

Catch up: Rebels declare Damascus “free”; South Korea arrests former defence minister



Rebel forces in **Syria** claimed to have captured Damascus, the capital. They declared it “free of the tyrant, [Bashar al-Assad](#)”. The president reportedly fled by plane. Crowds gathered to celebrate on the streets of Damascus and Aleppo, Syria’s second city. The leader of HTS, an Islamist militant group, said public institutions will “remain under the supervision of the former prime minister until they are officially handed over”. Earlier rebels in the north-west who began [a surprise offensive](#) on November 27th announced they had “fully liberated” the city of Homs, a strategically important city and Syria’s third-largest.

South Korean prosecutors arrested Kim Yong-Hyun, a former defence minister, over his role in a short-lived coup attempt by Yoon Suk Yeol, the president. Mr Yoon had declared martial law on December 3rd, rescinding it a few hours later. On Saturday a parliamentary motion to [impeach him](#) failed, to the dismay of thousands of protesters outside the National Assembly.

Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, told **Donald Trump** that any settlement with Russia must be “just” during three-way talks with Emmanuel Macron, France's president. The leaders had converged in Paris for the reopening of [Notre Dame cathedral](#). Hours after the meeting, Joe Biden's administration announced a new military-assistance package worth \$988m for Ukraine. Mr Trump once promised to [end Russia's war](#) in 24 hours.

The Alternative for Germany nominated one of its co-leaders, **Alice Weidel**, as its first-ever candidate for chancellor in an election expected to take place in February. The governing three-party coalition collapsed last month. Formed 11 years ago the AfD, the furthest-right of the seven political parties in the Bundestag, lies [second in the polls](#) behind the centre-right Christian Democratic Union. The CDU's [Friedrich Merz](#) is favourite to become the next chancellor.

Calin Georgescu, the far-right, pro-Russian front-runner in **Romania's** presidential election, said the country's democracy was under attack. His comments followed a top court's decision to annul the first round of the election. On Wednesday declassified intelligence alleged Mr Georgescu's social-media campaigns were orchestrated by Russia. The second round, originally scheduled for December 8th, has been cancelled.

Pope Francis created 21 new cardinals from 17 countries at [an event at the Vatican](#). Their elevation increases the proportion of cardinals from outside the rich world. Those under the age of 80 when Francis retires or dies can take part in the conclave, the assembly at which the next pope will be chosen. Given that Francis is 87 and uses a wheelchair, talk about his retirement is getting louder.

A pair of ruby slippers worn by [Judy Garland](#) in “**The Wizard of Oz**”, a film from 1939, sold for \$28m at auction in America—\$25m more than the estimate. They became the most expensive

piece of entertainment memorabilia ever sold. The sale perhaps benefited from the success of “[Wicked](#)”, a film about two witches from “The Wizard of Oz”, which broke three box-office records when released in November.

Word of the week: Russionia, a mystical land in “The Plot Against the King”, a picture book by Kash Patel, Donald Trump’s candidate to run the FBI. [Read the full story.](#)

India's pragmatic Russian partnership



[Russia's war in Ukraine](#) has made it a pariah in the West. But the country remains far from isolated on the world stage. This will be evident on Sunday when Rajnath Singh, India's defence minister, is expected to travel to Russia. He will visit Moscow, the capital, and Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave wedged between Poland and Lithuania.

India and Russia have maintained [close economic, military and diplomatic ties](#) since the cold war. For India, aligning with Russia offers several advantages. Strategically it helps to curb Russia's tilt toward China, India's rival in a border dispute. It brings material benefits too: in July India surpassed China as the largest buyer of Russian oil, which it purchases at a deep discount. India also relies on Russia to maintain its armed forces, which include Soviet-era jets and tanks, and for co-operation on nuclear-powered submarines. Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, is due to visit India in 2025. He can expect a warm welcome.

Romania's annulled election



Romanians were supposed to be voting today in the second round of their presidential elections, but some may be protesting instead. They have been riled by a decision by Romania's constitutional court to annul the results of the first round after claims by the security services that Russia had carried out a "hybrid attack" to influence them. Three weeks ago Calin Georgescu, a far-right nationalist who wants to cut aid to Ukraine, was garnering just 5% in polls. After a massive, TikTok-inspired social-media campaign he came first in the first round with 23% of the vote. That poll must now be rerun.

Support for mainstream parties has long been eroding. Many Romanians feel angry about self-serving elites at home and humiliated as second-class citizens when living abroad. Mr Georgescu and far-right supporters say a coup has taken place. But opponents counter that Romania is the first European country to take drastic action in the face of blatant Russian meddling.

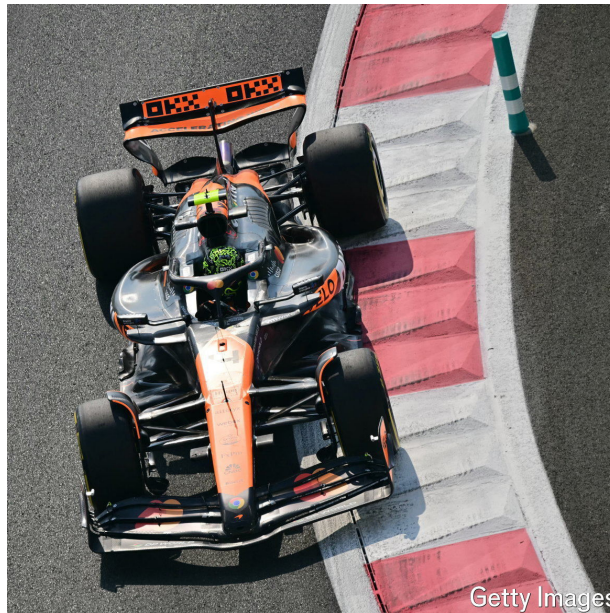
America's gambling craze



At the weekend many Americans tune in to watch their favourite sports team. Increasing numbers are having a flutter, too. A [betting craze](#) is sweeping over the country: Americans are set to wager nearly \$150bn on sports this year, compared with just \$7bn in 2018. And it's not just sports. Another \$80bn is being wagered in online casinos; physical casinos are spreading, too.

