

NEWSFLASH #16

Covering the period: 28/09/2017 – 12/10/2017

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The Newsflash of the European Forum of Democracy and Solidarity is a bi-monthly news bulletin covering relevant political developments in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and the South Caucasus. We have put the main accent on political party news, while at the same time attention is being given to gender issues, minority and human rights, and the process of accession to the European Union. It is sponsored by the British Labour Party through the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and is spread by e-mail to more than 1700 recipients. The Newsflash is based on mass media and internal sources. Contributions and comments are highly appreciated.

ACCESSION / CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

Albania

▶ *Albania appoints Kosovo ministers*

On 10 October Albania's Prime Minister, Edi Rama (Socialist party, SPA), has appointed four ministers who come from Kosovo, sending a political message about his ambitions to play a wider role in the region, experts said. On Saturday, Rama presented 33 government vice ministers, four of whom are professionals from Kosovo and little known in Albania. Hajrulla Ceku, for example, the new vice minister of Tourism and Environment was before a program coordinator in a Kosovo NGO engaged in environmental and urban planning issues. Afrim Krasniqi, director of the Albanian Institute for Political Studies, said that the selection sent a clear message. "Rama wants to create a precedent and give the impression that he is different from the other PMs in Tirana and Pristina and is going to play a regional role," he said.

Macedonia

▶ *Tensions between Social Democrats and Albanian party Besa*

On 9 October it was announced that Macedonia's main ruling party, the Social Democrats (SDSM), and the ethnic Albanian BESA party have exchanged a series of mutual accusations and warnings. The dispute erupted after the SDSM decided to openly support BESA's bitter Albanian rivals in the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), in the October 15 local elections. Relations dipped sharply after the Prime Minister and SDSM leader Zoran Zaev

visited the Albanian bastion of Tetovo on Thursday, where he expressed support for the DUI's mayoral candidate. During his visit, BESA activists staged a protest against what they call the unprincipled alliance between the SDSM and the DUI for the local elections. In response, Zaev accused BESA of secretly "playing for the VMRO DPMNE team", referring to the former ruling party ousted from power in May. "We are not playing for any team except for the interests of the Albanians as we are their strongest representatives. We advise Zaev to be more careful in future because he might lose Albanian support," a senior BESA representative said. BESA, with its five MPs, still remains an important partner for Zaev. Even with the support of the DUI and the Alliance for Albanians, he still has only a bare majority of one or two in parliament - with 62 of the 120 MPs. Despite not joining the government, BESA said it would in principle support the new government's promised reforms following 11 years of VMRO DPMNE rule.

► *US urges accountability for wiretapping*

On 3 October US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Hoyt Yee said that establishing accountability for the illegal mass surveillance allegedly conducted under Macedonia's previous government will be a "critical step" towards the country convincing the European Union and NATO that it is ready to join. "We call on all actors... to do what they can to ensure that justice is done, the rule of law is observed, that the Special Prosecutor [set up to investigate high-level crimes] is given the support necessary to do its job and that there is not political pressure, influence over the prosecutors, over the judges," Yee said. Yee also spoke about the importance of judicial reform that would ensure rule of law and trust in the country's institutions. But he noted that the [new government led by the Social Democrats](#), which came to office in March, is "still relatively new", and that the US will support it.

► *Mayoral candidates campaign for Albanian votes*

On 3 October it was announced that the two leading candidates for the post of Mayor of Skopje try to woo ethnic Albanian voters ahead of the vote on October 15, both are avoiding the kind of divisive ethnic language that marred last year's general elections. In the campaign for the December 2016 early general elections, the then ruling VMRO DPMNE party went all out in accusing its main opponents in the Social Democrats (SDSM), of surrendering to ethnic Albanian demands. This year, however, the party's mayoral candidate for Skopje has even fielded ethnic Albanian politician as party's municipal councillor. In a clear attempt to circumvent his party's dismal reputation among many Albanians, VMRO DPMNE's Koce Trajanovski, now running for his third term, got support from his Albanian party colleague, Muhamed Ameti. The two can be seen posing together on Albanian-language billboards that also contain the party's election slogan: "A new era begins for Skopje." Previously, the party made few attempts to appeal to Albanians, who make up about a quarter of the population, concentrated in the north and west of the country. They also make up between 10 and 20 per cent of the population of Skopje – but these numbers are only approximate as no national census has taken place in years.

Montenegro

► *Coup defendant slates 'rigged anti-Serbian' trial*

On 9 October one of the opposition leaders Milan Knezevic (Democratic Front, DF) pleaded not guilty to charges of plotting a coup, and told the court in Podgorica that he was only there because he was a Serb who opposed Montenegro's membership of NATO. Knezevic, is one of 14 [Russian, Serbian and Montenegrin citizens facing trial for alleged involvement in a plot to overthrow the pro-Western government in October last year](#). Knezevic appeared in court wearing Russian military symbols which he said he had received during a visit to Moscow at the ceremony marking Russian Victory Day in World War II. "I do not recognize this court. This is a politically mounted process against the Serbs. Only Serbs are on the bench today and the hunt against them has started," Knezevic said. Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov, Russian military intelligence service officers, are accused of being behind a network of Serbian and Montenegrin citizens who planned to assassinate then Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic last October. The prosecution has said it believes that "Russian state bodies" were involved in the alleged coup attempt. However, the opposition in Montenegro and some anti-government media outlets continue to claim that the coup was staged by the authorities to ensure Djukanovic won another election.

Serbia

► *Serbian opposition parties accuse speaker of parliament using penalties to silence them*

On 10 October several MPs from the opposition parties accused the ruling coalition of using disciplinary measures to silence the opposition. Last year, a disproportionate number of penalties, such as fines, reduction of salaries, and a 20-day exclusion of parliamentary sessions, was handed out by the speaker of the Serbian parliament. 60 out of 62 penalties were given to opposition MPs. Nova Stranka, member of the opposition New Party, was punished with a 40 per cent reduction of her salary on 29 May this year. According to her, the ruling coalition had "a clear intention (...) to exclude and sack as many opposition MPs as possible from the debate about the budget for 2018." She said that disciplinary measures should be used only to deal with serious security threats and risks, not to silence the opposition. Also Bosko Obradovic, member of the Dveri party, accused the coalition of trying to silence the opposition, because in his opinion the ruling parties do not want to hear something they do not like. He himself was punished several times in parliamentary sessions. Marija Janjusevic, MP of the Dveri party, was punished after accusing the speaker of parliament of violating the rules of procedure. Her microphone was turned off before she could finish her speech. According to her, "the regime's stance toward the

opposition is actually the most authentic possible picture of the government's treatment of its people. Opposition Democratic Party also said penalties are used as a tool to crush serious debates in the country.

► *Turkish and Serbian Presidents meet in Belgrade*

On 10 October Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic met in Belgrade to sign new agreements in order to boost trade between the two countries. Furthermore, a declaration was signed to establish a cooperation council. Twelve bilateral agreements were signed, including a revision of the FTA between Turkey and Serbia. According to Ivan Edjub Kostic, director of the Balkan Centre for the Middle East in Belgrade, "Turkey is well aware that Serbia is an important factor of stability in the Western Balkans region. Besides, Serbia represents a bigger economic market for Turkey than any other Western Balkans country." The President of Turkey visited the country for three days and has received a warm welcome in southern, mainly Muslim, town of Novi Pazar.

► *Leader of Free Citizens movement calls on to protest in Belgrade, demanding "free and fair elections"*

On 6 October head of the opposition Free Citizens movement and former presidential candidate, Sasa Jankovic, called on citizens, NGO's, political parties, and unions to join him in a protest in Belgrade, demanding "free and fair elections" in the upcoming local polls of the capital next year. Former Foreign Minister, Vuk Jeremic, and head of the opposition Democratic Party, Dragan Sutanovac, will attend the protest. A joint list of "election demands" will be read out during the demonstration. Jankovic accuses the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of planning "election fraud". Interior Minister and member of the SNS, Nebojsa Stefanovic, said Jankovic's accusations are ridiculous. However, according to Jankovic, the suspicious rising number of registered voters in Belgrade municipalities of Vracar and Zvezdara recently is due to the registrations of supporters from the SNS from other cities.

► *European Trade Unions Confederation: Serbian company Gosa ignore workers' rights*

On 6 October the Association of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia, member of the European Trade Unions Confederation (ETUC), said it will raise awareness on social media of the "years of agony" that workers of Gosa, a Serbian railway carriage manufacturer, had gone through. The heyday of the company have been slipping away since the fall of Yugoslavia. In 2007, the Serbian state sold the railway carriage manufacturer to Slovakia's ZOS Trnava company. Gosa has a 1.8 million debt at the moment. Six months ago, a worker of Gosa committed suicide because he was not able to nourish his family anymore. This resulted in public outrage and strikes by employees of the company. "Workers at the Gosa railway vehicle factory in Smederevska Palanka, Serbia, have been on strike for six months because they are owed 20 months' salary and employer's social contributions have not been paid since 2014," the ETUC stated. The ETUC condemned Gosa as one of the worst employers.

► *Journalists and activists launch new media freedom campaign*

On 4 October Serbian journalists and activists announced they will meet in Belgrade to launch a new media freedom campaign. The campaign is a sequel to the Stop Media Darkness Campaign on 28 September. All participants will sign a 'Freedom of the Media Declaration'. The official Facebook group 'For Media Freedom' called on journalists and activists to share a video to explain why they are fighting for media freedom. "We want to warn the public that freedom of media in our country is running out of breath, and we want to fight together to save it," said several participating organisations in a joint press release.

