

"Discovering International Relations and Contemporary Global Issues"

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About CRP News & Background

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The European refugee crisis: the journey to the European Union

Since 2015, a rising number of migrants have travelled from Western and South Asia, Africa and the Western Balkans across Mediterranean Sea or through Southeast Europe. Many of which are seeking asylum and better living conditions because of bomb attacks and war in their home countries. Most of these displaced people, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, originate from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Since April 2015 the term “European refugee crisis” has become widely used as a result of the sinking of 5 boats in the Mediterranean Sea and the death of more than 1,200 migrants. On the 8th of February, 27 migrants died whilst trying to reach the Greek island of Lesbos. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) claimed that from the beginning of 2016 approximately four hundred people died; most of whom had been travelling to Greece in an attempt to later reach northern Europe. There are many routes by sea and on land used by migrants to enter Europe; the western African route, the central Mediterranean route, and the current most popular Western Balkan route which consists of passing from Greece through Macedonia and Serbia to Hungary or Croatia.



*Syrian and Iraqi refugees arrive from Turkey to Skala Sykamias, Lesbos island, Greece.
Photo: Ggia [Wikimedia Commons]*

IOM underlines that more than 68,000 migrants had arrived on Greek shores in the first five weeks of 2016 and that there has been a huge rise compared to last year. In 2015, most of the migrants arriving in Italy were from Africa, in particular Eritrea (25%), Nigeria (10%) and Somalia (10%); while today the refugees arriving on the Greek islands mainly come from the Middle East, in particular Syria (57%) and Afghanistan (22%).

In the beginning of February the German Chancellor Angela Merkel was in Turkey to discuss how to reduce the number of migrants travelling to Europe with the Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.



Finally they agreed to seek NATO's help for vigilance the situation at sea. In spite of talks, Turkey closed its borders to 30,000 migrants, ignoring EU recommendation to allow the refugees to enter. In Turkey, both pro-government and opposition parties have criticised the EU for demanding they open their borders to Syrian refugees. Turkey is trying to balance between reducing the number of migrants travelling to Europe whilst also allowing Turkish aid workers to set up tents and provide the refugees with shelter, food and medical assistance. Erdogan said that he was their brother but now they have nowhere to go.



*Federica Mogherini and President Juncker meets Prime Minister Davutoglu.
Photo: European External Action Service [Flickr]*

Federica Mogherini, EU foreign policy chief, said that Turkey had a moral, if not legal duty to provide protection. EU is providing 3 billion euros of funding to Turkey in order to guarantee that Turkey has the “means, instruments and resources to protect and host people that are seeking asylum.” However, many critics claim that Turkey is not doing enough. 4.6 million People have

left Syria since the civil war began in 2011, while 13.5 million still living in Syria are considered to be in need of humanitarian assistance.

Finally, Turkey and Greece agreed to request a NATO mission in the Mediterranean Sea which aims to combat people smugglers. As a result, Turkey has declared itself prepared to take back refugees who are rescued at sea or picked up by NATO. On the other hand in an attempt to remedy the problem of migration, Austria has chosen to accept 80 asylum seekers a day whilst simultaneously allowing 3,200 migrants to transit through per day. The German interior minister Thomas de Maiziere considered it as “the wrong signal and unacceptable” for two reasons. Firstly, Austria's unilateral action to contain migration flow is not a good answer to the refugee problem because it puts extra weight on Germany's back and high pressure on Angela Merkel's open-door policy by blocking cooperation. This decision is viewed to be deeply problematic as 3,200 migrants a day allowed to transit through Austria towards Germany is a great number of people and would put immense strain on security services.

Austria's decision prompted a domino effect throughout the region; many countries in the Balkans only accept a small number of people every day and are now refusing to let Afghan refugees in. In Macedonia, for example, it has been decided that the government will allow the same number to enter as Serbia which



consequently provokes long delays and queues. This fact has also determined a huge bottleneck in Greece which is one of the most popular routes for refugees. More than 22,000 of people are stuck. These people are sleeping in the open, without tents, struggling with cold temperature and hunger.

The European Union is experiencing one of the most significant influxes of migrants and refugees in its history and the key question is whether Europe should act as one or whether states should act alone. Tensions in Europe have been rising because of the disproportionate burden of some countries as Germany's or France's quota compared to others for example in Eastern Europe. Many argues that the

answer to this problem is cooperation and reinforcement of the notion that is now Europe's responsibility to help these people by providing them security, housing and better living conditions.



Syrian refugees strike in front of Budapest Keleti railway station.
Photo: Mstyslav Chernov [Wikimedia Commons]

“The European Union is experiencing one of the most significant influxes of migrants and refugees in its history and the key question is whether Europe should act as one or whether states should act alone.”



Still no guarantee of EU deal with Britain



Brexit / EU Scrabble. Photo: Jeff Djevdet [Flickr]

As the “Brexit” referendum in June edges closer, Prime Minister David Cameron has been in negotiation with the European Union in an attempt to secure his demands for reform. Cameron is demanding a “special status” for the United Kingdom which would ensure protection through majority vote in London against the imposition of demands made by Eurozone states. In addition, the Prime Minister seeks to ensure that Britain is excluded from the EU notion of “an ever closer union” and further aims to secure more power for national parliaments to block EU legislation.

