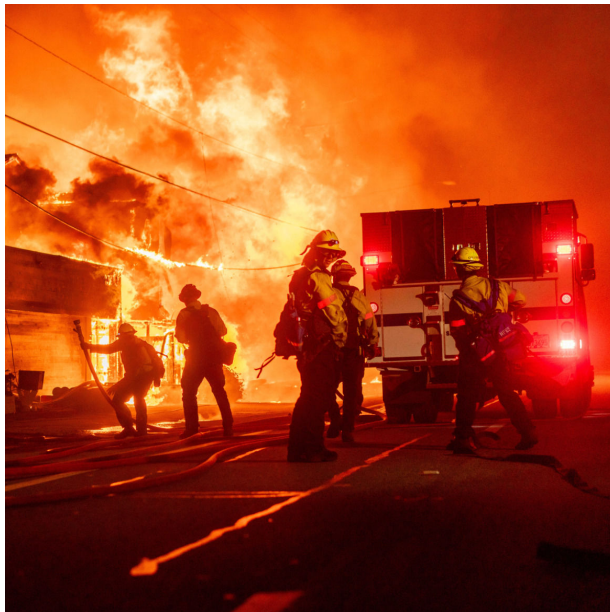


## Catch up: LA's blaze changes course; Ukraine captures North Korean soldiers



Planes dropped water and fire retardant over Pacific Palisades, a neighbourhood in **Los Angeles**, in a bid stop the eastward spread of devastating wildfires. On Saturday the biggest of the [six simultaneous blazes](#) lurched westwards, threatening new areas. At least 16 people have died; some 12,000 buildings [burned down](#). Warnings of high winds between Sunday and Tuesday threatened to further complicate firefighting efforts.

**Ukraine** said it had captured two wounded **North Korean soldiers** in the Russian region of Kursk. President Volodymyr Zelensky claimed that this was a rare feat because wounded North Koreans would usually be killed by their own side “to erase any evidence” of the country’s [involvement in the war](#)—a deployment that Ukrainian and Western sources estimate at 11,000 troops.

Nippon Steel said that America’s Committee on Foreign Investment extended the deadline for it to abandon its attempt to buy **US Steel**. The Japanese firm was to drop the deal, worth \$14bn, by February 2nd after President Joe Biden issued an

executive order blocking it on January 3rd. Nippon filed an objection with CFIUS. [It will now have](#) until June 18th to save the takeover.

[Jack Smith](#), the special counsel who spent two years pursuing **Donald Trump**, resigned from America's Justice Department. Mr Smith brought two of the four criminal cases against Mr Trump but dropped them both after America's election, citing a longstanding rule against prosecuting sitting presidents. Separately, Mr Trump was sentenced for 34 counts of falsifying documents on Friday, but was not given prison time or a fine.

The black boxes on the **Jeju Air flight** that crashed in South Korea on December 29th stopped recording in the crucial final four minutes. The country's transport ministry said it would investigate why the flight data and cockpit voice-recorders on the Boeing 737-800 had stopped working. Only two of the 181 people on board survived the crash, making it South Korea's [worst aviation disaster](#) in decades.

The **Sudanese** national army retook Wad Madani, the capital of Gezira state, from the Rapid Support Forces. The paramilitary group, which has been fighting against the Sudanese Armed Forces for nearly two years, had captured the city over a year earlier. Last week America said that the RSF had committed genocide in the western region of Darfur and imposed sanctions on Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, its leader.

**Germany** tugged a drifting Russian oil tanker—believed to be part of [Russia's "shadow fleet"](#) of old ships used to dodge sanctions—off its Baltic coast to safer waters. The heavily-loaded Eventin was discovered after a power outage near the island of Rügen on Friday evening. Germany's foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, called it a threat to the region's security and tourism.

