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World facing the greatest humanitarian crisis since 1945

Tamar Buachidze ■

■ According to UN, the world is facing the greatest humanitarian crisis since 1945. Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan and Nigeria are mainly affected, where approximately 20 million people are at the risk of starvation and affected by famine. UNICEF has also warned, that 1.4 children could starve to death this year without global support. Famine can only occur in certain circumstances, where 20% of the households are facing food shortages, acute malnutrition numbers exceed 30% and the death toll exceeds two people per day per 10,000 population.

As UN humanitarian chief Stephen O'Brien claims, \$ 4.4 billion are needed by July, in order to avoid such a catastrophe. Apparently, the UN is operating from only 90 million dollars received from donations since the start of the year.

From the four countries, the situation is the worst in Yemen, where the largest food security in the world is accounted. Two thirds, around 19 million people of the population are in need of some kind of humanitarian aid. The current circumstances are mainly generated by the conflict which escalated in March 2015, due to the tensions between the forces of a Saudi-led coalition backed President Abdrabbuh Mansour

Hadi and the Houthi rebel movement. During the fights, nearly 7,600 people, mostly civilians have been killed, and 42,000 have been injured. Around 3 million Yemenis have been already displaced due to ground and air strikes by the US and UK-backed Saudi-led coalition on rebel-held areas, and more than 180,000 people also fled the country. Besides these, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, and restrictions on food and fuel imports, poor governance and law, and under-development have also made living conditions extremely bad and largely contributed to the famine. According to The World Food Programme's executive director Ertharin Cousin, there are around three months of food left in the country, and seven million people do not know how they will get their next meal.

The second worst situation can be accounted to South Sudan, where around 100.000 people are suffering from starvation and 4.9 million people, 40% of the population are in urgent need of food supply. Like Yemen, fights since 2013, under-development and lack of law are hampering aid and already 3 million people had to flee from their homes. According to Food



Programme Director Joyce Luma, “This famine is man-made”. The war resulted in the serious economic damage mainly agriculture, meaning that the farmers had to give up their livestock and farming tools, and live by day after day. According to UN officials, President Salva Kiir is blocking the access of humanitarian aid, thus the bad living conditions cannot mainly improve without increased peace and security in the worst affected areas. As UN assistant secretary general Justin Forsyth claims, “In South Sudan, UNICEF has 620 feeding centres for severely malnourished children, so the places where children are dying are places we cannot get to, or get to only occasionally. If there was access, we should save these children’s lives.”

In Nigeria, also under-development lack of rule of law and Boko Haram are making serious obstacles concerning help. 7.1 million people are suffering from food insecurity and around 120,000 people are at the risk of starvation in north-eastern Nigeria. Boko Haram is the main source of the conflict, the Islamist group had already killed nearly 15,000 people, and forced millions to flee from their homes. Boko Haram began military operations in 2009, which resulted in the death of thousands of people, and the seizure of a large area in the north-east. In the last 22 months, most of the area have been retaken, which revealed the devastation and the extremely tough situation of people living in those areas, mainly meaning hundreds of thousands of children suffering from extreme malnutrition and thousands who have already died due to starvation. Due to the attacks,

farmers are unable to plant anything in the past three years and they cannot buy food either, as military closed markets because of security concerns. According to John Ging operations director for the UN, many more people are facing death soon without appropriate international aid.

In Somalia, the same reasons triggered such a crisis, just right after the death of 260,000 people six years ago, due to the first declared famine. Besides the terrorist attacks of Al-Shabab, lack of water resulted in the devastation of livestock and crops, effecting nearly 6.2 million people with famine. In March, more than 100 people have died due to starvation and dozens were killed by cholera (due to the lack of clear water) in the south-western Bay region. President Mohamed Abdullah Farmajo has declared drought caused by the El Nino weather phenomenon, resulting in the lack of food besides the need of clear water.

As it is described, in north-east Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen and South Sudan extremely poor living conditions and fighting against attacks made people’s lives so difficult that they are unable to get by. In Somalia, also a drought killed the animals and made it impossible to harvest and reach clear water. Altogether 19 African countries are facing food insecurity and crisis, but even with enough aid, many areas are hard to reach. According to secretary general Justin Forsyth, “Nobody should be dying of starvation in 2017. There is enough food in the world, we have enough capability in terms of the humanitarian community.”



60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome: achievements and challenges of the EU

Tamar Buachidze ■

■ The Treaty of Rome, EU's founding pact, was signed on March 25, 1957 in parallel with a treaty setting up the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), by the states of Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany. It was an international agreement bringing about the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC), the best-known of the European Communities (EC). European Union leaders renewed their vows on the 60th anniversary of the bloc's founding treaties at a summit in Rome as a proof of unity and readiness to overcome challenges despite Britain leaving the family.

The Treaty offered initial steps of reducing customs duties and establishing a customs union in addition with the creation of a Common Agricultural Policy, a Common Transport Policy, a European Social Fund and establishment of the European Commission. Its aims were transformation of the conditions of trade and production on the territory of the signatory states and serving as a step towards the closer political unification of Europe. In terms of specific goals, the signatories agreed to improve their citizens' living and working conditions, to

lay the foundation of an 'ever closer union' of Europe, to ensure balanced trade and fair competition as well as to abolish restrictions on international trade through a common trade policy. The treaty not only provided the structure and the path towards unity and cooperation, but also established institutions and decision-making mechanisms making it possible to express national interests and a joint vision. The main institutions consisted of the Council of Ministers, the Commission, the Parliamentary Assembly later becoming the European Parliament and the Court of Justice.

Meeting took place in the same Renaissance-era palace where six founding states signed the Treaty of Rome with the difference of 27 leaders being present, minus Britain, unlike on previous anniversaries. Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker also participated in the summit, where a number of events were organised marking the occasion and reflecting on Europe's common future. Prior to the summit, on March 1, the Commission launched a pan-European debate with the White Paper on the Future of Europe, which will enable citizens and leaders to shape the vision of the EU at 27. On March 10,



the informal meeting of the 27 Heads of State or Government also took place in Brussels. The discussion was advanced on the summit, where leaders signed the Rome declaration, prepared jointly by Presidents Tusk and Juncker and Prime Ministers Muscat and Gentiloni. The joint vision set out for the years to come involved a pledge to world towards a safe and secure Europe, a prosperous and sustainable Europe, a social Europe and a stronger Europe on the global scene strengthening its common security and defence to handle migration crisis as well as terrorism atrocities.