► *Serbian President postpones visit to Zagreb following diplomatic row*

On 4 October Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic postponed his visit to Zagreb following the diplomatic riot between Croatia and Serbia. "Given the comprehensive circumstances on which the date of the visit depends, it [the date] has not yet been established," the President said in a statement. The relations between the countries has been deteriorated since Serbia unveiled a monument to Yugoslav People's Army major Milan Tepic in the presence of defence and labour ministers in Belgrade on 29 September. The officer blew an ammunition house in the Croatian city of Bjelovar, killing himself and 11 Croatian soldiers in 1991. For the Serbs the major is a hero, because he blew himself up rather than surrender to Croatian troops. Serbian Foreign Minister said Zagreb's diplomatic protest about the monument is an example of "madness". The Croatian Foreign Ministry commented on the unveiling of the monument, and said that "Serbia still isn't ready to confront the past and its role in the bloody breakup of the former [Yugoslavia]." Zagreb called the move of Serbia "aggressive" and claimed that "heroic Croatian war veterans" had prevent Tepic to blow up the whole city of Bjelovar. The statute in Belgrade was also condemned by Bosnian media. Serbian Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin said that Serbia and Croatia will never agree on certain issues from the past.

► *Serbian police arrested two students with respect to the 'Against the Dictatorship' protests of last April*

On 3 October Serbia's police arrested two Belgrade students for organising one of the protests against President Aleksandar Vucic in April, a day after Vucic won the presidential elections. However, the so-called 'Against the Dictatorship' protests across Serbia had no official leaders. The police alleged that the two students, Terzic and Vucetic, were the organisers of the rally on 2 April, because they walked at the front of the demonstration, carrying a megaphone. Moreover, the students would have led the crowd in chanting of the offices of pro-government tabloid *Informer* and would called the protesters to observe a parliament session as guests. One of the students, said with respect to his arrest: "I think the case is that they couldn't find anyone to lay the blame on, so they picked us two because we were active at the protests." Their hearing will be held on 17 October.

► *Leaders of Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania back Serbia's EU membership*

On 3 October Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, Romanian Prime Minister Mihai Tudose, and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras met each other in Varna to talk about joint infrastructure projects, economic and energy cooperation, and security issues. With respect to the last theme, the Prime Ministers said Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania back Serbia's EU membership, because the joining will foster regional peace and security. According to the Bulgarian Prime Minister, "All of us know that the natural place of Serbia is in the European Union." Serbia hopes to join the EU in 2019.

► *Russia ships several combat vehicles and warplanes to Serbia for free*

On 2 October Russia delivered two MiG-29 fighter jets to Serbia. The shipment is the first tranche of a deal between Russia and Serbia. In total six warplanes will be delivered. The others are planned to arrive at 20 October. The planes will be displayed in Belgrade during a Liberation Day parade, which will be attended by the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu. In addition to the planes, Russia will also provide 30 T-72 tanks and 30 BRDM-2 patrol combat vehicles for free. President Aleksandar Vucic said Serbia planned to improve its defence and has been negotiating with Russia for the purchase of anti-aircraft systems. The recent deals between the countries have worried the West. Also Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina have expressed their concerns.

► *Serbian League Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV) supports Catalonia's independence referendum*

On 1 October Nenad Canak, head of the League Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV), said his party supports the Catalan independence referendum. On the polling day, LSV supporters hung the flag of Catalonia in several towns in Vojvodina. A day before, Young Vojvodina painted graffiti saying 'Catalonia=Vojvodina' in the region. The LSV seeks more autonomy for the northern province of Serbia. The far-right Serbian League called the graffiti "a separatist and criminal act". In a statement the party said "Vojvodina is Serbia, never Catalonia".

► *Judiciary experts condemn Serbia's President for blasting a court ruling*

On 29 September several judicial experts accused President Aleksandar Vucic of trying to influence the outcome of the case Miskovic, after he attacked a court ruling on the typhoon, saying the court allows typhoons to "run" Serbia. According to them, it is an excellent example of political pressure on the independent, but weakened judiciary. Appeal Court Judge Misa Majic said politicians are often commenting on court cases. This was also not Vucic's first time that he commented on an ongoing court case. "The Serbian judiciary is very vulnerable and has been fighting for its independence for decades," he said, "The executive power dominates." In a report in 2016, the European Commission mentioned Serbia's political influence over the judiciary as a key issue for the country to work on before it can join the EU.

Turkey

► *US-Turkey diplomatic row: suspension of visas, two US consulate employees arrested*

On 9 October Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan responded to the decision of the US's embassy to suspend all non-immigrant visa applications. "For the (US) ambassador in Ankara to take a decision like this, to put it into practice, is saddening," he said during his visit to Kiev. Turkey issued a retaliatory measure the same day, also restricting non-immigrant visa services in the US, and asked Washington to review its decision, because it had caused an "unnecessary escalation". However, the US Envoy to Turkey said the duration of the suspension depends on talks with the country. The decision of the US to suspend visa applications is motivated by its concerns over Turkey's Syria policy, and the arrest of a Turkish citizen working for the US consulate in Istanbul, Metin Topuz. On 10 October, Erdoğan said the US consulate employee is a spy with official links to Fethullah Gulen. According to him, Topuz would have got information about US involvement in the 2016 coup attempt. Furthermore, Turkey will boycott meetings with the US ambassador to Ankara. On 9 October, another unnamed employee was also arrested and questioned by the Istanbul's prosecutor's office as his son and wife were taken into custody. Neither Topuz nor the unnamed employee have diplomatic immunity, according to Ankara. The US still seeks explanation for the arrests.

► *First hearing regarding deadly confrontations on the Martyrs' Bridge in coup attempt of July 2016*

On 9 October the first hearing with respect to the deadly confrontations on the Martyrs' Bridge, the former Bosphorus Bridge, was held at Istanbul's 25th Criminal Court. 137 out of 143 suspects attended the hearing. 135 are currently remanded in prison, including 30 military officers and 47 military cadets. Prosecutors are seeking life sentences for all suspects. An indictment prepared by prosecutors Hikmet Pak and Bülent Başar from the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office's Terror and the Organised Crime Investigation Bureau accused the suspects of "attempting to remove the Turkish Parliament or preventing it from carrying out its duties", "attempting to remove the government of the Turkish Republic or preventing it from carrying out its duties", and "deliberate killing". In total 34 people were killed on the bridge during the coup attempt, mainly citizens.

► *Military operation starts in Syria's Afrin region, fear of clashes between armed groups*

On 8 October Turkey's forces moved into Syria's north-western province Idlib. Earlier, spokesman of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, İbrahim Kalın, said Turkey will not hesitate to carry out a military operation into Syria's Afrin region, which lies close to its borders. Hay'et Tahrir Al-Sham, which is a splinter group of al-Qaeda and is considered as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, controls this region. According to the spokesman, a de-escalation zone will be established in the coming days. "Turkey will continue to take these kinds of steps, as it did

in the past, because it prioritizes its own national interests. Turkey will not hesitate to act for its own security when and where it is deemed necessary," Kalin added. Residents live in fear of potential clashes between the Free Syrian Army, backed by Turkey, and Hay'et Tahrir Al-Sham that also holds the city of Idlib in the region.

► *Turkey closes its borders with northern Iraq and its oil flow from the KRG region*

On 5 October the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said Turkey, Iran and Iraq agreed to stop importing oil from the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). "In the case of northern Iraq, Iran, Iraq and Turkey will form a tripartite mechanism and will decide on shutting down the oil [from the KRG]," the President said. In addition, Turkey will close its borders with northern Iraq and its air space for flights from the Iraqi Kurdish region. On 4 October, the Turkish President met Iran's President Hassan Rouhani to discuss joint measures against the Kurdish Regional Government. According to Erdoğan, the KRG "aims to encircle Turkey from the south."

► *40 people have been given life sentences*

On 4 October 40 people convicted of plotting to assassinate President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have been given life sentences by a Turkish court. It is the first ruling involving top plotters. The trial, which began on 20 February, was held in the southwestern city of Mugla, near the luxury resort where the President and his family narrowly escaped when soldiers stormed the hotel in the coup attempt of July 2016. The defendants include several senior military officers. Only one out of 47 was acquitted. Since the coup attempt, more than 50,000 people charged with having links to the coup or Fethullah Gulen are in prison.

► *Turkish opposition HDP boycotts opening new legislative year*

On 1 October the parliamentary group of the opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) boycotted the parliament's new legislative year. Instead of attending the opening, members of the HDP went to the western province of Edirne, where the party's co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş is detained. He is accused of having links to the terrorist organisation Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Party's former co-chair Figen Yüksekdağ is also detained for the same reason. HDP deputies have been facing prosecution under the anti-terrorism law since parliamentary immunities were lifted in March 2016. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan criticised the boycott and said: "You know they belong to Kandil", referring to the mountains in northern Iraq, where PKK's headquarters are based. HDP co-chair Serpil Kemalbay said in response: "The AKP chair said our place is Kandil. He wants to get rid of all opposition. However, we won't let his dreams come true as those leading the struggle for democracy."

► *President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Turkey does not need EU membership*

On 1 October Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said the country no longer needs to join the EU, although Turkey will not unilaterally stop the accession talks. "We will not be the side which gives up. To tell the truth, we don't need EU membership any more," he said to the parliament. According to the President, the EU failed to understand the gravity of threats which Turkey faces. "If the EU is going to leap forward, there is only one way to do so. And it is to grant Turkey membership and start an action of cultural and economic growth," Erdoğan added.

