

# Europe and Central Asia

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## Balkans

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➔ **Kosovo** **Opposition Vetëvendosje party won landslide victory in snap parliamentary elections, while U.S. renewed calls for Kosovo-Serbia mutual recognition.** Govt 14 Feb held snap parliamentary elections resulting in landslide victory of Vetëvendosje party with 48% of votes, while Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) came in second with 17%; acting leader and PM candidate for PDK Enver Hoxhaj 15 Jan congratulated Vetëvendosje on results. Vetëvendosje will control at least 53 of 120 seats in parliament. Germany and France 22 Feb congratulated Vetëvendosje on victory and called for swift govt formation. Meanwhile, U.S. President Biden 7 Feb urged Serbian President Vučić to reach “comprehensive normalisation agreement with Kosovo centred on mutual recognition”; in response, Vučić same day said Serbia is ready to continue dialogue but will not recognise Kosovo. European Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee 23 Feb endorsed Committee report which called on member states to recognise Kosovo in order to contribute to normalisation of Kosovo-Serbia relations; Serbian FM Nikola Selaković next day condemned report as “gross violation of the existing practice of Brussels”. FM Meliza Haradinaj Stublla and Israeli FM Gabi Ashkenazi 1 Feb signed joint declaration establishing diplomatic ties; next day, Selaković expressed dismay over Israeli recognition of Kosovo, and EU said decision diverges from its position on Jerusalem. Lawyers representing former President Thaçi and three other former Kosovo Liberation Army guerrilla leaders at war crimes trial at Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague 16 Feb accused prosecution of hampering investigations by not properly disclosing evidence.

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## Caucasus

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➔ **Armenia** **Amid worsening political crisis, standoff emerged between PM Pashinyan and military as pressure mounted on PM to resign.** Pashinyan 10 Feb told parliament that govt would continue to work in line with roadmap presented in Nov 2020 as opposition rejected his offer to hold snap parliamentary elections in 2021. Opposition insists PM must first resign. Several thousand 22 Feb marched in capital Yerevan, demanding Pashinyan’s resignation over handling of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in Sept-Nov 2020; protests continued until end of month. In sign of worsening political crisis, Pashinyan 25 Feb dismissed top military leadership, accusing it of attempted coup after top brass called for his resignation; dismissal prompted thousands same day to protest in Yerevan in support of either army or Pashinyan; President Sarkissian 27 Feb refused to dismiss head of armed forces. Meanwhile, govt and Azerbaijan continued dialogue and cooperation. Notably, authorities 9 Feb swapped prisoners of war and post-ceasefire detainees with mediation of Russian peacekeepers (see Nagorno-Karabakh). Russian President Putin 17 Feb held phone conversation with Pashinyan, reportedly to discuss practical aspects of implementation of Nov ceasefire agreement, as well as Moscow agreements signed in Jan.

➔ **Azerbaijan Govt focused efforts on demining Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict zone and continued de-escalation process in line with ceasefire.** President Aliyev 2 Feb signed decree renaming and restructuring Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action as Mine Action Agency of Republic of Azerbaijan, appointing new director, and making it public legal entity able to receive financial assistance from foreign donors. Turkish Defence Ministry 4 Feb said 20 Turkish-made Mechanic Mine Clearance Machines had been sent to Azerbaijan to support demining efforts in NK conflict zone. Delegation from Azerbaijani Emergencies Ministry 4 Feb visited Russia's capital Moscow, where it held negotiations on cooperation in clearing Azerbaijani territories of mines and training of Azerbaijani mine specialists by Russian colleagues. Govt and Armenia continued dialogue and cooperation. Notably, authorities 9 Feb swapped prisoners of war and post-ceasefire detainees with mediation of Russian peacekeepers (see Nagorno-Karabakh).