The ceremonial gathering began with a speech of Pope Francis in the Vatican, who told the leaders: “You are called on to blaze the path of a new European humanism”. The most relevant argument of today’s position of the Union that he gave was: “when a body loses its sense of direction and is no longer able to look ahead, it experiences a regression and, in the long run, risks dying”. The challenges the EU faces was further underscored with British Prime Minister Theresa May’s absence, four days before launching of the two-year Brexit process. Hence, the Rome declaration signed on the summit marks the beginning of the process leading towards overcoming the current challenges. Reflection papers on key issues will follow the event focusing on five topics: developing the social dimension of Europe, deepening the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), harnessing globalisation, the future of Europe’s defence and the future of the EU finances. These ideas will be advance by President

Juncker’s State of the Union speech in September 2017 before European Council’s first conclusion release in December 2017. As the issue of transparency and Europe’s citizens’ involvement was also put forward, the Commission will be organising later this year public debates with the European Parliament and Member States in addition with online consultations to share citizens’ views on the future of Europe via the Commission Representations and a newly launched website.



*Photograph of the signing ceremony for the Treaty of Rome in 1957.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons*

The Member States of the Union explicitly need to stand together and cooperate more than ever taking into account the stream of challenges and rising Euroscepticism threatening the foundation and principles of the Union, on which it is based and built on. Events like this are undeniably beneficial to appreciate achievements of the consolidation and further cooperate on mutual steps essential to be taken in future.



Happy anniversary, Nordic countries

Tamar Buachidze ■

■ The Helsinki treaty of cooperation between Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden was signed on March 23, 1962. Fifty-five years passed since the governments of Nordic states desired to promote and strengthen the close ties existing between the Nordic peoples in matters of culture, of legal and social philosophy and to extend the scale of cooperation between the countries. They also aimed at achieving an appropriate division of labour in all the fields. The anniversary is usually celebrated with events and flags flying throughout the region. Frank Bakke-Jensen, Minister of EEA and EU Affairs and Minister for Nordic Cooperation, who was celebrating the occasion in Trondheim commented that Strategic Nordic cooperation is absolutely essential. The Helsinki Treaty is a treaty regulating one of the world's oldest and most comprehensive regional partnerships. Bakke-Jensen explicitly shows Nordic countries' readiness for the Union's challenges and expresses praises towards the cooperation: "Europe is experiencing a time of change and is constantly facing new global challenges. I consider Nordic cooperation to be particularly important because we share core values that are coming under pressure. A strong, united Nordic



Members of the Nordic Council.
Map: S. Solberg J. [Wikimedia Commons]

region is well equipped to meet the challenges of today and of the future." This year's new Norwegian Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, assumed on January 1, 2017, identified key priorities for Nordic cooperation in 2017 consisting of climate change. The green shift and digitisation. Despite of Nordic achievements that do not pass unnoticed in the rest of the world, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Minister underlines importance of the present challenges and the need for closer cooperation as there are a number of sectors countries need to be more efficient such as health services, digitisation and





Nordic flags.
Photo: Søren Sigfusson (norden.org)

energy. Therefore, he promotes expansion and further development of cooperation. The programme for the Norwegian Presidency in 2017 also came up with three main pillars: the Nordic region in transition, the Nordic region in Europe and the Nordic region in the world. The first Pillar focuses on promoting Nordic competitiveness, the transition to a green, low-carbon economy, integration, and health cooperation in the Nordic region. The second pillar aims at strengthening cooperation on European policy as it is believed that a strong Nordic voice in the European debate is good for the region and good for Europe. The third

directs attention to further develop of their strategic partnership in the field of foreign policy. Norwegian Presidency actively began its work with launching nine different projects including projects on plastic waste and the marine environment, health and antibiotic resistance, and integration.

Nordic cooperation is indeed successful example which would be beneficial for the Union to take into account and let it have a spill-over effect. Language, culture and social conditions being prioritized by Nordic states further strengthens the cooperation creating more inclusive societies which the rest of the Europe seems to be lacking. The Chairman of the Nordic Association also called for the stronger link within the states arguing: “uncertainty in the world around us makes it imperative to preserve the stability of outs and to build strong Nordic alliances”.



“a strong, united Nordic region is well equipped to meet the challenges of today and of the future”



Scottish independence: seeking a second referendum

Violetta Vaski ■

■ On the 23th of June 2016, the Brexit referendum showed that the UK would like to leave the EU, but 62% of Scottish people voted to remain. In 2014, a referendum was called on whether Scotland should remain in the UK, but turned out the majority (55%) would prefer to stay. Now, as the Brexit vote changes the circumstances, on 13 March 2017, Scottish Prime Minister Nicola Sturgeon confirmed to call on a second referendum. She is intending to protect Scottish interests against Brexit, believing that Scottish people should have a choice on this matter. “A choice of whether to follow the UK to a hard Brexit, or to become an independent country able to secure a real partnership of equals with the rest of the UK and our own relationship with Europe.” She would hold the vote between the autumn of 2018 and the spring of 2019, in the middle of the Brexit negotiations.

Hence, Scottish Minister Nicola Sturgeon had her first big push to allow such a legal referendum, but it cannot legally conclude without the majority of the Scottish Parliament voting in favour to seek a section 30 order Westminster, which would legally approve the referendum.

However, the proposal was rejected by Prime Minister Theresa May, saying “now is not the time.” According to her, Scotland should focus on good governance and cooperation with Westminster, in order to reach the right deal, what is good for the UK and Scotland as well.