EU ASPIRANT COUNTRIES

Bosnia-Herzegovina

► *Serb parties brace for assembly clashes*

On 9 October it was announced that the next session of the Republika Srpska (RS) parliament on October 17 could determine political relations and the balance of power in the entity in the coming months, experts say, as the 19 topics listed on the agenda include a number of hot issues. The agenda does not include the most controversial issue of all however, namely the long-awaited referendum on the authority of Bosnian state judicial organizations. The decision to hold a referendum on the powers of Bosnian courts in the entity was agreed by the assembly back in 2015. Under strong pressure from Serbia as well as from opposition parties, RS President Milorad Dodik had withheld publication of this decision for two years. The RS government has until mid-November to organize the referendum or officially withdraw the decision. Opposition parties decided to press charges against Dodik for withholding this decision for two years in order to publicly embarrass him and his government. But on the same day the referendum decision was published, on September 20, Dodik then announced he was withdrawing the initiative due to a perceived lack of support for it within the RS. Yet, even without a discussion on the referendum, the October 17 session will still include a number of highly controversial issues, which are expected to result in major clashes between the ruling and opposition parties. One is a discussion on the latest report on the execution of the entity budget, which entity chief auditor Dusko Snjegota submitted. Following submission of his report, Snjegota faced strong criticism from President Dodik, leading to his resignation two weeks ago. After Snjegota quit, Bosnian Serb opposition parties - which viewed the Auditor's Office as one of the last relatively independent bodies in the entity - condemned Dodik and his ruling Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), and temporarily blocked the work of the assembly. The session was continued only after police assistance and without deputies from the opposition bloc. Now the Bosnian Serb opposition bloc is preparing to use the issue to mount a new offensive against Dodik and SNSD.

► *Naser Oric acquitted of war crimes*

On 9 October Naser Oric, the Bosnian Army's former commander in Srebrenica, was found not guilty of killing three Bosnian Serb prisoners of war in 1992 - a verdict that sparked strong reactions from war victims. The prosecution had alleged that [Oric, who was a commander of Bosnian Army territorial defence units](#), killed the Serb captives in the villages of Zalazje, Lolici and Kunjerac in 1992. But presiding judge Saban Maksumic said the prosecution failed to prove beyond reasonable doubt that Oric and Muhic committed the killings. "Justice has won," Oric shouted as he left the court in Sarajevo. Political leaders from Serbia and Republika Srpska strongly criticised the acquittal. This is the time for us to speak about the referendum on the court and the [state-level] prosecution," said Dodik.

► *PM denies Muslim population poses terror threat*

On 12 September Bosnia-Herzegovina's prime minister, Denis Zvizdic, has denied allegations that Muslims in his country pose a terrorist threat to Europe. Zvizdic said such accusations were politically motivated and could damage the Balkan country as an investment and tourism destination. He dismissed comments by some European leaders that Muslims in Bosnia were openly showing support for the extremist group Islamic State (IS). Czech President Milos Zeman has alleged there was a risk the IS group could form its European base in Bosnia, where the group's "black flags are already flying in several towns." And Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic warned of "thousands of fighters returning to Bosnia from Syria and Iraq." Zvizdic dismissed the allegations, saying that "we have not had any incident that could be characterized as an act of terrorism, and we work to prevent the possibility of any such incident." Bosnian security agencies say 240 citizens left the country to fight for IS over the past five years. Of the 44 who have returned, 23 have been jailed, officials say.

Kosovo

► *Kosovo wants US participation in dialogue with Serbia*

On 12 October Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj has announced "a new platform for the dialogue with Belgrade." At the same time, he said Pristina's "condition" for the EU-mediated Belgrade-Pristina negotiations is that a US representative also be at the table. "We cannot continue the dialogue if America is not at the table," Haradinaj said. According to Haradinaj, "Kosovo has not yet clarified its role in the current dialogue, nor what it wants": "We need to be clear on what we want, not for someone to come to the parliament and surprise us with an agreement. It's a risk, and I do not want to do it."

► *Thaci urges Albania to grant Kosovars citizenship*

On 11 October at a meeting with Albania's President, Ilir Meta, Kosovo President Hashim Thaci asked Tirana to offer Kosovo citizens Albanian citizenship, to help them escape their current "isolation" from the European Union. Complaining that the EU had left Kosovo in "circumstances of classic isolation", Thaci said that the only hope "at this moment for the free movement of Kosovo citizens ... lies in granting Albanian citizenship to Kosovo citizens". The Albanian President, however, gave the idea short shrift and urged instead Kosovo to focus on resolving its vexed border demarcation agreement with Montenegro, which the EU has named as one of the keys to visa liberalisation. Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj meanwhile sounded more positive about visa liberalisation, saying that the new government was doing its job and not losing time. "I do not think we are hopeless when it comes to [visa] liberalisation, though I am not against granting [Albanian] citizenship [to Kosovars]," he said. [A BIRN investigation](#) revealed that the number of foreigners - mostly from Kosovo - who gained Albanian citizenship based on the criteria of "special interest" has risen since 2011, which is when Albanians obtained the right to visa-free travel to the EU.

► *Hardline clerics savage first Pride*

On 10 October some hard-line Muslim clerics in Kosovo have condemned the announced first Pride Parade in Kosovo. One imam, Fatmir Latifaj, has published a video using insulting expression about the LGBTI community and voicing deep opposition to the planned parade in Pristina. Another imam, Husamedin Abazi, has published a video titled "The week of shame" referring to the "Pride week". The imam accused all the organizations acting on behalf of the Pride Week of working day and night to destroy mankind. "We all are for human rights. But those that are in the disfavour of mankind should not be seen as human rights," he said. Gezim Kelmendi, leader of Fjala [the Word], a small religious party, wrote on Facebook that those who should hold parades in Kosovo should be the police or the Security Forces, as people who protect the country, not those who destroy and spread "disease". The organizers of the parade, the Kosovo Centre for Equality and Liberty, CEL, and the Centre for Social Group Development, CSG, told BIRN on Wednesday that they had not received any direct threats so far.

EASTERN EUROPE / SOUTH CAUCASUS

► *EU states agree on 'aspiration' declaration about Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova*

On 11 October ambassadors from the 28 European Union member states agreed on the language of a draft declaration recognizing the European aspirations of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. "Summit participants acknowledge the European aspirations and the European choice of the partners concerned, as stated in the

Association Agreements,” the document reads, referring to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine -- countries in the Eastern Partnership that have concluded the agreements with the EU in recent years. The Eastern Partnership is an EU initiative that governs relations with six former Soviet republics. It is aimed at creating a mechanism for talks on trade, economic strategy, travel agreements, and other issues between the EU and Eastern European countries. The draft declaration approved by EU ambassadors on October 11 uses language from the final declaration of the 2015 Eastern Partnership summit in Riga. The draft text will now be sent to the six Eastern Partnership countries, which also include Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus.

Armenia

► *Armenia to finally pass domestic violence law*

On 6 October after years of delay and indecision, it emerged that authorities plan to enact a law aimed at combatting domestic violence and helping its mostly female victims. Violence against women has for decades been a taboo subject in the conservative, patriarchal Armenian society. It has received growing publicity in recent years thanks to women's rights groups backed by international watchdogs. According to Yerevan-based Women's Resource Centre, over 50 women were beaten to death or killed otherwise by their husbands or other relatives in the last 5 years. Justice Minister Davit Harutiunian expressed serious concern, saying the government intends to tackle this with a law, which he hopes will be passed by parliament soon. If passed, the law will introduce criminal and administrative liability for cases of domestic violence. It will also oblige the state to protect victims through special shelters or banning violent spouses from approaching them and their children. Women's rights groups say police routinely tell assaulted women to withdraw their complaints saying they lack legal levers to prosecute. Under the draft law police will have to launch a criminal investigation even in case of such a withdrawal.

► *Parliament ratifies new defence accord with Russia*

On 5 October parliament ratified an agreement with Russia on a joint military force formed in Armenia over a decade ago. Under the 2016 agreement the joint force is tasked with 'ensuring military security in the region' and thwarting or repelling possible foreign aggression against Armenia or Russia. The joint contingent comprises troops from the Russian military base in Armenia and an Armenian army corps. It has been led by Armenian army generals since its creation in 2001. Armenian parliament backed the deal by 87 votes to 7. All of those 7 MPs represent the opposition Yelk alliance, which said the accord will limit Armenia's sovereignty and put its armed forces under Russian control. Pro-government majority dismissed this. Deputy parliament speaker from ruling Republican Party Eduard Sharmazanov insisted the joint military force will boost Armenia's security, saying it will defend the country in case of a military attack by Azerbaijan or Turkey. He dismissed pro-Western oppositionists' statements that Russia can't be trusted because it has sold billions of US dollars' worth of offensive weapons to Azerbaijan in the past decade. He insisted there is no alternative to Armenia's military ties with Russia. The parliament debate was very heated. Opposition MP Nikol Pashinian claimed he was physically assaulted by a pro-government MP in the corridors of the parliament building over their disagreement on the issue.

► *Opposition bloc insists on Armenia's exit from Eurasian Union*

On 3 October opposition Yelk alliance forced parliament to debate its calls for Armenia to leave the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which the 3 other parliamentary groups oppose. Days earlier, the parliament committee on foreign relations rejected Yelk's proposal to set up an ad hoc commission to look into consequences of the EEU membership. During the debate one of Yelk's leaders, Nikol Pashinian, said the proposed parliamentary inquiry is aimed at 'protecting Armenia's sovereignty' which has been dealt 'very serious blows' by EEU. Armenia must leave EEU and seek an Association Agreement with the EU, he said. Ruling Republican Party's (HHK) parliamentary leaders again dismissed the initiative. One of them, deputy speaker Eduard Sharmazanov, insisted that most Armenian parties and citizens oppose an exit from EEU. Representatives of HHK's junior coalition partner Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun), and businessman Gagik Tsarukian's bloc, which claims to be in opposition, also made clear they will vote against Yelk's motion. Yelk holds 9 of the 105 seats in parliament.

