

Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

➔ **Kosovo Acting President dissolved parliament and announced snap elections, which Central Election Commission banned former PM Kurti from running in.** Following Constitutional Court ruling in Dec that PM Hoti's govt was illegitimate, acting President Vjosa Osmani 6 Jan dissolved parliament and announced snap parliamentary elections scheduled for 14 Feb. Former PM and leader of Vetëvendosje party Kurti and Osmani 14 Jan confirmed they would run together as part of Vetëvendosje's electoral list. In controversial decision, electoral commission 20 Jan banned Kurti and 46 other candidates from running, citing criminal convictions in last three years (Kurti was handed suspended sentence in Jan 2018 for throwing tear gas in parliament). Vetëvendosje, Alliance for Future of Kosovo and four smaller parties subsequently appealed commission's decision; in response, outgoing PM Hoti 22 Jan said parties had obligation to respect ban, while Osmani 24 Jan urged commission to act impartially otherwise she would "be obliged to take all measures to protect the integrity" of commission and electoral process. Meanwhile, Osmani 11-12 Jan travelled to Brussels and met with EU Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, European Parliament Speaker David Sassoli and EU Special Representative for Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue Miroslav Lajčák; during meetings, Osmani emphasised that Kosovo had fulfilled all formal requirements for visa liberalisation and encouraged EU "to be more vocal in relations with Serbia ... to implement the agreement signed in Brussels".

Caucasus

➔ **Armenia Authorities attended Russian-sponsored talks with Azerbaijan on steps to further implement Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire.** PM Pashinyan 11 Jan met Russian President Putin and Azerbaijani President Aliyev in Russia's capital Moscow for Russian-initiated trilateral talks following deadly Autumn 2020 escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict zone; talks – which build on ninth point of Nov ceasefire relating to opening of all regional economic and transport links between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic through Armenia – concluded with signing of joint statement on steps to develop economic ties and infrastructure projects (see Nagorno-Karabakh). Meanwhile, after Pashinyan late-Dec invited all political forces for consultations on early parliamentary elections in 2021, ruling My Step party initiated internal consultations to plan snap elections. Former President Robert Kocharyan 27 Jan stated his interest to run in elections to take prime ministerial seat. French President Emmanuel Macron 7 Jan held call with Pashinyan to present France's plans to assist country with humanitarian aid and reiterated commitment to find political solution for region. Turkish FM Çavuşoğlu 7 Jan said Turkey may be open to normalise relations with Armenia. Azerbaijan 15 Jan filed case against Armenia with European Court of Human Rights for human rights violations during recent conflict and in past 30

years; Armenia 16 Jan announced intention to file similar complaint against Azerbaijan with European Court of Human Rights.

➔ **Azerbaijan Authorities attended Russian-sponsored talks with Armenia on steps to further implement Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire.**

President Aliyev 11 Jan met Russian President Putin and Armenian PM Pashinyan in Russia's capital Moscow for Russian-initiated trilateral talks following deadly Autumn 2020 escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict zone; talks – which build on ninth point of Nov ceasefire relating to opening of all regional economic and transport links between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic through Armenia - concluded with signing of joint statement on steps to develop economic ties and infrastructure projects (see Nagorno-Karabakh). Aliyev 5 Jan announced plans to build international airport in Fizuli district to enable foreign visitors to visit Shusha, town in Nagorno-Karabakh, and 15 Jan visited town. Govt 15 Jan filed case against Armenia with European Court of Human Rights for human rights violations during recent conflict and in past 30 years; Armenia 16 Jan announced intention to file similar complaint against Azerbaijan with European Court of Human Rights.

