

Catch up: judge limits DOGE's access to payments data; Saudi Arabia's anger at Israel



A federal judge temporarily blocked **Elon Musk** and some of his team at the [Department of Government Efficiency](#) from access to sensitive Treasury payment systems. Last week Mr Musk claimed DOGE was cancelling “illegal” payments, sparking concerns that he had gained access to systems handling trillions of dollars of Social Security and Medicare funds. The ruling follows a lawsuit by 19 state attorneys-general challenging DOGE’s authority.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt and **Jordan** rejected suggestions that Palestinians could be moved out of Gaza and the West Bank. The three countries appeared to be responding to remarks by Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister, who said in a television interview that Saudi Arabia has “a lot of land” and so could house a Palestinian state. This week Donald Trump [called for](#) the eviction of Palestinians from Gaza and an American takeover of the enclave.

Mr Trump told the *New York Post* that he had spoken to **Vladimir Putin** about [ending the war](#) in **Ukraine**. Mr Trump did not say how many conversations had taken place, or when. A Kremlin spokesperson said they could neither confirm nor deny the reports. Meanwhile Ukraine's armed forces said that Russia had launched around 150 drones at the country overnight; some 70 were intercepted.

Mr Trump signed an executive order to cut financial aid to **South Africa**, accusing its government of "racial discrimination" against Afrikaners, an ethnic group descended from European settlers. The [order](#) instructs the Department of Homeland Security to promote the resettlement of "Afrikaner refugees". South Africa's government said the directive lacks "factual accuracy" and "fails to recognise South Africa's profound and painful history of colonialism and apartheid".

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania disconnected from **Russia's** [power grid](#) on Saturday, cutting their final energy link to the country. The **Baltic states** will synchronise with the European Union's grid on Sunday. The move, decades in the making, gained urgency after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The transition required nearly €1.6bn (\$1.7bn) in infrastructure spending.

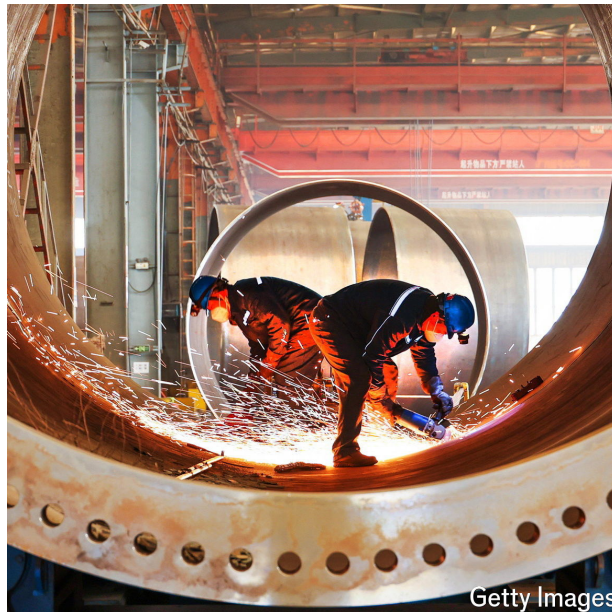
Leaders of **Patriots for Europe**, a [far-right alliance](#) in the European Parliament, gathered in Madrid under the slogan "Make Europe Great Again". Speakers railed against immigration and the EU establishment. Leaders of the bloc, formed after the 2024 elections, include France's **Marine Le Pen** and Hungary's **Viktor Orban**. Some important right-wing parties, including Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy, have refused to join.

Sam Nujoma, the first president of **Namibia**, died in the country's capital, Windhoek, aged 95. He led the South West Africa People's Organisation, a rebel movement that freed Namibia from rule by South Africa and became a political party. Mr Nujoma, the last of a

generation of African leaders who achieved independence for their countries, was Namibia's president for 15 years from 1990. SWAPO remains in power.

Word of the week: pig-butcher, a scam in which fraudsters build trust with victims over weeks or months before luring them into fake investments and stealing their money. Read the full story.

China's economy faces monsters at home and abroad



America began its second [trade war](#) with China while its rival was on holiday. The news landed during the Spring Festival from January 28th to February 4th. Amid the economic drama, many Chinese went to the movies. Cinemas sold over 23m tickets a day on average during the break—a new holiday record. The highest-grossing film was also a sequel, “Nezha 2”, about a young boy who fights sea monsters.

Now exports face new barriers, China is counting on consumer spending to lift its economy and dispel deflationary pressures. Extra spending in the run-up to the holiday period helped lift inflation in January, according to figures released on Sunday. Consumer prices rose by 0.5%, compared with a year earlier, up from 0.1% in the previous month. A [weak property market](#) and sluggish hiring is depressing consumer confidence, and the trade war will not help. China's economy faces monsters both at home and across the seas.