► *EU's 'ground-breaking' deal with Armenia to be signed 'soon'*

On 2 October during a visit to Yerevan EU commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy Johannes Hahn said EU and Armenia will sign a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) 'soon.' He said the landmark accord will not only deepen the EU's ties with Armenia but also serve as an 'example' to other countries, calling it a 'blueprint for possible other relationships.' 'This ground-breaking new agreement will help demonstrate that it is possible for Armenia to be part of the Eurasian integration process while also establishing comprehensive and enhanced relations with the EU,' Hahn said. Armenia's Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian confirmed that the deal is due to be signed at EU's 24 November summit in Brussels that will focus on its Eastern Partnership program with 6 former Soviet republics. CEPA, which was finalized in March, reportedly contains the main political provisions of a more far-reaching Association Agreement which Brussels and Yerevan nearly concluded in 2013. President Sarkisian prevented the signing of that agreement with his unexpected decision to seek accession to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union; a move widely attributed to Russian pressure.

Azerbaijan

► *PACE criticises Azerbaijan on human rights*

On 11 October Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) expressed concerns over Azerbaijan's 'unprecedented crackdown on human rights.' PACE adopted a resolution denouncing 'the reported prosecution and detention of leaders of NGOs, human rights defenders, political activists, journalists, and bloggers,' although some were released last year. PACE cited cases of 'torture and inhuman or degrading treatment' by police 'and the lack of effective investigations, violations of the right to a fair trial, and violations of the right to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.' The resolution also called on Baku to 'begin real and meaningful reforms' to remove the obstacles to the work of journalists and rights defenders. In another resolution adopted on the same day, PACE urged Azerbaijan to strengthen parliamentary control over the executive and ensure the independence of the judiciary, warning: 'recent constitutional changes could make the executive less accountable to parliament.' PACE also urged Azerbaijan to establish a justice system 'genuinely independent, impartial, and free from interference by the executive.' Head of the Azerbaijani delegation to PACE Samad Seyidov rejected this and denounced a 'campaign of hatred against Azerbaijan' aimed at creating a 'cleavage' between Baku and the Council of Europe.

► *Opposition stages anticorruption rally in Baku*

On 7 October hundreds of opposition activists held an anticorruption protest in Baku. The protest was organized by the National Council of Democratic Forces, an umbrella organization bringing together opposition forces. Baku police said some 1.200 people attended the rally. Azerbaijan's Turan news agency said thousands participated. Protesters shouted 'End to Corruption' and 'Freedom for Political Prisoners!' Supporters of the Popular Front Party, People's Democratic Party, National Statehood Party, Musavat Party Youth Organization, Muslim Union, and NIDA Movement participated in the protest. They accuse Azerbaijan's government of repressing journalists, civil society activists and human rights workers, and urged Western governments to do more to confront Azerbaijani authorities.

► *Crackdown on gays with dozens arrests*

On 29 September human rights groups voiced grave concern after dozens of gay people were reportedly jailed in raids by Azerbaijani authorities in recent weeks. Javid Nabiyeu, president of Nefes LGBT Azerbaijan Alliance, said police held them for up to 30 days, forcing them to give names and addresses of gay and transgender acquaintances. Nabiyeu, based in Germany, said right-wing political leaders had called for a crackdown on LGBT people, saying they are 'sources of immorality and dangerous diseases' and 'have been cursed by God.' Local activists said at least 50 gay and transsexual people were detained in police raids of homes, subway stations and LGBT-friendly clubs and bars over the past 2 weeks. Sweden-based human rights group Civil Rights Defenders said the number of arrests could run into the hundreds. Lawyers for some of those arrested said their clients were subjected to beatings, verbal abuse and forced medical examinations. Azerbaijan's Interior Ministry denied that 'sexual minorities' were targeted or discriminated against, saying the arrests were part of a crackdown on prostitution, which seems highly unlikely. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) will investigate the reports, Tweeted Stefan Schennach, a PACE co-rapporteur for monitoring of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan legalized homosexual activity in 2000, but was still ranked the worst in Europe for gay people in a 2016 survey by international advocacy group ILGA.

Belarus

► *Belarus invited to Eastern Partnership summit on 24 November*

On 9 October it was announced that Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is invited "without restrictions" to participate in the Eastern Partnership summit on 24 November in Brussels. It is the first time the country is welcomed along with the other states of the partnership, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Until now, the EU always considered Lukashenka, who has ruled the country since 1994, as 'the last dictator of Europe'. Lukashenka was re-elected for a fifth term in 2015, although Western monitors condemned the elections as neither free nor fair. The EU imposed restrictive measures on Belarus several times. However, most sanctions against the country were lifted in February 2016.

► *NATO is assessing whether Russia left troops in Belarus after military drills*

On 5 October NATO Secretary-General Jen Stoltenberg said the NATO is assessing whether any Russian troops are left in Belarus, after the military exercises, the so-called Zapad exercise. The NATO is "closely monitored the Zapad exercise", but "it is too early to make any final assessment" on the drill. On 30 September, Moscow denied a claim by Ukrainian military chief of staff, Victor Muzhenko, that it had left troops. Belarus' Defence Ministry said that the last train of Russian forces left on 28 September. "Russia is there to stay, NATO doesn't want a Cold War, we don't want a new arms race. Therefore, we also reach out to Russia for political dialogue," the Secretary-general also added.

Georgia

► *Opposition activists detained at protest in Tbilisi*

On 10 October police scuffled with opposition activists who were protesting against the Tbilisi city council's move to give a plot of land to a construction company linked to billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of the Georgian

Dream party. During the unrest eight activists were detained near the Tbilisi city-council building. Hundreds of opposition activists rallied near the building, demanding they be allowed to attend a council session addressing the issue that day. Opposition parties have the right to participate in council sessions and cast "advisory votes." But opposition representatives were barred from the session during which the council decided to let a company linked to Ivanishvili own the lot on Liberty Square in downtown Tbilisi, where a new hotel and parking area are planned. Ivanishvili founded Georgian Dream, which ousted former President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement party and came to power in 2012 parliamentary elections. Ivanishvili announced he was withdrawing from politics after serving as prime minister from October 2012 to November 2013, but many in the South Caucasus state believe he continues to control Georgian Dream from behind the scenes.

► *President vetoes constitutional amendments*

On 9 October Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili vetoed amendments to the constitution that would shift the government to a parliamentary-style system, with the president elected by lawmakers. He said he remained in favor of direct presidential elections. Parliament, which is dominated by the Georgian Dream Party, adopted the changes last week despite objections from Margvelashvili and the opposition. Margvelashvili also said he supported scrapping the voting "bonus" system under which votes of parties that failed to secure enough support to enter parliament would be transferred to the winner of the election. Lawmakers from the Georgian Dream said that they were willing to compromise on two of the president's objections -- allowing the parties to form electoral blocs and scrapping the voting bonus system. The draft constitutional amendments now go back to parliament, where the ruling party has a constitutional majority, allowing it to overcome the president's veto. The changes also include a measure to legalize the purchase of land by foreigners. Georgia will hold its next presidential election in 2018. Margvelashvili has not stated whether he will run.

Moldova

► *EU withholds loan to Moldova over lack of justice reforms*

On 11 October the EU delegation to Moldova said in a statement that the EU withholds a loan (worth 28 million euros) to the country as the government has not fulfilled the conditions for receiving the fiscal aid. According to the EU, "the Moldovan authorities showed insufficient commitment to reform the justice sector." A 100 million euros micro-financial aid package has also been delayed. The EU said Moldova needs to respect human rights and the rule of law, if it wants to receive [the first part of the financial-aid package in December](#), which was promised by the EU earlier this year.

► *European Parliament's foreign affairs committee calls for closer relations Eastern Partnership and EU*

On 10 October European Parliament's foreign affairs committee approved recommendations, which call for a mechanism to bring Eastern European countries such as Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine closer to the EU. Together with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus the countries are part of an Eastern Partnership. The committee also appealed to the EU member states to consider "an attractive longer-term EaP+ model" for those countries that have already association agreements with the EU, so it "could eventually lead to joining the customs union, energy union, digital union and Schengen area." Furthermore, the foreign affairs committee said it wants to establish a trust fund for Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia for private and public investments. The non-binding recommendations come ahead of an Eastern Partnership summit in Brussels on 24 November.

► *European Commission will closely monitor Moldova's new electoral law*

On 3 October European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, Christos Stylianides, said that the implementation of Moldova's new electoral law will be closely monitored by the European Commission. Suggestions made by legal experts of the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe were not addressed by Moldova's lawmakers. The law was signed by President Igor Dodon in July despite demonstrations in Moldova's capital Chisinau and criticism of the EU and the US. The law is controversial because it introduces a mixed electoral system. As a result, half of the lawmakers will be elected on party lists and the other half in individual constituencies. According to supporters of the law, the enactment makes politicians more accountable. However, critics say the electoral change favours the two largest political parties, the pro-Western Democratic Party and the opposition pro-Russia Socialists. Critics say the Democratic Party supported the electoral change in an attempt to get a better result in the parliamentary elections in 2018. Support for the party has been declining since the beginning of the year. According to the European Commissioner, "the effect of this law on multiparty democracy will depend on how it is implemented."