Map of Scotland within the United Kingdom. Map: [Wikimedia Commons](#)



The Prime Minister also adds, that a referendum before the end of the Brexit negotiations would be unfair towards Scottish people, they would be not aware of the consequences of the Brexit vote yet. Conservative Scottish politician Ruth Davidson also claims, that “People should only be asked to make a judgment on whether to leave or remain within a 300-year-old union of nations when they have seen for themselves how that union is functioning following Brexit. They should also know what the alternative entails and we have seen no clarity from the SNP on even the basic questions of their



proposition.” According to Scottish secretary David Mundell, a referendum can be appropriate, once Brexit is negotiated in details, and form of the future relationship is settled. Nicola Sturgeon labelled the response as a “democratic outrage”, adding that “It is an argument for independence really in a nutshell, that Westminster thinks it has got the right to block the democratically elected mandate of the Scottish government and the majority in the Scottish Parliament. You know history may look back on today and see it as the day the fate of the union was sealed.”

Later in March, on the 28th, Nicola Sturgeon has won the majority of the Scottish Parliament regarding the referendum. It means that Scotland can formally request the UK government to hand temporary powers under section 30, to deliver an independence referendum around the time Britain leaves the EU.

However, Scotland still seems to be divided over the question. As Scottish secretary David Mundell claims, “Now is the time for the Scottish government to come together with the UK government, work together to get the best possible deal for the UK, and that means Scotland, as we leave the EU.”

“Westminster thinks it has got the right to block the democratically elected mandate of the Scottish government and the majority in the Scottish Parliament”



Gibraltar's future at stake as Brexit advances

Tamar Buachidze ■

■ Gibraltar, a British overseas territory, located on the southern end of the Iberian Peninsula, is the subject of territorial claim by Spain. Considering Gibraltarians opinion, they have rejected any political party or pressure group in Gibraltar that support union with Spain and the UK's control over the territory. Nevertheless, Britain has stood on Spain's southern tip for more than 300 years representing a crucial bargaining chip in the Brexit negotiations.



The border between Gibraltar and Spain, as seen from the Spanish side.
Photo: Arne Koehler [Wikimedia Commons]

In 2016 referendum, 96% of Gibraltar's residents voted in favour of remaining in the EU leading to a current question of country's future either outside the EU or outside Britain. Following Theresa May's trigger of EU withdrawal talks under Article 50 on March 29, 2017, Britain will need all 27 EU nations to agree to the deals.

When it comes to Gibraltar's status, it will most likely be at the centre of Spanish demands. Concentrating more on the specific areas under the spotlight, the first could be the border crossing between Spain and Gibraltar, which will turn from an internal to an external EU border after Brexit with the Spanish government demanding control of. Senator José Ignacio Landaluce of the Spanish Foreign Affairs Committee said about the border situation, on which they have to react: "The rest of the EU will demand we control the southern border. Even if we go easy, I can assure you things will be a great deal more uncomfortable than they are now." Another equally important incentive making it such a prize is Gibraltar's prosperous economy, which has been growing at around 12% a year. Post-Brexit threat lies in the damage to some service industries which have thrived because of their access to the single market. Britain will need to make sacrifices to protect the Rock's status, but the Government in Gibraltar hopes it will not become a major bargaining chip. Fabian Picardo, the chief minister of Gibraltar underlined complexity of the negotiations and claimed: "In the 21st century the sovereignty of Gibraltar is not going to change and therefore I think it's a wasted effort



on the Spanish part to somehow pollute this negotiation with the sovereignty of Gibraltar.”

The UK must explicitly be alert to any move by Spain to intensify claims over the territory as part of Brexit talks. The calls on a House of Lords debate for the border between Gibraltar and Spain underlined to be “as free flowing as possible” after the UK’s departure from the EU relying back to the argument of Gibraltar’s economic importance. The process of disintegration is accompanied by the Lords EU Committee which argued that Britain had a “moral duty” to ensure that Gibraltar's voice is heard in the Brexit talks. The committee also focused on warning the country that considering 40% of the territory's workforce crossing over the border from Spain every day, withdrawal from the single market would have significant implications.

Brexit is less likely to go as smooth as both the Union and Britain wishes, Gibraltar case staying one of the central aspect of the UK’s departure.

United Kingdom European Union
membership referendum, 2016
Gibraltar

Choice	Votes	%
Remain a member of the European Union	19,322	95.91 %
Leave the European Union	823	4.09 %
Registered voters and turnout	24,119	83.64 %

Key issues after Brexit

Sovereignty: The day after the result Spain's acting Foreign Minister renewed calls for joint Spanish–British control of the peninsula.[19] These calls were strongly rebuffed by Gibraltar's Chief Minister.[20] After the result Spain reiterated its position that it wanted to jointly govern Gibraltar with the United Kingdom and said it would seek to block Gibraltar from participating in talks over future deals between the UK and EU.

Theresa May reiterated that "the UK would seek the best possible deal for Gibraltar as the UK exits the EU, and there would be no negotiation on the sovereignty of Gibraltar without the consent of its people.”

Movement over the border: Questions were raised over the future of free-flowing traffic at the Gibraltar–Spain border.

People: Gibraltar, like Britain, is not part of the Schengen Area. All people crossing the border to/from Spain have always been required to go through British and Spanish customs. 10,000 people living in La Línea in Spain, cross the border every day to work in Gibraltar. La Línea has an unemployment rate of 35% whereas Gibraltar has a 1% unemployment rate.

Goods: Gibraltar is not part of the EU's customs union, so there are more detailed checks on goods moving over the Spanish-Gibraltar border.[25]

Air travel: A Spanish diplomat has indicated that any agreement on airline landing rights agreed during Brexit negotiations would not apply to the Gibraltar airport.[26]

Finance industry: Finance Centre Director James Tipping told a European Parliament committee in May that the finance industry in Gibraltar is essential to the economy of the Rock. The industry was resigned to a loss of access to the EU market but had been given firm assurances that Gibraltar would have greater access to UK markets which will bring opportunities.



Ukraine blocks road and rail links in separatist regions

Tamar Buachidze ■

■ 2014 was just another year Russian Federation demonstrated its power with several military incursions into Ukrainian territory resulting in ongoing occupation. Getting hold of the right moment happened to be Euromaidan protests and the fall of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, after which Russian soldiers without insignias took control of strategic positions and infrastructure within the Ukrainian territory of Crimea followed by annexation of the territory. The conflict moved forward in the Donbass area of Ukraine between the Ukrainian government and the Russia-backed separatist forces of the self-declared Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics.