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan) Russian-brokered Nov ceasefire held in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict zone as Armenia and Azerbaijan continued dialogue and swapped prisoners.** In NK conflict zone, situation remained stable throughout Feb. Russian border guards 13 Feb set up additional post near Agarak village in Armenia's Syunik region (which now borders Azerbaijan) after Azerbaijani troops reportedly fired sporadically in vicinity. Azerbaijani side reported soldier and civilian fatalities in mine explosions in different parts of conflict zone throughout Feb; according to Office of Azerbaijani Prosecutor-General, total of 14 people killed and 60 injured as of 9 Feb since Nov ceasefire agreement. Azerbaijan and Armenia continued cooperation: parties 9 Feb swapped prisoners of war and post-ceasefire detainees with mediation of Russian peacekeepers, with one Azerbaijani prisoner returned to Baku and five Armenian detainees to Yerevan. Armenian side continued search for bodies of its soldiers and civilians killed during war in NK territories controlled by Azerbaijan until mid-month. During first-ever meeting of Armenian, Azerbaijani and de facto NK officials, sides 12 Feb discussed cooperation on missing persons; with International Committee of Red Cross mediation, Armenian side 12 Feb handed over remains of 17 bodies missing during war in NK in early 1990s; Azerbaijani side 16 Feb transferred remains of 106 bodies buried in territories under its control during recent war. Trilateral working group co-chaired by deputy PMs of Armenia, Russia and Azerbaijan 6, 12 and 27 Feb met and continued work on resuming use of transport links between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia in line with 11 Jan Moscow statement. Minsk Group Co-Chairs 16 Feb held separate online meetings with Armenian FM Ara Aivazian and Azerbaijani FM Jeyhun Bayramov, during which they discussed implementation of trilateral agreements on NK. Russian President Putin 17 Feb held phone conversation with Armenian PM Pashinyan reportedly to discuss practical aspects of Nov ceasefire agreement as well as Jan Moscow agreements. Armenia 1 Feb submitted interstate application against Azerbaijan at European Court of Human Rights for violations during 2020 NK war; move follows interstate application against Armenia filed by Azerbaijan in ECHR in Jan.

➔ **Georgia PM Gakharia resigned following court's decision to arrest opposition leader.** Tbilisi city court 17 Feb sentenced to pre-trial detention leader of main opposition party United National Movement (UNM) Nika Melia for his role in calling on protesters to take over parliament during June 2019 unrest; Melia

previously sentenced to home arrest in July 2019; opposition leaders and prominent politicians same day gathered in support of Melia at UNM headquarters. PM Giorgi Gakharia 18 Feb resigned, citing his opposition to court's decision that was at odds with position of ruling Georgian Dream party, which supported court's decision. Georgian Dream same day nominated former Defence Minister Irakli Garibashvili as new PM. Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe chairperson-in-office and Swedish FM Ann Linde 16 Feb visited Georgia for meetings with leadership and to discuss situation in breakaway regions. Restrictions on crossing from Abkhazia to Georgia-controlled territory 11 Feb eased for elders, pensioners and people with special needs; crossings had mostly remained closed, due to COVID-19, for almost a year.

➔ **Russia/North Caucasus** **Caucasus Protest organisers supporting opposition politician Alexei Navalny announced pause, and authorities arrested suspected Islamist militants reportedly planning attacks in North Caucasus.** Several hundred protesters 2 Feb marched in capital Moscow and St. Petersburg city in response to Moscow court's decision same day to replace Navalny's suspended sentence with two years and eight months imprisonment. Police immediately began to disperse crowds using force and detained 1,463 people, according to independent NGO OVD-info; Navalny supporters 14 Feb took to streets with candles and flashlights in solidarity with politician. Amid police crackdown on protests, Navalny's Chief of Staff Leonid Volkov 4 Feb announced that major protests will be postponed until at least Spring and attention diverted to Sept 2021 parliamentary elections. European Court of Human Rights 16 Feb demanded that Russian authorities release Navalny; in response, head of Russian Ministry of Justice Konstantin Chuychenko next day said demand was "unreasonable and unlawful"; court 20 Feb rejected Navalny's appeal. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell 4-6 Feb visited Moscow, where he held talks with Russian FM Sergei Lavrov; during visit, Russian MFA 5 Feb announced that it had expelled members of diplomatic missions of Germany, Sweden and Poland for participating in unauthorised protests held on 23 Jan. Meanwhile, Federal Security Service 17 Feb reported detention of 19 individuals in Karachay-Cherkessia, Rostov Oblast, Kuban and Crimea who were allegedly plotting attacks in North Caucasus, recruiting new supporters and promoting ideology of proscribed Islamist group At-Takfir wal-Hijra. Authorities 18 Feb conducted special operation in Voronezh in south west to suppress activities of supporters of Ukrainian youth group accused of promoting neo-Nazi propaganda and provoking interethnic conflict.