Russia

► *Navalny supporters stage protest on Putin's birthday*

On 7 October thousands supporters of opposition leader Alexei Navalny rallied in over 70 Russian cities in protests coinciding with President Putin's 65th birthday, with the biggest turnout in Putin's hometown St. Petersburg. Protesters demanded that Navalny be allowed to run in the March 2018 presidential election. OVD-Info, which monitors politically motivated arrests, reported at least 271 arrests in 26 cities. Amnesty International urged authorities to immediately release them and look into allegations that police used 'abusive force' in St. Petersburg and Yakutsk. Earlier, Navalny's campaign coordinators in St Petersburg, Perm, Stavropol and Tver

were detained, along with numerous activists across Russia. On 5 October, a Moscow court rejected Navalny's appeal against a 20-day jail term he received after being found guilty of publicly calling for unsanctioned rallies. This left him in jail during the rallies. His campaign chief, Leonid Volkov, received the same sentence. Numerous cities didn't grant permission for the rallies. 'Our demands are reasonable, simple and lawful: political competition [and] access to presidential elections for Navalny and other candidates,' his campaign said. Central Election Commission said in June that Navalny was ineligible to run for public office because of a financial-crimes conviction in a case that he says was fabricated for political reasons. His 2 previous nationwide rallies earlier this year led to mass detentions and rattled Russian officials with their substantial youth turnout. The authorities said they released all demonstrators on October 7. However, civil organizations reported new detentions – more than a dozen Navalny supporters - in smaller protests in central Moscow on October 8.

► *Kremlin threatens to restrict US media*

On 6 October Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said he couldn't rule out actions 'in accordance with the principle of reciprocity' against some US media operations in Russia in response to reported pressure on Russian state-funded outlets in the US. His comments were the latest in a series of threats and complaints from Russian officials. US law enforcement agencies have been looking into the operations of at least 2 Russian media outlets: satellite TV channel RT and news website Sputnik. Funded by Russia's government, RT was accused in a US intelligence report of being one of the primary ways by which the Kremlin sought to influence the 2016 US presidential election. Since then, calls have grown in the US to force RT and Sputnik to register under a 79-year-old law initially aimed at restricting Nazi propaganda. During the Soviet era some Russian-language media registered as foreign agents. Last month, RT chief editor Margarita Simonyan said US officials had ordered the channel to register under the foreign agent law. Justice Department refused to confirm or deny this.

► *European Parliament condemns Russia's prosecution of Crimeans*

On 5 October European Parliament (EP) adopted a resolution condemning Russian verdicts against dozens of Crimeans who opposed Russia's seizure of Crimea and demanding the release of those jailed. In the resolution, EP sharply criticized verdicts against nearly 50 Crimean Tatars and other opponents of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. In the resolution, lawmakers urged EU to impose sanctions on Crimean and Russian officials who are directly responsible for the three most prominent cases. They called for 'unhindered access of international human rights observers, including specialized structures of the UN, OSCE and [the Council of Europe] to the Crimean Peninsula in order to investigate the situation on the peninsula and for the establishment of [an] independent monitoring mechanism.' A September 25 UN human rights report said Russia's occupation of Crimea has been marked by disappearances and torture, infringements of the Geneva Conventions and violations of international law.

► *Twitter suspends accounts allegedly linked to Russian meddling in US election*

On 29 September Twitter suspended some 200 Russia-linked accounts and found nearly 2000 ads placed by Russia's RT TV in its investigation of Moscow's alleged efforts to influence the 2016 US presidential election through social media. The suspended accounts are directly or indirectly linked to fake Facebook accounts identified by Facebook as tied to Russia's alleged election meddling. Twitter said RT, a Russian state-funded broadcaster close to the Kremlin, spent \$274.100 on Twitter ads and promoted 1.823 tweets aimed at the US market during the election year. Those ad buys topped the \$100.000 that were discovered on Facebook to be linked to a Russian propaganda operation during the campaign, a revelation that prompted calls from US legislators for more regulation of such social media advertising. RT editor in chief Margarita Simonyan defended RT's purchase of ads on Twitter, saying those ad purchases were a standard commercial practice that is falsely presented as Russian meddling in US affairs. Republican and Democrat lawmakers have said they suspect social networks played a big role in what they say were Moscow's attempts to spread propaganda, sow political discord in the US, and help elect President Trump. Moscow denies it. On 10 October the Washington Post reported that Google has for the first time uncovered evidence that Russian operatives used its platforms in an effort to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election, saying 'Russian agents' spent tens of thousands of dollars on ads on YouTube, Gmail, Google search, and other products in an attempt to spread disinformation.

Ukraine

► *Poroshenko urges PACE not to return to 'business as usual' with Russia*

On 11 October Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) plenary session in Strasbourg that Ukraine is fighting a war on two fronts at the same time – one to counter military aggression and restore its territorial integrity, and the other to implement difficult and complex reforms. He has urged the PACE to keep pressure on Moscow over "the Russian aggression in Ukraine," urging the assembly not to return to "business as usual" with Russia. In the wake of Moscow's takeover of the Crimean Peninsula, PACE deprived Russian delegates of voting rights. "Systemic repressions have turned the Crimean Peninsula into an island of no freedom and a land of fear," Poroshenko told the assembly. "In the occupied Crimea, Russia applies the worst practices of the Soviet repressive machine. Anyone who dares to reject the so-called 'reunification with Russia' becomes a victim of arbitrary detention, prosecution, torture, extrajudicial execution, and inhuman treatment." The comments come a day after Czech President Milos Zeman told PACE

that Moscow's move was a "fait accompli" and that there should be dialogue over Russian compensation to Ukraine, possibly with gas, oil, or money.

► *U.S. ambassador to Russia cites Ukraine as key to improving ties*

On 7 October the new U.S. ambassador to Russia said restoring Ukrainian sovereignty over all its territory will be a key issue in his dealings with Moscow as he begins his tenure amid a period of high tensions between the two world powers. He said he wants to improve relations with Russia, but he insisted the first step would be for Moscow to return Ukrainian control to territory within its internationally recognized borders. Moscow seized the Crimean Peninsula from Kyiv's control and has supported separatists in eastern Ukraine in a war that has killed more than 10,000 people since 2014. The United States, other Western countries, and the European Union have imposed sanctions on Russia for its actions in Ukraine, just one of many global issues separating the two countries.

► *Ukraine expels another Russian journalist over coverage*

On 5 October the state security service (SBU) said that Ukraine has expelled a Russian journalist working for the television channel NTV as punishment for spreading anti-Ukrainian propaganda and justifying the actions of separatists. Relations between Kiev and Moscow have been poisoned since Moscow annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and backed a separatist insurgency in Ukraine's eastern Donbass region that has killed more than 10,000 people despite a notional ceasefire. Ukraine says Russia is fighting a "hybrid war" with Kiev, spreading propaganda while supporting the separatists with troops and sophisticated weaponry and launching cyber-attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure, which Moscow denies. Vyacheslav Nemyshev was expelled in the early hours of 5 October for preparing "a series of false anti-Ukrainian materials," the SBU state security service said. "The propagandist is forbidden from entering Ukraine for three years."

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Egypt

► *Future of Nation adopts campaign for Al-Sisi to return for presidency*

On 12 October the political party Future of Nation have officially adopted a campaign supporting the rerunning of President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi for another presidential term. The campaign named Alshan Tebneha (For you to build it), has announced that it already has headquarters in 13 governorates. The campaign has a petition to be signed by potential member or volunteers. Future of Nation has been a supportive of every social, diplomatic, and security decisions the presidency takes since Al-Sisi was sworn in office. Most of the party's critical statements are directed to apparatus in charge of education, health, and local affairs, but never attempt to question policies made by defence, security, diplomatic, and intelligence bodies. The pro-government party was formed after the 25 January Revolution and was founded by businessmen. It ranked second during parliamentary elections after the Free Egyptians Party (FEP) with nearly 50 members winning seats in the parliament. President-elect Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi took the oath-of-office before the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) on June 2014, beginning his four year presidency. Next year, an elections is expected to take place. However, no candidates have officially announced that they will run for the presidency.

► *Court cancels release of Al-Jama's Al-Islamiyya leaders*

On 8 October Cairo Criminal Court renewed the detention of two prominent leaders of the Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya for 45 days pending investigations, thus canceling an earlier release order. The general prosecution authority appealed the release decision issued on 4 October for Safwat Abdel Ghany and Alaa Abu El-Nasr. According to state media, they face accusations of inciting violence and belonging to a terror group. The pair was arrested in July 2014 for the aforementioned charges during participating in the Rabaa Al-Adaweya sit-in, following the ouster of former president Mohamed Morsi, who was the first Islamic president in Egypt. Abdel Ghany was the head of the political bureau of the Construction and Development Party—the political arm of Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya, while Abu El-Nasr was the secretary-general of the party.

► *Worst crackdown against Egyptian LGBT community since 2001*

On 6 October it was reported at least 57 gay, bi and transgender people were arrested over the past three weeks, as Egypt is under fire for its human rights record and the US denied state aid. It is the worst crackdown against the LGBT community since 2001. Several people were captivated by the police for raising a rainbow flag during a concert of Mashrou' Leila, a Lebanese alternative rock band whose lead singer is openly gay, on 23 September. The State Security Prosecution was ordered to investigate the incident. An image of the raised rainbow flag went viral on social media a day after the concert, and led to criticism and condemnation by state-aligned media. Since then, more and more LGBT people have been detained. Ahmed Alaa and Sarah Hegazy, who is the first woman accused of immorality in years, were charged with "joining a group formed in contrary to the law" with respect to the concert of Mashrou' Leila. They were detained for 15 days. Hegazy was beaten and abused by cellmates during her imprisonment. She faces life sentence if found guilty. On 1 October, 16 men stood trial charged with "promoting sexual deviancy" and "debauchery", euphemisms for homosexuality. One man was already sentenced to 6 years in prison. Gay male arrested were subject to forced anal examinations to determine whether

they had had gay sex. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International condemn the examinations, saying it is a form of torture. The Egypt government does not deny the accusations, but says they are legally carried out. Although homosexuality is not outlawed in Egypt, it is seen as a disease. Gay and transgender people experience much discrimination in the conservative Muslim society, and live continually in fear. Police officers create false dating profiles and set up dates only to arrest men who show up.

