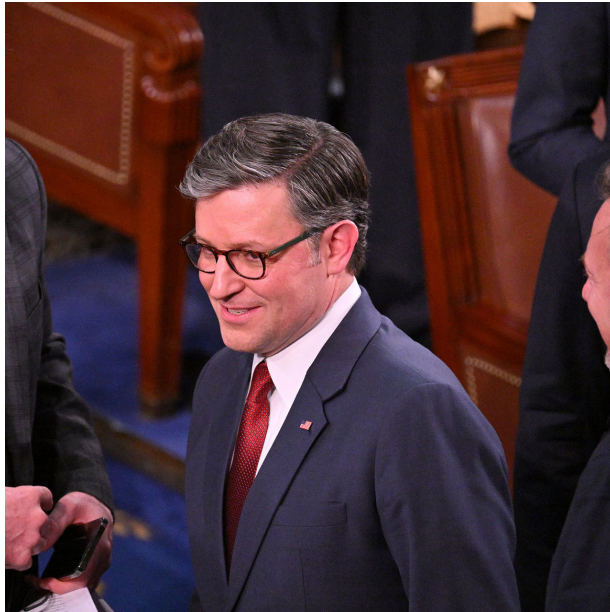


Catch up: Johnson re-elected as House speaker; Trump to be sentenced



Mike Johnson, a Republican, was re-elected as speaker of America's House of Representatives. Despite an endorsement from [Donald Trump](#) three Republicans initially voted against Mr Johnson. Given the party's tight majority, that would have been enough to trigger another ballot and delay the start of the 119th Congress. But two subsequently changed their minds, securing Mr Johnson just enough votes to win.

The judge overseeing Mr **Trump's hush-money case** said he would sentence the president-elect on January 10th, but that Mr Trump would not face prison time. Mr Trump had argued that [his conviction](#), on 34 felony counts, should be dismissed, because the proceedings would impede his presidential transition. The judge wrote that tossing the jury verdict would "undermine the Rule of Law in immeasurable ways".

President Joe Biden blocked **Nippon Steel's** proposed takeover of US Steel, claiming it could threaten America's national security. A government review panel recently failed to agree on whether that

was true. Mr Trump [had also vowed](#) to block the takeover by the Japanese company. In September US Steel's boss said that the firm would have to leave Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania if the deal fell through.

Efforts to form a new **Austrian government** collapsed. In September the hard-right Freedom Party [came first](#) in the country's parliamentary elections, but no party would form a coalition with it. Since then Karl Nehammer, leader of the runner-up, has been trying to put together a three-party coalition. But the smaller of the two pulled out of talks, citing a lack of ambition for reform.

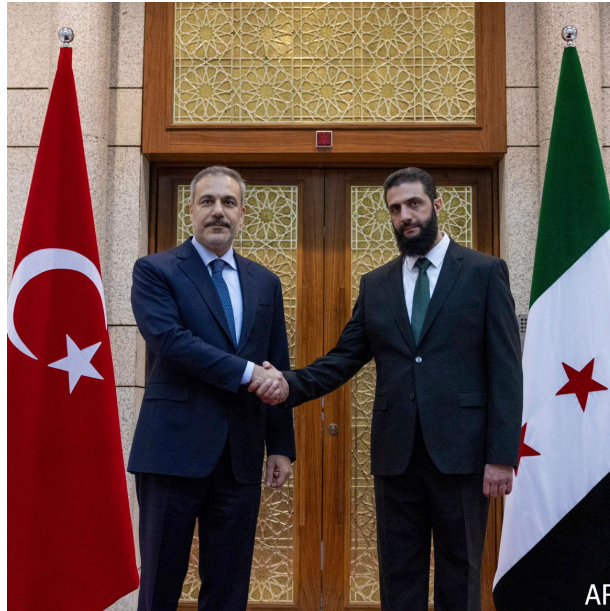
Israel said on Friday that its air forces had struck 40 Hamas "terrorist targets"—including gathering points and control centres—in Gaza over a 24-hour period. At least 40 people were killed, according to Gaza's health ministry. Meanwhile, Israeli mediators were dispatched to Doha, Qatar's capital, for a new round of [ceasefire talks](#) with Hamas.

