



# Watch List 2023

**Spring Update** | 12 May 2023

Every year Crisis Group publishes two additional Watch List updates that complement its annual Watch List for the EU, most recently published in January 2023. These publications identify major crises and conflict situations where the European Union and its member states can generate stronger prospects for peace. The two additional updates include an overview of the policy environment and main challenges for the European Union and five crises and conflict situations, which can update those identified in the annual Watch List or present a new focus of concern. For each of the five cases included in this update, Crisis Group provides analysis based on in-country research and specific policy advice to the European Union and its member states, with the aim to guide and improve their efforts to prevent, mitigate or end conflicts.

---

## CONTENT

President's Take

Maintaining Relations with Transitional Regimes in Bamako and Ouagadougou

Striking the Right Balance with Iran

Kosovo-Serbia: Finding a Way Forward

Latin America Wrestles with a New Crime Wave

Pakistan: At the Tipping Point?

---

Headquarters

**International Crisis Group**

Avenue Louise 235 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • [brussels@crisisgroup.org](mailto:brussels@crisisgroup.org)

*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*



## President's Take

Rarely has the agenda of the monthly European Union (EU) foreign ministers' meetings been as packed as the one on 24 April. As EU High Representative Josep Borrell [noted after the meeting](#): "It looks like all the crises come together, piling up". The day's [agenda](#) was indicative of the range of conflicts and challenges European policymakers have to grapple with. It included discussions of Sudan's crisis, the Ukraine war and its geopolitical fallout, and a recalibrated EU policy toward China – none of these items a small task. As of this writing, foreign ministers are continuing their conversations about these issues at an informal meeting in Sweden, and they will remain seized of the matters going forward.

The fighting in Sudan was rightly among the top issues of the day on 24 April. Crisis Group's last [Watch List in January](#), warned that, despite the 5 December framework agreement in which the Sudanese army agreed to hand over power to civilians, real obstacles remained for the transition. Tensions brewing between the army, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), under the command of Mohamed "Hemedti" Hamdan Dagalo, were all too evident as the deadline for the handover loomed. Yet few anticipated the pace and scale of [fighting that broke out on 15 April](#). With street battles and aerial bombardment wracking the capital Khartoum, millions of civilians are caught in the crossfire, with supplies of basic necessities running out fast. Both sides appear to view the confrontation as existential. With no end to the fighting in sight, it could escalate into a devastating civil war that destabilises the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region, both areas of strategic importance to the EU and many others.

While EU and European leaders have limited leverage in Sudan, they should do what they can to deter outside actors from getting sucked into the fighting, support mediation efforts under way and stand ready with humanitarian aid. In particular, with most EU nationals evacuated, it is important that European attention to the crisis not fade. Critical is to press all actors inside Sudan, in the country's immediate neighbourhood and farther afield to refrain from backing either side. Any dynamic that draws in other players – whether former rebels or other Sudanese armed groups or regional powers – would make a conflict that already looks intractable even harder to halt. For now, Europe should continue to support Saudi and U.S. efforts to mediate a humanitarian ceasefire. (The two parties [signed an agreement](#) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on 11 May committing to protect civilians.) If those talks get traction, the EU should prepare to quickly provide large-scale assistance to meet what look set to be vast needs. European leaders should also encourage Washington and Riyadh to widen the mediation format beyond representatives of the two warring parties as early as possible, bringing in Sudanese civilians and diplomats from neighbouring and other regional countries and bodies. Broader participation will be crucial for achieving a lasting settlement that goes beyond a humanitarian ceasefire.

Backing Ukraine in defending itself from Russia's invasion remains Europe's top security priority. The latest EU agreement on a three-track initiative to get Kyiv artillery and ammunition, including through new procedures for joint EU arms procurement, illustrates Brussels' readiness to take unprecedented steps to make sure Ukraine has what it needs. Since Russia's all-out invasion in February 2022, Euro-

pean capitals have shown sensible caution in avoiding steps that run too high a risk of direct conflict between NATO and Moscow, notably by drawing a line at deploying troops in Ukraine and training Kyiv's soldiers on Ukrainian soil (as, indeed, [Crisis Group has recommended](#) in previous Watch Lists). [Russia, too, has mostly avoided steps that could trigger direct NATO involvement.](#) But no one should let complacency slip in about escalation risks. As Europeans ponder the potential delivery of advanced Western fighter jets and long-range missiles, they should assess carefully the added value for Ukraine of such weaponry, particularly given the long lead times for training in its use and maintenance.