Thus far in negotiations, Cameron's spokesperson claimed that a “significant” agreement had been reached with the European Commission which would enable Britain to cease some welfare payments to EU immigrants for four years immediately after the referendum. However the practicalities of the so called “emergency brake” on welfare payments to immigrants along with the issue of protection for Britain's financial industry are yet to be resolved. The forthcoming referendum will undoubtedly shape a new role for the UK in world trade and politics regardless of whether the population votes to stay or leave. European Council President Donald Tusk warned that a UK exit “would be a defeat both for the UK and the European Union, but a geopolitical victory for those who seek to divide us.” The referendum will have a profound impact on the direction of the EU, especially as the organisation continues to face a great deal of scepticism and criticism over migration and financial crises. If the UK chooses to leave, the EU will lose its second largest economy and a significantly strong military power.



Kosovo opposition lawmakers use tear gas in parliament



Flag of Kosovo. Photo: Cradel [Wikimedia Commons]

Kosovo opposition lawmakers sparked uproar after releasing tear gas during a Parliamentary session on Friday 19th February. In spite of security checks, the opposition managed to smuggle the gas into the chamber and as a result managed to suspend normal proceedings twice that day. Consequently, 18 MP's were banned from Parliament, 7 MP's were arrested and four members of the opposition had to be forcibly removed by the police. Discontent has been brewing amongst the opposition as a result of the current EU supported deal between Kosovo and Serbia regarding greater powers to ethnic Serbians residing

in Kosovo. There are fears that by granting such powers, Serbia will in turn be able to exert greater influence over the region. Perhaps unsurprisingly the opposition find this agreement deeply problematic due to Serbia's continued reluctance to recognise the sovereignty of Kosovo. Last December, the Constitutional Court of Kosovo ruled such an agreement with Serbia as unconstitutional. Protestors are also unhappy with the current Montenegro talks which have been discussing potential border demarcation. Since September, the Parliament has witnessed an array of disruptions involving tear gas, pepper spray, water bottles and whistles all used in order to block the government from being able to function properly. The opposition claim that the current government is corrupt and incapable of representing the people of Kosovo therefore should resign and new elections should be held. US Ambassador to Kosovo Greg Delawie claimed that the opposition lawmakers who continue to disrupt the parliamentary sessions are "depriving the citizens of Kosovo of the right to live peacefully in an independent, democratic country".



Transatlantic data flows: EU-US Privacy Shield

The European Commission and the United States negotiators have agreed on a new data pact for protecting the Europeans' fundamental rights and for preventing restrictions of data transfers. On the 2nd of February, after two days of talks in Brussels, EU and US negotiators finally reached an agreement on data flows, replacing the Safe Harbour Decision. The previous arrangement was achieved in 2000 according to the objective of protecting personal data transferred to other countries. The Safe Harbour Privacy Principles allowed some US companies to comply with privacy laws protecting EU and Swiss citizens. In 2000, the European Commission made the decision that United States' principles agreed with the EU directive. Max Schrems, an Austrian law student, filled a complaint against Facebook in front of the Irish High Court which was referred to the European Court of Justice and the Safe Harbour was declared invalid.

The new Privacy Shield, following the Safe Harbour, "would establish stronger obligations on US companies to protect Europeans' personal data jointly with stronger oversight and monitoring by the US Department of Commerce and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) of companies'

compliance with their obligation to protect EU personal data."

The Europeans will have also the possibility to raise any enquiry or complaint with a dedicated new Ombudsman. The new arrangements will also include an alternative dispute resolution mechanism free of charge for the EU citizens and an annual joint review to regularly monitor the functioning of the accord.

The agreement received a general acceptance from lobbyist groups, The Information Technology Industry Council, Digital Europe and Paris-based International Chamber of Commerce and Business Europe, but some uncertainties and doubts remain over the deficiencies and possible validity of the pact. The following steps will be to listen to the opinion of a committee composed of representatives of the Member States and the EU Data Protection Authorities, before reaching a final decision. In this period U.S., will make the arrangements to guarantee the new framework, the Ombudsperson and the monitoring mechanism. Finally the Commission will propose the signature of the Umbrella Agreement and after the approval of the European Parliament; the decision should be adopted by the Council.



Developments on the Julian Assange case



*Julian Assange holding a press conference.
Photo: Cancillería del Ecuador [Wikimedia Commons]*

A UN panel ruled on the 5th of February that Julian Assange, WikiLeaks founder, had been arbitrarily detained and should be granted compensation. The famous hacker who leaked hundreds of secret US files had sought protection in the British Ecuadorian Embassy since June 2012 in order to avoid a Swedish rape investigation. Assange claims that the accusation of a 2010 rape in Sweden is false and is in fact a masked conspiracy which aims to eventually push him back to the United States where he would face a criminal investigation regarding his role in WikiLeaks. Despite lack of unanimity amongst the UN panel, the

majority sympathised with Assange's claim to political refugee status. Seong-Phil Hong, the leader of the panel, claimed that "the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention considers that the various forms of deprivation of liberty to which Julian Assange has been subjected constitute a form of arbitrary detention".