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh Ceasefire continued to hold, and Russia hosted Azerbaijan and Armenia for trilateral talks to consolidate Nov 2020 agreement and develop economic ties in region.**

Russian-brokered Nov ceasefire largely held despite occasional incidents mainly near towns of Stepanakert and Shusha. Armenia 13 Jan reported one soldier injured in shooting; Baku denied incident. Armenia and Azerbaijan reported soldiers and civilians killed in mine explosions in different parts of conflict zone throughout month. Russian President Putin, Armenian PM Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Aliyev 11 Jan met in Russia's capital Moscow for Russian-initiated trilateral talks. Talks concluded with signing of joint statement on steps to develop economic ties and infrastructure projects – building on ninth point of ceasefire agreement relating to opening of all regional economic and transport links between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic through Armenia. Statement indicated that working group will be set up to help unblock transport and communication lines between Azerbaijan and Armenia; group 30 Jan held first meeting to focus on key tasks, with rail and road links as priorities. Armenian, Azerbaijan and Russian representatives 30 Jan agreed to set up three other subgroups on transport issue during meeting held in Moscow. Pashinyan 11 Jan noted that exchange of prisoners of war and detained civilians – which he described as most sensitive issue – excluded from joint statement. Previously, Armenian MFA 9 Jan condemned Baku's decision to prosecute Armenian soldiers detained during war, accused Azerbaijan of refusing to comply with eighth point of ceasefire agreement mandating parties to exchange all prisoners and casualties; Azerbaijan MFA same day responded that Armenian soldiers were sent to Azerbaijan after ceasefire so they are not considered prisoners of war. Aliyev's aide 22 Jan said exchange of prisoners of war will continue. Russia 28 Jan facilitated exchange of five Armenian prisoners of war with one Azerbaijani detainee. After Armenian FM Ara Aivazian 5 Jan visited Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) main city Stepanakert, which sparked complaints in Azerbaijani social media and political groups, Russian FM Sergey Lavrov 18 Jan reaffirmed right to free travel between Armenia and NK, urged Armenian officials to avoid politicised statements when visiting Stepanakert.

➔ **Georgia Opposition parties largely continued to boycott parliament, while protests persisted in de facto South Ossetia over death in police custody.** Amid opposition boycott of parliament following disputed late Oct election, four members of opposition Alliance of Patriots 5 Jan quit opposition party and took seats in parliament in line with calls from ruling Georgian Dream party; two members of opposition Citizens Party 29 Jan also took seats, while other opposition members continued boycott throughout month. Georgian Dream 11 Jan offered to establish independent commission, which would also include foreign diplomats as well as local and international NGOs, to recount remaining ballots from 2020 elections; main opposition parties 26 Jan called on Georgian Dream to return to talks; according to law, mandates of MPs will be cancelled unless all those elected take seats by end of Jan. Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgian Dream founder, 11 Jan announced that he quit party chairmanship and politics “for good”. In breakaway South Ossetia, small-scale protests demanding resignation of de facto Prosecutor General Uruzmag Dzhagayev and justice for local man reportedly beaten to death in police custody in late Aug continued; protests over lack of investigation, which started early Dec, held throughout month in main square of regional capital Tskhinvali in front of governmental headquarters. Many local parliamentarians also continued boycott of parliamentary sessions to protest lack of investigation into death in custody; boycott, which started in Sept, left numerous senior de facto govt positions vacant due to lack of functioning parliament able to conduct approvals of govt nominations. Five former South Ossetia senior officials, including two ex-presidents, 14 Jan proposed mediation between de facto South Ossetia president and protesters. Meanwhile, de facto entity Abkhazia suffered stark increase in COVID-19 deaths throughout month, bringing the total to 11,301 confirmed cases, with 161 deaths 26 Jan. European Court of Human Rights 21 Jan declared Russia in breach of European Convention on Human Rights due to “administrative practice” revealing evidence of civilians being killed and houses looted in South Ossetia and its buffer zones in period after 2008 ceasefire.

