

Letter n°1049 of Tuesday 19th December 2023

Ten urgent Franco-German issues for Europe

Joachim Bitterlich - 19 Dec 2023

From research to defence, from energy to foreign policy, former German ambassador Joachim Bitterlich outlines some ways of tackling today's challenges.



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■ Front page! :



When Ukraine turns to the West

Previous enlargements have enabled entire societies, whose development had come to a halt under totalitarian domination, to take the road to democracy, modernity and prosperity, as no other example in the world is capable of doing," writes Jean-Dominique Giuliani following the European Union's decision to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. [Read more](#)

■ Foundation :



Schuman Network, European ideas platform

The Schuman Network aims to promote debate and reflection on European issues. Numerous contributions from think tanks on the international situation, the forthcoming European elections and the issues and challenges to be faced are available, such as those from the IFRI, the EUISS and the European Institute of Romania, which have recently been put online. Others will follow. [Read more](#)



European recovery plans: figures and priorities

In response to the economic and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Union has set up a €672.5 billion recovery fund. On 13 December, the Commission approved Portugal's 3rd and 4th payment requests, totalling €3.17 billion. On 14 December, it received Poland's first payment request for €6.3 billion. The Foundation offers you an interactive map of the plans country by country, to check the amounts and timetables. [Read more](#)

■ European Council :



Conclusions of the European Council

The heads of state and government, meeting on 14 and 15 December, decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, to recognise Georgia's status as a candidate country, and envisaged opening accession negotiations with Bosnia-Herzegovina subject to conditions. The leaders failed to agree on the reform of the multi-annual financial framework, including €50 billion in aid to Ukraine. They approved the 12th package of sanctions against Russia. They discussed the situation in the Middle East and security and defence issues. [Read more](#)

■ Commission :



The list of critical medicines

On 12 December, the Commission published the first list of critical medicines. 200 active substances have been designated as essential, and the Commission will have to ensure an uninterrupted supply of these substances. The list will be updated annually with the help of the European Medicines Agency and national agencies. [Read more](#)



Reduction of crossborder red tape

On 12 December, the Commission presented a regulation to reduce administrative divergences in cross-border regions. The aim is to facilitate cooperation in order to boost the economies of these regions, but also to improve access to public services or the response to crises. [Read more - Other link](#)



Defence of Democracy and the fight to counter foreign influence

On 12 December, the Commission presented proposals to protect Europe's democratic processes from destabilisation by malicious external actors, ahead of the European elections in June 2024. Under the proposed regulation, all actors conducting influence campaigns within the EU will have to disclose their foreign funding in a transparent manner. The Commission is also drawing up recommendations for combating threats to the electoral process, including cyber attacks. [Read more](#)



Release of some of the European funds for Hungary

On 13 December, the Commission announced the release of part of the European funds earmarked for Hungary, the payment of which was conditional on reforms to the judicial system. The Commission considers that the reforms bring the country sufficiently into line with the European Charter of Human Rights, and allow the payment of around €10 billion. The €21 billion in cohesion and European recovery plan funds, payment of which is conditional on reforms to the rule of law, remain blocked for the time being. [Read more - Other link](#)

■ Parliament :



Award of the Sakharov Prize

On 12 December, the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, presented the 2023 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to Saleh Nikbakht, lawyer for the family of posthumous laureate Jina Mahsa Amini, and to two representatives of the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran. Mahsa Amini's death in September 2022, following her arrest for failing to comply with Iranian laws on the wearing of the headscarf, was the event that triggered the movement for the emancipation of Iranian women. [Read more](#)



Pedro Sanchez reviews the six months of the Spanish Presidency of the Council

On 15 December, the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sanchez, took stock of the six months of the Spanish Presidency of the Council. He emphasised the progress made in terms of Europe's strategic autonomy, through reindustrialisation, and called for European unity to be strengthened in order to play a greater role in international affairs. [Read more](#)



Proposal for the European elections

On 12 December, MEPs called for the person who will chair the Commission to be chosen on the basis of the outcome of the European elections. They proposed other measures to strengthen the democratic dimension of the elections, such as new rules for European political parties, and a political agreement between the majority parties the day after the election, with a view to establishing a work programme for the legislature. [Read more](#) - [Other link](#)



Adoption of the regulation on critical raw materials

On 12 December, MEPs adopted a regulation on critical raw materials, aimed at improving the European Union's ability to source raw materials essential to the ecological and digital transitions. The regulation establishes a strategic list, setting targets for extraction, refining and recycling, as well as targets for the diversification of supplier countries. The legislation will come into force once it has been definitively adopted by the Council. [Read more](#)



Rules on the recognition of parentage

On 14 December, MEPs voted in favour of a draft regulation harmonising the recognition of parentage at European level. When a Member State recognises a parent-child relationship, the other Member States will systematically have to recognise it, regardless of how the child was conceived or born, or the child's family. [Read more](#) - [Other link](#)

■ Council :



