

World News Roundup



US Secretary of State John Kerry tours Hazrat Sultan Mosque with Chief Imam Serikbay Orazon (center right), on Nov 2, in Astana. John Kerry begins the third leg of a five nation tour of Central Asia in Kazakhstan, where he will meet Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov, President Nursultan Nazarbayev and the Grand Mufti of the Hazrat Sultan Mosque. (AFP)

Europe

Ciudadanos runs close 2nd: Spanish newcomer party Ciudadanos would come a close second to the ruling People's Party, and would probably be the main kingmaker, if a national election due in December was held now, an opinion poll showed on Sunday.

Ciudadanos, a market-friendly party founded nearly a decade ago in the north-eastern region of Catalonia but which expanded nationally only earlier this year, has been steadily gaining support over recent months on a message of moderate change.

Backing for the party has jumped to 22.5 percent, the Metroscopia survey released by El Pais newspaper showed, putting it ahead of the main opposition socialists and leftist Podemos.

That compares with 16.1 percent before September, when it made big headway in regional elections in Catalonia to become the second biggest group in the assembly there.

The centre-right People's Party of Mariano Rajoy is still seen as likely to win the Dec 20 election, with 23.5 percent of the vote, stable from last month, while the socialists (PSOE) would fall to 21 percent and Podemos would rebound slightly to 17 percent.

The poll was carried out from Oct 26-28, just as Catalan separatists launched their roadmap for independence, which Rajoy has vowed to block because the Spanish constitution does not allow for a region to break away.

Rajoy held talks with the socialist party, Ciudadanos and Podemos earlier this week to gather political support against the secessionist drive.

All four parties want Catalonia to stay in Spain, although Podemos has said it would support a referendum on the matter. (RTRS)

Azeri ruling party wins majority: Azerbaijan's President, Ilham Aliyev, maintained his grip on power in the oil-producing nation after loyalists won most parliamentary seats in an election on Sunday, but the opposition cried foul and observers saw democratic shortcomings.

The ruling Yeni Azerbaijan (New Azerbaijan) Party took 69 of the 125 seats in the single-chamber parliament, central election authorities said, while a host of small parties and independents also loyal to the government took most of the rest.

Aliyev has consolidated his power in the ex-Soviet republic since taking over from his father, Heydar, in 2003, benefiting from revenues from rising oil and gas exports which have delivered improved living standards.

But rights groups accuse the government of curbing freedoms of expression, while the opposition complains of harassment, a lack of access to broadcasting, and draconian restrictions on campaigning.

A 28-member delegation from the Council of Europe's parliamentary assembly (PACE), among about 2,000 foreign observers who monitored the poll, said the election generally met international standards although some observers disagreed.

"The voting process was observed to be adequate and generally in line with international standards," the PACE mission said in a statement. Despite some shortcomings the results expressed the will of the people, it said. (RTRS)

Kosovo ratifies agreement: Kosovo's Parliament has voted overwhelmingly to ratify a stabilization and association agreement with the European Union, considered a milestone for its economic growth.

The 120-seat Parliament voted with 86 votes for the deal signed last week in



People light candles at the parish cemetery, on All Saints Day, in Lomianki near Warsaw, Poland on Nov 1. People are visiting cemeteries to decorate family graves, light candles and pray. (AP)



Poroshenko



Korban

'The start'

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko warned Sunday that the arrest of a millionaire associate of one of the country's most powerful oligarchs was only "the start" of a fight against the corruption plaguing the ex-Soviet country.

Guennadi Korban, 45, a businessman and right-hand man of billionaire Igor Kolomoyski, was arrested Saturday as part of a probe into organised crime and corruption.

"Korban won't be the last," Poroshenko said in a joint interview with three television networks.

"The fight against corruption and to restore order will continue," he said, vowing "no one will enjoy immunity... neither the representatives of the new dispensation nor the representatives of the old regime" — a reference to the pro-Russian regime of ousted former president Viktor Yanukovich.

Korban is being investigated among other things over the reported theft of 40 million hryvnias (1.5 million euros, \$1.7 million) earmarked for Ukrainian soldiers fighting pro-Russian separatists in the east of the country, according to the SBU security service.

Ukraine's army alleges the money was used to finance private militia.