➔ **Russia/North Caucasus Detention of opposition politician Alexei Navalny sparked nationwide protests, which authorities promptly repressed.** Authorities 17 Jan arrested opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who had just returned from Germany where he sought medical treatment after being poisoned in Aug 2020 with lethal nerve agent; next day sentenced him to 30 days in custody for allegedly violating his probation as part of suspended sentence he received in 2014 for embezzlement. Subsequently, tens of thousands 23 Jan took to streets in over 190 cities from Vladivostok in Far East to capital Moscow to rally in support of Navalny. President Putin 25 Jan condemned mass protests, calling them “illegal and dangerous”; independent NGO OVD-Info 26 Jan revealed over 3,800 protesters arrested and detained, including over 1,500 in Moscow. Tens of thousands of protesters 31 Jan assembled again in at least 85 cities; OVD-Info same day revealed police detained 5,000. Navalny’s arrest prompted international response as EU, UK, U.S. and Germany 17-18 Jan condemned his detention and demanded his immediate release; FMs of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, UK and U.S. (G7) 26 Jan also called for Navalny’s release and condemned “violent suppression by police forces” of protests. Meanwhile in North Caucasus, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov 20 Jan confirmed that security forces killed Islamic State-affiliated warlord Aslan Byutukayev, involved in preparation of terrorist attacks across country, and five members of his armed group in counter-insurgency operation; Kadyrov

subsequently declared that “insurgency in Chechen Republic is completely finished”. In Far East, demonstrations 2, 16, 23 and 31 Jan continued in Khabarovsk city to protest July arrest of former local governor and member of populist Liberal Democratic Party Sergei Furgal; police detained several protesters.

Eastern Europe

➔ **Belarus Mass protests over disputed Aug presidential elections continued.** Hundreds of people 3, 10, 17, 23 and 31 Jan protested in capital Minsk, calling for President Lukashenka’s resignation; police detained dozens. Notably, police 23 Jan arrested around 100 people in Minsk who formed human chains in demonstrations demanding free and fair elections. Prosecutor General Andrey Shved 4 Jan announced proposed changes to legislation to strengthen prosecution powers to ensure nobody “who had endangered the public order ... would get away from strict responsibility”. Authorities 6 Jan extended pre-trial detention of opposition leader Maryya Kalesnikava until 8 March; Kalesnikava was arrested in Sept 2020 and charged with calling for action aimed at damaging national security. Belarus opposition leader Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya 9 Jan met with Lithuanian FM Gabrielius Landsbergis to secure support for opposition; Tsikhanouskaya 18 Jan announced that she requested Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s (OSCE) support to secure her safety when she returns to Belarus and called for OSCE-facilitated talks between EU, Lukashenka and opposition to resolve crisis.

➔ **Ukraine Ceasefire in Donbas area held tenuously, while diplomatic engagement to address conflict situation in east continued.** In Donbas conflict zone, combat deaths rose compared to previous month: casualties and shelling were concentrated east of Mariupol (southern Donetsk oblast), north west of Donetsk city and near Popasna-Zolote (Luhansk oblast). Sniper fire 11 Jan and shelling 21 Jan killed two Ukrainian soldiers; four were injured in combat on 14, 15, 25, 26 Jan. Russia-backed separatists reported four combat-related deaths on 2, 14, 21 and 23 Jan. One civilian 3 Jan sustained shrapnel injury while trying to dismantle explosive in Blahodatne in govt-controlled Donetsk region. On diplomatic front, advisers of Normandy Four (France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia) 12 Jan attended Berlin meeting, which Kyiv described as “complicated but constructive”, and sides agreed to work “on new approaches to conflict road map” in Trilateral Conflict Group (TCG). “Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics” 19 Jan invited their own “civil representatives” to join TCG political subgroup meeting, mirroring Kyiv’s move in June 2020 and prompting Kyiv’s subsequent complaints. At Berlin meeting, sides failed to agree on mechanisms to safeguard fragile ceasefire; sides agreed to restore gas supplies to govt-controlled front-line town of Maryinka for first time since July 2014 but separatists subsequently withdrew safety guarantees, accusing Kyiv of shelling them and saying front-line infrastructure repairs would depend on Kyiv’s willingness to negotiate with them directly. Meanwhile, two out of seven civilian cross-line checkpoints were operational during month: one in Donetsk and one in Luhansk. De facto republics kept their corresponding sides of two new checkpoints near Luhansk region’s towns of Zolote and Shchasti closed; sides still discussing future openings. Russia Today chief editor Margarita Simonyan 28 Jan gave speech in Donetsk calling for “Mother Russia to take Donbas home” and make it part of Russian federation.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➔ **Cyprus** Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders expressed willingness to convene for UN-led talks in coming months. UN special envoy on Cyprus dispute Jane Holl Lute continued groundwork to prepare for relaunching talks. Lute 11 Jan met separately Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar and Republic of Cyprus President Anastasiades; following meeting, Republic of Cyprus announced UN Sec-Gen Guterres was exploring option of organising five-party conference – which would include leaders of two Cypriot communities, as well as three guarantor powers Greece, Turkey and UK – to assess current state of affairs and prospects for relaunching talks; Tatar said that five-party meeting in Feb or March 2021 was possible and reiterated that he would “pursue an agreement on the basis of sovereign equality within a two-state solution framework”; Tatar 26 Jan said: “We deserve our own state to be recognized”. Turkish FM Çavuşoğlu 22 Jan said talks will be held in New York in next two months with EU as observer. Tensions over hydrocarbon explorations in disputed waters around island remained at low ebb after Turkey 13 Jan withdrew its survey vessel Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa (see Eastern Mediterranean).