► *Egyptians afraid to express their views according to an annual survey*

On 3 October it was reported Egyptians are afraid to express their opinions online. According to an annual survey, Media Use in the Middle East, conducted by North-western University in Qatar, freedom of speech has been falling in Egypt since 2013. In the survey respondents from Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Qatar, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia were questioned their attitudes towards freedom of speech over the past five years. Since the Arab Spring of 2011, it is harder for Egyptian citizens to express their views. President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi, a former head of military intelligence, introduced laws that limit the freedom of speech. Egypt also blocked more than 400 webpages recently, saying those websites were 'supporting terrorism' and 'publishing false information'. Even the website of Human Rights Watch was closed down.

► *Egyptian cleric accused of marrying off underage girls*

On 2 October the Egyptian administrative prosecution authority said that an imam of the El-Araeen mosque in the Nile delta near Cairo faces a hearing after accusations of marrying off minor girls. The occasion was a complaint filed by a mother whose daughter was married off by the cleric. According to spokesman Mohamed Samir, "the crime comes under the category of human trafficking cases." The law prohibits marriages of persons under 18, however, only registered ones. President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi said he was shocked by the high number of married 12-years-old children. According to statistics bureau chief Abo Bakr el-Gendy, up to 118.000 underage girls were married this year. The cleric has been removed from his position as preacher. Currently, the Egyptian health ministry is working on a bill that aims to prohibit informal and unregistered marriages under the age of 18.

Jordan

► *Senate president meets with youth delegations*

On 12 October Senate President Faisal Fayez met with members of delegations taking part in the 14th Youth of the Arab Capitals Forum, which is organised by the Ministry of Youth in cooperation with the Arab League. Fayez highlighted the importance of the youth building societies, combating terrorism and extremism through adopting policies that increase awareness and promote the values of tolerance, coexistence and moderation. He said that the anti-terrorism plan, which the government drafted in 2014 defined the responsibilities of ministries and public institutions in facing extremism, adding that the fight against terrorism requires comprehensive and collective efforts. During an extended dialogue, Fayez answered questions from youth that focused around the role of the Senate in the Jordanian political life, and its role in various cases and challenges that the country is facing.

► *US aid to Jordan a strong support to reform process according to PM*

On 10 October Prime Minister Hani Mulki met with a delegation from the US Congress. During the meeting, Mulki stressed the "historic" relations between Jordan and the US, appreciating the US support to the Kingdom, which contributes to supporting reform and development programmes. He outlined the reform programmes that Jordan is implementing in the fields of politics and economics including the recent local elections. The premier noted that the bilateral cooperation, along with other allied nations, is contributing to achieving victory against terrorism, which will help in restoring stability in Iraq and Syria. During the meeting, Fakhoury said that despite the challenges, including hosting the Syrian refugees, the government is continuously working on the comprehensive reform to achieve prosperity for Jordanians, enhance Jordan's resilience, and transforming challenges into opportunities through preserving the gross-economic stability in coordination with the World Bank.

► *Jordan on right track to democratic reform according to officials*

On 10 October representatives of the project "Enhanced Support to Democratic Governance in Jordan" (EU JDID), funded by the EU and the Kingdom of Spain, held its first coordination committee meeting to discuss the advancement of the programme since its inception, and the future plans for the 2017-2018 period. Held at the King Hussein Club in Jabal Amman, the meeting saw the attendance of Minister of Political and Parliamentary Affairs Musa Maaytah, EU Ambassador to Jordan Andrea Matteo Fontana, First Deputy Speaker of the Lower House Khamees Attieh, Chairman of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) Khaled Kalaldeh, European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES) President Monica Frassoni and the Spanish Deputy Head of Mission Tomás Lopez Vilariño. In his opening speech, EU Ambassador Fontana, who is also the co-chair of the coordination committee, said: "This project carries a great importance for both Jordan and the EU, as it is the first of its kind comprehensive programme encompassing the main components of democracy: parliament, elections, political parties and civil society with a strong focus on women and youth." "We have shown our support to the Kingdom's commitment to change by doubling our funding through this programme," he continued. "Jordan is currently at a crucial juncture and has shown its keenness towards reform, in line with His Majesty King Abdullah's discussion paper," the ambassador added, referring to the Monarch's reiterated pledge to enhance the "three pillars of a vibrant Jordanian democracy: a gradual deepening of parliamentary government, under the umbrella of [the] constitutional monarchy, underpinned by active public participation", in his fifth discussion paper. The first coordination committee meeting came five months after the official launch of the programme in May 2017.

► *Coalition formed to increase women's political participation*

On 7 October a women's coalition representing the civil society, parliamentarians and city councils was formed, in a bid to increase women's political participation in Jordan. The announcement came during a one-day event organised by the Arab Women Organisation (AWO), in coordination with the National Centre for Human Rights (NCHR), to recognise the 120 women who won seats in local councils and Parliament. The event, titled "Beyond the Municipal and Decentralisation Elections 2017", was funded by the European Union. "This is an occasion to thank our courageous women who fought 'the elections' battle' and are ready to fight 'the gender equality battle' by serving people with a gender perspective," said AWO Programme Director Laila Naffa. She added: "We want to announce the establishment of the Goal 5 Coalition to aggregate the efforts of women in politics and women activists to attain the 17 Goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the Global Agenda of 2030." It also seeks to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere; eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres and eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation. According to a report by the UN secretary general on the progress towards SDGs globally, women's participation in single or lower houses of national parliaments reached 23.4 per cent in 2017, just 10 points higher than in 2000. Such slow progress suggests that stronger political commitment and more ambitious measures and quotas are needed to boost women's political participation and empowerment, the report said. Women are still underrepresented in managerial positions. In the majority of the 67 countries with data from 2009 to 2015, fewer than a third of senior and middle-management positions were held by women, according to the report.

Lebanon

► *US offers 12 million dollar reward for two Hezbollah officials*

On 10 October the US offered a 12 million dollar reward for two high-level officials of the Lebanese group Hezbollah that is backed by Iran. The US will pay 7 million dollar for the capture of Talal Hamiyah, head of the group's external operations, and a 5 million dollar reward for Fu'ad Shukr, a senior military official and accused of masterminding the 1983 Beirut attacks that killed 241 US marines. According to the US, the terrorist organisation is plotting attacks inside the US. In June, two men were arrested who allegedly planned to carry out attacks on behalf of Hezbollah. "Today's rewards are another step to increase the pressure on them and their organization," said Nathan Sales, the US counterterrorism coordinator. The US will also continue to call other countries to recognise Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, he added. Hezbollah is currently part of Lebanon's coalition.

► *Lebanon's Foreign Minister: no more Syrian refugee camps in the country*

On 8 October Jebran Bassil, Foreign Minister and leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, said that the party will not tolerate the creation of Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon. "Syrian citizens have only one route, which is the route that leads to their homeland," he added. Over one and a half million Syrians have fled to the country since 2011, living in disorderly makeshift refugee camps scattered all over the land. Lebanese politicians disagree on whether to coordinate Syrian refugee's return with the Syrian regime, as argued by Hezbollah which supports the regime, or not.

► *Lebanese Shiite group forms opposition front against Hezbollah and Amal*

On 8 October around 60 public Shiite figures met each other to discuss the establishment of a Lebanese civil state. Among them were journalists, business people, writers, and university professors. According to the group, Lebanon is too much focused on its regions. It would mainly serve regional agendas "which, if continued, will eventually lead to the fragmentation and demise of Lebanon," the group stated. "Our meeting today is not a fleeting one, but the beginning of establishing a national opposition front that will correct the division of Lebanese politics." The group also forms an opposition front against Hezbollah and Amal. The meeting triggered a series of negative responses by pro-Hezbollah and pro-Amal media, which accused the group of 'treason' and called the attendees 'embassy's Shiites', a term used by Hezbollah to discredit its opponents by implying they are paid by foreign governments.

► *Hezbollah: America-Israel plot with respect to Kurdish independence referendum*

On 1 October, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, head of Hezbollah, said the Iraqi Kurdish referendum is an attempt of America and Israel to carve up the Middle East. According to the leader, the outcome of the referendum would lead to "internal wars" and must be opposed. The events are a threat not only to Iraq, but to the whole region. Indications of the alleged American-Israel plot by Hezbollah is Israel's support of the Kurdish statehood. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said with regard to the results of the referendum: "Israel had no part in the Kurdish referendum, aside from the deep, natural sympathy over many years for the Kurdish people and their aspiration."

► *Hezbollah leader says Israeli government pushed region to war*

On 1 October Hezbollah leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, said the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu was pushing the region to war in Syria, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. In a speech, he told his followers that Israel did not have "a correct assessment of where this war will lead if they ignite it." "They do not have a correct picture about what is awaiting them if they go to the idiocy of this war," he added. The leader spoke during Ashura, when Shiites commemorate the slaying of Prophet Mohamad's grandson in 680.

► *Sunni cleric al-Assir sentenced to death*

On 29 September a Lebanese military tribunal sentenced the Sunni cleric Ahmed al-Assir to death. The cleric was found guilty of terrorism and accused of killing 18 soldiers in the southern city of Sidon. He was also accused of forming an armed group against the state and inciting sectarianism. In 2013, clashes broke out between Al-Assir's supporters and opponents after the Sunni cleric criticised Shiite Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war. Al-Assir called supporters to join the fight with the army on Facebook and Twitter, when tensions grew between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The cleric was arrested after his attempt to flee the country in 2015. Besides Al-Assir, six other detainees were sentenced to death. Al-Assir's two sons got life in prison. Fadel Shaker, a singer who supported Al-Assir, was sentenced to 15 years in prison. The court ruling led to protests by the families of the defendants. 2004 was the last year the death sentence was carried out.