The fact that Assange entered the Embassy voluntarily was used by both the UK and Sweden to justify the contestation of the UN panel decision. The UK foreign minister Philip Hammond described Julian Assange as "a fugitive from justice" and consequently rejected the panel's finding by declaring it "ridiculous". The Swedish rhetoric somewhat echoes that of the British as prosecutors claim the UN decision has had "no formal impact" on the rape investigation. Downing Street reiterates that it must respect its legal obligation to extradite Assange to Sweden.

The decision of the UK and Sweden not to respect the panel's judgement arguably contributes to increasing tension over the effectiveness of international law and undermines the need for other states to adhere to UN decisions.



Obama rekindles US-Cuba relations

US President Barack Obama's office officially announced his visit to Cuba, scheduled for the 21st March 2016. This has been the most recent effort by President Obama to revive US-Cuba relations, which began with the re-opening of the US embassy in Cuba in 2014. Despite the scheduling of the visit and the establishment of closer ties, Obama has made it clear that there are sharp differences between the two nations and restated the United States "will always stand for human rights around the world". Furthermore, Obama announced he will not only meet with the government officials and the President Raul Castro, but also with Cubans from all walks of life, including dissidents, in an effort to improve the lives of Cubans.

While Obama is pressing for human rights, it is expected that Castro will make a case for the end of the trade embargo and for the return of Guantanamo's naval base to Cuban control. However, the Obama administration guaranteed Guantanamo is not up for negotiation.

The future meeting between Obama and Castro has been highly criticised by Republican candidates Ted Cruz and



*U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry at the newly re-opened U.S. Embassy in Havana, Cuba.
Photo: U.S. Department of State from United States [Wikimedia Commons]*

Marco Rubio who believe the ties between the two countries should remain closed until Havana's free from governmental oppression.

Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes has defended the government's choice by pointing out that "If the Cuban economy improves, there'll be more resources for the government. But there'll be far more resources for the Cuban people." Opinions aside, the fact remains that relations between the USA and Cuba have thrived since the beginning of 2016. Besides the scheduled visit, the US signed an agreement with Cuba re-establishing passenger flights. Thus, American citizens



may now fly to Cuba when the trip is motivated by specific activities such as humanitarian work, official US business and journalism. US Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx has praised this agreement claiming: "It really means a great deal to the people of both countries. Leaving aside the political differences, there's so many cultural connections between the two countries, in some cases family connections, the ability to have educational exchanges and things that happen as a result of resumption of this service, is really, really significant." Due to the economic and financial embargo, however, the agreement is limited, since Cuban airlines are not allowed to land on US soil and leisure travel is off-limits for American citizens.

One last remark should be made regarding the recent peak in Cuban migration to the USA, which has tripled since 2014. Cuban citizens are motivated by fears that the



Secretary Kerry Meets With Cubans Standing Across the Street From the Embassy in Havana.
Photo: U.S. Department of State from United States [Wikimedia Commons]

maintenance of good relations with the USA will cease the Cuban Adjustment Act. This policy, established during the Cold War, grants legal status to all Cubans who reach dry US soil.

There has been some polemic surrounding the subject as some argue it is an unfair advantage for Cubans over other Latin-Americans. So far the White House has remained silent about this topic.

“Leaving aside the political differences, there's so many cultural connections between the two countries, in some cases family connections, the ability to have educational exchanges and things that happen as a result of resumption of this service, is really, really significant.”



Suicide attacks in Afghanistan

For the past year the Taliban has been responsible for multiple attacks throughout the country in an attempt to restore extreme Islamist rule in Afghanistan. On 27th February, a suicide attack occurred in the eastern province of Kunar, which resulted in the death of a local militia commander and at least 12 others. According to the Provincial Governor Wahidullah Kalimzai the suicide bomber rode up on a motorcycle to the entrance of the governor's compound in Asadabad where he blew himself up. It is estimated that 40 people were injured by the explosion, most of whom were civilians passing by and children who were playing in the park. A couple hours after the attack in Kunar a second member of the Taliban committed a suicide bomb attack in Kabul, near the Afghan Defence Ministry. According to the ministry spokesman Dawlat Waziri the explosion caused the death of 15 people and wounded 33, most of them staff of the Ministry who were finishing work and making their way home. A witness claims that when he arrived to the site of the suicide bombing he saw about 30 people who were either dead or injured, adding that the nearby cars were damaged and the glass of many windows were shattered on the ground. The Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid



Kabul Downtown. Photo: Brian Hillegas [Flickr]

claimed responsibility for the attack in Kunar and claimed that 23 officers were killed and 29 wounded, adding that the victims did not include any civilians.

The potential reason for the attack is considered to be the pressing matter of the resumption of the peace process which was interrupted last year. Officials from Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China are desperate to continue the peace talks between the Western-backed government in Kabul and the Taliban, but Afghan President Ashraf Ghani issued a statement saying that "the Afghan government will not conduct peace talks with groups who have killed innocent people", adding that "security forces would step up the fight against terrorism".



North Korea rocket launch



North Korea — Pyongyang, Arirang (Mass Games).
Photo: (stephan) [Flickr]

On 7th February, North Korea managed to launch a satellite into space which was claimed to be a “complete success”. The launch of the Kwangmyongson-4 satellite, which was named after late leader Kim Jong Il, was personally ordered and directed by Kim Jong-un. Despite the fact that North Korea is indicating that the launch was for “scientific and peaceful reasons”, many countries consider it a disguised ballistic missile test, especially because of the purported hydrogen bomb test which was carried out by the DPRK in January.