Korban's Ukrop party has blasted his arrest as "political repression" targeting "patriots." (AFP)

Strasbourg, France, that opens the way to eventual full membership in the EU, Kosovo's main trading partner.

The opposition boycotted the voting Monday. It wants the government to renounce deals with Serbia to give more powers to Serb-dominated areas of Kosovo, and with Montenegro on border demarcation.

During the past two months opposition lawmakers have disrupted parliamentary session using tear gas canisters, whistles and eggs, only allowing Monday's vote

Central Asia

US eyes stronger ties

Kerry courts Kazakh leader

ASTANA, Nov 2, (RTRS): Secretary of State John Kerry reaffirmed US interests in Kazakhstan on Monday in talks with veteran leader Nursultan Nazarbayev who has lured huge Western investments to his Central Asian state while keeping it in Moscow's political orbit.

Kerry is touring ex-Soviet Central Asia to underline Washington's continued commitment to the energy-rich region amid a drawdown in US forces in Afghanistan, a more assertive Russia and the emergence of the Islamic State militant threat.

Of the five ex-Soviet Central Asian states, only Kazakhstan, a vast steppe nation of 18 million people with big international investments in its oil and gas sectors, has emerged as stable and prosperous, though it brooks no democratic opposition.

Nazarbayev has ruled Kazakhstan with an iron grip since 1989, two years before the demise of the Soviet Union. He has displayed a knack for complex geopolitical manoeuvring and has built good ties both with neighbouring Russia and China and with the United States and European Union.

"President (Barack) Obama is very appreciative of your leadership on the (nuclear) non-proliferation issue, for countering violent extremism, cooperation vis-a-vis Afghanistan and counter-DAESH (Islamic State)," Kerry told Nazarbayev. "We have a very strong set of security interests."

Nazarbayev was the first leader to renounce nuclear weapons that had been part of the Soviet Union's arsenal.

He has earned further favour with the Obama administration by establishing a nuclear weapons-free zone in Central Asia and advocating further nuclear arms reductions around the world.

However, Washington has concerns over human rights and democracy in Kazakhstan, though Kerry was expected to avoid public criticism and only to raise the concerns in private.

The Obama administration believes Kazakhstan can be a regional role model if it undertakes genuine political reforms, though Nazarbayev — who won re-election in April with more than 90 percent of the vote — has shown little interest in that.

Speaking to students at Nazarbayev University in the Kazakh capital Astana on Monday, Kerry touched on the theme of democracy without naming any specific countries. "Elections matter little if they are not free and fair, with all political parties competing on a level playing field," he said.

Kerry also urged Central Asian governments not to use fears of extremism as an excuse to crack down on all forms of dissent.

"We have to understand that the terrorist presence doesn't give authorities a licence to use violence indiscriminately," Kerry said. "And terrorism is not a legitimate excuse to lock up political opponents, diminish the rights of civil society or pin a false label on activists who are engaged in peaceful dissent."

Nazarbayev justifies his tight hold on power by saying it provides stability in an ethnically diverse country whose population includes Kazakhs,

Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars and ethnic Germans and has averted the shocks that have led to turmoil in some other former Soviet nations.

The Kazakh leader told Kerry he valued strong economic ties with the United States, which he said was the largest foreign investor with about 500 companies operating in the country.

US companies have ploughed some \$21 billion of investments into Kazakhstan since it won independence from Moscow in 1991 and bilateral trade stood at \$2.4 billion in 2014.

"We'd like to continue this cooperation," Nazarbayev said.

Some US officials have expressed concern that Nazarbayev is too close to Russia's President Vladimir Putin, but say they also understand the pressures Nazarbayev faces in dealing with his giant northern neighbour.

A senior official travelling with Kerry said Kazakhstan, like other Central Asian countries, "does not want to have an adversarial or confrontational relationship with Russia, nor would we want them to".

Kerry struck a similarly pragmatic note in his speech when talking about economic cooperation. "Economic integration is not a zero-sum game. To succeed does not mean that somebody has to lose and somebody has to gain," he said. "Trade from the north to the south can support trade from the east and west, linking Eurasia with markets in Europe and China. And the United States fully encourages Central Asian nations to develop the broadest range of partners you can."

The channel has been under pressure since Crimea was annexed by Moscow from Ukraine in March 2014. (AFP)

and the search was ongoing at the offices of ATR in Simferopol, the main city of the peninsula, Budzhurova, who also works as a reporter for AFP, said.