In November 2014, intensive movement of troops and equipment was reported by the Ukrainian military from Russian into the separatist controlled parts of eastern Ukraine. Despite international community and organisations such as Amnesty International condemning Russia for its actions in post-revolutionary Ukraine in addition with many countries implementing economic sanctions against Russia, the conflict continues with minor



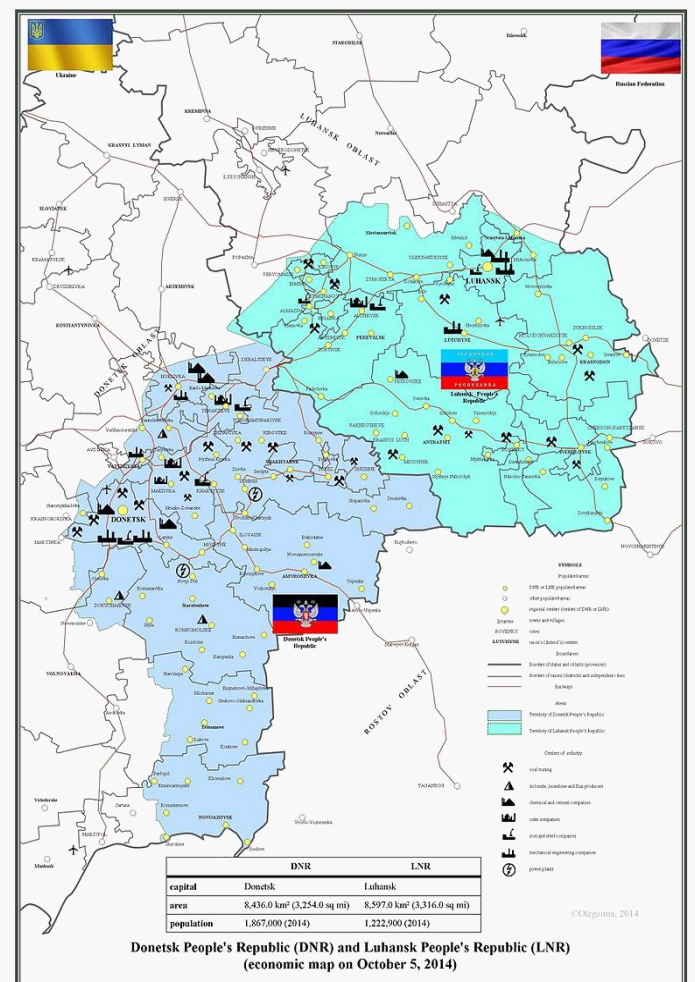
House destroyed during the war in Donbass. Photo: NEWS UTR [YouTube]

progress out of which we can consider President Vladimir Putin's admission of Russian military intelligence officers operation in Ukraine in December 2015. Concentrating on latest news, after the ceasefire starting on February 20, 2017, on March 15, Ukraine's government announced the fact of cutting off all transport connections with Russian-backed separatist territories in the east part of the country. The statement indicates on undermining of a fragile ceasefire as well as jeopardising the country's uncertain economic recovery. They made the announcement at a special meeting of the



country's security and defence council with President Petro Poroshenko. According to the joint statement, only humanitarian traffic will be allowed cutting off flows of goods and people that had persisted despite nearly three years' war. On the one hand, the decision was denounced by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claiming the decision to be against common sense and human conscience. On the other, rebel seizures of Ukrainian businesses were blamed for the move by local government. Rebels responded with the fact of them "nationalising" holdings owned by Ukraine's richest man, Rinat Akhmetov, and other oligarchs. Akhmetov's DTEK energy company representatives underlined the loss of control of the main assets in the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine meaning the shutdown of companies that would result in significant reduction of income as well as rise in unemployment.

The blockade of four railroad junctions has been going on by dozens of activists from January 2017, preventing coal from the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk territories from traveling west into government-controlled areas as well as stopping iron ore and other inputs for the steel industry from reaching factories in rebel-controlled territory. The government moved to end the blockade with dismantling one of the blockaders' base camps and detaining more



The self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in 2014.
Map: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

than 40 activists, who were later released. Government's latest announcement minorly satisfies the blockaders who claim to have two goals: to force the release of Ukrainian political prisoners and POWs held in the east and in Russia, and to bring an end to all trade with Russia and the breakaway territories.

“only humanitarian traffic will be allowed, cutting off flows of goods”



Israel-Syria incidents

Tamar Buachidze ■

■ Two most important conflicts between Israel and Syria taking place in 2017 are Palmyra offensive and March Israel-Syria incident. However, several other incidents have taken place on the Israeli–Syrian ceasefire line during the Syrian Civil War, complicating the relations between the countries. The incidents are often linked with the Quneitra Governorate clashes since 2012 and clash between Syrian Army and the rebels, ongoing on the Syrian-controlled side of the Golan, the Golan Neutral Zone and the Hezbollah involvement in the Syrian Civil War. Relying on some examples, starting from late 2012, as of mid-2014, one Israeli civilian was killed and at least 4 soldiers wounded; on the Syrian-controlled side, it is estimated that at least ten soldiers were killed, as well as two unidentified militants, who were identified near Ein Zivan on Golan Heights.

As of 2013, one of the major incident took place on March 14, 2013, the IDF fired a guided missile at a Syrian machine gun nest after Israeli troops were shot at twice in the Golan Heights.

No Israeli soldiers were hurt in the shooting, though IDF vehicles were hit. In 2014, the most attention was drawn to the occasion happening on March 18, when an explosive device was detonated close to an Israeli jeep near the Syrian border. One soldier was seriously wounded, other three soldiers sustained light-to-moderate injuries. This occurred a few days after a similar incident on the Israeli-Lebanese border. Israel blamed Hezbollah for both incidents. 2015 was packed with atrocities underlining one of the most distracting one taking place on August 20, when four rockets struck the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights and Upper Galilee. The IDF retaliated with air strikes on Syrian Army warehouses and infrastructure in the Quneitra and Rif Dimashq region of Syria later that day and artillery fire at fourteen targets in Syria. Security sources said the Islamic Jihad organization was responsible for the rocket fire, with the financial backing and the direction of Iran. Furthermore, Israel said that Syria was also responsible and “will suffer the consequences”.