The overturning of gambling bans, the rise of betting apps and America's booming economy all explain the rise. Many will view it with concern: gambling addiction is, for some, a ruinous addiction. But the boom should, mainly, be [celebrated](#). Sports punters are mostly relatively well-off young men, reducing concerns that gambling is a vice that ensnares the poor. Moreover, America, which long restricted gambling to casinos, is in part just catching up with the rest of the world. The growth of gambling reflects an expansion of people's freedom to lead their lives as they choose.

Norris shines in Formula 1



On Sunday the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix will bring another electrifying Formula 1 season to a close. Red Bull's [Max Verstappen](#) has already secured this season's world championship after a dominant performance. But McLaren's Lando Norris emerged as a credible challenger to the Dutch driver, dispelling fears of a one-sided title race. If McLaren sustains its recent gains in Abu Dhabi, Mr Norris could even start the 2025 season as the favorite.

Off the track, however, Formula 1 faces troubles with its governance. The Federation Internationale de l'Automobile, the sport's governing body, has seen a wave of senior departures. Mohammed Ben Sulayem, FIA's president, is pushing reforms that would give him direct oversight of its ethics and audit committees—the same bodies that investigated him over alleged interference in a grand-prix result. (He denies wrongdoing and was cleared.) The heads of these investigations have left the FIA. That raised eyebrows, and questions about accountability at the top of the sport.

An unsettling tale of grief



“She doesn’t look like someone who’s seen a corpse,” sniffs one of Shula’s aunties. The girl has not shed a tear for her uncle Fred, whose body she found on a roadside in Lusaka, Zambia’s capital. “On Becoming a Guinea Fowl”, released in British cinemas this week, examines grief—and lack thereof.

The film, written and directed by Rungano Nyoni, a Zambian-Welsh film-maker, is surreal yet serious. While Shula’s family engages in a fervid display of grief, she plays a shrill sound over and over in her head: the call of a guinea fowl when it is approached by a predator. Uncle Fred, it turns out, had abused Shula and other young relatives. The family ignores this awful truth, pushing ahead with the elaborate funeral ritual. Ms Nyoni’s tale is strange, uncomfortable and often frustrating. The guinea fowl’s alarm call will stay with you long after it finishes

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:

Michael Lepri, Brooklyn, New York, USA

Gabriel Priven, São Paulo, Brazil

Esther Ballachey, North Vancouver, Canada

They all gave the correct answers of: bearing false witness against your neighbour, runner bean, Fugitive Slave Acts, the Second Empire and Indiana. The theme is films starring Harrison Ford: Witness, Blade Runner, The Fugitive, The Empire Strikes Back and the Indiana Jones movies.

The questions were:

Monday: What does the ninth commandment forbid?

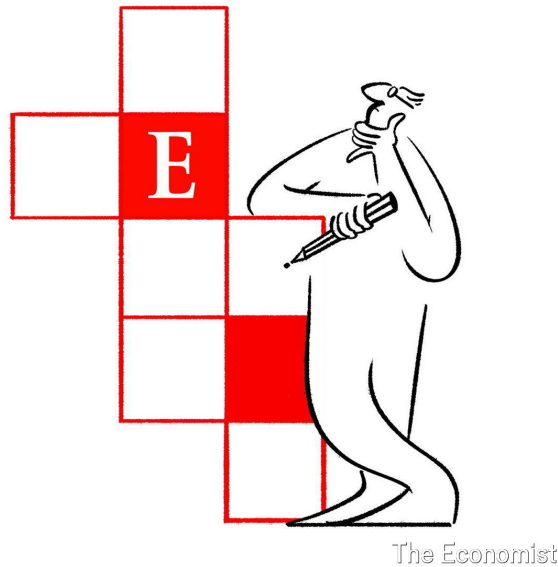
Tuesday: *Phaseolus coccineus* is better known as which vegetable?

Wednesday: Which two acts, with the same name, were passed by the US congress in 1793 and 1850, only to be repealed in 1864?

Thursday: The regime which ruled France from 1852 to 1870 is generally known by which title?

Friday: Which state has borders with Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky and Illinois?

The 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*.

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

December 6th edition

Cryptic clues

1 down Crazy! A non-electric vehicle gets you to an island (10)

1 across Compassion sounds like gratitude in Paris (5)

2 across Greater London Authority acquires ship for a vessel (5)

3 across Scramble aid or wireless technology (5)

Factual clues

1 down The world's fourth-largest island, famed for its vanilla (10)

1 across A medieval power recently wielded by Joe Biden (5)

2 across A hard, brittle usually clear substance (5)

3 across An old technology used to guide Ukrainian ordnance (5)

**The highest tribute to the dead is not grief
but gratitude.**

Thornton Wilder