Elections in Kosovo



Kosovars vote in parliamentary elections on Sunday. Albin Kurti, the prime minister since 2021, is likely to be re-elected by a small margin. But there is a reasonable chance that opposition parties will win enough seats to form a coalition that would topple him. Mr Kurti's policy of shutting down institutions run by Serbia's government, such as tax and post offices, in areas where [Serbians](#) are a majority is popular among ethnic Albanians, Kosovo's dominant group. He has achieved little else.

If Mr Kurti does win, he will have to manage a troubled relationship with America. In 2020 Richard Grenell, whom Donald Trump appointed to lead peace negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo, helped engineer the downfall of Mr Kurti's first government. Kosovo and Serbia subsequently signed an agreement in the White House to normalise economic ties, which produced little of substance. Mr Grenell is back in Mr Trump's second administration, and has already accused Mr Kurti of being a destabilising influence in the region.

Super Bowl LIX



On Sunday the Kansas City Chiefs and the Philadelphia Eagles will knock lumps out of each other in America's biggest sporting spectacle, the Super Bowl. It's a repeat of the final in 2023, in which the Eagles narrowly missed out on glory. New Orleans will host the event for the 11th time, tying Miami as the most frequent location. The city is still traumatised by a terrorist attack in the Big Easy's Famous Party district on New Year's Day in which 14 people died.

The Chiefs have the opportunity to achieve an unprecedented "three-peat", winning the competition for the third time in a row. Their [quarterback](#) is widely considered to be the best in the National Football League. But some spectators think the team has another edge: based on controversial calls in its favour, they believe that referees are biased towards Kansas City. Roger Goodell, the league's commissioner, calls the theory ridiculous.

Elections in Ecuador



Ecuadorians head to the polls on Sunday to elect a president and all 151 members of parliament. The country is one of the world's most violent, growth is anaemic and blackouts are common. The presidential front-runners are the incumbent, [Daniel Noboa](#), the 37-year-old heir to a banana fortune, and Luisa González, a left-wing lawyer. Polls put Mr Noboa in the lead.

He has only been in power since November 2023, having won a snap election. Soon after he sent the army onto the streets and into prisons to crack down on gang violence (with modest success). Mr Noboa has cut fuel subsidies, which reduced a large budget deficit. But as the election approached he took a populist turn, handing out cash to unemployed youth. Conveniently for Mr Noboa, the election commission has disqualified several of his rivals. The president is family friends with Robert F. Kennedy junior, America's likely next health secretary. If Mr Noboa wins re-election, he will probably have a powerful pal in Washington.

A literary hotspot in Sri Lanka



The historic fort of Galle in Sri Lanka will host an annual literary festival this weekend. Established in 2007, it has become one of South Asia's most prestigious cultural events, presenting the work of both local and foreign writers. Some 5,000 people attended last year.

Young Sri Lankan writers have recently won several of the most distinguished international literary awards. V.V. Ganeshanathan won the Carol Shields and the Women's prizes for fiction in 2024 for her novel "Brotherless Night". Shehan Karunatilaka received the Booker prize for "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida" two years earlier. Yet Sri Lanka's publishing industry has been hit by higher taxes, which the government raised to deal with an economic crisis in 2022. These increased book prices. The organisers of the festival in Galle hope to lift the island's literary spirits.

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:

Lungile Twalo, Johannesburg, South Africa

Héctor Romero, Santiago, Chile

Jeannette Duplessis, Calgary, Canada

They all gave the correct answers of A Knight's Tale, the opening, first mate, Joey Bishop and Stephen King. The theme is terms associated with chess: knight, opening, (check)mate, bishop and king.

The questions were:

Monday: Which Hollywood film, set in the Middle Ages, stars Heath Ledger as a character named William Thatcher and Paul Bettany as Geoffrey Chaucer?

Tuesday: Al-Fatiha, the first chapter of the Koran, has what literal meaning?

Wednesday: What is the common term for someone who is second-in-command of a ship?

Thursday: Which comedian was the fifth member of the Rat Pack, alongside Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Junior, Dean Martin, and Peter Lawford?

Friday: Which famous writer has also used the pen name Richard Bachman?

This week's 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* King has work uncovered—not bad author! (6,6)
- 1 across* Bakery has a little Greek and Russian breakfast food (6)
- 2 across* Meal I regurgitate as form of communication (5)
- 3 across* City has some nylon donations (6)

Factual clues

- 1 down* Who wrote that book blurbs are “disgusting tripe” (6,6)
- 1 across* A British bakery chain (6)
- 2 across* Medium by which many American federal employees were recently offered “deferred resignation” (5)
- 3 across* Where those wishing to travel between Oxford and Cambridge by train must go via (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.

Pig-butchering

A scam in which fraudsters build trust with victims over weeks or months before luring them into fake investments and stealing their money. Read the full story.

Read the full story

**Anything one man can imagine, other men
can make real.**

Jules Verne