

## Catch up: Biden pardons his son; Syrian and Russian jets bomb rebels



**Joe Biden** pardoned his son, **Hunter Biden**, who had been [convicted](#) for illegally owning a gun and also faced several tax-related charges. For months America's president had insisted he would not use executive powers to help his son. But the president said Hunter had been “selectively, and unfairly, prosecuted” and that politics had “infected” the process of justice.

**Russian** and **Syrian** air forces intensified their attacks on [Syrian rebels](#), who are advancing south after seizing most of Aleppo, the country's second-biggest city. Jets targeted the rebel-held city of Idlib. It is the first time Syria's opposition has captured territory from the regime in years. A local rescue service said at least 25 people were killed in the attack.

Olaf Scholz, **Germany's** chancellor, arrived in Kyiv as part of an unannounced trip to **Ukraine**. Mr Scholz said Germany would remain “Ukraine's strongest supporter in Europe”. He is expected to meet Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, and announce

more military aid. It is only Mr Scholz's second trip to Ukraine since [Russia's invasion](#) in 2022.

Carlos Taveres quit as the boss of **Stellantis**, the world's fourth-largest carmaker. The abrupt resignation comes amid reports of tensions over how to improve the firm's [profitability](#). In September Stellantis (whose largest shareholder part-owns *The Economist's* parent company) slashed its profit forecast for 2024, triggering a sell-off in its shares. The firm said it would hire a [new chief executive](#) by the first half of 2025.

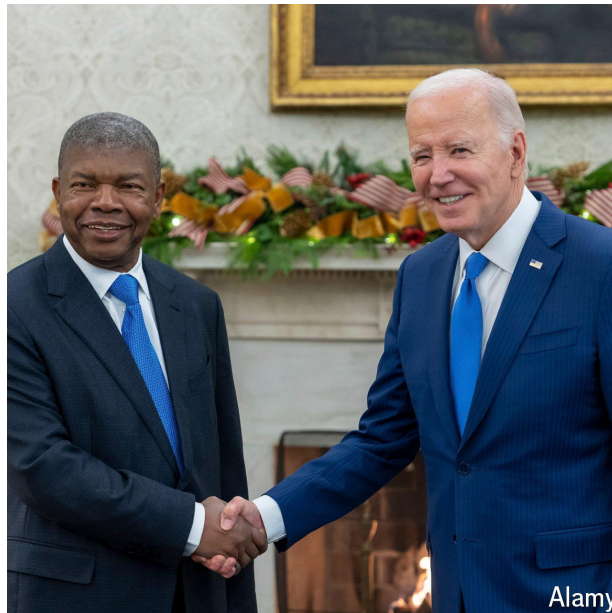
Preliminary results from **Romania's** parliamentary election suggested that the centre-left Social Democratic party would continue to hold the most seats, despite a strong showing from the hard-right. Last month the country's politics was upended when Calin Georgescu, a [pro-Russian nationalist](#), surprisingly won in the first round of the presidential contest. He now faces a run-off with Elena Lasconi, a centre-right candidate.

**Donald Trump** picked [Massad Boulos](#), a Lebanese-born billionaire who is his daughter's father-in-law, to advise him on the Middle East. During Mr Trump's campaign, Mr Boulos cast himself as the liaison to Arab-American voters. Earlier the president-elect said he would appoint **Kash Patel** to be director of the **FBI**. Mr Patel, who was part of Mr Trump's previous administration, has vowed to strip the FBI of its intelligence-gathering role.

Negotiations over a UN treaty on **plastic pollution** ended without a much-anticipated deal. Delegates from over 100 countries had gathered in Busan, South Korea to implement a globally binding agreement that would [limit plastic use](#). But talks collapsed after Saudi Arabia and Russia led other oil-rich countries (which supply the raw materials for plastics) to block efforts to cap new production.

**Figure of the day:** \$1bn, the economic losses caused by “clear-cutting”—removing all the trees in a given area—in the Brazilian Amazon between 2006 and 2019. [Read the full story.](#)

# Why America is keen on Angola



On Monday Joe Biden will become the first American president to visit Angola—and the first to visit sub-Saharan Africa since 2015. The trip to the region’s second-largest oil producer is the culmination of seven years of strengthening diplomatic ties. Since João Lourenço became Angola’s president in 2017, he has turned his country’s focus to America, after decades of dependence on Russia for arms and on China for finance. America has been happy to reciprocate; it is keen to win friends in the global south to combat China’s influence.

Mr Biden will visit the centrepiece of Angola’s partnership with America: the Lobito Economic Corridor, an infrastructure project including a railway from Angola’s coast to the Congolese copperbelt. The project is likely to continue under Donald Trump, whose [Africa strategy](#)—to the extent he will have one—will probably focus on critical minerals, business deals and diluting China’s influence.