According to a spokesman for the US Strategic Command, two objects have been detected in Earth’s orbit, which was believed by arms control expert David

Wright to be the satellite and the third stage of the rocket booster. He said in a statement that if North Korea manages to communicate with the launched satellite it will learn about the ways of operating it in space, adding that even if it won’t be able to do so, at least the country will learn about “the reliability of its rocket system”. An analysis by Japan indicated that parts of the rocket fell into four different locations after the take-off. According to the Japanese Prime Minister’s office the first location is 150 km west of the Korean Peninsula in the Yellow Sea; following by two other locations to the southwest of the Korean peninsula in the East China Sea, and finally the fourth location is situated about 2,000 kilometres south of Japan in the Pacific Ocean.



A model of the “Unha-g” missile on display at a floral exhibition in Pyongyang.
Photo: Steve Herman [Wikimedia Commons]



The launch of the rocket was quickly criticized by a number of states and their governments, including the United States, South Korea, Japan, China, Russia and France. John Kerry, the Secretary of State of the United States said that the launch was the “second one just over a month [...] which is not only threatening the security of the Korean peninsula, but the region and the United States as well”. United States officials believe the same type of rocket, the Unha rocket, which was used to launch the satellite, could deliver a nuclear warhead. The Unha rocket is considered to be based upon the Taepodong long-range ballistic missile, which has an estimated range of around 5,600 miles (9,000 km) that would put Australia, much of Western Europe and the West Coast of the United States in range of the North Korean warhead.

South Korean President Park Geun-hye identified the launch as a “challenge to world peace” and he also announced the country would like to begin a series of talks with the United States to deploy a defense system called Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) which is able to intercept missiles in flight. If the system was deployed to South Korea it would only be focused on North Korea, but other nations, such as China and Russia are afraid that if the US decides on the deployment of THAAD then it could be used against them as well. Besides the planning of the deployment of THAAD South Korea is considering the reduction of the personnel at the Kaesong



President Park Geun-hye. Photo: Korea.net [Wikimedia Commons]

Industrial Complex, which is a joint economic development zone between the two Koreas. The factory is believed to be used to fund nuclear and missile programs by North Korea. South Korea's decision to shut down the factory was met with the deportation of South Korean citizens by the North Korean government, the seizing of South Korean assets and the North Korean governments vow “to militarize the park”. South Korea responded to North Korea's provocations by cutting off power and water supplies to the industrial park on 12th February.

On 7th February, the UN Security Council called for an emergency meeting to discuss a potential international response to North Korea's violations. The United States and China have different ideas over how best to respond to the incident; Washington believes tougher sanctions have to be set up whereas Beijing continues to stress the importance of dialogue. John Kerry stated that the US would work with the United Nations Security



Council to set up a number of “significant measures” to hold North Korea account for the violations of UN resolutions, so far the decision has been made to temporarily deploy an additional Patriot missile battery in South Korea.

North Korea has been under United Nations sanctions since its first nuclear test in 2006,

but despite being under sanctions it has conducted three more atomic tests since then, including the one in January, and numerous ballistic missile launches. Therefore the question concerning North Korea is not what the sanctions should be, but how to force the country to respect the United Nations resolutions.

Korean border incidents

According to a South Korean military official a North Korean patrol boat crossed into South Korean waters in the first week of February. It was reported by a news agency that despite warning communications from the South Korean navy the boat did not leave the area, it only retreated after a couple of warning shots were fired by a naval gun. The so-called Northern Limit Line, which was crossed by the North Korean boat, was drawn up at the end of the Korean War, but North Korea has refused to acknowledge it ever since. The incident came in a time when tensions are constantly heightening on the Korean Peninsula, since it came the day after North Korea fired a long-range rocket carrying a satellite into space, which other countries, including South Korea, consider as a disguised missile test.



Korea_DMZ_Train_26. Photo: Republic of Korea [Flickr]



Trans-Pacific Partnership: Twelve nations sign the deal in Auckland

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, one of the biggest multinational deals in history, was signed by 12 countries at the Skycity Hotel Auckland in Auckland, New Zealand on 4th February after years of relentless negotiations. Trade representatives announced in a joint statement that their goal by signing the deal is “to enhance shared prosperity, create jobs and promote sustainable economic development for all [their] nations” while focusing on their “respective domestic processes”. The initiative which is led by the United States is a key part of President Obama's so-called “pivot to Asia”, but it has proved to be a controversial issue ahead of the US elections which will take place in November. The United States considers the deal as a companion agreement to the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which is a broadly similar agreement between the United States and the European Union. But as the TTIP has a wide team opposing its implementation, so does the TPP: despite the fact that President Obama is praising the signing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, most members of his own party oppose it. One of the biggest opponents of the agreement is President Obama's potential successor, Bernie Sanders, who pledged on

3rd February that, if elected president, he would kill the deal because he is not willing to let “corporations outsource American jobs overseas”, adding that “trade is a good thing, but trade has got to be fair and the TPP is anything but fair”. However, President Obama believes the agreement was a new type of trade deal “that puts American workers first”, adding that “the partnership would give the United States an advantage over other leading economies, namely China, and it also allows America to write the rules of the road in the 21st century, which is especially important in a region as dynamic as the Asia-Pacific.” The 12 nations who are part of the deal are Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, Brunei, Mexico, Chile and Peru and they are said to be responsible for approximately 40% of the world's economy. The first to sign the agreement was Australia's Minister for Trade, Andrew Robb and closing the queue of the formal signing ceremony was New Zealand's Trade Minister, Todd McCay. The first nation to become involved in the agreement was Malaysia, by ratifying the deal at the end of January. The other participants have two years to decide if they want to ratify or to reject the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal.



