Service continued to operate in Germany. Russian espionage in Germany has escalated since the worsening of relations between NATO members and the Russian Federation following the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, with an increasing number of espionage instances becoming publicly acknowledged. In the aftermath of the Russian attack towards Ukraine in 2022, espionage activities in the West are reported to have reached or surpassed Cold War levels. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution reports that Russian services in Germany employ cyberattacks, sabotage, disinformation campaigns, covert influence operations, and clandestine activities. Russian espionage primarily targets digital, military, and other essential infrastructure, in addition to politics, business, society, and research.



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Germany's Minister of Education and Research, Bettina Stark-Watzinger

It's not just Russia, either, of course. In the spring of 2024, the Federal Prosecutor's office in Germany announced the arrests of three suspected spies working for China's secret intelligence service. It has led to the country's research minister, Bettina Stark-Watzinger, calling for a review of collaborations by all of Germany's universities with China and, of course, with Russia. Those who were arrested had been accused of procuring information on dual-use technologies on behalf of China's secret service. They had apparently been in contact with several German universities and had even signed a contract with one of them. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) wants to see urgent moves to curb this misuse of trust by foreign entities, while its vice-president, Sinan Selen, has warned that his organisation will be paying closer attention to Chinese and other foreign activities connected with university spin-offs and start-ups.

According to Britain's Financial Times, the sophistication of Beijing's espionage operations is now on a par with Russia's. Germany's universities

have long prided themselves on their willing cooperation in international research bodies. Worries have arisen, however, that their much-vaunted openness is not matched by their equivalents in other countries. Germany has, for instance, decided to reimpose border controls with neighbouring EU states, where previously the Schengen agreement offered border-free travel. Germany is keen to protect itself from irregular migration. That would seem to be a growing theme in Europe, which will delight Putin, of course. Indeed, the future of Schengen itself now seems in doubt. Not



© KREMLIN/RU

Russian President Vladimir Putin

so many years ago, when I was living in Brussels and there was discussion about how to make Europe really open, it all looked relatively simple. Not any more, as Europe's enemies abroad seek to capitalise on what could be seen as weaknesses in the EU's basic premise.

Putin has made no secret of his own wish to see an end to the European Union. Freedoms such as those of choice, of the press, of cross-border movement and other matters apparently look threatening to Putin. On the other hand, renewed talk of the



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North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visiting the Nuclear Weapons Institute and the production base of weapon-grade nuclear materials in North Korea

Korean War being resumed would appear to most people in the West as quite a threat, too, however far away. Conditions and a readiness for war would, according to some reports, seem closer to igniting a conflict there than at any time since the 1950s. And North Korean president Kim Jong Un has been talking about nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles, including a build-up of solid-fuel ICBMs with miniaturised warheads and tactical nuclear weapons. Back in 1950, when what would become the European Union was first taking shape, Jean Monnet, the organisation's great architect, was very worried about the effects of events in Korea. He feared it would lead to Germany thinking it could get what it wanted from the so-called Schuman Plan by some other route, making it irrelevant for the country.

That was why Monnet suggested a French initiative: the formation of a European army to solve Germany's problem and allow the Schuman Plan negotiations to conclude successfully. Success only happened because of Monnet's dogged determination, according to Dirk Spierenburg and Raymond Poidevin, both of whom were instrumental in making it all work. I spent a long time with both of these charming men as I worked with them on the English version of their excellent book, "The History of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community: Supranationality in Operation". The resulting coal and steel community would eventually evolve into the EU. It was one of the most enjoyable jobs I have undertaken, meeting regularly with the two men in a Brussels bar to discuss progress on the book. Spierenburg had been Director-General of Foreign Economic Relations in the Netherlands and represented the country throughout the negotiations for the so-called Schuman Plan. Poidevin, with a Doctorate from the Sorbonne, was Professor of History at the University of Strasbourg III and Director of the Centre des



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Jean Monnet



© WIKICOMMONS/JOOP VAN BILSEN

Dirk Spierenburg

Recherches d'Histoire des Relations Internationales when I was working with him.

In Germany, the scientific community is – according to Germany's "Research.Table", a professional briefing from a large independent start-up for high-quality journalism in Germany – discussing how best to balance research cooperation with the stresses presented by political reality. The German University Association, for example, wants overarching standards to be developed in both science and the world of politics, agreeing that "qualified, cross-institutional information and counselling services are needed." But still the spies are out there, hovering on the fringes, binoculars at the ready. The science ministry has now published a position paper on research security, with the aim of developing a central "clearing station" to help academics to know and understand what they can say and to whom. After all, it's not as if spies are always identifiable like those in cartoon strips. The EU would seem to be following suit, according to a fact sheet it published early in 2024, with a view to developing a "due diligence" tool based on the China Defence Universities Tracker created by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, establishing a European centre on research security. Of course, such a tactic would be a mode of defence against the Russian intelligence service, too. But for MI5, at least, China is far less of a threat than Putin's Russia.

With such an open civilisation as we have in Europe enjoying its freedom of travel, you may find the idea of a looming clamp-down disturbing. If so, you have only to look at Moscow and Beijing (but especially Moscow) for the reasons. Both have been very actively engaged in trying to subvert the exchange of scientific and political information between friendly nations for their own advantage. If they were to succeed, then all the great benefits that the EU brought to its member states would be no more. And sadly, we no longer have people such as Dirk Spierenburg and Raymond Poidevin to put it right.

Jim Gibbons

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© NRE

Demonstrators outside the Georgian Parliament protesting the approval of the “Foreign Agent Bill”

BROKEN DREAM

Georgia's European Disconnect

In the October issue of Europe Diplomatic Magazine, we presented our featured article entitled “CROSSROADS OF DESTINY: GEORGIA’S FUTURE IN QUESTION.” The piece offers an in-depth exploration of Georgia’s intricate history and political evolution since it liberated itself from the constraints of Soviet communism.

Building on the insights from our previous article, this sequel shifts its focus to the inner workings of Georgia’s political landscape. We delve into some of the more troubling aspects of its governance, shedding light on the rise to power of its de factor ruler, Bidzina Ivanishvili, as well as the significant challenges the nation faces as it strives to realise a fully functioning democracy—one that is not only recognised but also embraced by the West.



Map of the Russo-Georgian War

When it was under Soviet domination, Georgia was subjected to intense Russification, which today fuels deep resentment among Georgians towards their powerful neighbour. Furthermore, through its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, seeking to draw closer to both the European Union and the United States, Georgia has made some provocative political choices regarding Russia, particularly its bid for NATO membership. This climate of animosity, which the international community truly recognised with the outbreak of the August 2008 war, has always influenced Georgian political discourse, portraying Russia as the primary culprit behind the erosion of its territorial integrity due to its support for and control over secessionist entities.

And on Sunday, 27 October – one day following the parliamentary election – the worst fears of Georgian democrats and pro-European voters were confirmed. European observers reported that the election unfolded in a “climate of hatred and intimidation,” marked by numerous violations and instances of violence.

Observers from the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations, highlighted several critical violations during the election. These included violence against opposition members, stuffing of ballot boxes, voter intimidation, smear campaigns aimed at observers, and widespread misuse of administrative resources.