It is essential to also highlight the incident that happened on September 13, 2016, when Syrian military claimed to have intercepted an Israeli jet near Quneitra and a military drone in the vicinity of Sa'sa' in southern Syria. IDF elaborated that it took out Syrian military targets on the Syrian controlled Golan Heights after artillery fire over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, but that all the aircraft returned safely. Moving onto the most recent events, the Palmyra offensive, that I mentioned above, was launched by the Syrian Arab Army against the armed forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the Eastern Homs Governorate in January 2017, with the goal of recapturing Palmyra and its surrounding countryside. The ISIL had retaken the city of Palmyra in a sudden offensive between December 8-11, 2016. On March 2, 2017, the Syrian Army, with Russian reinforcement, succeeded again in recapturing the city of Palmyra. The operation started on January 13, when Abu Hafs al-Mashrifi, ISIL's chief of security in Homs province, was killed in an artillery strike on his headquarters in the Huwaysis area. On 14 January, the Army captured several points around al-Tayyas village, as well as areas near the abandoned base, advancing to the Jazal Mountains. The military advanced further on 15 January, capturing the hills around the airbase and the Jihar crossroads. ISIL managed to prevent an attempt by the Army to advance around the airbase on 16 January. Offensives continued until the beginning of March. After March 1st assault, the Syrian Army captured the Palmyra Triangle area, Palmyra

Castle, Qatari Castle, and al-Amriyah village, as well as many hilltops including Jabbal Hayyal and Jabbal al-Tar. All in all, 283 ISIL militants, 115 Syrian Army soldiers and five Russian servicemen were reported killed during the offensive by the SOHR.

The most serious clash between Israeli and Syrian forces since the beginning of the Syrian conflict six years ago is believed to be March 17, 2017 incident, in which the Syrian Army fired several S-200 missiles at the Israeli jets above Golan Heights. Syrian Armed Forces this time also claimed that Israeli Air Force jets struck a military site near Palmyra, in Syria. Both sides claimed to have shot down each other's missiles in addition with providing no photo or video proof of downed Israeli aircraft or personnel. The incident is also 'special' considering it the first-time Israeli officials clearly confirmed an Israeli strike against Hezbollah during the Syrian Civil War. In addition, in response to the fourth round of Israeli bombings, the administration of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has threatened war with Israel involving firing of Scud missiles at Israeli cities as well as targeting the city of Haifa. Responsively, Israel also claimed to begin targeting Syrian air defence systems.

Several Israeli airstrikes followed the series of incidents that have lasted for years. Current situation explicitly provides much more incentives for further escalation of the conflict rather than reaching compromise between the two taking into account the complexity of providing certain reliable predictions.



The Mosul offensive

Violetta Vaski ■

■ On 14 March 2017, Iraqi forces successfully recaptured the train station in Mosul which is one of the main rail hubs in the country, symbolising a key aspect of fight against the Islamic State. The station accounted as a main opportunity for carrying goods to Syria and Turkey and back, thus it was a target for terrorist attacks, which resulted in the outage of transport since 2014.



*Iraqi Army firing at ISIL positions in Western Mosul, 17 March 2017.
Photo: U.S. Army / Staff Sgt. Jason Hull [Wikimedia Commons]*

On 17 March, the city's airport, the Mosul museum and the provincial government headquarters were also retaken, which are also part of the successful offensive of Iraqi forces, getting closer to recapture west Mosul. However, since operation of Iraqi forces began in last month, 80,000 people have already fled the

area, according to the International Organisation for Migration. Around 238,000 people are currently displaced due to the Mosul offensive, out of the 750,000 who were estimated to be located in the area since the beginning of the fighting.

On the same day, the US military in coalition with Iraqi forces launched an airstrike on a neighbourhood in Mosul, which resulted in the death of 100 civilians, as it was later acknowledged by the US. The unintended loss of civilian life account as the biggest one since the US began its strikes against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Later, as a municipal official confirmed, the death toll can be as high as 240, which would account to be the worst civilian loss caused by the coalition since the 2003 US-led invasion, thus Iraqi Vice President described the air strike as a humanitarian disaster.

The US military had no aims to cause any civilian casualties, and claimed it as an unintentional war accident. According to a statement released by the Pentagon, the air strike had targeted Isis fighters and equipment "at the location corresponding to allegations of civilian casualties. The coalition respects human life,



which is why we are assisting our Iraqi partner forces in their effort to liberate their lands from ISIS brutality." Survivors claimed that Isis used families as human shields, but Iraqi forces were unaware of this. Before the attack, a Mosul resident received a phone call from a family trapped in the neighbourhood, and he sent the coordinates towards Iraqi forces, but did not get a response.

With the election of Donald Trump, operations became more aggressive against the Islamic State, as he promised to be harder on the problem than the previous administrations. The approach also generates a bigger death toll of civilians, as the airstrikes are targeting a fiercely contested urban area, which questions the handling of the offensive. According to UN data, between February 17 and March 22, at least 307 civilians died due to the operations.

Speculations about changing attitude came to life, and President Donald Trump has already raised questions to military leaders, whether the military operations should be loosened. However, a statement after the events engrossed the direction: "But the coalition will not abandon our commitment to our Iraqi partners because of ISIS's inhuman tactics terrorising civilians, using human shields, and fighting from protected sites such as schools, hospitals, religious sites and civilian neighbourhoods."

As the UN High Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini claims, the coalition was not paying enough attention to the precautions, in order to protect civilians.

International reactions

Amnesty International: AI stated that recent increase in civilian casualties from U.S.-led coalition airstrikes "raised serious questions about the lawfulness of these attacks."

United Nations: The UN expressed profound concern over the escalating civilian death toll in the battle to retake Mosul.