■ News in Brief

Domestic Affairs affecting international relations

Only three men arrested for sexual assault in Cologne are refugees

■ Following the mass sexual assaults in Cologne, Germany, it has been found that only three out of 58 arrested suspects were refugees and had recently reached the country from Syria or Iraq. Contrary to popular belief until recently, most of the suspects were already in Germany and were of Algerians, Moroccan or Tunisian descent. Furthermore, Cologne's public prosecutor has claimed that the majority of the charges were related to theft and not sexual offense or assault.

Finland to test drones on Russian border as migrant flow grows

■ In early February it was reported that Finland intends to test drones along its frontier with Russia. A Finnish border guard, Major Jussi Napola refused to explain the reason the country is intending to run such tests along the border. According to Major Napola, 500 migrants have arrived to Finland from Russia already this year, compared with about 700 in the year of 2015. He also claimed that "the plan is to test the remote piloted aerial system in operation use at the Russian border and the coastal areas", adding that the country wants to see if "the technology suits the nation's needs and if it is suitable for Finnish conditions". The EU has already been using drones to monitor the flow of migrants and refugees over the Mediterranean. Finland has been helping FRONTEX, the European Union's border agency in reviewing the different options of drone use. Helsinki's goal is to get more experience in the EU's operational capabilities, because the development of the technology can be turned into "a possibly cost effective option" for them.

Support for Merkel rises, but doubts over refugee policy remains

■ The German Chancellor Angela Merkel is facing one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century to date; the refugee crisis. In this month, popular support for Merkel has risen, reaching 54%. However, 60% of the voters are unsatisfied with government's "open door policy" and high pressure remains for reducing the number of refugees allowed to enter Germany. Most German citizens, around 70%, trust in an EU solution but they think that the chance to reach good results in a little time is questionable. During the CDU party in Volkmarshausen, Merkel refused the idea of closing borders. There are great expectations from the talks between EU and Turkey on 7th of March and on migration summit of 18th and 19th of March but her idea remains the one that "human dignity is inviolable" and she will continue to do her "damned duty", to help refugees.



Sweden Democrats lose ground in polls on new asylum rules

■ Current polls have shown a continuous decline in support for the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats party since the beginning of this year. Generous asylum policies were once characteristic of Swedish politics, however since the government has begun to introduce border checks and more stringent regulations polls have shown a drop in support for the Sweden Democrats from 16.2% in February from a high of 18.9% in December. The poll conducted by Ipsos also highlighted the amounting strength of the opposition centre-left Moderate party with current support standing at 25.6%. The next election is due to be held in 2018.

A new Swiss law which would expel convicted foreigners without appeal

■ Later this month, Switzerland will hold a binding referendum on whether to subject any foreign resident to automatic deportation if convicted and the reason for that are the 1,1 million migrants have streamed into Europe during the past year, and over a spate of sexual assaults by mainly North African migrants on women partying on New Year's Eve in Germany. Swiss People's Party (SVP), which holds about a third of seats in parliament, initiated this referendum and secured the required number of signatures, playing on fears that foreigners may pose growing risks to the Swiss way of life. Free Democrats and liberal-left Social Democrats are against it, claiming that the SVP's undertaking is racist, excessive and could damage relations with the European Union. Foreigners would be automatically deported after completing their sentences according to the proposed law, without the right to appeal. The SVP initiative will be subjected to the Swiss system of direct democracy on February 28 and in order to pass, it requires a simple majority. Claude Longchamp of the GfS research institute says that polls suggest supporters of the proposal slightly outnumber opponents.

Ireland: green impasse

■ On 29th February, Ireland's two biggest parties declared their intention to form their own government over the next 10 days, however critics claim such a prospect is unrealistic. The election produced no clear winner but the threat of weeks of political stalemate and a possible second election could quickly change sentiment among investors. When asked if events would eventually lead to a deal with rival Fianna Fail, Flanagan said "immovable positions" would not resolve the crisis. Theresa Reidy, a politics lecturer said: "There are only two options on the table: some kind of minority administration or coalition, a majority without each other is just not possible." Irish 10-year bond yields remained near record lows at 0.90 percent but traders have cautioned that investors would become more nervous the longer the instability lasts. Fiona Muldoon, the head of one of Ireland's largest insurers, said political stability was needed to keep the economy on track.



