

## Catch up: Venezuela's opposition leader reportedly arrested; LA death toll “will rise”



María Corina Machado, **Venezuela's** opposition leader, was reportedly arrested by the government of Nicolás Maduro. Ms Machado, who was banned from running in the country's recent election, emerged from months in hiding to protest against [Mr Maduro's planned inauguration](#). In a statement, her party said that she was detained after “regime forces fired on the motorcycles that were transporting her”.

Five fires were [still raging](#) in parts of **Los Angeles** County, though by Thursday two were partially contained. At least five people have been killed so far; the county's sheriff predicted that “the death toll will rise” in the coming days. Almost 180,000 fled their homes. The first blaze broke out on Tuesday in the hillside neighbourhood of Pacific Palisades, and extreme winds sparked more.

**Lebanon's** parliament elected **General Joseph Aoun** as president. He will be the first person to hold the office in more than two

years, during which lawmakers failed to agree on a candidate. The election of General Aoun, whose bid was supported by America, reflects the waning influence of [Hizbullah](#), an Iran-backed Lebanese militia, which has been weakened by its war with Israel.

**Argentina's** government paid \$4.3bn to its bondholders. It made the payment with dollars purchased using the fiscal surplus that [Javier Milei](#), the country's libertarian president, delivered last year by making swingeing cuts to public spending. The payment—Argentina's largest since it restructured its debt in 2020—will be a boost to Mr Milei, who wants to secure investors' confidence in the economy.

Giorgia Meloni, **Italy's** prime minister, warned that **Russia** may strengthen its presence in Libya after the Kremlin-backed Assad regime in Syria [collapsed](#) last year. The Libyan National Army, based in the country's east, has been building closer ties with Russia. Ms Meloni said that NATO's defence of its eastern flank could leave it “exposed” in the Mediterranean.

**Norway** sold 124bcm of [natural gas](#) in 2024, breaking a previous record of 122.8bcm sold in 2022. The Norwegian Offshore Directorate, a government body, said that businesses will drill around 40 wells this year, compared to 42 in 2024. Norway became Europe's biggest supplier of gas in 2022, overtaking Russia, which cut supplies after the war in Ukraine.

Donald Tusk, **Poland's** prime minister, said that **Binyamin Netanyahu**, Israel's leader, would “be guaranteed security” from arrest if he visits the country for the 80th anniversary of [Auschwitz's](#) liberation. In November the International Criminal Court [issued arrest warrants](#) for Mr Netanyahu and his former defence minister, accusing them of overseeing war crimes during Israel's war in Gaza against Hamas.

**Figure of the day:** 10-20%, the share of content that Meta, a social-media giant, admits is taken down in error. [Read the full story.](#)

# Uninsurable California?



Five wildfires were **still scorching** Los Angeles on Thursday, after **extreme winds** fanned several firestorms beginning on Tuesday. The blazes are already among the most destructive in California's history. The scale is staggering, even for a state accustomed to natural disasters. At least five people have died, 130,000 people were told to leave their homes and 2,000 buildings have been destroyed.

Because wildfires have come to seem more like a certainty than a risk in California, a lot of those homes **will not be insured**. State consumer-protection laws prevent insurers from raising premiums high enough to cover increasing wildfire risks and rising reinsurance rates—so some, including State Farm and AllState, have simply stopped selling policies. Last year State Farm decided not to renew almost 70% of its policies in Pacific Palisades, one of the worst-hit areas this week. Before the fires, California's insurance commissioner was trying to lure back providers. Those negotiations will be even more difficult now.

## Friedrich Merz's money gap



Can Germany's next government do what the previous one failed so signally to achieve—lift the country's economy from the mire? [Friedrich Merz](#), the pollsters' favourite to take over as chancellor after next month's election, believes so.

On Friday Mr Merz's centre-right Christian Democratic Union will approve a 12-page "Agenda 2030" paper. It promises a carnival of individual and corporate tax cuts, fresh investments and adherence to the deficit-limiting debt brake. The paper claims that its measures will lift Germany's annual growth rate, which for years has hovered close to zero, to 2%.

