

## Catch up: Starmer convenes “coalition of the willing”; America kills IS commander



Sir Keir Starmer, **Britain's** prime minister, chaired a virtual meeting of European leaders and other allies of Ukraine. [Sir Keir](#) accused Russia of “dithering and delay” over Donald Trump’s ceasefire proposal and stated that Ukraine must be able to “deter future Russian aggression”. He said that a “coalition of the willing” would send officials from their armed forces to London on Thursday to discuss operational details of how to secure an eventual peace deal.

Earlier, **Mr Trump** had called talks between Vladimir Putin and Steve Witkoff, America’s envoy to the Middle East, “good and productive”. Mr Witkoff met Russia’s president in Moscow on Thursday to discuss a [ceasefire](#) in Ukraine. Mr Putin later issued a long list of conditions for Russia to agree to the 30-day truce.

American and Iraqi forces killed an **Islamic State** commander in an air strike in western Iraq. Abdallah Makki Muslih al-Rifai, known as Abu Khadijah, led the [terrorist organisation's](#) most senior decision-making group, according to America’s Central Command.

He was also responsible for much of the organisation's global finances. Another member of IS was also killed in the strike.

Hours before **America's government** was due to **shut down**, enough Senate Democrats joined Republicans to pass a spending bill that extends funding until the end of September. On Thursday Chuck Schumer, the Democrats' leader in the upper chamber, surprised many in his party by announcing that he would vote for the bill, arguing that a government shutdown would cede more control to Donald Trump.

**America** declared **South Africa's** ambassador in Washington to be persona non grata, in effect expelling him. Marco Rubio, America's secretary of state, accused Ebrahim Rasool of "race baiting" and [hating Donald Trump](#) and America. Mr Rasool recently attributed MAGA's popularity to the prospect of whites becoming a minority in America, and criticised Elon Musk's support for hard-right parties in Europe.

Fitch maintained **France's** credit rating as AA- and affirmed a negative outlook for the country's public finances. The ratings agency also forecast that [France's sovereign debt](#) would grow to more than 120% of GDP by the end of 2028. Fitch lowered France's credit rating from AA in 2023 when political opposition stymied the government's efforts to reduce the country's deficit.

**America's** justice department is investigating whether last year's [pro-Palestinian protesters at Columbia University](#) violated "terrorism crimes", said Todd Blanche, the deputy attorney-general. An investigation was under way into allegations that the university had been "harbouring and concealing" illegal immigrants on its campus, he added. Immigration officials arrested two protesters this week; a third voluntarily left America after her visa was revoked.

**Word of the week:** *Fulul*, a term used by Syrians to refer to the remnants of the Assad regime. [Read the full story.](#)

# The backlash against Tesla



On Saturday protesters will gather outside a Tesla showroom in London. Similar “TeslaTakedown” demonstrations have taken place in America and elsewhere in Europe. Protesters are angry that [Elon Musk](#), the electric-vehicle maker’s boss, is [backing far-right parties in Europe](#) and helping the Trump administration [slash spending](#). Some have smashed showroom windows and vandalised vehicles.

Tesla’s shares soared in November, when investors bet that Mr Musk’s support for Donald Trump’s re-election would be good for business. But now the firm’s sales are falling and its share price has slumped. The anti-Musk mood is [just one of the carmaker’s problems](#). Tesla relies on two models, the 3 and Y, for most of its sales. Global giants like Toyota have many more to satisfy all parts of the market. Competition from established carmakers and Chinese newcomers is heating up, too. And even Mr Musk admits that in attempting to manage Tesla and his other businesses alongside the [Department of Government Efficiency](#) he is perhaps spreading himself thin.

# Romania's toss-up election



Romania's original presidential election took place in November, but voters are still awaiting a new leader. Calin Georgescu, a pro-Russia conspiracy theorist, unexpectedly came top in the first round. But the constitutional court [annulled the vote](#), implying allegations of manipulation by Russia. In February he was placed under investigation for illegal campaign financing. The race will be re-run in May. Saturday is the deadline for politicians to register their candidacies.

Mr Georgescu will not be among them. Recently he was leading in the polls but on March 11<sup>th</sup> the constitutional court rejected his appeal against a ban on his candidacy. Without him there is no clear front-runner. Candidates include Crin Antonescu, backed by the ruling parties of the centre right and centre left; Victor Ponta, a former prime minister who is playing a nationalist card; and probably George Simion, a populist who admires Italy's Giorgia Meloni, who hopes to scoop up Mr Georgescu's supporters.



# Europeans meet China's boy hero



Movie-goers in Europe will soon get to see what all the fuss is about with “[Ne Zha 2](#)”, a film that has been breaking box-office records in China. It opens in cinemas across Europe, including Britain, next week. Featuring a lovable “demon boy”, the film is the most successful animated feature ever made anywhere—and the sixth-highest-grossing film of all time, behind two “Avatars”, an “Avengers”, a “Star Wars” and “Titanic”.

That is exalted company. Will Europeans care? The film is cute and brilliantly animated. But not only is its title hard for non-Chinese-speakers to pronounce (try: nuh-jah), its themes—rooted in a 16th-century novel—are very Chinese. The boy hero battles monsters and immortals on a quest to save his friend. A warm reception from Europeans would bode well for the potential of Chinese soft power.