Romanian government kicks off anti-poverty drive

■ The Romanian government intends to lift at least 580,000 people out of poverty within the next four years. Prime Minister Dacian Ciolos and his cabinet have concocted a 47 point plan which, at a cost of approximately 1 billion euros, aims to address problematic issues within health, education, housing and other important aspects of social policy. Romania remains one of the EU's poorest states with 1 in 10 on the population living in poverty. The measures laid out by the government include plans to offer more affordable housing, soup kitchens, and an increase number of educational opportunities. It is expected that this plan will be made possible through use of EU funding set aside for local development as part of its poverty eradication programme.

Slight chances for Socialists to form government in Spain

■ King Felipe appointed Socialist head Pedro Sanchez on Tuesday to lead talks about forming a government in Spain, although this would require an agreement between parties whose policies are incompatible. The reasons why Sanchez accepted this offer is because he wanted to break political deadlock and avoid a new national election in the next few months. Since inconclusive parliamentary elections on 20th December, Spain had no government and little progress has been made with the talks held so far. Pedro Sanchez said he will have open talks with all parties -including Rajoy's People's Party (PP) – but is not willing to have the backing of the ones which favour Catalonia's independence from Spain.

Egypt to shut prominent NGO that documents alleged rights abuses

■ The Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation for Victims of Violence and Torture has been ordered to close by Egyptian authorities. It is claimed by sources within the government that the closure is a consequence of "unspecific violations". The Nadeem centre director Aida Seif el-Dawla argues that such a closure notice is now characteristic of "the toughest crackdown on dissent in Egypt's modern history". Amnesty International condemned the action of the Egyptian government claiming that the NGO gave support to those "hundreds of victims of torture and families of people subjected to enforced disappearances". President Abdel Fattah-al Sisi has been accused of widespread human rights violations since his rule began after toppling President Mursi in 2013 but continues to deny allegations of running secret detention and torture centres.

“The Romanian government intends to lift at least 580,000 people out of poverty within the next four years.”



Bomb explosion in Ankara, Turkey

■ On the evening of 17th February an explosion occurred in the heart of the Turkish capital of Ankara. The targets were Turkish military personnel who were traveling in a military vehicle which was stopped by traffic lights. It is believed by officials that the large explosion was caused by a car bomb in which at least 28 people lost their lives and 61 more were wounded. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but government officials are treating the incident as an act of terrorism. It was reported that the attack was well organized and one of the leading suspects is considered to be the Kurdish Workers' Party, the PKK. After the explosion Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for an urgent emergency meeting with top level security officials in Ankara. He said in a statement that Turkey will continue fighting those who have no morals and are willing to carry out such attacks. This was the fourth major explosion in the country in the last few months.

Suicide bombings kill 40 in eastern Iraq, 8 west of Baghdad

■ On 29th February a suicide bomber blew himself up in Iraq's eastern province of Diyala, resulting in the death of at least 40 people. At the same time, 8 members of the security forces were killed at a security checkpoint in the western outskirts of Baghdad. According to security officials and police in Diyala the larger attack in Muqdadhiya, 8 km northeast of Baghdad, caused the death of 6 local commanders of the Hashid Shaabi umbrella group of Shi'ite militias who were attending the funeral of a commander's relative. During the attack 58 people were reported to be wounded. Not long after the attack the so-called Islamic State claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing.

Syrian opposition claims that government broke armistice agreement

■ A senior official from Syria's main opposition group said on Monday that an initiative to halt five years of fighting was in danger of collapse because of attacks by government forces. The official of the Saudi-backed opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC) said that cessation of hostilities drawn up by Washington and Moscow faced "complete nullification" because Syrian government attacks were violating the agreement. Jihadist groups such as Islamic State and the al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front and Russia are not included in the cessation deal.

“On the evening of 17th February an explosion occurred in the heart of the Turkish capital of Ankara.”



Philippine army kills 45 Islamic militants in the battles in south

■ An army spokesman told reporters that Philippine security forces eliminated 42 Muslim rebels on 26th February who were linked to the self-proclaimed Islamic State. It was also reported that the invasion of the bastion of an affiliate of Jemaah Islamiyah, a Southeast Asian network of Islamist militants, resulted in the death of three soldiers and another eleven were wounded. During the operation the “army was shelling rebel positions, while air force planes dropped bombs and helicopters fired rockets”. The operations were carried out near the town of Butig, which is considered one of the bases of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the country’s largest Muslim rebel group. It was stated by the military that the Front stayed away from the battle and even helped out about 8,000 people who had been displaced from their homes after the fighting began on 20th February. It is believed by army and police officials that some Muslim rebel groups have “pledged allegiance to ISIS”, but they have no evidence to prove such an assumption.

Xi Jinping urges reform implementation

■ Prior to the Chinese New Year, the President Xi Jinping has reasserted the importance of economic and military reforms and has called for commitment in its implementation. This push for reform was put forward during Jinping's visit to Jiangxi, a southern Chinese province. Among other statements, Xi Jinping made reference to its government's commitment to develop the old revolutionary base areas in order to tackle poverty. Due to the stagnation of economic growth for the past two years, the province of Jiangxi was also encouraged to support up-and-coming industries and to modernize traditional ones. Regarding the military, Jinping is enforcing a reform which has led to the sacking of 300,000 people so far. However, the President highlighted the importance of people's devotion to these reforms, calling for the cooperation of the Chinese people.