Libya

► *EU wants to reopen embassy in Libya*

On 10 October it was reported that the EU seeks to reopen its embassy in Libya. On a summit in Brussels on 19-20 October, EU leaders will announce that they "encourage work underway to rapidly establish a permanent EU presence in Libya", thereby offering further political support to the UN backed Government of National Accord in Tripoli. However, the country has to improve the security situation first. At the moment, only Italy has an embassy in Libya.

► *Libya's Sharara reopens after three days of occupation by armed group*

On 4 October Libya's Sharara oilfield reopened after an armed group had occupied the giant oilfield on the night of 1 October. The militant group Brigade 30 had issued a series of demands, such as salary payments, release of group members, and fuel supplies. Although it is unclear whether their demands were met, the National Oil Cooperation (NOC), which operates in partnership with other oil companies, thanked the head of the guard force tasked with protecting Sharara as well as members of the Tuareg ethnic group. Since 2011, Libya's oil production has been fluctuating sharply due to several blockades of armed groups, security problems, and protests.

► *Colonel al-Mesmari: ISIS and branches of Muslim Brotherhood infiltrates Libya, Qatar supports them*

On 1 October Libya's army's spokesman, Colonel Ahmad al-Mesmari, said ISIS and branches of the Muslim Brotherhood linked to al-Qaeda have combined forces to infiltrate Libya and spread extremism. Furthermore, he said that "Qatar is transporting armed ISIS militants from Syria to Libya. Also, Qatar's financial support for terrorist organizations in Libya persists." The comments of the army's officer came after a US airstrike which led to the death of ISIS militants on 27 September. Al-Mesmari also demanded that the UN does not interfere with the Libyan military.

► *General Haftar: force remains an option*

On 29 September Libya's eastern-based military commander, Khalifa Haftar, said force remains an option in the long way of bringing peace in the country, although a political solution would be preferable. "It's obvious that we prefer the political routes, but when these don't work there must be other solutions." The remarks came after UN Envoy Ghassan Salame's call to sign a plan to stabilise Libya, which included armed groups, so parliamentary and presidential elections can be held. The former-Gadhafi officer also rejects the converting of militants into anti-smuggling police by the western government.

Morocco

► *French Minister of Foreign Affairs visits Morocco*

On 9 October Morocco's Prime Minister, Saad Eddine el-Othmani, and French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, met each other in the government residency. Also Morocco's Minister Delegate of Foreign Affairs attended the meeting. Aim of the two-day visit was to strengthen bilateral relations. The representatives talked about issues of common interests, such as counterterrorism, climate change, management of migration influx, and cultural cooperation. Also the conflict in Western Sahara was a subject to talk about. France is Morocco's main ally with respect to this issue and supports Morocco's Autonomy Plan.

► *Moroccan MPs oppose presence of former Israeli Minister of Defence Amir Peretz*

On 8 October several Moroccan MPs denounced the presence of former Israeli defence minister and member of Israeli parliament, Amir Peretz, inside Morocco's House of Councillors. Peretz headed a Israeli parliamentary delegation to Rabat. In a YouTube video MPs from three parliamentary groups, the Justice and Development Party, the Moroccan Union of Labour, and the Democratic Confederation of Labour, shouted at Peretz, calling the Israeli a war criminal and asked him to leave the country. Although Morocco had a large Jewish population in the 20th century, Moroccans have largely been fierce supporters of the Palestinians. Diplomatic relations between Israel and Morocco were officially cut in 2000.

► *Opposition Istiglal Party (PI) elects new leader*

On 7 October former Minister of Finance and current president of the advisory state-body CESE (Social, Economic and Environment Council), Nizar Baraka, was chosen as the new leader of the Istiqlal Party (PI), ending the era of the party's former Secretary-General Hamid Chabat. 924 out of the 1284 members vote for Baraka, who is the grandson of the iconic leader of PI, Allal El Fassi. The new Secretary-General has the challenging task to overcome internal conflicts, which began after Chabat made uncalculated statements about Mauritania's sovereignty in December 2016, causing a diplomatic crisis and an internal split between supporters and opponents of Chabat. Furthermore, the former major party which took part in several government coalitions between 1998 and 2011, has a diminishing support. According to Baraka, "our goal is to regain the confidence of our Istiqlal members and citizens in our party."

► *Girl accuses cleric of sexually exploiting her, raising the question of polygamy and marriage of young women*

On 7 October the 18-year-old Hanane accused online the controversial Salafi sheikh Mohamed El Fizazi of marrying her without papers and sexually exploiting her. Furthermore, she would be kidnapped and filmed naked by a gang. The sheikh denied the complaints and accused in turn the woman of "lying, debauchery and to blackmail". The cleric had asked her hand and took her to Tangier to live with him, where she became pregnant but lost her baby. The cleric refused to legalise the marriage. Afterwards, she would be blackmailed by a gang of five men who forced her to take off her clothes while they filmed her. Hanana's brother said the gang was related to El Fizazi. The story went viral on social media, slamming the cleric for "exploiting" a girl at "the age of his granddaughters." The incident raised again the question of polygamy and the marriage of young women in the country.

► *Former chief MINURSO urges to move towards solution in Western Sahara conflict, no referendum*

On 6 October former head of the United Nations Mission for Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), Erik Jensen, warned that failure to move towards a solution poses threats to the wider region. The former chief spoke during a meeting of the UN Fourth Committee. According to him, the recent appointment of Horst Kohler as the new Western Sahara Envoy was intended to restart talks between Morocco and the Polisario Front, an independence movement for Western Sahara. The Algerian-backed Polisario Front is considered by the UN to be the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people, but outlawed in parts of Western Sahara under control of Morocco. The Polisario Front was accused by some non-government members during the UN Fourth Committee, denouncing the prevailing "slavery" in Tindouf camps under leadership of Polisario Front. Earlier this year, a NGO drew attention to the humanitarian crisis in the camps where Sahrawi lack food, water, and medication. At the Fourth Committee, Morocco's ambassador to the UN, Omar Hilale, said there is no room for a referendum in Western Sahara, because that option has been "buried" for a long time. According to him, the conflict has to be resolved through a political process based on "realism" and the pre-eminence of Morocco's Autonomy Plan. The ambassador also added the issue of Western Sahara should be removed of the agenda of the Fourth Committee.

► *Coalition party USFP loses parliamentary group*

On 29 September it was reported the parliamentary group of Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) lost two seats in the parliament due to a court ruling some days earlier. To constitute a parliamentary group, a minimum of 20 seats is required. The court decision was made after a recount of the legislative elections ballots of last year. Both USFP MP Mohamed Belfkih and Justice and Development Party (PJD) MP Oumar Boumriss lost their seats. Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) candidate Mohamed Abouddrar obtained a seat. The opposition party holds 103 seats currently. The court decision is bad news for Morocco's government, for USFP is part of the coalition. Furthermore, USFP's leader Habib El Malki is President of the House of Representatives, the lower house of Morocco's parliament.

► *Prime Minister says Morocco suffers from shortcomings in human rights*

On 28 September head of government, Saad Eddine el-Othmani said he recognised Morocco's shortcomings regarding human rights, "despite the efforts made to improve it" during a meeting of the government council. El-Othmani stressed cooperation between all actors is necessary to address the outstanding issues. "The issue is of the interest to everyone, whether in the government sector, constitutional institutions or civil society and the press." According to him, national efforts have to be increased to improve Morocco's human rights system. The remarks of the Prime Minister came after the comments of Morocco's Minister of Human Rights Mustafa Ramid, saying the country only supports 191 of the 244 recommendations made by the UN Human Rights Council.

► *Morocco's government rejects outcome Iraqi-Kurdish independence referendum*

On 28 September Morocco's government spokesman, Mustapha El Khalfi, said the government does not recognise the outcome of the Kurdish independence referendum. According to him, the action "threatens Iraq's security and territorial integrity. Morocco's position vis-à-vis the territorial unity and security of Iraq remains unchanged." Furthermore, the government spokesman referred to King Mohammed VI's speech on the Morocco-GCC summit last year, in which the king called for mobilisation against those who seek to divide the Arab world.

Palestinian Territories

► *Hamas claims deal agreed with Fatah over control of Gaza Strip*

On 12 October the rival Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah appear to have reached a partial deal over who should control the contested Gaza Strip and on what terms. The Hamas political leader, Ismail Haniyeh,

announced early that a deal had been agreed in Egyptian-brokered talks in Cairo, and that details would be announced later. Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) officials confirmed that a deal had been reached but also said they had no further details. The talks marked the latest in a series of attempts to end a decade-long Palestinian territorial, political and ideological split that has crippled statehood aspirations. Amid the nascent signs of progress, a top Fatah official announced that the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, would visit Gaza for the first time in a decade “within less than a month”. If it goes ahead, the Abbas visit would be the first since 2007 when the Islamist Hamas movement assumed control of Gaza. In 2007, a year after winning Palestinian parliament elections, Hamas evicted Abbas’s western-backed Palestinian Authority from Gaza. Abbas was left with autonomous enclaves in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Over the past decade, each side deepened its control over its territory, making it increasingly difficult to forge compromises. Previous efforts to reach a negotiated reconciliation between the two factions – such as in 2014 – have been announced before but have always faltered. The current round of talks have focused on issues with broader areas of agreement between the two sides – leaving out the most contentious points, most significantly the future of Hamas’s 25,000-strong armed wing in Gaza.