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## **Eastern Europe**

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➔ **Belarus** **While protests over disputed Aug presidential elections continued, opposition leader raised challenge of sustaining momentum amid crackdown.** Protests took place on 7, 14, 19, 20, 21 and 28 Feb calling for President Lukashenka's resignation; police detained dozens. In Brest city, protesters 14 Feb formed human chains holding national flag and chanting "We are together, and we are strong". Protesters 21 Feb took to streets in capital Minsk in solidarity with detained journalists and political prisoners. Demonstrations 7 Feb held in Russia, Ukraine, Italy, Germany and Estonia marked international day of solidarity with Belarus. Opposition leader Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya 19 Feb noted that "we

have lost the streets, [and] we have no opportunity to fight the violence of the regime”, but she raised prospect of greater organisation in Spring. NGO Human Rights Watch 17 Feb stated that law enforcement previous day conducted nationwide raids targeting human rights defenders and activists, searching their homes and offices and detaining at least 40. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet 25 Feb submitted report to UN Human Rights Council describing “human rights crisis of unprecedented dimension” in country; court same day jailed protester Aliaksandr Kardziukou for ten years for attempted murder of police officer and found protester Henadz Shutau, who was killed by security forces in Aug 2020, guilty of disobeying police order.

↓ **Ukraine Casualties in Donbas conflict zone surged while govt sanctioned several Kremlin-friendly public figures.** July ceasefire in Donbas – longest-lasting ceasefire in east to date – faced growing strains amid significant uptick in casualties: Ukrainian army during Feb suffered up to a dozen combat-related deaths while Russian-backed forces lost at least eight fighters, per social media reports. Landmines 14 Feb killed three Ukrainian servicemen. In first civilian casualties from live fire since July, shelling 23 Feb killed one civilian and 3, 22 Feb injured two, according to Ukrainian and separatist media reports. Ukrainian commander 20 Feb reported extensive use of heavy weapons in Donbas by so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) forces; DPR-friendly sources, however, suggested Ukrainian forces fired artillery first. Other incidents contributed to deteriorating security in Donbas: Ukrainian security personnel 9 Feb fatally shot man attempting to cross front-line checkpoint after he ignored orders to stop car; car bombing 15 Feb injured DPR battalion commander and his daughter, for which de facto authorities blamed Ukrainian security services. Ukraine’s chief envoy to Minsk Trilateral Contact Group Leonid Kravchuk 8 Feb said armed groups’ aggression warranted return fire. President Zelenskyy 11 Feb brought G7 ambassadors to visit military positions at frontline and spoke of July ceasefire’s success. In capital Kyiv, hundreds 23 Feb protested Odesa court’s decision to sentence activist Serhiy Sternenko to seven years in prison for alleged kidnapping, leaving 27 law enforcement officers injured and 24 people arrested. Meanwhile, National Security and Defense Council 19 Feb announced sanctions on Kremlin-friendly politician Viktor Medvedchuk and his wife; Kremlin press secretary 20 Feb responded that such action fuels concern that Kyiv “will consider it possible to solve the situation in [Donbas] by military means”. Kyiv 2 Feb sanctioned Medvedchuk associate Taras Kozak, accusing him of involvement in Russia-linked coal smuggling scheme and stripping licenses from three television channels he owns. U.S. Sec of State Antony Blinken and Ukrainian FM Dmytro Kuleba 2 Feb held first call during which Blinken pledged “robust U.S. economic and military assistance”; Ukrainian MFA same day said Blinken promised lethal weaponry.

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## **Western Europe/Mediterranean**

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➔ **Cyprus UN scheduled informal meeting after almost four-year hiatus while proposal to share prospective hydrocarbon revenues gained traction.** UN 24 Feb announced five-plus-one talks – which includes UN, leaders of two Cypriot communities, and three guarantor powers Greece, Turkey and UK – to be held 27-29 April “to determine whether common ground exists for the parties

to negotiate a lasting solution”; talks will be held for first time since negotiations collapsed in 2017. Ahead of announcement, Turkish and Turkish Cypriot officials throughout Feb continued to emphasise preference for solution based on equal sovereignty of two states, while Greek and Greek Cypriot sides continued to voice support for return to settlement talks for bi-zonal, bi-communal federation. Meanwhile, Turkish FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu 2 Feb visited “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” and, after meeting with Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar, declared “if in Cyprus we manage to find a way to share revenues, then we will have solved 50% of the eastern Mediterranean issue”; proposal followed Jan letter from Republic of Cyprus President Anastasiades to UN Sec-Gen Antonio Guterres that reportedly proposed escrow account to share prospective hydrocarbon revenues between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots.