Human Rights Watch: HRW stated that "The high number of civilian deaths in recent fighting, as well as recent announcements about changed procedures for vetting airstrikes, raise concerns about the way the battle for west Mosul is being fought."

Australia: Defence Minister Marise Payne stated that, after an investigation, it was found that Australian combat aircraft were not involved in the airstrike.

Belgium: Belgium has opened an investigation into the Mosul airstrikes to determine if its warplanes were responsible for civilian casualties.

Iran: Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, has accused the United States of committing war crimes, saying: "This war crime is similar to the behavior of Daesh [Islamic State] and other Takfiri groups in targeting civilians and innocent people and should be urgently addressed in courts of justice [in Hague]."

Iraq: Speaker of the Iraqi parliament Salim al-Jabouri, said in a statement, "What's happening in the west part of Mosul is extremely serious and could not be tolerated under any circumstances."

Russia: According to Russia's Ministry of Defense, "Absurd statements of the Pentagon representatives [that "ISIS is smuggling civilians into buildings"] justifying civil casualties caused by American bombing in Iraq give more information on the operation planning level and the alleged supremacy of the American "smart" bombs."

Vatican City: Pope Francis stated that forces involved in the battle for Mosul have an obligation to protect noncombatants, "In expressing profound sadness for the victims of the bloody conflict, I renew my appeal that everyone commit themselves to using all efforts to protect civilians, an imperative and urgent obligation"



US President Donald Trump meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping

Violetta Vaski ■

■ US President Donald Trump invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to his beach resort in Mar-a-Lago in Florida, for a summit on April 6 and 7, which he refers to as a difficult meeting. The meeting has a great significance, as the leaders of the world's biggest economies will discuss important global, regional and bilateral issues. According to the US President, the summit will mainly focus on issues concerning trade and jobs, but other topics related to the threats of North Korea and territorial questions are also likely to be raised. Relating to North Korea, President Donald Trump revealed that the country's nuclear power is the biggest security concern for him, thus he called on China to be tougher on the issue and take measures against



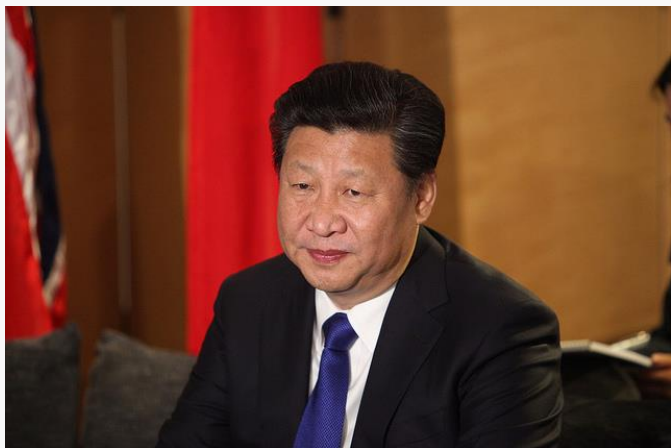
Donald Trump. Photo: Gage Skidmore [Flickr]

Pyongyang, where nuclear tests are suspected. Regarding territorial issues, China's attempt of building man-made islands in the South China Sea is also expected to be discussed. As President Donald Trump claims in his tweets on twitter, "The meeting next week with China will be a very difficult one in that we can no longer have massive trade deficits and job losses. American companies must be prepared to look at other alternatives." However, Chinese media and officials views the meeting positively, Vice Minister Zheng Zeguang declared it to be a "new starting point".

During the US President's election campaign, China was a target regarding the 500\$ billion annual trade deficit, as the two thirds of it is accounted to trade relations with China. President Trump accused China for "raping the US economy" and manipulating currency, aiming to impose import taxes on Chinese goods, but the administration did not follow the promises. After the election, he also questioned the legitimacy of "One China" policy, which China believes to be adequate concerning Chinese sovereignty concerning relations with Taiwan. Only when he reaffirmed his commitment, spoke the two leaders on telephone for the first time.



Currently, the President is aiming to sign an executive order at the end of March, in order to investigate the trade deficit in detail.



Xi Jinping. Photo: Foreign & Commonwealth Office [Flickr]

However, despite of the negative American tone, China expects the meeting to be smooth, claiming that the imbalance is not caused by Chinese attempts towards a trade surplus, instead the differences between the economic structures of the two countries. According to President Xi, “China does not deliberately seek a trade surplus. We also have no intention of carrying out competitive currency devaluation to

stimulate exports. This is not our policy.” China views the meeting as an opportunity for overcoming tensions and building constructive ties.

As China is a key source of diplomatic and economic support concerning the nuclear programme in North Korea, President Donald Trump is expected to seek help rather than being attacking during the meeting.

Earlier this year, President Trump also hosted Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Mar-a-Lago resort, at which there where an awkward 19-seconds long handshake. This time, such an amiss would have consequences, as Zhu Feng, professor of international relation at Nanjing University claims: “The Chinese leader is a very serious man. Any tricks that Trump wants to play would be perceived as some sort of humiliation.” Despite of claiming the meeting to be smooth, officials worry of no meaningful achievement, thus the Chinese side insisted on the have the meeting somewhere informal, in order to avoid a press conference without a significant joint statement at the White House.

“the summit will mainly focus on issues concerning trade and jobs, but other topics related to the threats of North Korea and territorial questions are also likely to be raised”



Mexico-United States diplomatic crisis

Violetta Vaski ■

■ Diplomatic crisis between Mexico and United States drastically fuelled with Donald Trump's term in office. Building a wall on the southern border of US has been voiced number of times during his presidential campaign. Verbal promises continued with Trump's deportation policy manifesting continuous efforts towards immigration enforcement through sending to Mexico immigrants crossing border illegally, regardless of nationality.