Venezuela's government has offered up to \$100,000 for information leading to the arrest of [Edmundo González](#). Mr González defeated the incumbent president, Nicolás Maduro, in elections in July. But Mr Maduro refused to relinquish power, claiming he had won the vote. Mr González is now in exile in Spain; Mr Maduro [will be sworn in](#) again on January 10th.

America's surgeon-general called for cancer warning labels to be added to **alcoholic beverages**, citing new research linking [booze](#) to an increased chance of at least seven types of the disease. Vivek Murthy said only 45% of American adults were aware of the risk. Congress would have to approve such a change; the country's alcohol labels have not been altered since 1988.

Word of the week: *Knödelexpress*. Literally "dumpling express". A fond German nickname for EuroCity trains derived from their the sadly disappearing old-world dining cars. [Read the full story](#).

Syria's uncertain future



Thousands of Syrians greeted the new year in central Damascus with a raucous street party. They are still celebrating the fall of Bashar al-Assad last month. The new regime, dominated by [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#), an Islamist rebel group, is trying to restore diplomatic ties broken under the dictator, who was backed by Iran and Russia. Top representatives from Germany and France arrived in the capital on Friday for meetings with Ahmad al-Sharaa, the once rebel chieftain and now the country's leader.

Mr Sharaa has ditched his combat fatigues in favour of dapper suits and a Western-friendly approach. But uncertainty abounds over the country's direction. The appointment of foreign Jihadist fighters to senior posts in the new Syrian army raised eyebrows, as did a revised curriculum with a conservative religious tone, recently posted on social media by the education ministry. Mr Sharaa has said it may take four years until elections are held. Political stability looks a way off.

America's wilting marijuana industry



In 2012 Washington and Colorado became the first American states to allow cannabis to be sold for recreational use. Another 22 followed, creating a sizeable market: in 2024 Americans spent about \$29bn on legal marijuana. But the cannabis boom is [losing strength](#). President Joe Biden did not keep his promise to federally decriminalise the drug, and [reform at state level](#) slowed. The American Cannabis Operator Index, which tracks firms' market value, has fallen by more than 90% since February 2021.

Donald Trump claims to be pro-pot, but weed stocks have continued to perform poorly since his re-election. Investors doubt that Mr Trump will prioritise wide-reaching cannabis reform. Still, some relief may soon come from changing tax rules for the industry. That would give investors cause for cheer, even if their dreams of federal decriminalisation go up in smoke.

What makes a vaccine durable?



The question of why some vaccines confer longer-lasting immunity than others has long puzzled scientists. A simple blood test could reveal the answer, according to a study published this week.

Researchers at Stanford University studied 50 people who had received an experimental jab against [H5N1 avian flu](#). The scientists collected 12 blood samples from each person for 100 days following vaccination. They then used a machine-learning program to identify patterns in the data.

The researchers believe that higher levels of activated megakaryocytes, blood cells within bone marrow that produce platelets, were associated with longer immunity. But these cells are difficult to track. They found that [RNA](#) (an acid present in all human cells that carries DNA instructions around the body) from those megakaryocytes is easier to follow and could serve as a proxy. The results could help speed up clinical trials and the development of personalised vaccines.

The new kings of English football



Manchester City have won England's Premier League for the past four seasons. But this year the club is floundering. The Sky Blues won just two of their seven league fixtures in December. The players look tired and uninspired; the team's esteemed manager, [Pep Guardiola](#), suddenly seems short of ideas. When City host West Ham United on Saturday, they will be aiming less to defend their title than to avoid slipping into mid-table mediocrity.