The Election Administration of Georgia announced that the ruling party had secured nearly 54 per cent of the vote, while the four main opposition groups collectively received 37.5 per cent. This outcome could enable Georgian Dream to capture up to 89 seats in Parliament, leaving the remaining 61 for the opposition.

These issues cast a heavy shadow over the election results, raising

extremely serious concerns about the future direction of the country in Europe.

Georgia is strategically located next to Russia, Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, in a region intersected by oil and gas pipelines and bordering the Black Sea. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has been caught between Russia and the West, much like Ukraine, and both countries have been promised the possibility of NATO membership in the future. The West has a significant interest in whether Georgia will fall back under Moscow's influence or break free, and whether this transition can happen without sparking further conflict.

In June 2024, the European Council raised serious concerns about Georgia's recent passage of the so-called “Foreign Agents Bill.” Officially titled the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, this legislation mandates that any organisation receiving more than 20% of its funding from abroad must register as a foreign influence agent. Those who fail to comply could face crippling fines.

The Council indicated that this legislation marks a troubling departure from the progress outlined in the Commission's recommendations, and they warned that, in practical terms, this move could effectively bring the country's accession process to the EU to a standstill. Meanwhile the United States has temporarily halted joint military exercises and imposed visa restrictions



Georgian prime minister, Irakli Kobakhidze

on Georgians deemed responsible for or complicit in undermining democracy; a separate act in the U.S. Congress is proposing additional sanctions.

In any event, this situation highlights the delicate balance Georgia must navigate as it seeks closer ties with Europe and the West while addressing complex internal political dynamics.

I A Battle of Wills

The controversial “Foreign Agents Bill” that has triggered widespread protests was promoted by the ruling Georgian Dream party which, it says, is based on the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act and is

necessary to enhance transparency while addressing what they see as “pseudo-liberal values” being imposed by foreign influences.

Georgian prime minister, Irakli Kobakhidze managed to push the law through with 84 votes in favour and 30 against, in the 150-seat legislature. Naturally, this markedly pro-Russian, authoritarian drift can only please Vladimir Putin.

Georgia’s opposition, on the other hand, has labeled the bill “the Russian law,” drawing parallels to similar legislation used by the Russian president to stifle political opponents and suppress dissent. Critics argue that this bill is part of a broader trend towards authoritarianism by the Georgian Dream party, which will jeopardise Georgia’s bid to join the EU. The party has already enacted laws to tighten its grip on the electoral commission ahead of the October legislative elections.

In the meantime, Georgian Dream intends to continue its efforts to oust the country’s pro-European president, Salomé Zourabichvili, who has been accused of visiting Brussels, Paris and Berlin without official approval from the prime minister. The president, who has limited powers, opposes the Georgian Dream party, which holds the majority in Parliament and leads the government. Salomé Zourabichvili tried hard to unite opposition movements to win the parliamentary elections on October 26.

The President of Georgia serves as the ceremonial head of state and the commander-in-chief of the defence forces, but it is interesting to note that in 2013, a set of constitutional amendments went into effect, marking the country’s shift to a parliamentary republic. As a result, the president’s executive powers were greatly reduced, with more authority shifting to the Prime Minister.

It should also be noted that in the November 2024 presidential election, it will be a 300-member Electoral College that will choose the president, who will then be approved by the Central Election



On July 19, 2021, the presidents of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, (from left to right), Salomé Zourabichvili, Maia Sandu and Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed, in the presence of European Council President, Charles Michel, a trilateral cooperation declaration on European integration, committing to work together for “the peaceful, democratic and prosperous European future” for their nations.



Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of Georgia Dream (left) and Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze

Commission. This college will consist of all members of Parliament, representatives from the legislative bodies of the Autonomous Republics of Abkhazia and Adjara, as well as nominees from various political parties who are part of local government bodies. Furthermore, the election will take place without debates and through an open ballot.

The Puppet Master of Georgian Politics

He appoints the nation's prime ministers. Three of the last four have previously held executive positions within his corporate enterprises. He claims to have stepped back from active politics, yet as the chairman of the Georgian Dream party, he remains the true power behind the scenes. Critics describe him as an "eminence grise," maneuvering from the shadows like a puppet master in the nation's political conflicts.

He is Bidzina Ivanishvili, a man of immense fortune and considerable power in Georgia. But, he is also the target of vehement dissent as civil disturbance engulfs his nation.

Emerging from modest beginnings, he left Georgia in around 1988 to amass significant wealth in Russia, forging close relationships with Vladimir Putin's inner circle—the kleptocratic elites and oligarchs who have exploited the nation's resources in exchange for unwavering loyalty to the Kremlin. Ivanishvili managed to acquire lucrative metals and banking assets on the cheap, and now his wealth is estimated at \$6.4 billion by Forbes, which represent about one third of Georgia's GDP!

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the unprecedented sanctions imposed on Russia by the West, the ruling elite in Georgia has attracted considerable attention for its unique approach to managing relations with Russia.

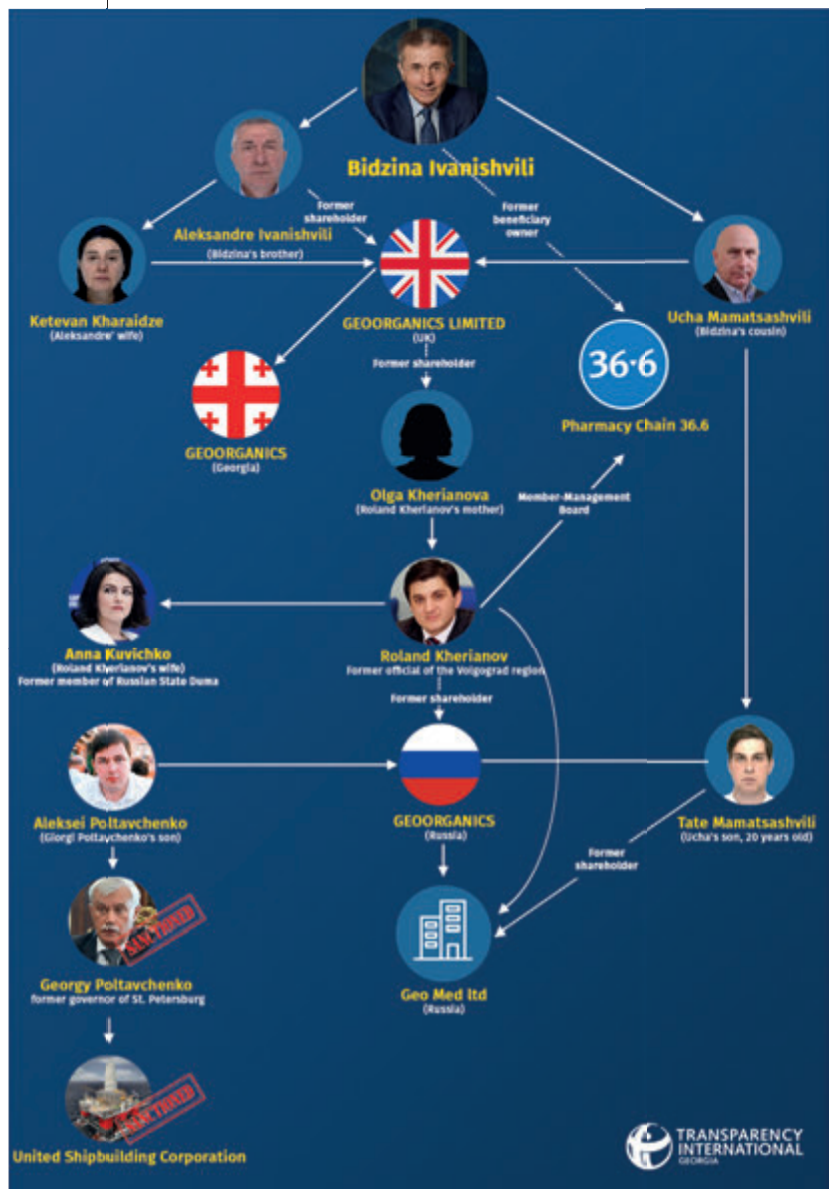
After taking power, the Georgian Dream party made it clear that it intended to pursue a policy of non-confrontation with Russia. Over the years, this approach, along with other targeted policies,