*A soldier of the 1st Scout Ranger Regiment of the Philippine Army.
Photo: Kguirnela [Wikimedia Commons]*



*Xi Jinping.
Photo: Day Donaldson [Flickr]*



Uganda rights group receives hundreds of complaints from women about vote

■ Uganda's most recent Presidential election was characterised by allegations of violence against women and intimidation. Such violence, paired with delays in the delivery of ballot materials in key areas of opposition strongholds, has prevented many Ugandan citizens from being able to exercise their right to vote. Moreover, Besigye, the leader of the opposition party was arrested after protesting against results. The desire for a more prosperous, peaceful Uganda free from violence, corruption and oppression will remains unsatisfied.

Scorching copper mine in Peru

■ On 16th February, 15 families occupied their former lands in Las Bambas in order to press the MMG Ltd's company for compensation. The protest has not affected operations at the mine, said the community's vice president, Obispo Huamani Las Bambas, which recently started production and cost \$7.4 billion to build, is expected to become one of the world's biggest mines with annual output of about 400,000 tonnes. It is also expected to propel an economic recovery in Peru this year and help the Andean country become the world's second biggest copper supplier after Chile. Huamani said former residents of Fuerabamba would remain inside the mine until MMG fulfilled a series of commitments, including paying each family the remaining half of a 400,000 soles (\$113,955) compensation pledge and providing teachers for new schools. Peru is rife with disputes over mining, especially related to water. But no project in Peru at this stage of development has ever been stopped by protests.



Election day in Uganda - 18 February 2016.
Photo: Commonwealth Secretariat [Flickr]



Mine in Peru.
Photo: desierto_atacama [Wikimedia Commons]



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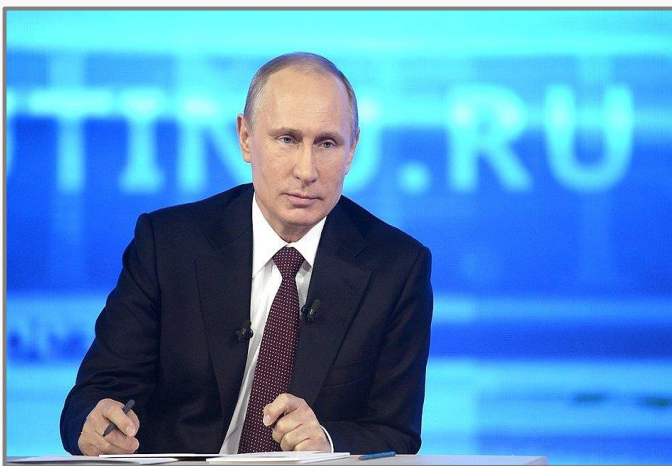
Bilateral relations

Ties between EU-Russia will be normal “sooner or later”

■ Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that he is certain that Russian relations with the European Union will “sooner or later” become “normalised” once again. During a meeting with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, in light of the imposed EU economic sanctions against Russia’s action in Crimea, the pair discussed the prospect of restoring trade relations. Despite Russia’s current economic problems, Putin reasserted his commitment to the 2014 \$10 billion loan agreement which is to cover 80% of the costs required to expand the Paks nuclear plant on the Danube. Orban went on to argue that the EU will have “no opportunity to extend sanctions” later this year and reiterated the need for cooperation between the EU and Russia.

Poland to seek migrants welfare payment details before accepting EU-UK deal

■ President Andrzej Duda demanded to see the full details of the EU proposal which would enable the UK to suspend welfare payments to immigrants. Polish migrants are the largest group of EU immigrants in the UK. Therefore it is perhaps of little surprise that Polish President Duda is greatly concerned over the potential discrimination Polish citizens working in the UK may face as a consequence of the so called “emergency brake”. However, the governing party Law and Justice welcomes strengthened sovereignty. Currently, European Council President Donald Tusk aims to address the UK’s call for reform of the EU in order to curb the exacerbating problems of migration whilst simultaneously ensuring the protection of the UK’s sovereignty.



*Direct Line with Vladimir Putin.
Photo: [kremlin.ru]*



*Andrzej Duda.
Photo: Lukas Plewnia [Flickr]*



Saudi Arabia claims 375 civilians were killed on its border in Yemen war

■ According to Riyadh, since the start of the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen in late March, 375 civilians, including 63 children were killed by mortars and rockets fired at Saudi Arabian towns. Houthis and Saleh's forces fired nearly 130 mortars and 15 missiles at Saudi border positions on Monday alone in a measure of how fierce the fighting on the frontier continues to be. United Nations reports show that around 6,000 people, about half of them civilians, have been killed in fighting and coalition air strikes in Yemen since the war began. Yemeni forces backed by the coalition pushed the Houthis from the main southern port city of Aden in June and from the north eastern town of Marib in September, but have since made little territorial progress.

Nepal ends fuel rationing after supply from India improves

■ After months of fuel rationing by Nepal the struggle ends as India improves its fuel supply. The need for the rationing was caused by ethnic protesters who were objecting Nepal's first post-monarchy constitution which was adopted in September 2015. The country blamed its sole fuel supplier, India for supporting the protesters who have family relations and close cultural ties, causing the shortage that has strained ties between the South Asian partners. The fuel shortage, which called for the need of the rationing, led to black marketing and caused kilometre-long lines by motorists in front of a number of petrol stations. Protesters called off the blockade in February after the government made changes in the constitution, providing greater political voice to the Madhesis. After the blockade ended the fuel supply trucks were allowed into the country and since Nepal is now getting about 70% of its normal fuel supply from India there is no need of the restriction of distribution.