➔ **Eastern Mediterranean Turkey and Greece prepared for next round of talks as fiery rhetoric and local maritime tensions continued.** Following meeting between Turkish and Greek delegations 25 Jan in Turkish city Istanbul for “exploratory talks” on their disagreements in Aegean, after which both sides initially issued constructive statements, Greek PM Mitsotakis 4 Feb said talks likely to resume by end of Feb or early March ahead of EU summit scheduled for 25 March; Mitsotakis added “Turkey has to be consistent in terms of its behaviour, this cannot just be a decoy to avoid the discussion [around sanctions] at the EU council in March”. Harsh rhetoric and tensions between sides continued throughout Feb. During 8 Feb visit to Republic of Cyprus, Mitsotakis said that “end of the Turkish occupation and finding a viable solution [for Cyprus] are top priorities of Greek foreign policy”. Turkish President Erdoğan 10 Feb responded, “How can we continue our talks?” after “Mitsotakis targeted us once again”, and warned Athens that it “will come to know the crazy Turks” if its PM continued such language. Turkish Foreign Ministry 11 Feb strongly condemned Friendship Forum held same day in Greek capital Athens attended by Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, France and United Arab Emirates, claiming it was another sign of “hostility toward Turkey”. Ankara 15 Feb announced navigation advisory on hydrographic surveys held 18 Feb-2 March in international waters in central Aegean; Athens 21 Feb announced advisory announcing firing exercise close to Turkey’s announced survey area. Turkey 23 Feb said four Greek F-16s harassed Turkish research vessel near Aegean island of Limnos in international waters, which Greece denied. Separately, Turkish and Greek military officials 6 Feb met for ninth round of technical deconfliction talks under auspices of North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

➔ **Northern Ireland (UK) Controversial Northern Ireland Protocol faced criticism amid warnings from Unionist leaders of potential return to violence.** Amid growing disquiet surrounding Northern Ireland Protocol – provision of UK-EU “Brexit” agreement in effect since 1 Jan 2020 that creates regulatory border in Irish Sea – former Northern Ireland First Minister and co-architect of 1998 Good Friday Agreement David Trimble 20 Feb warned that “there is real potential for those who have engaged in past violence to take action again into their own hands” if protocol is allowed to stand; Trimble criticised protocol, saying it means “Northern Ireland is no longer fully part of the UK”. First Minister Arlene Foster 25 Feb met with Loyalist Community Council (LCC), organisation representing loyalist paramilitary groups; LCC chairman David Campbell 3 Feb said it may be necessary for loyalists “to fight physically to maintain our freedoms within

the UK.” Chief Constable Simon Byrne 4 Feb warned of “increasingly febrile” rhetoric around protocol.

➔ **Turkey Ankara continued with military operations against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in northern Iraq and south-eastern Turkey while tensions resurfaced with U.S.** Military continued operations against PKK in Turkey’s south east and intensified operations against PKK in northern Iraq. In first ground offensive targeting PKK inside northern Iraq since Sept 2020, security forces 10 Feb commenced operation to end PKK’s presence in northern Iraq’s Gara Mountains area in Duhok province, ostensibly also aimed at rescuing 13 Turkish hostages held by PKK since 2015-2016; clashes with PKK 11 Feb killed three special forces personnel. Authorities 13 Feb announced deaths of all hostages as Ankara and PKK blamed each other. Operation ignited fiery domestic debate in immediate aftermath; opposition called on govt to take responsibility. Meanwhile, govt efforts to criminalise pro-Kurdish opposition Peoples’ Democratic Party persisted; police detained more than 900 members or affiliates of Kurdish political movement throughout Feb. Security forces continued operations against Islamic State (ISIS) operatives; police detained over 70 individuals for alleged ISIS links. Meanwhile, protests held throughout Feb at Boğazici University in Istanbul city against appointment of Melih Bulu as rector, with demonstrations spreading to universities in Izmir city and capital Ankara; over 300 detained by end of Feb, including individuals accused of belonging to terrorist groups; U.S. State Dept 4 Feb expressed concern about detentions of demonstrators and condemned Turkish officials’ anti-LGBTI rhetoric surrounding protests. Relations with U.S. further strained after 54 U.S. senators 10 Feb signed letter urging President Biden to impose severe sanctions upon Ankara for its assertive foreign policy, targeting of U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria, acquisition of Russian S-400 missile defence system, and worsening human rights and democracy record. Turkish Foreign Ministry 15 Feb summoned U.S. ambassador to protest State Dept’s statement previous day that apparently questioned PKK’s role in death of 13 Turkish hostages in operation in northern Iraq; U.S. Sec of State Antony Blinken same day backtracked, confirming view that “PKK terrorists bear responsibility”.

