

Catch up: America's warning to Europe; Zelensky open to peace talks



In a fiery address to the **Munich Security Conference**, America's vice-president warned that **Europe's greatest threat** comes "from within", citing political suppression and mass migration. J.D. Vance criticised Romania's decision to annul its election in December, when the courts overturned a surprise victory by a pro-Russian nationalist, and condemned the exclusion of the far-right Alternative for Germany from the event.

Ukraine's leader, **Volodymyr Zelensky**, said he is prepared to negotiate with allies before engaging with Russia to end the war. His comments come after Donald Trump agreed to start **peace talks** with Vladimir Putin, Russia's president. Earlier **Emmanuel Macron**, France's president, told the *Financial Times* that only Mr Zelensky can negotiate peace with Russia and warned against any settlement that amounts to "capitulation".

A **Russian drone strike** hit the defunct **Chernobyl nuclear plant**, Mr Zelensky said on Friday. The attack damaged the radiation containment shelter, breaching the protective structure over Reactor

4—the site of the 1986 disaster—and igniting a fire, which has since been extinguished. The Kremlin dismissed the claim as a “provocation”. Radiation levels in the immediate area remain stable.

The [Rwanda-backed M23 rebels](#) operating in the **Democratic Republic of Congo** claimed to have seized control of an airport 30km from Bukavu, the country’s second-biggest city. The armed group has been advancing south since [capturing the eastern city of Goma](#) last month. Roughly 350,000 people have been displaced, according to the UN Refugee Agency, which warned of a “rapidly worsening humanitarian crisis”.

Seven federal prosecutors quit over a request from America’s justice department to [dismiss](#) corruption charges against **Eric Adams**, New York City’s mayor. On Thursday Danielle Sassoon, Manhattan’s acting top federal prosecutor, resigned and accused the Trump administration of dropping Mr Adams’ indictment in exchange for his co-operation with the president’s immigration crackdown. Mr Trump and Mr Adams deny the allegation.

Syria’s central bank received a shipment of freshly-printed banknotes from **Russia** to ease a severe cash shortage disrupting businesses and daily transactions. Due to Western sanctions, [Syria](#) relies on Russia’s state-run printer, Goznak, for new currency. Banks have struggled to meet withdrawal demands, and businesses warn they can no longer access deposits to pay suppliers and salaries.

Pope Francis was admitted to Rome’s Gemelli hospital on Friday for tests and treatment for bronchitis, according to the Vatican. The [88-year-old pontiff](#) had struggled with symptoms for days, delegating speeches to aides. He was hospitalised for bronchitis in March 2023 and cancelled a COP28 trip later that year due to illness. He had part of a lung removed at 21.

Word of the week: trochas, the Spanish term for illegal border crossings, often used to describe those used by Venezuelans entering Colombia. [Read the full story.](#)

Gaza's fragile ceasefire



On Saturday Hamas is expected to release three more Israeli hostages out of the remaining 76 it has been holding in Gaza since October 7th 2023. Their freedom seemed unlikely just days ago. On Monday the Islamist group accused Israel of breaching the [ceasefire agreement](#) and said it was suspending the hostages' release. Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, retaliated with a threat to renew his country's war in Gaza; Donald Trump, America's president warned that he would "let hell break out". By Thursday Hamas back-pedalled.

Even if the release goes to plan, the ceasefire, which has been in effect since January 19th, [looks increasingly fragile](#). Talks on its next stage—which involves the withdrawal of all Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip and the release of all remaining living hostages—are yet to begin. Mr Netanyahu has vowed that Israel will not end the war with Hamas still in control of Gaza.

A troubling trend for American science



America has long been a scientific powerhouse. The country's well-funded research institutions and leading scientific companies have attracted the world's brightest minds for decades. Every year scientists gather for a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to learn about the newest research.

This year's meeting, which concludes in Boston on Saturday, has offered the usual tour d'horizon, touching on everything from the search for [dark energy](#) to the future of psychedelic drugs. But even dazzling lectures may not brighten the mood precipitated by Donald Trump's return to the White House. He has marked university funding for cost-cutting, threatened to downsize several federal science agencies and appointed [Robert F. Kennedy junior](#), a vaccine sceptic, as health secretary. Sudip Parikh, the boss of AAAS, called it "a moment of turmoil". America's nervous scientists will be hoping it won't last.

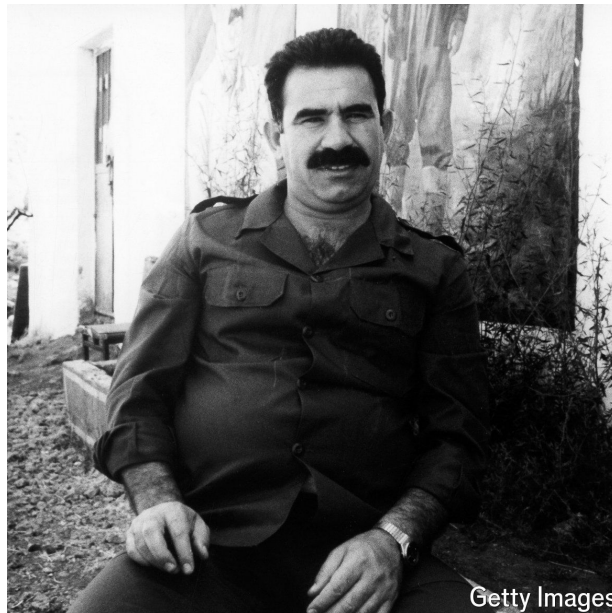
Russia looms over a vote in the Caucasus



Abkhazia holds presidential elections on Saturday. The territory, which broke away from [Georgia](#) after a bitter ethnic war in 1992-93, is in turmoil. In November protests erupted against Abkhazia's president, Aslan Bzhania. An ally of the Kremlin, the enclave's longstanding patron, Mr Bzhania had tried to pass a law that would encourage Russian investment. Locals, worried that a rush of cash would force up house prices, occupied Abkhazia's parliament. Mr Bzhania withdrew the bill. When protests continued, he resigned.