Meeting of Agriculture and Fisheries Ministers

On 10 December, Agriculture ministers discussed the regulation governing genomic techniques in agriculture, national strategic plans for the CAP and a proposed regulation on pesticides. On 11 and 12 December, the Fisheries ministers reached agreement on fishing quotas for 2024. [Read more](#) - [Other link](#)



Meeting of Environment Ministers

On 18 December, the environment ministers reached agreement on the regulation on packaging waste. They also debated legislation on soil health, and the establishment of a European forest monitoring framework. [Read more](#)

■ Trilogues :



Reform of the electricity market

On 13 December, Parliament and the Council reached an agreement on a reform of the electricity market to protect consumers from price rises and speed up the development of zero-carbon energies. [Read more](#)



Corporate liability and amendments to the Solvency II Directive

On 14 December, Parliament and the Council reached an agreement on corporate liability. The Due Diligence Directive will make companies responsible for human rights and environmental abuses throughout their value chain, while the Defective Products Directive will improve the protection and compensation of consumers injured by a defective product. On the same day, they also reached an agreement on the revision of the Solvency II Directive, which governs the insurance sector. [Read more](#) - [Other link](#) - [Other link](#)



Fight against money laundering and the confiscation criminal of assets

On 13 December, Parliament and the Council reached agreement on the creation of a European authority to combat money laundering, to be known as AMLA (Anti-money laundering authority). On 12 December, they reached agreement on European rules for the freezing and confiscation of criminal assets. [Read more - Other link](#)



Freedom of the media

On 15 December, Parliament and the Council reached agreement on media freedom legislation, which establishes a European framework to protect journalists from political interference. The Commission will be assisted in its implementation by a European Media Services Council, made up of representatives of national agencies. [Read more](#)



Agreement on the legal framework of substances of human origin

On 14 December, Parliament and the Council reached agreement on a legal framework for the medical use of blood, tissues and cells. The aim is to establish European standards for the quality and safety of these substances, and to improve exchanges between Member States as required. The regulation also extends the range of substances of human origin to include breast milk and intestinal microbiota. [Read more](#)



Status of Platform Workers

On 12 December, Parliament and the Council reached an agreement on the directive on digital platform workers' rights. The text defines the working conditions and remuneration on the basis of which workers will have to be considered as employees of the platforms and not as self-employed. In addition, platforms will no longer be able to use algorithmic processing for certain employee data in their personnel management. [Read more](#)



Meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers

On 11 December, Foreign Ministers discussed Russian aggression in Ukraine, the situation in the Middle East, and security in the Sahel region. The ministers also approved conclusions on civilian security and defence policy (CSDP), and officially launched a CSDP initiative in support of four countries in the Gulf of Guinea. [Read more](#)



Summit with the Western Balkans

The 27 Heads of State and Government met their 6 counterparts from the Western Balkans on 13 December. They adopted a declaration reiterating the European perspective of the countries in the region, subject to internal reforms, particularly in terms of the rule of law. The leaders called for a complete alignment of foreign policy and an acceleration of regional cooperation. [Read more](#) - [Other link](#)



Meeting of Eastern Partnership

The 27 Foreign Ministers met with their counterparts from the Eastern Partnership countries on 11 December. They called for support for the reconstruction of Ukraine and for enhanced cooperation. The ministers said they were committed to achieving concrete results in 2024, particularly in the areas of regional roaming, road safety and transport. [Read more](#)



Trade and Political Agreement with Chile

On 13 December, the Commission signed an advanced framework agreement for political cooperation and a trade agreement with Chile. The aim is to promote trade and investment, while defending shared values, notably in the fight against climate change. The agreement now has to be approved by the Parliament and adopted by the Council. [Read more](#)



Trade agreement signed with Kenya

On 18 December, Kenya and the European Union signed a trade agreement, the first major agreement with an African country since 2016. This Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) guarantees Kenyan products duty-free and quota-free access to the European market, as well as tariff reductions for European products destined for the East African country. [Read more](#)

■ ECB :



The rates remain unchanged ... for the time being

On 14 December, the ECB Governing Council decided to leave the three key interest rates unchanged. According to its estimates, inflation should pick up in the short term but continue to fall gradually, reaching the 2% target in 2025. [Read more](#)

■ Germany :



Revision of the Budget

The German coalition government reached an agreement on the budget on 13 December, a few weeks after a Constitutional Court ruling invalidating spending through special funds. The budget for the Climate and Transformation Fund will be reduced by €12 billion by 2024, and by €45 billion by 2027. However, support for Ukraine remains a government priority, and the amount of aid could even be increased. [Read more](#)

■ Poland :



New Polish government

On 13 December, Polish President Andrzej Duda (PiS) officially appointed Donald Tusk (PO) as President of the Council of Ministers. Tusk has surrounded himself with a multi-party, pro-European government that includes 9 women out of 26 ministers. [Read more](#)

■ Slovakia :



The draft reform of the Penal Code undermines the rule of law

The European Public Prosecutor's Office took the view on 18 December that Slovakia's plans to reform its criminal code represented "a serious risk of a breach of the rule of law". The head of the public prosecutor's office, Laura Kövesi, sent a letter to the European Commission regarding the reforms proposed by the government, which include the easing of penalties for corruption and economic crimes, the removal of protection for whistleblowers and the abolition of the prosecutor's office dedicated to cases of high-level corruption and organised crime. [Read more](#)