The problem is money. One calculation puts the annual costs of the CDU's tax cuts at €90bn (\$93bn), or over 2% of GDP. Mr Merz's proposed cuts to spending on welfare and migration do not come close to this figure. Fresh funds must also be found for defence. Something will have to give. Many think it will be the debt brake.

# TikTok ban reaches the Supreme Court



America’s justices will on Friday hear a [case](#) on the fate of America’s most popular social-media app. *Garland v TikTok* pits the outgoing Biden administration against ByteDance (TikTok’s parent company) and some of the app’s estimated 170m regular users. The question is whether the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, a bipartisan law enacted last April, violates the First Amendment.

The Biden administration says that the law—which requires TikTok to be sold or to shut down by January 19th—stops China from collecting Americans’ data and using the app to influence them. Donald Trump wants a pause in the law’s implementation.

The company’s lawyers argue that the government is “obviously wrong” to claim that the law does not constrain speech. It targets “nothing more than a potentially disagreeable mix of ideas”, attorneys for several TikTok creators contend, and is thus “anathema to the First Amendment”. The typically slow-moving justices have only days to decide which side is in step with the constitution.



# Maduro's coronation



On Friday [Nicolás Maduro](#) will again be presented with the presidential sash in Caracas, Venezuela's capital. He will formally begin his third term—against the will of his people. He lost an election in July, but his regime's puppet electoral council declared him the victor. The fraud was exposed by the opposition, which collated tens of thousands of receipts from voting machines. These proved that the real winner, with 67% of the tallied votes, was Edmundo González, a retired diplomat.

Mr González ran because María Corina Machado, the opposition leader, was banned from doing so. On Thursday Ms Machado emerged from months in hiding to protest against Mr Maduro's inauguration. Her party said that, while speaking in Caracas, the capital, she was arrested by regime forces. That will prompt condemnation from most Western democracies, which were already planning to boycott Mr Maduro's swearing-in. But envoys of authoritarian regimes, including China's and Russia's, will attend to applaud a dictator.

## A TV show on Mussolini divides Italy



On Friday millions of Italians are expected to tune in to Sky Italia, the Italian arm of Comcast, an American entertainment giant, to watch “M. Il figlio del secolo” (“M. Son of the Century”). The eight-part series depicts the rise to power of Benito Mussolini, the Italian fascist dictator. It is adapted from a historical novel by Antonio Scurati. His account is detested—and contested—by many who support the Brothers of Italy, the hard-right party of the prime minister, Giorgia Meloni.

The series bucks a trend. Other media conglomerates recently appear to have become friendlier towards right-wing populism. Last year RAI, the state-owned broadcaster, prevented Mr Scurati from reading a monologue on the network in which he accused Ms Meloni of failing to thoroughly repudiate fascism. *Libero*, a right-wing daily, said the TV version of his novel had “all the defects of the author”. Expect further controversy as the series progresses.



## Daily quiz



*The Economist*

We will serve you a new question each day this week. On Friday your challenge is to give us all five answers and, as important, tell us the connecting theme. Email your responses (and include mention of your home city and country) by 1700 GMT on Friday to [QuizEspresso@economist.com](mailto:QuizEspresso@economist.com). We'll pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners on Saturday.

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

**Thursday:** Which concert venue is based at 881 Seventh Avenue in New York?

# The winners of last week's crossword



Thank you to everyone who took part in our weekly crossword, published in the weekend edition of Espresso. The winners, chosen at random, were:

**Rey Paragas**, Quezon City, Philippines

**Matthew Buynoski**, Palo Alto, California, America

**Raxita Kapashi**, London, Britain

They all gave the correct answers of [Mr Brightside](#), [Mekong](#), [group](#) and [equity](#).

**Truth is the only merit that gives dignity  
and worth to history.**

*John Dalberg-Acton*