↑ **Eastern Mediterranean Greece and Turkey relaunched “exploratory talks” on their differences in Aegean Sea after almost five-year hiatus amid low-level military tensions.** Following conciliatory messages earlier in month, Turkish and Greek officials 25 Jan met in Turkey’s capital Istanbul for first time since 2016 to launch 61st round of so-called “exploratory talks” on issues in Aegean; no details were revealed on content of talks but sides agreed to continue them in next round in Greece’s capital Athens in coming months. Prior to talks, differences surfaced over their scope: Greek PM Mitsotakis 13 Jan said Greece hoped talks would continue where they left off in 2016, focused exclusively on maritime delimitation issues, while Turkish FM Çavuşoğlu 15 Jan said “there is no point in having these talks” if Athens does not want to discuss other issues, such as sovereignty over disputed islands. International powers welcomed dialogue: U.S. and UK 12 Jan expressed support and Germany 16 Jan called talks “important step” and “good news for the entire region”; German FM Heiko Maas 18 Jan visited Ankara and reiterated support. Despite Athens and Ankara 18 Jan holding military-to-military talks at NATO, some military tensions in Aegean continued throughout month. Notably, Greece 12 and 13 Jan held military exercises near islands of Limnos, Samothrace and Psara, prompting Turkey to call for islands to be demilitarised; Greece 14 Jan also held aeronautical exercise in disputed airspace south of Kastellorizo island. Ankara 16 Jan said Greek exercises both violated demilitarised status of islands and impinged on area in which Turkish navy conducted firing drills.

➔ **Turkey Military continued operations against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in country’s south east and northern Iraq.** Military throughout month continued operations targeting PKK militants in rural areas of country’s south east, mainly in Bitlis, Mardin and Diyarbakır provinces; fatalities further decreased this month likely owing to harsh winter conditions in mountainous areas. Military also continued air raids targeting PKK positions in northern Iraq during month. Following recent clashes in northern Iraq between PKK/People’s Protection Unit (YPG) and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), Defence Minister Hulusi Akar 19 Jan

visited Iraq's capital Baghdad and later Erbil to meet high-ranking Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials; following meeting with KRG PM Masrour Barzani, Akar said: "We should increase our cooperation and together stand against the PKK with determination", and pledged military support to oust PKK from Sinjar if requested. Govt efforts to criminalise pro-Kurdish opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) persisted: police detained more than 80 HDP members or affiliates throughout month; notably, Chief Public Prosecutor's Office 13 Jan reportedly launched proceedings to remove immunity of nine HDP MPs, including party's co-chair Pervin Buldan, for allegedly inciting violence during 2014 Kobani protests. Govt continued operations targeting Islamic State (ISIS), as police throughout month detained over 180 individuals for their alleged links to ISIS; notably, police operation in Şanlıurfa city 12 Jan apprehended ISIS member who was allegedly involved in ISIS terrorist attacks in Turkey in 2015 (Suruç) and 2016 (Sultanahmet).