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## Central Asia

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➔ **Kazakhstan Opposition groups staged protest calling for reform and release of political prisoners.** Following 11 Feb EU Parliament resolution citing “worrying deterioration in general situation of human rights and crackdown on civil society organisations”, opposition groups 28 Feb held demonstrations in several cities including Aqtobe, Oral, Almaty and capital Nur-Sultan calling for political reforms and release of political prisoners; authorities detained at least 50 protesters in Almaty city.

➔ **Kyrgyzstan Parliament approved new streamlined govt and unveiled draft constitution, while border incidents triggered small-scale rallies in capital Bishkek and south.** Following President Japarov’s election victory in Jan, parliament 3 Feb approved new govt with Ulugbek Maripov serving as PM; Japarov previous day explained “we have shed everything that was excess to requirement. All that is left are 12 ministries.” Govt 9 Feb published draft of new

constitution, which reduces members of parliament from 120 to 90, among other provisions; Japarov indicated constitutional referendum could be held in April. Japarov 24 Feb visited Russia's capital Moscow on first foreign tour as president. Around 30 residents from southern Batken and Jalal-Abad regions 15 Feb rallied in Bishkek to call on govt to resolve border issues with neighbouring countries; previously, around 50 villagers 12 Feb rallied in village in Batken region, claiming Tajik border guards had taken control of pasture earlier in month; separately, locals in Jalal-Abad region 12 Feb met border guard representative amid accusations that Uzbekistan had installed border fence that cut off access to grazing lands. National security chief Kamchybek Tashiev 18 Feb visited Batken region; Tashiev said border talks with Tajik officials would take place in first half of March and with Uzbek officials in second half, and govt intends to demarcate 150km of state border this year. Meanwhile, hundreds of anti-corruption protesters 14 Feb rallied in Bishkek to demand that authorities take measures against widespread corruption. State Committee for National Security 10 Feb announced detention of top Muslim cleric, Grand Mufti Maksatbek Hajji Toktomushev, for alleged misuse of funds; dozens of Toktomushev's supporters 11 Feb rallied in Bishkek to demand his release. Transport minister 18 Feb met Russian counterpart to discuss resumption of regular flights between countries that were largely halted due to COVID-19.

➔ **Tajikistan Security chief visited Afghan capital Kabul to discuss border security and Afghan peace talks.** Head of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation Abdullah Abdullah 14 Feb announced he met with head of Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security Saimumin Yatimov in Afghan capital Kabul to discuss peace efforts and security situation; Abdullah's aide same day said Tajik authorities are concerned about "uncertainty in the ongoing Afghan peace talks, the continuation of violence in Afghanistan, the activation of terrorist groups in Afghanistan's north, and the growing illegal drugs smuggling via the Afghan-Tajik border". Earlier in month, Tajik and Russian govt officials 8-9 Feb convened in Russia's capital Moscow and agreed "measures to expand Tajik-Russian economic ties and industrial cooperation" while Tajik officials requested that Moscow consider resuming air traffic between two countries, which was largely halted due to COVID-19. World Bank 14 Feb approved \$8.63 mn for procurement and delivery of COVID-19 vaccines.

➔ **Uzbekistan Govt brought forward 2021 presidential election while arrest of blogger prompted international criticism.** President Mirziyoev 8 Feb signed into law bill, proposed by parliament in Jan, that rescheduled presidential, parliamentary and local elections, formerly held every five years on first Sunday of last ten days in December, to first Sunday of last ten days in October; move implies next polls now scheduled on 24 Oct 2021. NGO Human Rights Watch 12 Feb condemned 30 Jan arrest of video blogger Otabek Sattoriy, calling extortion case against him "dubious", said Sattoriy's coverage of sensitive issues put him in "local authorities' crosshairs"; UK ambassador 5 Feb said if no credible evidence presented, Sattoriy's case is "concerning" and "undermines media freedom", while UN resident coordinator in Uzbekistan 10 Feb said in a tweet UN "welcomes the call for fair & impartial application of the law in respect to this case".