Thousands in Japan rally against US base in Okinawa

■ On 21st February, thousands of people surrounded the parliament of Japan to protest against the government's plans to relocate a US military base on the island of Okinawa. It was reported that about 28,000 protesters gathered in front of the parliament in central Tokyo and hundreds more held similar protests all over the country. Okinawa was the site of Japan's only land battles in World War Two and many current residents of the island resent the fact that it hosts tens of thousands of American troops and military. In 1996, the US and Japan agreed on relocating the base, but the proposal was rejected by residents who wish to move the base altogether, because they identify the US bases as noisy, which are the sources of pollution and high crime rates.



■ News in Brief

International relations

Bosnia and Herzegovina formally applies to join the European Union

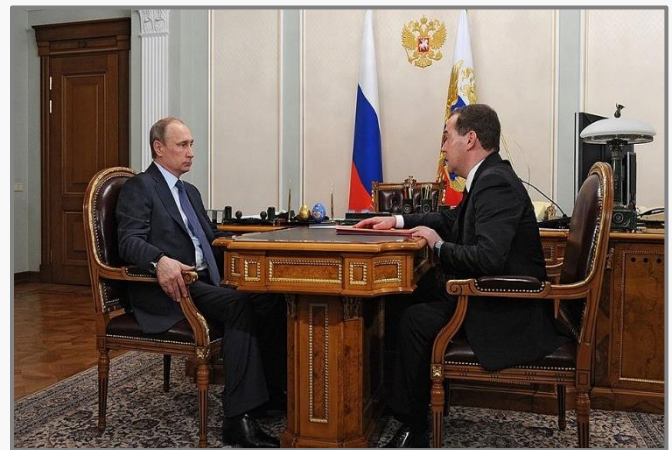
■ On 15th February, Bosnia and Herzegovina formally submitted its application to the European Union in the hope of becoming a future member. The country have made several attempts of applying, but it was repeatedly denied by Brussels and was told that it would need to make further improvements and has to carry out a number of reforms just to be considered as a potential member of the EU. Dragan Covic, the chairman of Bosnia's presidency wrote in the application letter that the country understands that it has to join the EU at some point, therefore it considers this as its task, especially because its neighbouring countries are either a member of the Union (Croatia since 2013) or are on their path of integration (Montenegro and Serbia). The European Union's Head of Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini saw Sarajevo's attempt as "a step towards European unity".

Russia and Western countries: a new cold war?

■ Air strikes in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Russian role in neighbouring Ukraine with the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014 have caused a change in the communications between Russia and Western countries. The Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev says that a new cold war is on. However, Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of NATO, in an interview with BBC at Munich conference says that "we are not in a cold war but also not in the partnership that we established at the end of the cold war." NATO's aim is to increase the political dialogue with Russia. Regardless of such claims, Russia justifies its continued aerial bombardment as a mechanism to stop extremist groups from reaching Russia.



Flag of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Photo: Kseferovic [Wikimedia Commons]



Putin with Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.
Photo: [kremlin.ru]



Pope urges united response on refugees “drama”

■ As Europe is arguing over sharing the burden of refugee acceptance, Pope Francis called for a united response on 28th February to help asylum seekers begin their new lives in a war-free zone. The pope addressed a crowd of people in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, claiming that the “refugee drama was always in his prayers”. He said that the unison of the states could be an effective and distribute way handling the crisis, adding that there is a need to push for negotiations. He also mentioned the example of Greece and other countries that have been helping out numerous refugees who have been fleeing in from the Middle East and Africa, seeking asylum in Europe. The Pope has welcomed a cessation of hostilities deal in Syria which came into effect on 27th February. The cessation seemed to be working at first, but there have been reports of violations on both sides since.

Italy will contribute to EU migration fund to Turkey

■ Italy has recently agreed to drop its objections to the migration fund to Turkey and will contribute with 3 billion euros. The migration fund aims to help Turkey deal with the increasing pressure faced from an uninterrupted influx of migrants while ensuring that Ankara will stem the flow of migrants coming into Europe. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi highlighted that Rome's contribution is related to its commitment to saving lives. It has not yet been made clear whether Italy will let go of its demands, related with the EU's deficit policies. Despite the EU's plan to exempt the contributions for the migration plan from the state's deficit, Renzi continues to put pressure on Brussels to accept Italy's migration spending.

Tensions rise in the South China Sea with Chinese missile deployment

■ China has increased militarization in the South China Sea by deploying a surface-to-air missile on Woody Island on February 16th. The Taiwan president-elect Tsai Ing-wen has called for “self-control” and cooperation in order to maintain peace. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, on the other hand, has labelled the deployment as “hype” while stating it is China's right to increase security to ensure self-defence. United States' Secretary of State John Kerry is expected to conduct conversations with Beijing over his concerns about the increased militarization.

“Pope Francis called for a united response on 28th February to help asylum seekers begin their new lives in a war-free zone.”





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