# Ferrari and Lewis Hamilton start their engine



Lewis Hamilton's decision last year to [leave Mercedes](#) after 12 seasons and join Ferrari initially puzzled Formula One fans. Ferrari have not won the F1 drivers' championship since 2007. Money may be one reason why Mr Hamilton switched cars. Now 40 years old and nearing the end of his driving career, he is reportedly getting €65m (\$70m) a year from Ferrari. (Fiat, part of a group whose biggest shareholder part-owns *The Economist's* parent company, owns a stake in Ferrari.)

Helpfully, Ferrari are looking more competitive than they have been for years. The Italians finished second in the constructors' championship in 2024 and ahead of Red Bull for the first time since 2019. Mr Hamilton's first chance to show what he and Ferrari can do will come at the season-opening Australian Grand Prix this weekend. He may also simply wish to enjoy the ride: Mr Hamilton recently gushed about the "magic" at the team's pre-season training.

## Weekend profile: Jared Isaacman, the high-school dropout who will lead NASA



In 2021 Jared Isaacman bought a 30-second Super Bowl ad. The 42-year-old billionaire was looking for a lucky member of the public to join him on a privately funded space flight. Any interested viewer who donated to a children's hospital in Tennessee had a chance to win a seat alongside him on one of SpaceX's Dragon spacecraft.

The boyish-looking Mr Isaacman, a jet pilot and one-time owner of the world's biggest private air force, was no mere dilettante on a joyride. He is a space enthusiast who believes humanity's destiny is to colonise the solar system, and who is happy to spend his own money to help make it happen.

If confirmed by the Senate as [NASA's boss](#), however, he will be stuck flying a desk for the foreseeable future. Like many of Donald Trump's appointments, he is an outsider to the agency he will take charge of. He is not a conspiracy theorist or MAGA radical. But he is likely to push through big changes at an organisation that has

devolved into a vehicle for barrelling pork to contractors as much as an enterprise dedicated to exploring space.

Mr Isaacman grew up in New Jersey. The youngest by eight years of four siblings, he was jealous of their adult freedoms while he was still stuck in school. At 16 he dropped out to work at a payment-processing firm, but soon realised he could streamline the clunky process of setting retailers up with credit-card terminals. He left to start a rival firm from his parents' basement. These days Shift4 Payments is worth \$8bn and employs around 4,000 people.

As a teenage entrepreneur Mr Isaacman worked himself hard and decided he needed a hobby. He drove to a local airport and signed up for flying lessons. That would eventually spawn another business. Draken International, which was sold to Blackstone in 2020, uses surplus military jets to provide training services to America's air force.

Mr Isaacman's entrepreneurial experience will influence what he does with NASA. He dislikes the "Old Space" establishment: big firms such as Lockheed Martin or Boeing, which receive billions from NASA to build rockets and satellites. He puts his faith instead in a newer generation of space startups and will probably throw his weight behind the insurgents. But rumours in Washington that Mr Trump's first budget will require [huge cuts](#) to NASA's science spending could require closing down things like [space telescopes](#) and [Mars probes](#).

The biggest question is the extent to which Mr Isaacman will prove to be his own man, rather than simply a cipher for the views of [Elon Musk](#), a presidential confidante, SpaceX's boss and a fellow supporter of colonising the solar system. Mr Musk stands to benefit personally from a change of direction at NASA. Navigating such potential conflicts of interest may prove just as hard as piloting a fighter jet.



# Weekly crossword



We now publish an interactive edition of our crossword, allowing you to enter and check the answers, and see explanations, instantly. Try it [here](#). Or, if you prefer to do things the old-fashioned way, use the grid below.

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* Best contests are confusing for important secretary (5,7)
- 1 across* Country in the bottom left-hand corner of Paradise (6)
- 2 across* Move to the end of Egypt to save money (6)
- 3 across* Is the Financial Times fair about trade policy? (6)

## Factual clues

- 1 down* Trump administration proponent of a strong dollar (5,7)
- 1 across* Where all eight parties in Parliament have agreed to raise defence spending (6)

2 across What South Africa's government failed to pass this week (6)

3 across Tax the Coalition for a Prosperous America favours (6)

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:

**Dave Halton**, Wigan, England

**Ella Rich**, Peachtree Corners, Georgia, America

**Nuno Ibérico**, Lisbon, Portugal

They all gave the correct answers of swimming pool, Picnic at Hanging Rock, Uruguay round, kitchen debates and coffee. The theme is types of table: pool table, picnic table, round table, kitchen table and coffee table.

The questions were:

**Monday:** What must be at least 50 metres long and 25 metres wide to be used in the Olympics?

**Tuesday:** Which 1975 Australian film, directed by Peter Weir, concerns the disappearance of a group of schoolgirls?

**Wednesday:** What term, linked to a South American country, was used to describe the series of negotiations that led to the

establishment of the World Trade Organisation?

**Thursday:** What term was given to the series of discussions between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow in 1959?

**Friday:** Lungo and doppio are both types of which drink?





**Experience is the teacher of all things.**

*Julius Caesar*