**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.](#)

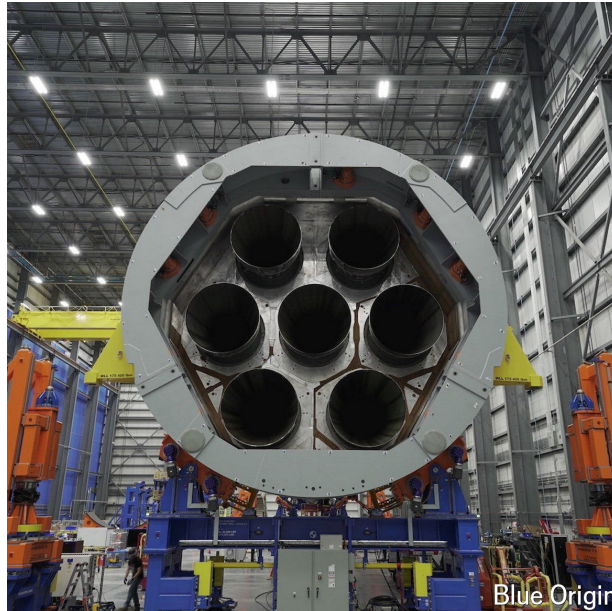
# A bellwether vote in Croatia



On Sunday Croatia holds the second round of its presidential election. The brash, left-leaning incumbent, Zoran Milanovic, will probably secure a second term. He trounced his conservative opponent, Dragan Primorac, by 30 points in first-round voting on December 29th. Mr Primorac is backed by the prime minister, Andrej Plenkovic. That may not have helped his campaign: the ruling Croatian Democratic Union party has been wracked by corruption scandals (the prime minister denies wrongdoing). Voters are fed up with high inflation, too.

The vote is also a barometer of opinion about Russia. Mr Milanovic has condemned its invasion of Ukraine. But he criticises arms shipments to the embattled country and has prevented Croatia from training Ukrainian soldiers. He is a critic of the European Union and NATO. Mr Primorac has called him a “pro-Russian puppet”. A landslide win for Mr Milanovic would indicate growing support for accommodating [Russia](#).

# Bezos chases Musk in the space race



Blue Origin, a rocket firm owned by Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, is trying to reach orbit for the first time. The firm's New Glenn rocket was set to blast off from Florida on Sunday, but poor weather moved the launch to Monday. Space (rather than online retail) is Mr Bezos's passion. He has [advocated](#) moving humanity into space-going cities, allowing the population to rise to a trillion and leaving Earth as a nature reserve.

But until now Blue Origin has had to content itself with flying tourists on sightseeing trips to the edge of space. New Glenn will allow the firm to compete in the commercial launch market, which is currently dominated by SpaceX, Elon Musk's rocket company. Blue Origin is trying to catch up. It has signed a deal to launch satellites for Amazon's new Kuiper satellite-internet service. Moreover it is building a moon lander for NASA, and has plans for a [private space station](#).

# Breaching the “Paris” temperature limit



It is official: 2024 was the [hottest year on record](#), according to assessments released this week by groups that monitor the world's climate. Last year one of the five main data sets measuring average global temperature showed that it was more than 1.5°C above the pre-industrial level. This year three did.

1.5°C has taken on an iconic value. In 2015 governments met in Paris and pledged to limit warming to that level. A single year of data is probably insufficient to judge success or failure in doing so, but 2024 made clear that there is [no plausible scenario](#) in which the limit will not be breached before too long. Last year built off a remarkable 2023, when El Niño, a weather pattern that temporarily raises global temperatures while redistributing heat and moisture around the world, kicked in. With that El Niño now over, scientists reckon that 2025 will be the third hottest year—cooler than the previous two, but warmer than anything that came before.



# The mental health of chief executives



Earnings calls give investors an insight into a company's performance. They could also shed light on the chief executive's mental health. Surveys have suggested that one in four bosses have depression or anxiety. Now researchers claim to have designed an AI system that assesses whether a boss is depressed by analysing their voice during public conference calls.

A machine learning model, trained on interviews with 189 non-CEOs, 65 of whom suffered from depression, identified vocal characteristics, such as lower pitch and longer pauses, that could indicate depression. The model then analysed bosses' presentations on earnings calls. The study found that female and older chief executives were less likely to be depressed. Perhaps surprisingly, bosses whose jobs seemed more demanding, because of their firm's size or because of other factors, such as restructuring, were also less depressed. But chief executives of firms that missed analysts' earnings forecasts were more likely to show signs of depression.

# Tennis reels from doping scandals



The best men's tennis player in the world, Italy's Jannik Sinner, is the favourite for this year's Australian Open, which begins on Sunday. His biggest rivals, Spain's Carlos Alcaraz and Serbia's Novak Djokovic, are in the other half of the draw. Still, a success in Melbourne could be Mr Sinner's last for a while. In March 2024 two drug tests found a banned steroid in his system. Tennis authorities accepted Mr Sinner's explanation that he did not know he had been exposed to the substance. But the World Anti-Doping Agency is appealing the decision and seeking a ban of up to two years.

A doping scandal has rocked the women's game, too. In Melbourne Iga Swiatek of Poland will play her first grand slam since serving a one-month suspension for taking a banned substance. Authorities accepted she had done so unknowingly. She is among the favourites for the tournament, along with Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus, the defending champion, and [Coco Gauff](#) of America.



# 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*