led to significant parts of the Georgian economy becoming heavily reliant on Russia.

In this context, it may prove insightful to explore the business interests that the Georgian ruling elite have in Russia, as these could influence their decisions on key issues affecting Georgia's future. And in particular, the commercial ties of Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of the ruling Georgia Dream party and the informal leader of Georgia, along with those of his relatives that reveal the depth of their entanglement and strategic alliances with the Kremlin.

After serving as prime minister from 2012 to 2013, Bidzina Ivanishvili publicly declared his retirement from politics. However, he made a formal "return" to the party in 2018. About three years later, he issued another letter announcing his "final retirement" from politics. In reality, he never truly stepped away, as many events in Georgia's political scene have shown.

When he first entered politics in 2011, Ivanishvili declared that he would divest all of his Russian-owned businesses to prevent any unwanted scrutiny in Georgian society. Although Ivanishvili did sell the assets that were directly registered under his name in Russia, investigators at Transparency International found that he still maintained ownership of at least 10 Russian companies through





Ucha Mamatsashvili

offshore entities between 2012 and 2019.

He employs a similar strategy in Georgia, owning numerous companies in a way that keeps his name out of the spotlight. So far, Transparency International has identified three offshore companies—Vanity Overseas Limited, Wellminstone S.A., and Wenigen Management Limited—that Ivanishvili has used to manage his Russian businesses for years. After he announced his exit from the Russian market, over 20 other offshore companies emerged as current shareholders of his former Russian ventures. These companies were part of an even more extensive network of subsidiaries.

Nepotism and Business: a Family Affair

Many of Bidzina Ivanishvili's relatives are involved in business in Russia, working alongside family members of both current and former high-ranking Russian officials. It's important to view these companies as part of Ivanishvili's wider business interests, and while Georgian media outlets have highlighted these connections in the past, the

noteworthy fact is that one of Ivanishvili's Russian business partners has recently faced sanctions from the U.S.

Bidzina Ivanishvili's brother, Alexander Ivanishvili, and his cousin, Ucha Mamatsashvili, are involved in business ventures through a company called Geo Organics. Their business partners include some notable figures.

One of them is Georgy Poltavchenko, a former KGB general and Governor of St. Petersburg, who has been sanctioned by the United States. Another partner is Roland Kherianov, a former high-ranking official from Volgograd. Interestingly, Kherianov's wife, Anna Kuvichko, is a former member of the State Duma and has become known for creating and appearing in the controversial propaganda music video, titled *"Uncle Vova, We Are With You."*

This video, glorifying Vladimir Putin, can be viewed on YouTube at the following address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pveg6rf2D_c

When it comes to state matters, Ivanishvili has often placed significant trust in his relatives, highlighting the special bond he shares with them. One notable example is Ucha Mamatsashvili, his cousin, whom Ivanishvili has called his most "beloved" and trusted family member. Mamatsashvili has held key positions, including Deputy Director of Georgia's state investment fund, JSC Partnership Fund, and he is also a shareholder in the company overseeing Ivanishvili's private investment venture, the Georgian Co-Investment Fund.

Ivanishvili's nephew, Kakha Kobiashvili is another notable figure who has served as the official representative for Ivanishvili's offshore companies in Georgia for quite some time. Given the level of trust Ivanishvili places in his relatives to manage his assets, it is clear that the companies run by them, including those in Russia, are part of his larger business interests. Moreover, it is difficult to believe that his relatives could forge successful business connections with powerful Russian politicians - who might act as their 'cover' - without Ivanishvili's backing.

Loyal Servants

The fact that individuals who once managed Bidzina Ivanishvili's personal assets now occupy top positions in Georgia's executive government raises further suspicions. It suggests that some decisions



Russian president Vladimir Putin and Georgy Poltavchenko, former KGB general and governor of St. Petersburg



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Georgian Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure, Irakli Karseladze

made by the Georgian government might be aligned with the interests of their former boss. Nevertheless, Bidzina Ivanishvili continues to run his businesses and manage his assets through certain trusted individuals, including:

- Irakli Gharibashvili, current Prime Minister of Georgia
- Giorgi Bachiasvili, Chair of the Advisory Board of the Georgian Co-Investment Fund
- Irakli Karseladze, current Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure
- Zviad Khukhushashvili, former head of Cartu Bank's securities department

Several other prominent figures have also played significant roles in managing the country's politics, economy, and resources. These individuals, often tied to the ruling party or Bidzina Ivanishvili's personal network, wield considerable influence over key decisions that shape national policies and economic strategies.

Their involvement raises concerns about the concentration of power and the potential for self-serving agendas to overshadow the public interest, further entrenching an oligarchic system in the governance of the nation.

One of the most prominent among these figures is Otar Partskhaladze, the former Chief Prosecutor of Georgia designated as a Georgian-Russian oligarch, due to his cooperation with the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).

Transparency International Georgia has obtained documents revealing that Partskhaladze received his Russian passport in February 2021. Since then, he has acquired a substantial amount of personal property as well as real estate in Russia, indicating a significant investment in the country. This resulted in sanctions being imposed on him in 2023 by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the US Treasury Department.

In late 2016, at the Chinese-Georgian Business Forum in Beijing, one of China's largest



© IPN

Former Georgian Chief Prosecutor, Otar Partskhaladze

conglomerates, CEFC China Energy, announced it would open a regional office in Tbilisi and that it aimed to acquire a substantial stake in the Poti Free Industrial Zone, located near the Black Sea port of Poti.

Georgia was represented at the forum by Ivane Chkhartishvili, a very controversial businessman and former economy minister who is also a close ally of Bidzina Ivanishvili. Chkhartishvili played a crucial role in facilitating CEFC's entry into Georgia and in strengthening ties with Beijing over the years.



© BEKUSHKEV

Ivane Chkhartishvili

Previously, Ivane Chkhartishvili had been identified as a beneficiary in a questionable court ruling involving a Georgian cigarette company and the local subsidiary of tobacco giant, Philip Morris International.

