

## THE DEBATE SHOULD IRELAND BUILD MORE DATA CENTRES?

Rosi Leonard, Garry Connolly  
Opinion & Analysis



**“**In the past two years, I have been invited to eight weddings, eight hen parties and now baby showers too. This is driving me crazy, as it has literally taken over my life

**Trish Murphy**  
Health & Family



## CLASS MOVE WHY CHESS IS TAKING OFF IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

**Michelle McBride**  
Education

# Weapons flights over Ireland up two-thirds since 2016

Recent increases coincide with war in Gaza and Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Department refused 1% of exemption requests to fly weapons since 2016

**CONOR GALLAGHER**  
Crime and Security Correspondent

The number of aircraft permitted to bring military weapons and ammunitions through Ireland has hit a 13-year high, with 1,354 flights sanctioned last year.

It represents an increase of 14 per cent on weapons flights in a year and a 67 per cent rise since 2016.

The recent large increase coincides with Israel's invasions of Gaza after Hamas's attacks on October 7th, 2023 with much of Israel's equipment coming from the United States, and Ukraine's defensive war against Russia that began in 2022.

Early statistics for 2025 indicate significantly more exemptions will be granted again this year.

In each of the first two months of this year, 142 flights were permitted to transport "munitions of war". The figures for the first two months of last year were 70 and 106 respectively.

The Department of Transport figures also show there has been a huge increase in Irish-registered aircraft, which are subject to Irish law, carrying munitions of war outside the State. In 2020, just nine such flights were approved by the department. Last year there were 519.

Under Irish law, all aircraft carrying "munitions of war" over Irish airspace must apply for exemptions from the Minister for Transport. Irish-registered aircraft carrying munitions are also required to seek permission.

### Consults

The Department of Transport consults the departments of foreign affairs, justice and defence before granting exemptions. There are various grounds on which exemptions can be refused, including that aircraft are carrying "indiscriminate" weapons, such as cluster bombs and landmines that have a high chance of causing civilian casualties. However, the primary reason for refusal is aviation safety concerns. The Department of Trans-

port data shows exemptions are almost invariably granted when sought. Since 2016, the department has refused just 1 per cent of the 9,848 applications it received.

The number of granted war munitions exemptions has not been this high since 2011, when the US's troop presence in Afghanistan was at its peak.

The Government has previously said military transports carrying troops with their personal weapons made up a large proportion of exemption applications.

### Criticism

The recent increase in munitions of war exemptions has drawn criticism from peace campaigners and Opposition politicians who allege the Government is facilitating Israel's war on Gaza, which has claimed 50,000 lives, most of them civilian, according to the Palestinian health ministry.

Tomorrow, senators Alice-Mary Higgins, Lynn Ruane, Frances Black and Eileen Flynn will bring forward a Bill that "seeks to ensure that munitions of war, weapons and dangerous goods are not being transferred to Israel through Ireland, either directly or indirectly".

"Israel renewed its bombardment of Gaza on March 18th, killing 400 people including 174 children in just one night. It is horrifying to think that the weapons which are destroying so many lives may well have been allowed to pass through Ireland. There can be no more excuses or evasions," Ms Higgins said.

The previous government committed to adopting aspects of an earlier version of the Bill that would strengthen powers to "search, sample and sanction" airlines travelling through or over Ireland.

This followed reports that air carriers were regularly transporting munitions through Irish airspace without government permission.

However, it remains unclear if this new system will come into force. Earlier this month, the Government said "it has not considered this matter to date".



# Le Pen vows to appeal bar on running for election

**JACK POWER**  
Europe Correspondent

French far-right leader Marine Le Pen has vowed to appeal a "politically" motivated court sentence that bars her from standing in France's next presidential election.

The leader of France's far-right movement was convicted of embezzlement for her role in a scheme that siphoned off millions of euro in EU funding to finance the salaries of national party staff.

Ms Le Pen was the front runner heading into France's next presidential election, due to be held in early 2027.

A Paris court yesterday convicted her and several other figures in her anti-immigrant National Rally of financing domestic party activities in France with European Parliament funding meant to pay the salaries of MEPs' assistants.

The criminal court handed the far-right leader a two-year prison sentence, which the judge said she could serve at

home wearing an electronic tag. A further two years was suspended. Ms Le Pen was also ordered to pay a €100,000 fine and was barred from running for public office for five years.

The ban on standing for election is immediate, but the other elements of the sentence take effect only after appeals have been exhausted.

Ms Le Pen said she would appeal the court decision, but it is unclear whether this process will conclude before the presidential election.

Currently leading opinion polls, Le Pen had seen the 2027 presidential vote as the moment the far right might finally upend the French political system. President Emmanuel Macron cannot stand for a third consecutive term.

Ms Le Pen has unsuccessfully run for the presidency three times since taking over what was then the National Front from her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in 2011. The party was renamed National Rally in 2018.

Speaking yesterday evening,

Ms Le Pen criticised the "political" motives behind the court case. She told French broadcaster TFI her appeal would be instigated "as soon as possible" and she would fight the efforts to "eliminate" her from the presidential race.

Right-wing supporters of Ms Le Pen in Europe and the US condemned the court's decision. Elon Musk, an ally of US president Donald Trump, said on X: "When the radical left can't win via democratic vote, they abuse the legal system to

**French far-right leader Marine Le Pen in Paris yesterday.** PHOTOGRAPH: TOM NICHOLSON/GETTY IMAGES

jail their opponents." Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orban, posted: "Je suis Marine!" Jordan Bardella, her 29-year-old protégé, is seen as a likely successor to Ms Le Pen.

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## Third-level fees set to increase as end to cost-of-living supports mooted

**PAT LEAHEY**  
Political Editor

More than half of all third-level students could face an increase in college fees this year as cost-of-living supports are reduced or scrapped.

The €3,000 annual "student contribution" has been lowered to €2,000 for the past three years. But Minister for Higher Education James Lawless has signalled the €1,000 reduction could be cut this year, meaning an effective increase in fees for many students.

About half of students receive State grants to cover the student contribution completely or in part. The rest, however, will be subject to any effective increases in the charge if the reduction is ended or curtailed.

In the Dáil last week, the Minister stressed the "temporary" nature of the €1,000 reduction, adding that "these measures were in response to particular

cost-of-living challenges arising at the time and were not intended to be a permanent solution". "It was a temporary reduction. That is the point," he told TDs.

It is understood that while no decisions have been made and none will be made until the budgetary process gets under way later this year, Mr Lawless is minded to consider an effective increase to the fee and using the money saved to promote access to higher education.

In a statement to The Irish Times, Mr Lawless said the programme for government committed to reducing the student contribution fee "in a financially sustainable way".

"I am very keen to address the cost-of-education challenges facing students and I am exploring the ways in which that can be achieved, of which subsidising the fee is one, but there are other options also," he said.

"Other supports may include changes via the Susi [Student

Universal Support Ireland third-level grants] system, identifying and addressing anomalies and targeting measures at those most in need. It is possible some combination of measures will be deployed."

Mr Lawless said he would host a "cost of education" event this week with stakeholders, including students and colleges.

"Following those discussions I will publish an options paper which details costs, including opportunity costs, of the various possible measures to support access to education. Reductions to the student fee will play a part in that process," the Fianna Fáil minister said.

The issue is likely to be a flashpoint with Fine Gael. Party leader Simon Harris introduced the €1,000 reduction during the last government when he was higher education minister. During last year's general election campaign he pledged to abolish fees.



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### Weather

Dry and mostly sunny with highs of 11-18 degrees in a moderate to fresh southeast wind. Warmest in the west.

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