So who will take their crown? Liverpool look likeliest. The club's Dutch manager, Arne Slot, has made an impressive start since taking over from Jürgen Klopp in the summer, in part because he has changed relatively little. Still, the club could have problems in the longer term. Three of its stars are out of contract at the end of the season. They include Mo Salah, the side's Egyptian wizard. Liverpool should win this year's title. But if such players leave, next season may be another matter.

Weekend profile: Russ Vought, Donald Trump's holy warrior



The MAGA movement can be rather brash. Yet one of the people driving it forward is anything but. It is almost easy at first to overlook Russell Vought, with his tortoiseshell spectacles, neatly trimmed beard and scholarly demeanour. But his calm exterior belies an incendiary streak, fuelled by his religious convictions. He will be a pivotal player in Donald Trump's administration, aiming at nothing less than a destruction of the status quo in American governance.

Mr Vought has been tapped to return to the exact job he held in Mr Trump's previous administration, as director of the Office of Management and Budget, which helps write the president's budget and helps co-ordinate the regulatory activities of other agencies. He has come a long way from his blue-collar upbringing in a small Connecticut town. Mr Vought graduated from Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian school in Illinois, and spent more than a decade working on budgetary issues on Capitol Hill.

He calls himself a [Christian nationalist](#). His religious views have provoked controversy. He has for instance called for a total abolition of abortion—a position that is too extreme for most American conservatives. But Mr Vought’s religiosity gives a scorching fervour to his criticism of politics and society, which appeals to the Republican base. He regularly describes the federal government as “woke and weaponised” and has warned that the Democratic Party is “increasingly evil” because it forces secularism on families.

But Mr Trump picked him for his mastery of the budget process and his radical policy ideas. Mr Vought was one of the architects of “Project 2025”, a collection of proposals for how Mr Trump should reform the federal government. (During the election campaign [Mr Trump assured voters](#) that he had “nothing to do” with Project 2025.) In his contribution Mr Vought argued that there was an “existential” need for the president to make aggressive use of his powers. He wants the White House to hold back, or impound, expenditures approved by Congress in order to reduce overall federal spending. He also wants to end employment protections for thousands of career civil servants.

These proposals could enhance the ability of the White House to control the bureaucracy and dictate policy. Yet they would encounter fierce resistance both on Capitol Hill and in courts. Mr Vought has no doubt that he is on the right path. “The storm clouds are upon us,” he said in a recent interview on a Christian podcast. “We need to trust that the duty is ours and the results are God’s.”

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* Song that sounds like you didn't see a silver lining (2,10)
- 1 across* King gnome confused Asian flower (6)
- 2 across* Set point lost? Grow up! (5)
- 3 across* Magnate quit yet keeps value (6)

Factual clues

- 1 down* Hit by The Killers that is perennially popular in Britain (2,10)
- 1 across* Transboundary river in East Asia (6)
- 2 across* A collection of like-minded individuals (5)
- 3 across* Ownership interest in a property or company (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:

Bruce Fink, Honolulu, Hawaii, United States

Ogden Hadžizukić, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Alexandra Millbrook, London, Britain

They all gave the correct answers of the Ross shelf, Green Eggs and Ham, Bing, Phoebe Waller-Bridge and a joey. The theme is characters from the TV show "Friends": Ross Geller, Rachel Green, Chandler Bing, Phoebe Buffay and Joey Tribbiani.

The questions were:

Monday: Which is the largest ice shelf in Antarctica, at almost 500,000 square kilometres?

Tuesday: Which Dr Seuss book features the character Sam-I-am?

Wednesday: Which is the second most-used internet search engine?

Thursday: Which actress wrote and produced the first series of the

tv show “Killing Eve” and wrote and starred in two series of “Fleabag”?

Friday: What is the name for a baby kangaroo?

Knödelexpress

Literally “dumpling express”. A fond German nickname for EuroCity trains derived from their the sadly disappearing old-world dining cars.

Read the full story.

**Sorrow is a sitar that cuts the maestro's
finger just to test the sharpness of its
strings.**

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain