

## Catch up: America beats jobs forecast; Trump sentenced in hush-money case



**America's economy** added 256,000 jobs in December, the biggest monthly increase since March. The unemployment rate also fell to 4.1%. Economists had expected the economy to add 155,000 jobs. The figures will reinforce the Federal Reserve's case for [holding interest rates steady](#) after cutting them by a full percentage point last year.

**Donald Trump** received no jail time over his hush-money conviction in New York. The president-elect was given an “unconditional discharge” by Judge Juan Merchan, who said that the legal protection of the presidency did not “reduce the seriousness of the crime”. Mr Trump's lawyers had asked the Supreme Court to intervene to delay the hearing, arguing that sentencing him before his [inauguration](#) would threaten national security.

During a hearing on Friday America's Supreme Court justices seemed inclined to [uphold a law](#) requiring **TikTok** to be sold by ByteDance, its Chinese owner, or to shut down by January 19th.

The justices, who have just days to make a decision, are considering whether TikTok's Chinese origin poses a national-security threat. TikTok argues that the law violates free-speech rights.

**Israel** bombed two ports and a power station in **Houthi**-controlled parts of **Yemen**. Houthi-affiliated media said that one person was killed and nine injured. Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, said that the attacks were retaliation for the [Iran-backed rebel group's](#) strikes on his country and cargo ships in the Red Sea, which began shortly after October 7th 2023.

**America** announced sanctions on **Russia's oil exports**. The measures will be imposed on Gazprom Neft and Surgutneftegas, two oil producers, as well as dozens of traders and government officials. They will also target 183 ships involved in [delivering Russian fuel](#). Brent crude, the international oil benchmark, rose to a three-month high on the news.

**Constellation Energy**, an American power-generation firm, said it would acquire **Calpine**. The cash-and-stock deal, which values Calpine at nearly \$27bn, will see Constellation pay \$16.4bn for its smaller rival. The businesses said they would form "the nation's largest clean energy provider". Growing [demand for electricity](#), driven by the artificial-intelligence boom, has caused Constellation's shares to more than double over the last year.

Shares in **Bloks Group** soared after the company listed on Hong Kong's stock exchange. The debut raised \$215m for the Chinese toymaker and made its founder, Zhu Weisong, a billionaire. The company produces figurines of characters from children's TV programmes. The listing reflects the toy market's strong performance in recent years, which has been driven by growing numbers of [adult collectors](#).

**Word of the week:** *Lepénisation*, the spread of the core ideas of Jean-Marie Le Pen, a far-right French politician who died this week. [Read the full story.](#)

# Lifting sanctions on Syria



This week America announced limited exemptions on its economic measures against Syria, almost one month after the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. The Treasury [issued licenses](#)—temporary waivers, valid for six months—which allow companies to do business with the new Syrian government and to provide the country with electricity and fuel. None of America’s sanctions on Syria were lifted. But the Treasury said the licenses would help improve “essential services” and the “continuity of governance functions”.

Yet Syria will need more than piecemeal exemptions if it is to recover. Donald Trump’s arrival in the White House could delay sanctions relief; the European Union may move faster, and could start by unwinding measures against Syrian banks and the national airline. But a separate, trickier debate will take place over whether America, the EU and the United Nations should lift their designations of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the rebel group largely responsible for toppling Mr Assad, as a terrorist organisation.

## Germany's hard-right party convenes



Last June, the congress of the hard-right [Alternative for Germany](#) (AfD) drew 100,000 protesters to the moderate western city of Essen. On Saturday the party will convene on safer ground: the town of Riesa, in its eastern heartland of Saxony. Dominating the agenda will be next month's federal elections. These were called after the government of Chancellor Olaf Scholz, a Social Democrat, collapsed in November. The AfD plans to nominate Alice Weidel, its co-leader, for the chancellorship. It will also split from its youth wing, whose designation by federal authorities as an extremist group could be inconvenient.

The AfD is riding an international wave of anti-immigrant politics. Polls put its vote share at 20%, far behind the centre-right Christian Democrats but ahead of the Social Democrats and Greens. [Elon Musk has vigorously backed the AfD](#). But the American billionaire's intervention might end up hurting the party by galvanising its opponents.

# A bloated Wild Card Weekend



Wild Card Weekend kicks off on Saturday in America's [National Football League](#). In a series of games, played across the country, six of the teams that did not finish first in their division will have a chance to move on to the next round of playoffs for the Super Bowl championship.

The league has faced criticism in recent years for tweaks it has made to its wild-card format. Since 2020 it has allowed 14, rather than 12, teams the chance to qualify for the playoffs overall; six, rather than four, games are played in the wild-card round. In recent years the NFL, the world's most profitable sports league, has made it a priority to further beef up its viewership and revenue.

Proponents of the expanded competition say that more teams playing more games adds excitement to one of America's most popular sports weekends. But some fans argue that it is instead rewarding mediocre teams—and lowering the quality of the games played.



## One Beatle's ode to country music



“Look Up”, Ringo Starr’s new solo album, is released this weekend. The 84-year-old’s country collection follows [a revival of the genre](#) by younger stars. But the [former Beatle](#) is not jumping on the bandwagon: he was a devotee long before most newcomers were born. His stage name was inspired by Western movies and the much-mythologised outlaw Johnny Ringo. His spotlight piece during Beatles shows was a cover of Buck Owens’s first number-one country hit, “Act Naturally”. And his second solo album, “Beaucoups Of Blues” (1970), was country through-and-through.

His 21st is produced and chiefly written by T Bone Burnett, a pioneer of modern Americana music. It is among Mr Starr’s strongest recent work, and he sounds at ease. Many songs recall the smoother style of country music that was popular in the early 1970s—with a few Beatlesque flourishes, just to remind listeners whose name hangs over the ranch door.

## Weekend profile: Herbert Kickl, Austria's hard-right ideologue



The prospect of Herbert Kickl, the leader of the hard-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), running Austria alarms centrists in the Alpine republic and its European neighbours. But his leadership [could soon be reality](#). After talks to form a three-party coalition without the FPÖ collapsed on January 3rd, the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) said it would enter coalition talks with the FPÖ. Tens of thousands of Austrians took to the streets on January 9th to protest against the prospect of a government led by Mr Kickl.

The short, bespectacled man causing such concern was born in 1968 in Villach, in Austria's south. An only child in a working-class family, he was a good student, interested in all things military—including cargo pants. But he never finished a philosophy degree at Vienna University, nor his military service. At 27 he joined the FPÖ and became a disciple of Jörg Haider, the party's charismatic leader from 1986 to 2000. He was a speechwriter for Mr Haider, and came up with some of the party's nastiest nativist, anti-Islamic slogans.



Mr Haider quit the FPÖ in a huff to set up a new party in 2005. The FPÖ picked as its new leader Heinz-Christian Strache, a jolly, slap-on-the-back politician. Mr Strache's lack of political nous, however, made it easy for Mr Kickl to pull strings behind the scenes. In 2019 Mr Strache was caught up in a corruption scandal, which triggered the fall of the coalition government. Mr Strache was kicked out of the party, and the disciplined but comparatively dull Mr Kickl rose to become its leader. An avid triathlete, he prefers water to beer, is scrupulous with his finances and is said to be uninterested in getting rich.

The FPÖ made Mr Kickl. He has in turn remade the FPÖ into a xenophobic, homophobic, anti-Islam and Eurosceptic party. He has praised Europe's "identitarian" movement, a home-grown equivalent of America's alt-right. And the FPÖ struck a friendship treaty with [Vladimir Putin's](#) party United Russia in 2016 and steered a pro-Kremlin course even after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The party's 92-page manifesto is titled "Fortress Austria". It calls for suspending the right to asylum (which would breach EU law), cutting benefits for immigrants, creating processing centres for migrants in third countries outside of the EU and stopping payments to the EU if it fails to police its external borders.

Few Austrian voters seem enamoured with Mr Kickl himself. Still, they are voting for the party. In September the FPÖ came first with 29% of the vote. According to polls, it would receive around 37% if elections were held today. Mr Kickl has wanted for years to be *Volkskanzler*, a peoples' chancellor, a term tainted by the Nazis' use of it for Adolf Hitler. Until recently he probably thought his best chance would come in 2029, when the next elections had been due. It is now likely to happen much sooner.

# Weekly crossword



Our crossword has two sets of clues, one for seasoned cruciverbalists and the other for less experienced solvers. Both give the same answers, all of which feature in articles in this week's edition of *The Economist*:

## Cryptic clues

*1 down* Fiery gale, no less, leads to devastation here (3,7)

*1 across* Buffalo calf hides nearby (5)

*2 across* Heads of nearly all vessels yield to armada (4)

*3 across* Keen, with hesitation, to get dry (5)

## Factual clues

*1 down* City hit by multiple wildfires (3,7)

*1 across* Type of business that is outplaying Amazon in the global south (5)

*2 across* One of the branches of the military (4)

*3 across* How nearly one-third of Americans plan to get through the month (5)

Email all four answers, along with your home city and country, by 9am GMT on Monday to [crossword@economist.com](mailto:crossword@economist.com). We will pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners in next week's edition.

# The winners of this week's quiz



*The Economist*

Thank you to everyone who took part in this week's quiz. The winners, chosen at random, were:

**Peter Pas**, Sevenoaks, Britain

**Jorge Ferrando**, Zapallar, Chile

**Astrid Ahlgren**, Ottawa, Canada

They all gave the correct answers of: Lee Majors, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, Free Trade Agreement, Carnegie Hall and the Gateway Arch. The theme is words ending in way: leeway, halfway, freeway, hallway and archway.

The questions were:

**Monday:** Which actor played "The Six Million Dollar Man" in the 1970s TV show?

**Tuesday:** What was the title of the sixth book in the Harry Potter series?

**Wednesday:** What do the initials FTA stand for in economics?

**Thursday:** Which concert venue is based at 881 Seventh Avenue

in New York?

**Friday:** Eero Saarinen designed which notable feature in St Louis?

# Lepénisation

*The spread of the core ideas of Jean-Marie Le Pen, a far-right French politician who died this week.  
Read the full story.*



**When the sword is once drawn, the  
passions of men observe no bounds of  
moderation.**

*Alexander Hamilton*