► *Israel to advance plans for nearly 4,000 settler units*

On 10 October an Israeli official said Israel is to advance plans for nearly 4,000 settler units in the occupied West Bank as part of a push to greatly boost settlement growth. The approvals are to include units in the flashpoint West Bank city of Hebron for the first time in years. Hebron is home to around 200,000 Palestinians, with about 800 settlers living under Israeli army protection in several heavily fortified compounds in the heart of the city. It is holy to both religions, with Old Testament figures including Abraham believed to be buried there. The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said “3,736 housing units will be approved at different stages of planning and construction”. He did not give a timeframe or a precise breakdown, but said the units would be located throughout the West Bank, including in Hebron and at the Migron and Beit El settlements near Ramallah. Israeli media say that a planning council is expected to meet next week to approve at least some of the plans. Israel faced heavy criticism of settlement construction from US president Barack Obama’s administration, but that has not been the case with his successor Donald Trump.

► *Trump says he won’t move embassy to Jerusalem for now*

On 7 October U.S. president Donald Trump said in a television interview he will not proceed for now with his pledge to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem. The status of Jerusalem is one of the most sensitive issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Palestinians regard Jerusalem as the capital of their future state. Israel has annexed East Jerusalem and declared all of the city as its capital, a move never recognized by the international community. Most countries have their embassies in Tel Aviv. During his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump vowed to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and move the embassy there. He now said he would hold off on the controversial embassy move until another push for an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal could be attempted.

Tunisia

► *EU approves €200 million loan for Tunisia*

On 9 October a €200 million loan to Tunisia was approved by the European Commission. It’s the first of three instalments totaling €500 million. “Today’s disbursement to Tunisia is proof of our strong commitment to support the successful economic recovery of one of our closest neighbours,” said Pierre Moscovici, Commissioner for Economic and Financial Affairs, Taxation and Customs. “With a renewed sense of urgency, Tunisia has reaffirmed its dedication to an effective partnership. The EU stands firmly with Tunisia in achieving prosperity for all of its people.” The aid is part of the second Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA-II) programme to Tunisia. According to a European Commission press release, the MFA-II was proposed following the 2015 terrorist attacks, which contributed to halting Tunisia’s economic recovery. This had a significant impact on the country’s balance of payments position and financing needs. The programme was agreed by the Council and the European Parliament in July 2016. The EU’s strategy of assistance to Tunisia also includes budget support programmes under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), of which Tunisia is a major recipient among the Southern Neighbourhood countries, and substantial loans from the European Investment Bank.

► *Egyptian and Tunisian PMs planned to attend consultation commission in Tunis*

On 3 October the Tunisian Foreign Ministry announced that a new session of the Egyptian-Tunisian consultation commission will be held in Tunis in November. Both the Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed and the Egyptian Prime Minister Sherif Ismail planned to attend the commission. The meeting takes place as part of the 15th meeting of the Egyptian-Tunisian High Joint Commission, which was held in September 2015. The Commission aims to increase the bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

► *First national council of Ettakatol after its 3rd congress*

On 2 October the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (Ettakatol) held its first national council, after which Elyès Fakhfakh and Afef Daoued were elected to the presidency of the National Council and Kamel Gargouri and Arbia Kousri at the General Secretariat. The 3rd national congress of Ettakatol held from 8 to 10 September had elected Khalil Zaouia as party president succeeding Mustapha Ben Jaafar who decided not to run for another term. Héla Ben Youssef was elected Vice-President. At the conclusion of the 3rd National Congress of his party, Khalil Zaouia declared that the rules of procedure of Ettakatol have been amended and is now oriented towards

the participative presidency "to establish a joint presidency between the president and the vice-president, while respecting the principle of parity." He also mentioned "the issue of making the party and its leadership younger to boost a new dynamism and restructure Ettakatol," saying that young people accounted for 40 percent of party members.

► *Tunisian navy and army rescued and arrested 140 migrants*

On 1 October the Tunisian navy rescued 98 migrants in Kerkenah on the southeast coast. "The water leaked to a boat carrying 98 migrants, when it was sinking, but the naval guard rescued them off the coast of Kerkenah," said Colonel Major Khelifa Chibani of the national guard. In addition, the army said they arrested 43 migrants who were planning to flee to Europe. They were rescued from four boats in Zarzis on the southeast coast as well. Tunisia arrested 555 Tunisian and African migrants in September. More and more migrants try to flee to Europe via Tunisia, because Libya's coast guard, aided by several armed groups, are tightening their controls on the illegal boats trips.

CENTRAL ASIA

Kyrgyzstan

► *Kyrgyz say Kazakhs tighten border amid election tensions*

On 11 October Kyrgyz authorities say Kazakhstan has tightened control along the border between the Central Asian neighbors amid tension over the October 15 presidential election in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan's State Border Service reported that long lines of automobiles and people formed near several checkpoints as Kazakh authorities appeared to step up checks and slow the pace of passage across the border as of October 10. There has been no official comment from Kazakh authorities on the situation, which developed days after Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambaev publicly accused the Kazakh authorities of "meddling in Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs." On October 7, Atambaev accused Kazakhstan of interfering in the election campaign by openly supporting Omurbek Babanov, who is facing off against ruling party candidate Sooronbai Jeenbekov and 13 others in the vote. Atambaev also criticized Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev, who has been in power since the Soviet era, over his long rule. Nazarbaev sparked anger in the Kyrgyz government by meeting on September 19 with Babanov, who is seen as a front-runner along with Jeenbekov. Atambaev is constitutionally barred from seeking a second term and has publicly supported Jeenbekov, who stepped down as prime minister in August to run for president.

► *Former Kyrgyz prosecutor now in opposition, convicted in politically charged trial*

On 10 October a Kyrgyz court has handed a five-year prison term to former Prosecutor-General Aida Salyanova, who is now an opposition lawmaker, but postponed her imprisonment until her 2-year-old daughter reaches age 14. The abuse-of-office conviction of Salyanova, a legislator from the Ata-Meken (Fatherland) party, came amid political tension five days before a presidential election in the Central Asian country. In addition to the postponed prison sentence, the Lenin District Court ruled that Salyanova's property must be confiscated. Salyanova was accused of illegally prolonging the license of a lawyer with links to then-President Kurmanbek Bakiev's son Maksim shortly before Bakiev's ouster in 2010, when she was prosecutor-general. Salyanova said that she and her lawyers proved her innocence during the trial, which she said was politically motivated. Authorities targeted Salyanova for investigation in March, days after Ata-Meken leader Omurbek Tekebaev was arrested on what his supporters say were trumped-up bribe-taking allegations. Tekebaev, who was named as Ata-Meken's candidate in the October 15 election shortly after his arrest, was convicted in August and sentenced to eight years in prison.

► *EU to start negotiations on new political deal with Kyrgyzstan after election*

On 9 October it was reported European Union member states have given the European Commission and its foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini a mandate to negotiate a new political deal between the EU and Kyrgyzstan. The new accord would replace the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) that has underpinned political relations between the bloc and Bishkek since 1999. A statement announcing the decision said that the Brussels-Bishkek "partnership" is based on Kyrgyzstan's "commitment to undertake reforms to strengthen democracy, fundamental freedoms, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, and to promote sustainable economic development." The move comes before an October 15 presidential election in Kyrgyzstan. The EU expects the vote "to be carried out in line with [Kyrgyzstan's] international obligations and commitments in terms of holding credible, inclusive and transparent elections." The new agreement is expected to be similar to the one neighboring Kazakhstan signed with the EU in 2016. The Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) that the EU and Astana negotiated for over three years was the first new political agreement the EU concluded with a Central Asian country.

► *Kyrgyz deputy prime minister killed in car accident*

On 7 October a deputy prime minister of Kyrgyzstan was killed when a vehicle he was riding in collided with a KamAZ truck on a highway in the Central Asian nation. Temir Jumakadyrov, 38, died as a result of injuries sustained in accident west of the capital, Bishkek, the Kyrgyz government confirmed. At the time of the accident, Jumakadyrov was reportedly traveling to the northwestern Talas region to inspect polling stations ahead of the

election. Jumakadyrov had been tasked by Kyrgyz Prime Minister Sapar Isakov with overseeing preparations for the October 15 presidential vote to elect a successor to outgoing President Almazbek Atambaev. Kyrgyzstan has one of the highest traffic-fatality rates per capita across the former Soviet Union and Europe.

► *Uzbek, Kyrgyz presidents reiterate two nations' readiness to cooperate*

On 5 October Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoev and his Kyrgyz counterpart, Almazbek Atambaev, on reiterated the two neighboring Central Asian nations' readiness for closer cooperation. Mirziyoev said at talks with Atambaev in Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent, that "in a very short period of time" Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan "managed to reach a very high level of cooperation that will allow us to move to even closer ties." Mirziyoev mentioned that, since his visit to Kyrgyzstan last month, several border crossings between the two countries have been reopened. On the eve of Atambaev's visit, Mirziyoev signed a law on the delimitation of 85 percent of the 1,280-kilometer long common border. According to the law, more than 1,170 kilometers of the border are now considered fully established. Atambaev signed an equivalent law on 2 October. The border between the two Central Asian neighbors has been a major bone of contention in bilateral ties since 1991, when they gained independence from the Soviet Union. Over the past decades, there have been numerous incidents along the border which in some cases involved gunfire.

► *Rally held 'for fair elections' in Bishkek ahead of October vote*

On 30 September around one thousand people gathered at a rally in the Kyrgyz capital organized by activists protesting against election-campaign abuses, including bribery and the use of "administrative resources" -- whereby political candidates and parties use their official connections to influence and pressure voters, especially those employed by the state. Around 500 protesters initially gathered on Bishkek's central square to attend the "For Fair Elections" rally before being joined by hundreds more as they made their way to the city's Botanical Garden. "We have gathered with one single mission: we demand fair and clean elections. We are against bribery and administrative resources," independent parliamentary deputy Zhanar Akaev told protesters. Two members of the Central Election commission also attended the rally, informing people that their vote in the upcoming election was confidential.

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