■ Albania :



Suspension of the migration agreement with Italy

On 13 December, the Albanian Constitutional Court suspended the ratification of an agreement signed with Italy on the relocation to Albania of part of the asylum applications lodged in Italy. The agreement was the subject of an appeal by members of the Albanian opposition, on the grounds that it violated the Constitution and international treaties. The Court has until 6 March 2024 to issue a final ruling. [Read more](#)

■ Serbia :



Results of the legislative and municipal elections

President Aleksandar Vucic's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won the country's parliamentary elections on 17 December with 46.7% of the vote against 23.58% for the opposition united under the banner "Serbia against violence". Thousands of Serbs protested in front of the electoral commission (RIK) on 18 December, calling for the results of the municipal elections in Belgrade to be annulled. According to international observers, the ballot was tainted by "vote buying" and "ballot box stuffing". [Read more - Other link](#)

■ Switzerland :



Negotiation mandate with the European Union

On 13 December, the Parliament resulting from the 22 October elections appointed the 7 members of the Federal Council for a 4-year term. It elected Defence Minister Viola Amherd (Centre) as President of the Confederation for a one-year term in 2024. On 15 December, the Federal Council approved the draft mandate for negotiations with the European Union on a new framework agreement. This mandate must now be examined by Parliament and the cantons. [Read more](#)

■ Russia :



Concern about Alexei Navalny

Russian opponent Alexei Navalny, condemned to prison for "extremism" last August is said to have been transferred on 15 December to a prison with tougher conditions. People close to him have not heard from him since 6 December. The French Foreign Minister qualified the situation as "concerning". [Read more](#)



Twelfth package of European sanctions against Russia

On 18 December, the Council adopted the 12th package of European sanctions against Russia since the aggression against Ukraine. The package includes restrictions on trade in Russian diamonds or diamonds transiting through Russia, as well as a clause to prevent the re-export to Russia of sensitive goods and certain technologies from third countries. In addition, 61 individuals and 89 entities have been added to the list of persons and organisations subject to sanctions. [Read more](#)

■ Ukraine :



Speech by Volodymyr Zelensky

On 15 December, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky described the European Council's decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine as "a truly remarkable result for Ukraine and for Europe as a whole". On 13 December, he held talks with the leaders of Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland at the second Ukraine-Nordic Countries Summit in Oslo. They discussed the Nordic countries' economic, military and technological assistance to Ukraine. [Read more](#) - [Other link](#) - [Other link](#) - [Other link](#)

■ UN :



COP28 Agreement

The United Nations Climate Change Conference ended on 13 December with an agreement marking the "beginning of the end" for fossil fuels. This agreement established the framework for tackling global greenhouse gas emissions and implementing new economic practices for governments and businesses. [Read more](#)

■ Eurobarometer :



Survey of Citizens' preoccupations

According to a Eurobarometer survey published on 13 December, the majority of European citizens remain in favour of measures to support Ukraine. 28% consider support for Ukraine to be the most important issue, with 28% believing that the main issue is immigration. 70% of those polled believe that the European Union is a place of stability in a troubled world, and 61% say they are optimistic about the future. [Read more](#) - [Other link](#)

■ Culture :



The art of the printmaker in Edinburgh

The National Gallery of Scotland's exhibition "The Art of the Printmaker", on show until 25 February 2024, explores 500 years of the history of printmaking, with works by artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt, Hokusai, Andy Wahrol and Tracey Emin. [Read more](#)



Ulla von Brandenburg in Madrid

"Espacios de una secuencia" is an exhibition created for the Palacio de Velázquez in Madrid by the German visual artist Ulla von Brandenburg until 10 March 2024. The space is transformed and conceived as a theatrical stage on which the audience plays the leading role. [Read more](#)



Jürgen Teller in Paris

Until 9 January 2024, the Grand Palais in Paris is presenting the "I need to live" exhibition on the German photographer Jürgen Teller. The exhibition reflects the extraordinary work of the photographer, known for his shots of celebrities and his emblematic campaigns. [Read more](#)



Textiles and Ceramics in Vienna

The Austrian Museum of Applied Arts is presenting an exhibition on textiles and ceramics in contemporary art. Works by more than 40 artists will be on show until 20 May 2024. [Read more](#)



Commemoration of the Krakow Ghetto

Until 6 February 2024, the Krakow Historical Museum is presenting an exhibition entitled "Untrampled Memory: My Commemoration of the Krakow Ghetto". It highlights documentary photographs taken by secondary school pupils in the Krakow ghetto, under the guidance of experts, learning about the history of the place in the process. [Read more](#)

■ Agenda :

 18 December 2023

Environment Council (Brussels)

 19 December 2023

Energy Council (Brussels)

 20 December 2023

Meeting of the Economy and Finance Ministers

 1 January 2024

Start of the Belgian Presidency of the Council



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