Central Asia

➔ **Kazakhstan** **Amid stifling of dissent and exclusion of opposition in run-up to vote, ruling party won unopposed parliamentary election.** In lead-up to local and parliamentary elections on 10 Jan, authorities in capital Nur-Sultan and Aqtobe city 4-6 Jan arrested and sentenced to seven-15 days imprisonment four activists – including election observer – for allegedly calling for local protests; police 6 Jan detained activist in southern city of Shymkent. On election day, authorities reportedly detained dozens of protesters across country, including two dozen in Almaty city; Deputy Interior Minister Arystangani Zapparov 10 Jan said all detainees were released without charges. Central Election Commission – which last month excluded opposition parties from polls – 11 Jan announced ruling Nur Otan party won over 71% of vote; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe same day stated that "an uncompetitive campaign and systemic de-facto limitations on constitutionally guaranteed fundamental freedoms left voters without genuine choice". Meanwhile, authorities targeted civil society groups; tax authorities 15-25 Jan fined and later suspended one election-monitoring group and two human rights organisations over alleged financial irregularities; authorities 18 Jan fined fourth group. Court in western city of Atyrau 22 Jan imposed three-year parole restriction on activist Maks Boqaeв ahead of his expected release 4 Feb; authorities sentenced Boqaeв on extremism charges in 2016 after he allegedly organised unsanctioned protest. Ordabasy district court in southern region of Turkistan 26 Jan sentenced activist to one year "freedom limitation" for involvement with banned Koshe party, associated with proscribed opposition party Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan. Administrative court in northern Kokshetau city 28 Jan sentenced activist to 12 days imprisonment for allegedly taking part in unsanctioned rally 25 Jan in city's central square.

➔ **Kyrgyzstan** **Former acting President and PM Sadyr Japarov won presidential election and voters approved constitutional reform on strengthening presidential powers.** After country 10 Jan held presidential election, preliminary election results showed victory for former acting President and PM Japarov, who was freed from prison by protesters in Oct 2020 after contested parliamentary election results sparked violent protests; Japarov same day vowed not

to “repeat the mistakes of previous governments”. Opposition presidential candidates Adakhan Madumarov and Abdil Segizbayev 11 Jan reportedly rejected preliminary election results showing victory for Japarov; Japarov next day declared: “There will be no dictatorship as some scaremongers say”. EU 11 Jan welcomed “orderly and well-administered Presidential election” but noted low voter turnout and “uneven playing field for the candidates, abuse of administrative resources and violations of campaigning procedures”. Central Election Commission 20 Jan officially declared Japarov winner with over 79% of vote, and announced result of constitutional referendum also held 10 Jan, which offered choice between presidential and parliamentary systems of govt; 80% of voters opted for presidential system which will grant president greater powers, while just over 10% cast ballots for current parliamentary system. Japarov 28 Jan sworn in as president during inauguration ceremony in capital Bishkek. Military Prosecutor’s Office 25 Jan announced former head of State Committee for National Security Abdil Segizbayev was placed in custody on charges of abuse of office.

➔ **Uzbekistan Trial on deadly security incident at dam last year proceeded; video surfaced showing small-scale protest in Fergana region.** Tashkent City Court 5 Jan resumed closed-door trial of May 2020 incident at Sardoba dam, which left six people dead and forced 70,000 people to flee their homes in eastern region of Sirdaryo; trial, which started 21 Dec, involved 17 defendants, including officials of state railway company and construction company, accused of negligence, abuse of office, violation of safety regulations and other offenses. NGO Human Rights Watch 7 Jan said authorities are “severely hindering the work of independent nongovernmental organizations” due to “excessive and burdensome registration requirements”, and called on govt to amend its legislation and allow independent groups to register. Video 13 Jan surfaced apparently showing dozens of people blocking road to protest power cuts in Altyaryk district in far-eastern Fergana region; protesters reportedly dispersed after state officials arrived and promised to resolve energy supply issues.