Grigol Liluashvili, currently head of security services in Georgia and special advisor to Bidzina Ivanishvili, plays a key role in managing relations between Georgia and Russia. Liluashvili is particularly tasked with conducting activities aimed at circumventing the economic sanctions imposed on Russian entities. This includes developing strategies to facilitate economic exchanges and strengthen trade ties, despite international restrictions. His involvement raises questions about the integrity of national security policies and the enduring influence of Ivanishvili in Georgian affairs.

He also oversaw the special security escort for Yekaterina Vinokurova, the daughter of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who travelled to Georgia by private jet to attend a wedding in 2023. This mission required close coordination between Georgian and Russian security services to ensure the safety of the high-profile guest in a delicate diplomatic context. Police detained 19 people protesting the visit outside the wedding venue at Kvareli Lake Resort.

Liluashvili's role in this operation highlights not only his influential position within the security services but also the importance of bilateral relations, even during times of political tension.

A Threat to National Sovereignty

More recently, as a kind of retaliatory measure against the West, Bidzina Ivanishvili has begun to promote the concept of a "Global Party of War". This rhetoric posits that Western governments and their allies are engaged in promoting conflict and instability around the world. This narrative is not only echoed by his supporters in the government, but also embraced by those aligned with Russia, creating a chorus of voices that amplify this perspective.

By framing the political landscape in such confrontational terms, he seeks to cast doubt on the motives of Western nations, suggesting they are driven by a relentless agenda for conflict rather than cooperation. This strategy serves to unite his base, fostering a sense of shared purpose and animosity toward perceived adversaries.

And Russian encouragement not only strengthens Ivanishvili's position domestically but also fits into Russia's broader strategy of undermining Western narratives and fostering scepticism towards Western policies in the region.

Even though Bidzina Ivanishvili has officially stepped away from politics, he obviously still wields considerable influence over



© GEORGIAN PRESIDENCY OFFICE

Georgian President Salomé Zourabichvili and State Security Service Director Giorgi Liluashvili in 2019

Georgia's ruling party and several key institutions, which are led by individuals who have previously worked for his business concerns.

This type of influence over democratic institutions closely resembles what is referred to as 'state capture', a term first coined in 2000. In this scenario, an unaccountable elite takes control of the political, legal, and economic levers of a country, undermining the integrity of democracy and the rule of law. At its core, 'state capture' involves a small, unaccountable elite gaining control over the mechanisms of the state. This can manifest in various ways, such as corrupt practices, lobbying, and the appointment of individuals into key positions who are aligned with the interests of these elites. Instead of serving the public good, government



© SSG.GOV.GE

State Security Service of Georgia



Georgian protesters

officials may prioritise the needs of their benefactors, leading to policies that favour specific businesses or sectors at the expense of broader societal interests.

Given this clear evidence of state capture, the fact that Georgia's informal leader has significant business interests in a hostile state poses potential risks to national security and could jeopardise the country's foreign policy direction.

An Uncertain Path Ahead

Pro-European Georgian democrats seem to be resolute in their mission to thwart the man they perceive as Putin's puppet, viewing him as a direct threat to their aspirations. This determination stems from a deep-seated belief that if he succeeds in consolidating power, he will effectively extinguish their hopes for closer ties with Europe and the eventual goal of European Union membership. For many Georgians, this is not just about politics; it is about preserving their national identity and autonomy in the face of external pressures.



Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu (right) and his South Ossetian counterpart, Lieutenant General Ibrahim Gassev, signing an agreement in 2017 on integrating a part of South Ossetia's army into the Russian Armed Forces

The stakes are incredibly high. Georgia has a rich history and a unique cultural heritage that many citizens feel is at risk of being undermined by a government that prioritises allegiance to Moscow over the aspirations of its own people. The desire for integration with Europe is not merely a political goal; it represents a longing for democratic values, human rights, and economic opportunities that are often associated with membership in the EU.

Moreover, the situation is intricately linked to Vladimir Putin's broader strategy in the region. By maintaining influence in Georgia, Putin aims to project power and control over former Soviet republics, reinforcing a sphere of influence that counters Western presence. This is crucial for him, as losing Georgia could signal a significant weakening of Russian authority in the South Caucasus, potentially inspiring similar movements in neighbouring countries.

The protesters are aware that their struggle is part of a larger geopolitical contest. They view their resistance not only as a fight against a potentially authoritarian regime but also as a crucial step in reclaiming their sovereignty from foreign domination. Their protests serve as a rallying point for those who wish to see Georgia flourish as an independent nation, free to forge its own path without the shadow of Russian influence looming overhead.

As tensions rise, the outcome of this struggle will likely have profound implications for both Georgia's future and the dynamics of power in the region. A victory for the protesters could pave the way for genuine reforms and stronger ties with Europe, while a triumph for the current leadership could solidify Russia's grip, further isolating Georgia from its Western aspirations. In this context, the protests represent not just a political battle, but a defining moment in the ongoing quest for national identity and self-determination in a rapidly changing world.

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BULGARIA AND ROMANIA

Bulgaria and Romania pay a hefty price for their non- Schengen status

For Bulgaria and Romania, the costs of not being full members of the Schengen area are counted in billions of euros. The transport and tourism sectors of both countries are most affected and checks at land borders create huge barriers for Romanian and Bulgarian companies, restricting their competitiveness and preventing them from fully reaping the benefits of the single market.

Non-full membership in the Schengen area costs Bulgaria more than EUR 834 million per year. Romania loses EUR 2.32 billion in annual revenues from not participating fully in Europe's border-free regime, with losses for its transport operators amounting to another 90 million annually due to delays at the country's land borders.

The figures were presented at the conference *"The cost of non-membership of Schengen for the Single Market – impact on Bulgaria and Romania"*, which took place in Sofia, Bulgaria on 24 September. The event was jointly organised by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA).

'We marked the 30th anniversary of the European internal market last year. However, data from business organisations in Europe show that 60% of all barriers which were established 20 years ago still remain', affirmed Mariya Mincheva, member of the EESC's Employers' Group and Vice-President of the BIA, who is currently preparing the EESC opinion on the topic.

'Our businesses still have yet to benefit from all the privileges of the single market. Now they are paying a high price, as their competitiveness is restricted because of the non-Schengen status of our country,' Ms Mincheva stressed.

Bulgaria and Romania are among the four out of 27 EU Member States that are not part of the Schengen area. The other two are islands – Cyprus and Ireland.

'Romania and Bulgaria should be full members of Schengen. The security issue is of primary relevance and we can tackle it only via full Schengen integration,' said BIA president Dobri Mitev, opening the conference.

'Full membership in the Schengen area is also relevant in a broader economic context for EU economic resilience and security, and the war in Ukraine makes full Schengen membership even more important for the stability of the region. Trust is key,' said Călin Ile, Vice-President of Concordia.

Exorbitant Costs Of Endless Queues At Land Borders

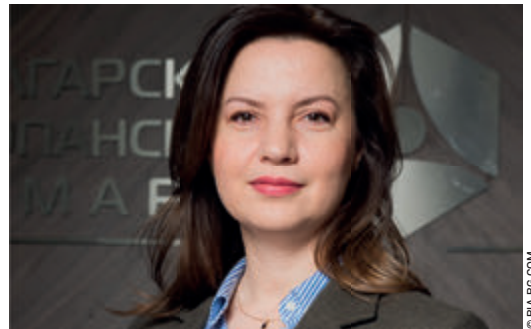
The participants at the event listed many problems that both Bulgaria and Romania have to grapple with due to customs controls at their land borders with other EU Member States.

Checks at the two countries' land borders cause daily delays and queues, with waiting times ranging from 20 to over 200 minutes and with truck drivers sometimes spending more than five days trying to cross to another country. Truck queues can be over 30 km long.

This can lead to deterioration of goods and result in financial losses for both exporters and importers. As a consequence, these costs are ultimately passed on to consumers, contributing to the increase in prices of goods. It also negatively affects drivers who are often forced to spend days at parking lots with poor sanitary conditions.

'With 80 to 85% of Bulgaria's trade turnover with the EU passing through land borders, delays due to customs processing cause significant costs. For example, a 24-hour delay of a truck at the border can cost between EUR 786 and 2 322 depending on the type of goods carried,' said Emil Angelov, Chief Executive Officer and Deputy Chairman of the Management Board of Bulgarian Glavbolgarstroy Holding.

'Waiting at the Romanian and Hungarian border in 2023 cost EUR 2.5 billion, and in 2020-2021 it was EUR 2.4 billion,' said Deputy Chairman of the National Union of Road Transport Operators of



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Mariya Mincheva, member of the EESC's Employers' Group and Vice-President of the BIA



© ZF-RO

Călin Ile, Vice-President of Concordia

Romania (UNTRR) Romeo Medan. 'Thousands of trucks are crossing the border. They are all waiting in queues and, given the EU's ambitious goals under the Green Deal, this represents a serious obstacle. The social dimensions are also huge – drivers wait for days to go home without food, without water. The status of non-members of the Schengen area accumulates costs along the supply chain and reduces competitiveness.'

Mr Angelov highlighted the many missed economic opportunities for Bulgaria caused by the non-Schengen status, which are most visible in tourism and foreign direct investments. 'Full integration of both Bulgaria and Romania would lead to an annual increase in their GDP of between 0.5% and 1%.'

Mr Angelov also affirmed that social implications should not be underestimated as Bulgarians and Romanians may sometimes feel like second-class citizens of the EU for not enjoying the same rights. These feelings can in fact be used in what he called 'the weaponisation of social media and the disinformation war'.



© GLAVBOLGARSTROY HOLDING

Emil Angelov, Chief Executive Officer and Deputy Chairman of the Management Board of Bulgarian Glavbolgarstroy Holding

Environmental Goals Jeopardised, Tourism Sector Suffers

The implementation of the EU's Green Deal, which aims to achieve a carbon-free Europe by 2050, is also put into question.

Ms Mincheva stressed that the pollution caused by heavy border traffic is equivalent to the yearly emissions from the electricity consumption of about 28 000 EU households. In fact, annual border carbon emissions resulting from the remaining border controls at the Hungary-Romania, Romania-Bulgaria and Bulgaria-Greece borders amount to over 46 000 tCO₂/year.

Other sectors, such as tourism, are also paying the price. Prolonged border controls between Bulgaria and Romania, and with neighbouring Schengen area countries such as Greece and Hungary, create significant time constraints for travellers. This represents a problem not only for tourism itself, but for regional development too. Furthermore, the non-Schengen status of Bulgaria and Romania has repercussions for the construction, agriculture and service industries since seasonal and cross-border workers face difficulties when crossing the border for work.

Benefits for the EU

The full integration of Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen area can strengthen the EU's internal cohesion, enhance competitiveness and investments, and uphold the fundamental principles of free movement and solidarity that underpin the European project. Removing land border controls will facilitate the availability of transportation options and increase the opportunities for cross-border labour mobility, thereby also boosting the opportunities for higher productivity and economic output in the relevant cross-border regions.

'Attempts to enter Schengen have been going on for more than 10 years. We have fulfilled all the technical criteria mentioned in the Council's decision and we think that this is the right moment to take the next step [...] This is the right time to clearly say that by strengthening countries at the periphery, the economic development of the entire EU will accelerate – this is not just our regional issue,' Ms Mincheva concluded.

And at EU level, an important announcement was made by the head of the European Commission Representation in Bulgaria, Yordanka Chobanova: on 10 October, the Commission and the Hungarian presidency will propose to the Council to lift the land border control for Bulgaria and Romania.

Background

Since their accession to the EU, Bulgaria and Romania have been progressively implementing the Schengen legal framework. In 2011, the European Commission assessed that both countries were ready to join the Schengen area, based on their compliance with the necessary conditions for membership.

On 31 March 2024 – following the unanimous decision reached by the Council of the EU with Bulgaria and Romania on 30 December 2023 – internal air and maritime border controls in both countries were lifted, however, checks at internal land borders were maintained, and a definite date for their removal has not yet been established. Bulgaria's and Romania's full entry into the Schengen zone was blocked by Austria, which feared an increase of illegal immigration.



President Rumen Radev (bottom left) sitting opposite Yordanka Chobanova, head of the EU Representation in Bulgaria



OPENING OF THE LUNA FACILITY

**‘The Moon on
Earth’ in Cologne**

Training facility for astronautical and robotic missions to the moon

- The LUNA facility is designed to replicate conditions on the lunar surface.
- The research centre will prepare astronauts and robots for missions to the Moon.
- The joint DLR and ESA endeavour makes use of the space infrastructure and expertise available in the region and throughout Germany.
- Focus: Spaceflight, Moon, Exploration

The Moon now also exists on Earth – for the training of astronauts, the development of technologies and the preparation of long-term missions: The German Aerospace Center (Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt; DLR) and the European Space Agency ESA have now jointly established the LUNA research facility. The LUNA hall contains, among other things, a simulated lunar surface spanning an area of 700 square metres. It is filled with ‘Moon dust’, which is strikingly similar to actual lunar regolith. The rocks and boulders are modelled on lunar geology and a solar simulator recreates the lighting conditions on the Moon.

“LUNA will contribute to optimising our preparations for activities on the lunar surface through research into technologies and innovation for space exploration. This involves robotics as well as artificial intelligence, the utilisation of local resources and resource-conserving cycles all the way through to regenerative energy systems. LUNA provides a unique array of elements for scientific research and technological development under one roof. In its role as the ‘Moon on Earth’, LUNA will sustainably support activities on the Moon from Germany,” says Anke Kaysser-Pyzalla, Chair of the DLR Executive Board.

Minister-President of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia Hendrik Wüst: “Now it’s official: the road to the Moon runs through North Rhine-Westphalia. With the opening of the LUNA Analog Facility, Cologne is once again making space history. The globally unique training and technology centre shows how innovative research and international

cooperation are pushing the boundaries of what is possible. North Rhine-Westphalia is thus strengthening its position as a prime location for aerospace and making a significant contribution to driving technological innovation.”



© DLR/ESA

The LUNA Analog Facility

ESA Director General Josef Aschbacher says, “The opening of LUNA marks a significant milestone in Europe’s space exploration efforts. This unique facility, with its ability to replicate lunar conditions, advances our understanding of the Moon and prepares us for future missions. We are proud to lead this project, which positions Europe at the forefront of lunar exploration and beyond, while also fostering international collaboration in space research.”