Historically, since Ronald Reagan was first elected, in 1980, "tradition" of every new American President meeting with his Mexican counterpart shortly after winning the White House continued. Reagan travelled to Mexico before his swearing in and welcomed Mexican President José López Portillo to Washington later that year. When George H. W. Bush was elected, he met with Carlos Salinas de Gortari, in Houston, in 1988, before either man was sworn in as President. Bill Clinton met with President Salinas, in Austin, before Clinton's Inauguration. George W. Bush's first foreign destination as President was also Mexico meeting with President Vicente Fox. Obama also met with President Felipe Calderón, in Washington, shortly before his swearing in. Despite his well-known hostility toward Mexico, Donald Trump planned on continuing the tradition, but the meeting has not happened yet. After just few

days in office, on January 25 the new American President signed an executive order to strengthen the nation's deportation force and start construction of a new wall between the nations in addition with expanding the categories of undocumented immigrants who would be prioritized for deportation. Adding to the perceived insult was the timing of the order, it came on the first day of talks between top Mexican officials and their counterparts in Washington, and just few days before a meeting between the two countries' presidents was supposed to take place.

The crisis worsened with abovementioned Trump's action resulting in cancelation of a meeting by President Nieto, who condemned US' decision to continue with the construction of a wall. He said: "Mexico will not pay for any wall," and promised to turn Mexico's fifty consulates in the United States into "true ramparts in defence of migrant rights." It is essential to mention that the meeting was cancelled, but on January 27 countries' presidents had a lengthy phone conversation focusing on the importance of their relations and issues such as stemming the sale of illegal drugs and arms that they could cooperate on. Agreement was frankly impossible in terms of payment of the wall. However, Trump at White House news conference with British Prime



Minister Theresa May described a conversation with Peña Nieto as “very, very friendly” while at the same time insisting on the maintenance of a tough stance on trade with southern neighbour. “Mexico ... has out-negotiated us and beat us to a pulp through our past leaders,” Trump said. “They have made us look foolish.”

Escalation of already aggravated relations manifested in Trump’s deportation policy, which carries the idea of deporting anyone caught crossing the southern border to Mexico, regardless of where they come from. There is a threat of hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans, Hondurans, Salvadorans, Brazilians, Haitians and Ecuadorans being pushed into Mexico. “If you want to make a claim for asylum or whatever we’ll hear your case but you are going to wait in Mexico,” a DHS official said. Numerous doubts question feasibility of the policy. On the one hand, former senior Mexican and American immigration officials consider it a base for creating new security problems along the border, as authorities in each country push unwanted migrants back and forth. On the other, according to the American Immigration Lawyers Association, the proposal would violate US law and international treaty obligations. The new guidelines also allow Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement to deport people immediately.

The similarity between Obama’s and Trump’s enforcement efforts on immigration is essential to mention claiming the ones convicting serious crimes to be deported while the Obama administration has deported record number of

immigrants, most of whom had only been accused of minor crimes and immigration violations, and the Trump administration redefined crimes to include any activity that might bring a conviction, including entering the US without permission. That effectively makes the ones living in the U.S. without a proper visa subject to roundup at their workplace or home. On 23 February two top US officials visited Mexico to discuss the measures. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s and the head of Homeland Security John Kelly’s visit was not proven to be productive. While Trump referred to mass deportation as a military operation, Kelly claimed that would not be a case, proving ambiguity within the administration. Negotiations were not achieved on the meeting, supported by a comment of Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray of Mexico claiming it to be a “complex moment in the relationship”.

Mexico-United States diplomatic crisis will not explicitly come to an end in near future. On the one hand, controversy comes with the feasibility of “unilateral” effort from the US to impose immigration or other policies on the Mexican government and on the other, with possible Mexican countermeasures such as redirecting purchases of corn away from the US. More importantly, a reconsideration of Mexico’s participation in the drug war and leveraging its participation in sharing of intelligence opposed to previous cases of cooperation in arresting top cartel leaders and intercepting drug shipments destined for the US. Taking the issue to the United Nations and other International agencies could not be excluded neither.



■ News in Brief

Domestic affairs affecting international relations

Anti-corruption “silenced” protests in Russia

■ Hundreds of people were arrested in nationwide anti-corruption protests on March 26, 2017, including the opposition leader Aleksei Navalny in Moscow, where thousands gathered for the biggest demonstration in five year against President Vladimir Putin. The protest took place in a form of a synchronized walk along a major shopping street to avoid a ban on unsanctioned stationary gatherings. There were 99 similar rallies in cities and towns across the country, from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad, out of which 82 had been declared illegal by the authorities. In the capital, some protesters tried to block security vans with cars, and the authorities deployed the riot police and surveillance helicopters. The brutal action of the police was explicitly condemned internationally with the US State Department also speaking out against the attests.

Chile sentences 33 over Pinochet-era disappearances

■ The High Court in Chile has sentenced 33 former intelligence agents over the disappearance of five political activists in 1987, who had been abducted and killed and their bodies thrown into the sea. According to investigations, they were killed in revenge for

the abduction of an army colonel by left-wing guerrillas. In addition, the activists are believed to have been the last ones kidnapped under the rule of Gen Augusto Pinochet from 1973 to 1990. Those sentenced, including former CNI head Gen Hugo Salas Wenzel and the CNI’s ex-chief of operations Maj Alvaro Corbalan Castilla, are former members of the CNI intelligence service, the army’s intelligence battalion and flight commando.

Bread war in Venezuela

■ After the global fall in oil prices, Venezuela is facing big shortages in basic goods, as the country’s is relying mostly on oil exports. Hence, bakeries are not receiving enough amount of flour, which resulted in strict regulations from the government. Bakeries will be tested by inspectors, and those, which does not meet the regulations, will be occupied by the government. The government puts the blame on bakers, by not baking enough simple bread, but also pastries, as they are more expensive, and profits can be increased. Thus, one of the new regulations is that only 10% of flour can be accumulated for pastries and other sweetened goods. According to the baker’s federation Fevipan, bakeries cannot produce more bread, unless they are not given more flour.



■ News in Brief

International relations

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

■ Armenia-backed separatists gain control over the mainly ethnic-Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh during a war in the 1990s, resulting in 30,000 dead people. Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes have escalated in these years, and diplomatic efforts took little to make progress. Recently, on 25 February, the separatist military controlling the region reported Azerbaijani armed forces attacking along the line contact, resulting in casualties. Several Azerbaijani soldiers were killed during the attack, but there were no casualties on the Armenian side. According to Azerbaijan's Defence Ministry, the attacks were confirmed, but they highlighted, that they were caused to happen by separatist forces.