Hopes in Western capitals partly hinge on a Ukrainian counter-offensive. Ukrainians from the start have bucked expectations on the battlefield as Russian forces have struggled to break through Ukrainian defences along fronts in the east and south. With a new counter-offensive, Kyiv is surely hoping to repeat the dramatic advances of the late summer and autumn of 2022. But the Ukrainians will have their work cut out for them, with Russians dug in and the element of surprise that was decisive before hard to replicate. Even if Ukraine's counter-offensive regains territory and puts Moscow under military pressure, it seems unlikely for now to change the Kremlin's calculations about the war. Moscow has given no indication that it seeks any sort of bargain to end the war, let alone on terms acceptable to Kyiv. Indeed, the Kremlin gives every sign of settling in for a long struggle – and perhaps even sees benefits in doing so, as a means of keeping society on a war footing. Putin's goals appear to remain a pliant government in Kyiv and a West that accepts Russia's self-defined sphere of influence. Kyiv, for its part, is understandably showing no willingness to compromise either at this stage, given that doing so would involve accepting loss of its own territory and sovereignty.

As unlikely as any settlement seems right now, the EU and its member states should nevertheless prepare for a moment when calculations in Russia might change. Even as they continue to support Ukraine, they should signal to Moscow that a path toward a negotiated ceasefire or settlement remains possible. As Crisis Group has argued before, that means avoiding any measures and rhetoric that suggest the West seeks regime change in the Kremlin and making clear that some EU sanctions would be lifted in the event of a political settlement acceptable to Ukraine.

For now, and notwithstanding some differences in views and policies in Europe, there is no sign of significant cracks in the West's unity in backing Ukraine. Whether fissures will appear over the next year, as supplies run lower in Western countries and U.S. elections approach, remains unclear. For the most part, the U.S. political establishment is firmly behind the Biden White House's Ukraine policy and its commitments to the transatlantic partnership and European security, though a small but vocal caucus in the Republican party, including former President Donald Trump, have been consistently critical. Dwindling U.S. support for Ukraine appears unlikely any time soon. But given the centrality of U.S. aid, any change would pose difficult questions for Europe. While most European policymakers realise how much trouble a change in U.S. policy could bring, [they appear unsure](#) about how to prepare, exposing again Europe's vulnerability to U.S. domestic politics.

Then there is Europe's response to the Ukraine war's geopolitical knock-on effects. Part of that sensibly entails increased bilateral engagement with countries in its immediate neighbourhood, Asia, Africa and Latin America – steps I have advocated for in meetings with European interlocutors. That the EU is taking such outreach seriously and has even adopted a concrete action plan to strengthen EU partnerships around the world through greater political and economic engagement, including through the use of its Global Gateway initiative, is good news. Yet some of the rhetoric from Western leaders still displays a lack of sensitivity to the concerns of capitals elsewhere.

As I have [argued](#) before, European leaders should be more nuanced and understanding. Inevitably, many capitals around the world prefer to define their national policies on their own terms rather than as part of a West-Russia – or for that matter West-China – contest. Few sympathise with Moscow or have any illusions about its aggression in Ukraine. Yet they do not see picking sides as serving their or their societies' interests. Few buy the notion, which still runs through much of European thinking, that the West occupies the moral high ground, given its own track record over the past few decades. More concretely, in dealings with Europe, they want to focus on their own priorities. This Watch List contains a few concrete ideas for specific regions: efforts to work with Latin American countries on reducing organised crime and the associated violence, for example, or the importance of not closing the door on poor countries that have developed close ties to Moscow, such as Mali and Burkina Faso. Broadly speaking, framing policy solely through the prism of confrontation with Moscow or Beijing will backfire. Countries across the world will chafe at feeling forced to choose.