Mona Neubaur, Minister for Economic Affairs, Industry, Climate Action and Energy of the State of North Rhine



© DLR

The LUNA Hall official ceremony in Cologne, Germany. From left: ESA astronaut Alexander Gerst, Mona Neubaur (Minister for Economic Affairs, Industry, Climate Action and Energy of the State of North Rhine Westphalia), Anna Christmann MdB (Federal Government Coordinator of German Aerospace Policy), Anke Kaysser-Pyzalla (Chair of the DLR Executive Board), Josef Aschbacher (ESA Director General) and Daniel Neuenschwander (ESA Director of Human and Robotic Exploration)



Westphalia: “Straight to the Moon from North Rhine-Westphalia: LUNA, the only lunar simulation facility of its kind in Europe, will make Cologne a major hub for spaceflight. Europe together with international partners is currently planning projects on the Moon and in near-Earth space - and one of the routes into space now starts in Cologne. We are particularly proud of this fascinating research facility which, in addition to providing sustainable means of preparing astronauts and technology for the exploration of the Moon, also offers innovative opportunities for the efficient utilisation of energy and materials. Supporting the establishment of the facility with state funds was therefore a major priority for us.”

Anna Christmann, Member of the German Bundestag and Federal Government Coordinator of German Aerospace Policy, emphasises: “The missions to the Moon are not only crucial for space exploration, but they also provide important insights that will help us address challenges and develop solutions on Earth: limited resources, climate change, public health in an ageing society and the restructuring of our energy and transport systems. With the LUNA Analog Facility in Cologne, we hold the key to the Moon in our hands and are paving the way for innovative and European lunar activities through the highly complex simulations it enables.”

Solar simulator, hidden ‘ice’ and Moon dust from NRW

LUNA has a lot to offer: Most of the floor is covered with a 60-centimetre-thick layer of regolith. An area three metres below ground level, which can even be frozen, allows drilling techniques to be tested. In future, it will be possible to carry out tests on an inclined plane on an adjustable ramp. This will be important to determine whether astronauts or rovers will be able to move

safely on inclined surfaces. The ‘Gravity Offloading System’ will soon simulate lunar gravity: To this end, trolleys and cable systems will be installed on the ceiling over the next few months so that astronauts or rovers are able to move as if they were on the moon weighing just one sixth of their actual weight. A number of artefacts are buried in the regolith, such as Plexiglas elements and a lava tube. The Plexiglas elements simulate water ice hidden beneath the surface of the moon, which can be explored using radar experiments.

The lava tube is a relevant localisation target for seismic experiments. The LUNA hall also includes a dust chamber in which protective measures against lunar dust can be investigated. The fine and sharp-edged regolith can cling to technological equipment and cause problems. The solar simulator is suitable for recreating the long, sharp, dark shadows cast in the polar regions of the Moon. The Moon’s south pole is particularly interesting because it is thought to harbour water ice in its ever-shadowy craters. The LUNA facility will also be connected to the data networks of the German Space Operations Centre (GSOC) in Oberpfaffenhofen, to which the DLR Microgravity User Support Center (MUSC) and the European Astronaut Centre (EAC) are also linked.

In future, GSOC will also be home to the Human Exploration Control Center (HECC), the European control centre for the future Artemis moon missions, creating a unique ecosystem for lunar missions.

The LUNA hall is expected to reach full operational status by 2026. “LUNA will support the exploration of the Moon by providing astronauts and researchers with a realistic operational

environment in which to train, test equipment and refine mission procedures. This will help ensure that the technologies and strategies to be used on the Moon are thoroughly tested and optimised beforehand,” says Thomas Uhlig, DLR LUNA Project Manager.

The regolith simulant in the hall was made from basalt and originates from a quarry in the Rhein-Sieg district of North Rhine-Westphalia. In terms of its chemical, physical and geotechnical properties, the mixture is very similar to the regolith that the Apollo astronauts brought back to Earth from the Mares regions. These areas can be recognised as brighter areas on the lunar surface. There are currently approximately 750 tonnes of regolith simulant in the LUNA hall. This will increase to 900 tonnes as soon as the final construction work on the ramp and dust chamber has been completed. The ‘Moon dust’ was delivered over weeks in large sacks and distributed throughout the hall.

Prepared for extended missions to the Moon: Neighbouring greenhouse and lounge area

The LUNA infrastructure also supports longer-term lunar missions: The FLEXHab, a living and recreation area for astronaut training missions, will be located next to the hall in future. In addition, the EDEN LUNA greenhouse will be brought to Cologne. The greenhouse supplied employees at Neumayer Station III in Antarctica with fresh food during the EDEN ISS project between 2018 to 2022. EDEN LUNA will be located next to the LUNA hall in Cologne next year following a refurbishment.

History of the LUNA facility

The initial concept of a lunar facility was the result of a study that began in 2013. Over the years, the concept developed into a very sophisticated and versatile facility. In 2022, the state of North Rhine-Westphalia pledged funding of 25 million euros. Construction work began the following year. ESA is financing the construction of the hall, while DLR, with the support of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Industry, Climate Action and Energy of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, is



© DLR/ESA

providing the technical equipment for the hall and the integrated lunar technology centre. A large part of the infrastructure as well as preparation rooms, laboratories and visitor rooms are housed here.

The LUNA facility will be available to national and international research institutions, space agencies, universities and student groups, industrial companies and start-ups wishing to conduct experiments and test campaigns.

The LUNA facility is located on the DLR site in Cologne in the immediate vicinity of the European Astronaut Centre (EAC), :envihab of the DLR Institute of Aerospace Medicine, the DLR Institute of Materials Physics in Space and MUSC. The existing space infrastructure and the technical expertise of the ESA and DLR institutions in the region flow into the activities of the LUNA facility. In addition, LUNA is linked to space control centres around the world via GSOC.

The DLR institutes for Future Fuels, Materials Research, Robotics and Mechatronics, Space Systems and DLR's Space Operations and Astronaut Training are also involved. The German Space Agency at DLR is involved in LUNA through its contribution to the ESA Exploration Programme.



© DLR/ESA

Mona Neubaur (Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Protection in North Rhine-Westphalia) in conversation with ESA astronaut Alexander Gerst at the opening of the LUNA facility



RETHINK THE DRINK

Non-alcoholic beverage trends

‘In vino veritas’, the old Latin saying that most of us have probably heard at least once, seems increasingly to be evolving into ‘in vino veritas, in aqua sanitas’ (in wine there is truth, in water there is good sense). Indeed, there is a marked decline in the consumption of alcoholic beverages, particularly among the newer generations, from the well-known Millennials and Generation Z onwards.

The history of alcohol consumption stretches back nearly 7,000 years, with evidence drawn from several ancient cultures. The earliest known chemical evidence of alcohol comes from pottery fragments unearthed at Jiahu, in northern China. The beverage, produced from fermented rice, honey, and fruits, is considered one of the earliest forms of alcohol. Evidence of early wine production has also been discovered in a Neolithic village in present-day Iran.

The ancient Egyptians were among the first to brew beer. In ancient Mesopotamia, beer was a staple in the daily diet and played a central role in religious and social activities. The ancient Greeks and Romans were renowned for their production and consumption of wine. It was the Romans who subsequently popularised wine across Europe.