The police actions are related to an "extremism" probe launched against the owner of the channel, Lenur Islyamov, Budzhurova added.

The channel has been under pressure since Crimea was annexed by Moscow from Ukraine in March 2014. (AFP)

Romanians probed for manslaughter

BUCHAREST, Nov 2, (AFP): Three bosses of a nightclub in central Bucharest where a weekend blaze left 30 people dead and nearly 200 injured are under investigation on suspicion of manslaughter, officials said Monday.

The three men have been called in to be "heard as manslaughter suspects" following the disco fire late Friday, the public prosecutor's office said.

Witnesses said fireworks unleashed a blaze at the Colectiv nightclub in a former shoe factory which was followed by a stampede as terrified clubbers scrambled to get out. Authorities said three more badly burned victims succumbed to their injuries Sunday, bringing the death toll to 30.

North Korea

Girl with 7 names

Hyeonseo still feels 'hunted'

UBUD, Indonesia, Nov 2, (RTRS): The girl with seven names is finding it hard these days to contact relatives in Stalinist North Korea on the underground mobile phone link defectors have used for years.

Hyeonseo Lee is also increasingly worried about her personal security since the July publication of the best-selling memoir about her escape from North Korea, "The Girl with Seven Names". Defectors living in South Korea contact relatives in the North through Chinese mobile phones that are smuggled across the border. They communicate through transmission towers on the Chinese side of the border.



Hyeonseo

It's all arranged through brokers on the Chinese side, who also help smuggle money from the defectors to their relatives.

North Korea, however, has been cracking down on this lifeline, using phone signal detectors and interference devices, Lee said in an interview on the sidelines of the Ubud Writers and Readers festival. The signals can reveal the location of the speaker if the conversation lasts much longer than a minute.

Lee arranged for many of her family members to join her in exile after her own escape in 1998, but she still talks to an aunt there.

"Right now the signal is not so good. I can't hear their voice clearly ... And my aunt says after a minute, oh my god, we have to turn off the phone now we're being monitored."

The aunt was sent to a labour camp for a few months last year, accused of trying to escape. "She was reported by her best friend. That's how this regime works," Lee said.

Sending money across the border — or private communications of any kind with the North — is also illegal in South Korea.

The money from defectors goes into North Korea's increasingly established rural markets, which sprouted up during the famine years when the state food distribution system broke down. The markets are thriving hot spots of commerce, where people can buy or barter for things, including smuggled Hollywood and South Korean movies.

Crackdown Despite the occasional crackdown, the government has been unable to shut down the markets and now basically tolerates them, Lee said, despite the fact they have become the thin edge of the wedge for Western influences.

North Koreans have been brainwashed since the country was founded at the end of World War Two into thinking they truly live in a "workers' paradise", she said.

"But the famine came, and then movies from Hollywood and South Korea became available in the black market. From the videos, we realized that South Korea was a heaven. The secret is out and is being shared widely."

"Now the brainwashing is much less (effective), and the loyalty is less. For Kim Jong Un it is much more difficult to rule than his father."

The regime tolerates the markets because they do provide material goods for people who can see from the movies how their neighbours live, she said.

"North Korea is changing, yes. There's more cellphones, more fashion, the markets. But many things have not changed: the public executions, the labour camps, people are still starving. The people who don't know how to make money in the markets, they are the ones starving."

Lee grew up in Hyesan, next to the Chinese border. She had a close family with an array of colourful relatives including "Uncle Opium" who smuggled North Korean heroin into China.

Family life took place beneath the obligatory portraits of North Korea's revered founder Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il, father of the current ruler Kim Jong Un, which hung in every home.

Her father's job in the military meant they were relatively well off. Her world turned upside down when her father was arrested by the secret police. He was later released into a hospital. He had been badly beaten and died soon afterwards. The circumstances remain unclear. Her book chronicles her escape to China at 17 and the hardships that followed.

The book, and her criticisms of the North, have made Lee a target, she said. South Korean intelligence told her in August that North Korea had sent a letter to its embassies abroad about her and warned Lee she could face an abduction attempt.



A woman holds roses while standing outside the Colectiv nightclub during a mournful march joined by thousands in Bucharest, Romania on Nov 1. (AP)