Abkhazia's next president is unlikely to revise its strategic relationship with Russia. Many of those who protested against Mr Bzhania were Abkhaz nationalists, keen to maintain the Kremlin's military support against Georgia without giving Russia even more influence over the enclave's internal affairs. The main candidates are all pro-Russia. Still, more instability would worry the Kremlin, which wants to tighten its grip on Abkhazia. With the rest of Georgia rocked by [anti-Kremlin protests](#), Russia will be watching closely.

Could the PKK disarm?



The conflict between Turkey and the [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK), which began when the group launched an insurgency in 1984, has killed 40,000 people. Fighting spread to Iraq and more recently to [Syria](#). In the coming days the PKK's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Ocalan (pictured), is expected to call on the group to disarm. Turkish agents captured him in Kenya 26 years ago on Saturday.

Mr Ocalan's statement may pave the way for peace talks and for concessions to Turkey's 15m Kurds. It could have an immediate impact in Syria, whose new leaders want the PKK's local franchise, the People's Defense Units (YPG), to dissolve. Turkey has also warned YPG leaders to leave Syria or face a new army offensive. Pressure from Damascus, threats from Ankara and an appeal from Mr Ocalan may induce the YPG to lay down its guns.

Profile: Alice Weidel, Germany's most vilified—and powerful—female politician



Last weekend thousands of Germans again took to the streets to protest against the hard-right [Alternative for Germany](#) (AfD) party. In [parliamentary elections](#) on February 23rd it is expected to win 21% of the vote, [double its share](#) in the election in 2021. No other party will join a coalition with a party that many Germans regard as an heir to the Nazis. But Alice Weidel, its leader, intends to become Germany's chancellor in the next election, in 2029. In the meantime the AfD is reshaping German politics.

Ms Weidel alone does not explain the 12-year-old party's rise. Like others on Europe's hard right, it has benefited from widespread anger about immigration and a stagnant economy. Unlike [Marine Le Pen](#), the leader of France's hard-right National Rally, and [Giorgia Meloni](#), Italy's prime minister, she has not tempered her party's radicalism to win over more moderate voters. The 46-year-old economist, who gives rabble-rousing speeches dressed in blue blazers and pearl earrings, uses the loaded term "remigration" to talk about her plans to mass deport immigrants. Her party's manifesto calls for big tax cuts, steep increases in public spending

and Germany's departure from both the European Union and the single currency.

The AfD's core supporters are white men without college degrees. Ms Weidel studied economics and worked for Goldman Sachs, as well as the Bank of China. She speaks Mandarin and wrote her doctoral thesis on the future of the Chinese pension system. She is in a civil partnership with another woman, a Sri Lankan-born film producer.

Ms Weidel ("Lille" to her friends and family) grew up in Gütersloh, in the north-west, as the youngest of three children. She joined the AfD when it was a single-issue party opposed to the euro. As it became more radical and xenophobic many moderates left. Ms Weidel stayed; whether she was motivated more by conviction or ambition is up for debate. She used to praise Margaret Thatcher, Britain's pro-market prime minister of the 1980s, for "swimming against the tide". Now she extols Viktor Orban, Hungary's autocratic leader, whom she visited in Budapest on February 11th.

She is betting that Germany is becoming ready for this sort of politics. In neighbouring Austria the far-right Freedom Party began joining governments long ago. In Germany, she thinks, resistance is crumbling. A few weeks ago [Friedrich Merz](#), the centre-right probable next chancellor, pushed through parliament a non-binding motion calling for tougher migration measures with the support of the AfD.

"Alice für Deutschland!" chanted the party faithful last month in Riesa, a town in Saxony. It was a provocative pun: "Alles für Deutschland", now banned, was a slogan of the SA, the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party. To the AfD Ms Weidel is already a rock star. Her career, and Germany's future, may depend on how the rest of the country comes to regard her mix of modernity and madness.

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 Diarist, deserting job, gets drunk (7,5)

1 across Rabbis hope to include clergyman (6)

2 across Every great young pharaoh toppled leaders here (5)

3 across Block my site? Outrageous! (6)

Factual clues

1 down This fictional heroine's fourth cinematic outing has just been released (7,5)

1 across Ordained member of the clergy, and the putative profession of Saint Valentine (6)

2 across Where Donald Trump suggests some Gazans might settle (5)

3 across To stand in the way of something (6)

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.

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:

Curt Coy, Tbilisi, Georgia

Nancy Dixon, Kansas City, Missouri, America

Jean-Marc Divoux, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France

They all gave the correct answers of Hi Yo silver away, Pearl Buck, Jack Ruby, Heart of Gold and Jared Diamond. The theme is gifts linked to wedding anniversaries: Silver (25th), pearl (30th), ruby (40th), gold (50th) and diamond (60th).

The questions were:

Monday: What was the Lone Ranger's famous call to speed his horse into action?

Tuesday: Which author was the first American woman to win the Nobel prize for literature?

Wednesday: Who killed Lee Harvey Oswald, President Kennedy's assassin?

Thursday: Which is the only number one single achieved by the singer-songwriter Neil Young?

Friday: Which American scientist wrote the best-selling book “Guns, Germs and Steel”?

**Mathematics is the language in which God
has written the universe**

Galileo Galilei