Wine is frequently mentioned in ancient religious texts, including the Bible, and has been a part of religious rituals ever since.

Alcohol has been intrinsically linked with human civilisation for millennia. Beer is the most consumed alcoholic beverage globally, accounting for approximately 38 per cent of worldwide alcohol consumption. It is affordable, has a relatively low alcohol content, and has some nutritional value.

The leading beer-consuming countries include China, the United States, and Brazil. On the European continent, the Czech Republic has the highest per capita consumption of beer, with 136 litres, followed by Austria with 102 litres (Source: Statista).

However, in Europe, the most consumed alcoholic beverage is wine, particularly in countries such as France, Italy, and Spain, which are also some of the world's largest wine producers. In parts of Eastern and Central Europe, spirits are more commonly consumed, whereas in Northern Europe, beer remains the most popular choice.

Europe is home to some of the largest wine-producing regions in the world. Spain has the widest area of land dedicated to vineyards, even though its overall production volume is slightly lower than that of Italy or France. Italy is the biggest wine producer in Europe and the world, with famous regions such as Tuscany (Chianti), Veneto (Prosecco), and Piedmont (Barolo), producing around 50 million hectolitres each year.

France comes a close second, with some of the world's most prestigious wine regions, including Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Champagne. These three countries alone account for the majority of Europe's and a significant portion of the world's wine production.

However, in recent years the demand for non-alcoholic wines has been steadily growing worldwide, driven by a variety of factors related to changing lifestyle choices, increased health awareness, and evolving social trends.

The United States is one of the largest and fastest-growing markets for non-alcoholic wines. Health-conscious consumers, alongside a rising interest in the 'sober curious' movement, where



This image features part of the so-called "Banquet Plaques." In the middle register, an unidentified man and woman appear to be toasting with beer. Beer was a common dietary staple in ancient Mesopotamia.

individuals consciously choose to reduce or eliminate alcohol without fully abstaining, are driving this trend. Millennials and Generation Z, in particular, are opting for alcohol-free beverages more frequently, and this demographic shift is fuelling growth in the market.

Australia's non-alcoholic wine demand is driven by an increased focus on health, as well as campaigns encouraging the reduction of alcohol consumption. In the Middle East, where many countries have strict regulations on alcohol due to religious and cultural beliefs, non-alcoholic wine is becoming very popular among consumers looking for alternatives to traditional alcoholic beverages.



Organic Non-Alcoholic Wine

On our continent, the United Kingdom and Germany have particularly witnessed a significant surge in non-alcoholic wine consumption. The UK, known for its vibrant wine culture, is seeing increased demand for low and no-alcohol alternatives due to growing awareness of health benefits. Germany, a country



© HEINEKEN

with a well-established and strong relation to beer and non-alcoholic beer, is likewise increasingly embracing non-alcoholic wine.

Consumers are reducing their alcohol intake due to concerns over its negative effects on health. Many people are also turning to lower-calorie, lower-sugar alternatives but are unwilling to compromise on taste or the social aspect of drinking. There is now a growing social acceptance of people choosing alcohol-free drinks on different occasions. Non-alcoholic wines offer a way to participate in various social events, but without the after-effects of alcohol.

Over decades of research, new production techniques have significantly improved the taste and quality of non-alcoholic wines. Modern de-alcoholisation methods, such as vacuum distillation and reverse osmosis, retain most of the flavours and aromas of traditional wines that consumers are seeking.

In regions such as the Middle East or some African countries, where there are alcohol restrictions due to religious, cultural, or legal reasons, non-alcoholic wine provides a widely attractive option. As more people focus on preserving mental health and achieving a more balanced lifestyle, reducing alcohol consumption has become part of a larger trend towards living more mindfully.

Non-alcoholic beverages, particularly non-alcoholic beer and wine, are often considered healthier alternatives to their alcoholic counterparts. They are generally also lower in calories; a regular glass of wine or beer can contain from 100 to 250 calories, while non-alcoholic similar versions tend to have significantly fewer.

They often contain less sugar while avoiding the negative health impacts associated with alcohol, such as liver damage, heart disease, or an increased risk of developing cancers. It is now believed that regular alcohol intake can negatively affect mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, or disrupted sleep.

Non-alcoholic beverages do not impair cognitive or motor functions, making them a safe choice for 'drink-driving', and they also do not carry the risk

of developing addiction or dependency. Meanwhile, people trying to reduce or quit alcohol can still enjoy the taste and experience of wine or beer without risking a relapse.

Non-alcoholic beer can aid hydration, too, while alcoholic beverages are known to have a diuretic effect. Non-alcoholic beer contains minerals like potassium and magnesium, which help maintain proper electrolyte balance, especially after intense physical activity. Non-alcoholic wine retains some of the beneficial compounds found in the regular drink, such as resveratrol, which is an antioxidant linked to better heart health.

Non-alcoholic beverages do not cause hangovers, which are often a result of dehydration and the toxic by-products of alcohol metabolism. They are also a safer choice for pregnant women or people taking medication that is incompatible with alcohol.

While the quality of non-alcoholic beverages has greatly improved, some people still find them less tempting in terms of flavour or taste.

As mentioned earlier, millennials (born roughly between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) are both driving the movement towards non-alcoholic options because they place a higher emphasis on well-being, are more likely to prioritise healthy lifestyles, and are more open to trying new things, encouraged also by the increasing influence of social media trends.

They are equally less likely to associate heavy drinking with status or success, compared to previous generations. Meanwhile, non-alcoholic beverages are often marketed as sophisticated and premium products, making them attractive to a young audience.

These younger generations are more environmentally and ethically conscious. That is why many non-alcoholic beverage producers promote their products as being more sustainable or eco-friendly, aligning perfectly with their customers' values.

Slowly but surely, social norms around drinking are shifting.



© BANDBOX

Recent surveys show that each younger generation is drinking less alcohol compared to the previous one at the same age. For example, studies have shown that Generation Z is 20 percent less likely than millennials to drink alcohol.

Sober bars are rising in popularity, with 'mocktails' and other alcohol-free drinks on their daily menus. Traditionally, when the holiday season approaches, consumers stock up on food and drinks for parties and events with loved ones. In recent years, many wine and beverage companies have noticed a surprising change in consumer habits, namely a major increase in non-alcoholic beverage sales during the holidays.

At the same time, movements like 'Sober October', meant to prepare the body before the frequent excesses during the winter holidays, are increasingly fashionable, directing consumers towards non-alcoholic products. Naturally, 'Dry January', which takes place immediately after the end-of-year parties, is a natural continuation of this trend, perhaps having a direct connection with the traditional New Year's resolutions, when people set all kinds of goals and targets for the following year.

Many people thus want to start the new year on a healthy note, and non-alcoholic drinks offer them the right and available alternative. Believe it or not, today we can buy almost any kind of alcoholic drink in its non-alcoholic variety, from beer and wine to gin and whisky.