Russian aircraft buzzed US destroyer in Black Sea

■ Russian banned land-based cruise missile has been deployed in the Black Sea dispatching a spy ship up the Atlantic coast and buzzing an American warship. During the first week of February a Russian Su-24 flew within 200 yards of the USS Porter according a defence official. Two other Russian Su-24s came within 300 yards of the ship in a separate incident in addition with an IL-38 fling at unusually low altitude. The action is believed to be testing the new administration, how Trump will resort to

confrontational responses. US officials reported that all four Russian planes were flying without their transponders on, which increased the risk of an accident or miscalculation.

Syria: Turkey-backed rebels' control of al-Bal

■ Turkish-backed rebels battling Islamic State control most part of north Syrian town, al-Bal. Al-Bab, just 25km south of the Turkish border, has been the target of an over three-month assault by Turkey and rebel forces which were resisted by ISIL fighters, who had captured the Aleppo province town in early 2014. The operation also involves Turkish troops, Kurdish fighters, the Syrian army and Russian planes. According to Turkish News Agency Anadolu, fighters from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) group were clearing mines and explosives devices laid by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group after capturing the centre of the flashpoint town. The advance in the city is believed to be slowed down because of ISIL's traps and suicide bombings, some of which had been carried out by 13 years old children. However, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based monitoring group which tracks developments in Syria's conflict claimed that ISIL still controls more than half of al-Bal.



Frans Timmermans thoughts concerning EU's role

■ “Beware the horrible hangover” of nationalism, Frans Timmermans warns, emphasising the values and positive side of the EU in one of his speeches. Undoubtedly, the EU has suffered from several crises, involving economic, migration crises and terrorism. All of these led to insecurity in European people, blaming the EU itself, for not delivering the solution immediately. However, according to the EU leader, young people are instinctively European, and the disagreements concerning the institutions can be solved by incremental reforms in the future. “Young people say they don't like the institutions, which is fine because these are just instruments, but for them Europe is the space in which they live, travel and understand each other,” he said.

Martin Schulz, hardliner on Brexit

■ Martin Schulz, Angela Merkel's biggest possible challenger regarding the German federal elections in September 2017, represents the hardest possible approach towards Brexit. As the president of the European Parliament, he accused David Cameron for delivering such a referendum, which he labelled as the “mutual humiliation” of Britain and the EU. Recently, after Sigmar Gabriel stepped down from leading SPD, he was the new leader elected unanimously. However, as Germany has a parliamentary system, Schulz has to persuade voters to back his party. Theresa May cannot

hope anything good if he is elected, as he expressed “with me there will be no Europe bashing”, taking a hard line on the future negotiations.

Dangerous anti-EU talk of Trump

■ After Brexit, US President Donald Trump encouraged other EU member states to leave the block, which resulted in negative responses in the block. Jean-Claude Juncker expressed his disagreement towards the American Vice President Mike Pence, claiming that this attitude could lead to a new Balkan war. If the EU leaves Bosnia Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, Macedonia, Albania and other countries alone, a new Balkan war could burst out. Juncker has described Trump, as someone who has no idea about Europe, being the first US president in post-war history, which seems to be not interested in European issues.

EU officials sign documents allowing Georgians visa-free EU entry

■ Documents formalising a visa-liberalisation deal with Georgia was signed on March 1, 2017 enabling Georgians to travel visa-free to the EU from March 28. The country having strong connection with Europe for centuries has eagerly waited for the moment overcoming diverse challenges and fulfilling necessary requirements. Georgia's European choice was and is often targeted by Northern neighbour, which has put persistent efforts to increase Moscow's influence following August war in



2008. Officials and diplomats have signed a document on a visa-suspension mechanism, which allows for visa-free regimes to be halted under certain circumstances once they are in place, that has been drafted as a condition for the implementation of visa-liberalisation agreements for non-EU countries. On February 28, the EU decided to move ahead with visa liberalisation for Ukraine as well, but more steps are needed before it can go into effect. The visa-liberalisation deal applies to all EU countries except Britain and Ireland, and also to non-EU Schengen Area countries Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland.

Russia accused of “state terrorism” after former MP shot

■ Ukraine accused Russia of “state terrorism” after a former Russian lawmaker and key witness in a treason case against former leader Viktor Yanukovich was shot dead in a hotel in central Kiev on March 23, 2017. The allegation was denied and called “absurd” by Russia. According to police, former parliamentarian Denis Voronenkov was killed by an assailant who was armed with a pistol and later died in hospital after being shot by Voronenkov's bodyguard. Voronenkov fled to Ukraine last year and was helping the Ukrainian authorities build a treason case against Yanukovich, Ukraine's pro-Russia former president. Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko said the killing “is an act of state terrorism on the part of Russia, which a former leader was forced to leave for political reasons.” Apparently, relations between Kiev

and Moscow are at an all-time low after Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014 and the subsequent outbreak of separatist fighting in Ukraine's eastern Donbass region.

Somali pirates seize oil tanker in first major hijack since 2012

■ On March 14, off the northern coast of Somalia, Somali pirates hijacked an oil tanker owned by the United Arab Emirates, called Aris 13. They kidnapped eight Sri Lankan crew members, while the ship was carrying fuel from Djibuti to Mogadishu. Since 2012, this is accounting to be the first hijacking of a large commercial vessel on the global trade route. According to an official, two dozen men attacked the ship, in an area where weapons are used by smugglers and al-Shabaab members. Somali pirates usually do not kill crew members, unless rescue attempts are delivered.

TPP members look to redesign trade deal without the USA

■ The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) finalised proposal was signed on February 4, 2016, in Auckland, New Zealand, concluding seven years of negotiations. There is an issue with ratification due to US withdrawal from the agreement. The TPP would have included about 40 percent of the world's gross domestic product if not the withdrawal. Talks are under way in Chile, a keen promoter of free trade, to revive the trade deal and forge a new way forwards.





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