# A boom for the world's arms producers



Major wars and mounting global tensions have been a boon for the world's 100 largest arms producers, according to a report by SIPRI, a Swedish think-tank, published on Monday. The revenues of big defence firms increased in 2023 to \$632bn, a 4.2% gain on the previous year.

It is perhaps surprising that the rise was not greater. SIPRI notes that the numbers do not yet reflect the scale of demand. Many companies are investing in new capacity to fulfil orders. But the biggest among them in America and [Europe](#), which work closely with governments, need more time to adjust complicated supply chains.

However, the revenues of [Russia's](#) main arms company, Rostec, increased by 49% last year, while sales of companies in the Middle East, especially in Israel and Turkey, were up by 18%. Firms in South Korea and Japan saw revenues leap by 39% and 35% respectively. Expect sales in America and Europe to start catching up.

# Volkswagen's unions pulls on the brake

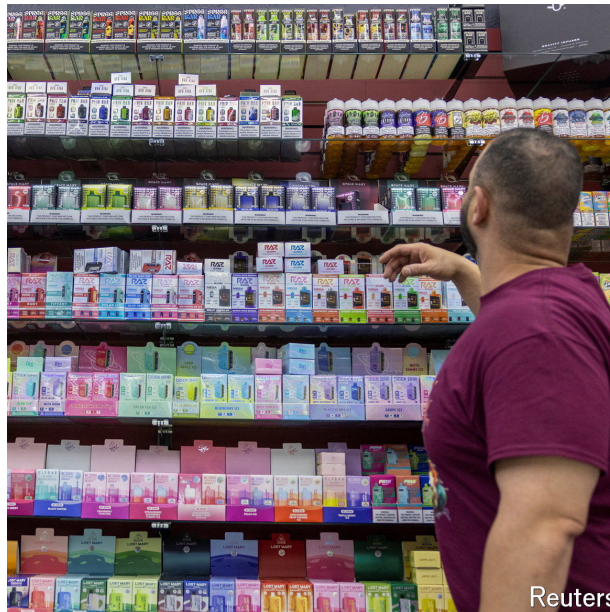


Workers at Volkswagen will go on a “warning strike” as early as Monday. After three rounds of talks the leaders of IG Metall, Germany’s big metalworkers union, and VW’s bosses failed to strike a new collective wage deal. The agreement concerns 120,000 of the carmaker’s 300,000 workers in Germany as the company plans for thousands of redundancies and the first domestic-plant closures in its history.

But it is not just VW that [is in trouble](#). Gloomy profit forecasts have dragged down the combined market value of Europe’s five biggest carmakers by sales (see chart). In Europe demand has shrunk and competition from Chinese electric-vehicle firms is intensifying. In China, European companies are losing out to domestic rivals. And America’s incoming administration is threatening to upend supply chains with a [25% tariff on imports](#) from Mexico and Canada. The cost cuts, redundancies and closures facing VW and others will pose a severe test for Germany’s usually harmonious labour relations.



# An e-cigarette clash in America's Supreme Court



On Monday America's Supreme Court hears *Food and Drug Administration v. Wages and White Lion Investments*, a case asking if the FDA's crackdown on the sale of flavoured e-cigarettes violates administrative law. In 2021 the FDA barred two companies from marketing several vapes, including "Killer Kustard Blueberry" and "Suicide Bunny Mother's Milk and Cookies". The agency reckoned that such sweet flavours pose a "known and substantial risk to youth". In 2020 a fifth of [high-school students vaped](#).

The companies counter that e-cigarettes are safer than their combustible counterparts and contribute to "an overall decrease in disease and death from tobacco-product use". The FDA did not provide "fair warning", they say, of the criteria it would use to assess the applications for approval. In January the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals sided with the manufacturers, finding that the FDA had led them on a "wild goose chase" with "regulatory switcheroos". But the federal government characterises this ruling

as “aberrational”, noting that seven other appeals courts, in similar cases, reached the opposite conclusion.



# An ancient human crossroad



For most of their evolution, humans were not a single species. Several types of humans overlapped in time and sometimes interbred, as evidenced by Neanderthal DNA in the modern human genome. Scientists have now found the most direct evidence so far of two different human species crossing paths, some 1.5m years ago: their fossilised footprints, made only days apart, have been found near the shore of Lake Turkana in Kenya.

In a paper published in *Science*, researchers from America and Kenya hypothesise that the makers of the prints were *Homo erectus*, an ancestor of modern humans, and *Paranthropus boisei*, the only other hominin known to have lived in the region. The team reckons that the two species may have lived side by side for about 100,000 years. Fifty years after the discovery of the famous Lucy fossil in Ethiopia, the last remaining human species still has plenty to learn about its lost family.

## 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.

**Monday:** What does the ninth commandment forbid?

**The inability of some critics to connect the dots doesn't make pointillism pointless.**

*Georges Seurat*