The alcohol-free wine market is smaller compared to non-alcoholic beer, at around 2.1 billion USD in 2023, but it is growing at a similar pace. Roughly 200 million litres of non-alcoholic wine are sold each year, with Europe and North America as the leading markets. The non-alcoholic wine market in Europe has been growing rapidly, with several well-known brands setting the trend and offering a wide variety of alcohol-free wines, including red, white, sparkling, and rosé.

One of the well-established wine producers in Spain, Torres is a renowned brand for both alcoholic and non-alcoholic wines. 'Natureo' is one of the most popular non-alcoholic wine lines in Europe, while Codorníu offers a range of non-alcoholic sparkling wines, already recognised for their excellent quality, using traditional cava-making methods before the alcohol is removed.

Lussory Premium is another Spanish brand specialising in premium non-alcoholic wines, with their Tempranillo and Chardonnay varieties being particularly popular among European consumers. Lussory wines are halal-certified, which adds to their appeal in regions with such strict requirements.

Sinzero, also Spanish, has gained popularity for its focus on high quality, using innovative techniques that maintain the aromas

and flavours of the original wines, while removing the alcohol.

The German brand Carl Jung, widely available across Europe, is one of the pioneers in the non-alcoholic wine industry, having developed a patented de-alcoholisation process in the early 20th century. A top German winemaker from the Rheingau region, Leitz produces some of the most highly regarded non-alcoholic wines in Europe. Their 'Eins-Zwei-Zero' range includes non-alcoholic Riesling, rosé, and sparkling wines, all known for retaining the aromatic profile of the regular versions.

Based in the famous Languedoc region of France, Pierre Chavin is a producer of high-end non-alcoholic wines, particularly known for its attention to detail and high quality.


The 'Perle' line offers sophisticated non-alcoholic sparkling wines produced following closely the same methods as those used for traditional sparkling wines.

Vintense is a Belgian brand that focuses exclusively on non-alcoholic wines. They offer a great variety, from Merlot, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, or rosé to sparkling wines, widely distributed across Europe and acknowledged for their good taste and affordability.

A UK-based brand that specialises in premium non-alcoholic sparkling wines, Wild Idol is considered more on the luxury side, with its products targeting consumers who want more elegant alcohol-free options.

In recent years, the growing demand for non-alcoholic wines, driven by health-conscious

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Showing straw yellow colour, fruity, with notes of apple, pear, fruits and floral.

© LUSSORYWINES



© PIERRE-CHAVIN

The Chavin Zéro range offers dealcoholised wine with 0.0% ABV. It is low in calories, free from preservatives, and contains no added flavours.

consumers, has led producers to refine and diversify their offerings, ensuring that the quality and taste of their wines remain high, despite the removal of alcohol content. Although some might think that alcohol-free wine is just grape juice, the non-alcoholic beverage market is proving itself able to offer a wide range of sophisticated options that almost completely mimic the taste of traditional alcoholic beverages and that are able to satisfy even the most complex and demanding requirements of informed consumers.

The market for these kinds of drinks is becoming more and more competitive. The World Alcohol-Free Awards is the only global beverage competition dedicated exclusively to non-alcoholic beverages. Lately, numerous stars and influencers, from Kylie Minogue and Katy Perry to Blake Lively or Bella Hadid, have added their names to non-alcoholic drinks, which they promote with conviction on social media.

In a world where health and mindful consumption are becoming paramount, non-alcoholic beverages offer a refreshing alternative to traditional drinks. Whether it's enjoying a crisp, alcohol-free wine at dinner, savouring the flavours of a craft non-alcoholic beer, or simply embracing a more balanced lifestyle, these beverages are no longer just substitutes; they're evolving into a category of their own, much regarded by the public.

With growing innovation, improved taste, and a rapidly expanding market, non-alcoholic drinks are also reshaping the way we socialise and celebrate, proving that the joy of raising a glass doesn't have to come from the alcohol itself.

We can still meet and enjoy a drink, even if it doesn't contain a few degrees of alcohol.

The question that remains is whether the traditional producers, the big players from the wine and beer industries, are willing to devote their attention and financial resources to finding ways to adapt to current trends, or if they are simply ready for this seemingly imminent 'revolution'.

Time will tell... Until then, cheers!

Alexandra Paucescu

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Kylie Minogue promoting her 0% non-alcoholic wine – a sparkling rosé

TIMELESS CHIC

STANDOUT FASHION AND BEAUTY TRENDS

‘SAD GIRL AUTUMN’

This season’s more melancholy trend

Decoding and inspirations around the current trend on social media

Autumn enthusiasts are eagerly awaiting the end of the Indian summer, to embrace their favourite season. The colourful trees will gradually shed their leaves, the chill in the air will intensify, and rain and mist will make their resurgence (although in much of Europe, rain is a constant companion). Pumpkins will adorn the scenery, and warm beverages will be savoured as we snuggle up to watch TV under a throw blanket.

A seasonal hashtag

It is within this distinct atmosphere that the trends and hashtags “cozy autumn,” “sad girl autumn,” or “sad girl fall” have emerged on social media, all reflecting the indescribable melancholy associated with autumn and the mass cultural (and marketing!) phenomena it inspires.

The power of the “aesthetic”

Nowadays, every trend has its own “aesthetic” - its codes, colours, and signature pieces - on social media. Beyond cable knit sweaters, Ugg boots, beanies, and turtlenecks, a specific chromatic palette emerges with warm oranges, browns, camels, and beiges...



© AWARE

(Not at all sad) Autumn inspirations



© UGG

Sheepskin boots with silky bows (Ugg)



© MONCLER

Down-panelled wool jacket (Moncler)



© BRUNELLO CUCINELLI

Cable-knit mohair-blend sweater (Brunello Cucinelli)



© AWARE

Houndstooth print jacket (Aware)



© HERMÈS

Beanie in knit cashmere with “Chaine d’Ancre” motif in relief (Hermès)

Loose-fitting wool pants (Nike)



© NIKE

Aim for a trio of collections

| Marc O'Polo - Gisele Bündchen

Supermodel, global icon, family-oriented individual, nature enthusiast, environmental activist, and health advocate—Gisele Bündchen embodies all of these qualities. Her conscious lifestyle and dedication to the environment resonate with the timeless and thoughtful aesthetic of Marc O'Polo, where style harmonises with responsibility.

Our crush: This stand-up collar sweater loose made from a soft alpaca wool mix. (marco-o-polo.com)



© MARC O'POLO



© UNIQLO



| Uniqlo - Comptoir des Cotonniers

International clothing brand Uniqlo has introduced a collection in collaboration with the French brand Comptoir des Cotonniers, blending refined elegance with a colour palette characteristic of Parisian style. This capsule collection fuses Uniqlo's "lifewear" ethos with Comptoir des Cotonniers' dedication to natural materials.

Our crush: This wide-wale corduroy which offers a relaxed, casual look. (uniqlo.com)

| Vero Moda - Josephine Skriver

Josephine Skriver is not just a Danish fashion icon; she is also an ambassador for PlanBørnefonden, a charity dedicated to ensuring that every child has equal rights. This autumn, she returns with a new collection in collaboration with the Danish brand Vero Moda. This capsule collection reflects the changing seasons and embodies durability, minimalism, and timeless pieces designed for everyday elegance.

Our crush: This fitted midi-dress with a turtleneck. (veromoda.com)



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