Globally – again as Crisis Group has [argued before](#) – Europe should pay even greater attention to the cumulative economic effects of the war, sanctions on Russia and the COVID-19 pandemic that are foremost in the minds of many leaders elsewhere. The fuel and food price hikes of 2022 have subsided somewhat. Still, inflation remains high and many poor countries' debt burdens look increasing unmanageable (seventeen [low-income countries](#) are in debt distress). In some places, the economic toll risks aggravating instability, fuelling discontent and sharpening political crises. Pakistan, in this Watch List, is one example, but many other countries could be in similar boats. Wealthy countries, including in Europe, have been slow to cough up various forms of financial relief they pledged in 2022. It is true that a much smaller fraction of debt is owed to Western countries than was the case some years ago. Any comprehensive efforts need to involve other capitals, notably Beijing, and the private sector. Still, the forthcoming G7 summit, which the EU and several member states will attend, is an opportunity for the world's richest economies to use their leverage in international financial institutions and hefty aid budgets to ease poorer countries' economic woes and bolster aid to those facing conflict risks. A Crisis Group paper, to be published next week, will lay out more in detail what the G7 can do in this regard.

Also high on the agenda of EU foreign ministers is China. A flurry of European visits to Beijing underscored the variation among EU leaders with respect to China policy and the need to resolve internal differences. Some leaders, most prominently

French President Emmanuel Macron, suggest that Europe should avoid getting too enmeshed in China-U.S. tensions. (An option paper prepared by the European External Action Service for the 12 May foreign ministers' discussion [reportedly](#) cautions Europe not to get drawn into a zero-sum contest between Washington and Beijing.) Others push for a more aggressive European line, seeing China as a dangerous competitor and ally to Moscow, and eager to stay on side with Washington. With European heads of state set to tackle the topic during their June summit, the days and weeks ahead are an opportunity to rethink and recalibrate.

As is often the case in the EU, the common position will probably fall somewhere in the middle. The EU seems likely to maintain its three-pronged approach that simultaneously treats China as a negotiating partner, economic competitor and strategic rival, albeit arguably with greatest emphasis on the last of these. Most EU and member state officials seem to broadly agree with the agenda laid out by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in a [speech](#) shortly before her own Beijing trip, which points more forcefully than in the past to the many irritants that create friction in the EU's relationship with Beijing (from the closer China-Russia partnership and what European capitals view as destabilising policies in Asia to human rights violations in the Xinjiang region and disinformation and economic coercion against EU member states). That agenda also stresses the need to reduce Europe's economic dependence on China, while acknowledging the importance of engagement on issues of mutual interest.

Treading the right line in Europe's multifaceted relations with Beijing – one that is realistic about the importance of trade and global problem-solving with China while clear-eyed about the challenge a more assertive Beijing poses – is one of European policymakers' biggest tests. It is made all the harder by Washington's increasingly tough policies, accelerated by competition among leaders of both major U.S. parties to outdo one another in assertiveness toward Beijing.

Changes are in the offing. As von der Leyen forecast, it is nearly certain that Europe will reduce its reliance on critical Chinese industries in order to limit China's economic leverage over the bloc and its members. While this move makes strategic sense, Europe should remain wary of entirely outsourcing its China policy to Washington. Although the transatlantic relationship remains crucial for regional security – as the conflict in Ukraine has demonstrated – it can withstand some back-and-forth on key matters of regional interest. Given the one-way ratchet toward hardline policies inside the U.S., Brussels may play a useful role moderating the U.S. position. For example, after Europe resisted a U.S. push to pursue economic decoupling from China and put forward its own more moderate concept of “de-risking”, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan shifted to the same rhetoric. Whether Europe and the U.S. mean the same thing by that term is unclear, but the adoption of the EU's measured tone is itself a positive step.

Given the strategic rivalry between Washington and Beijing, it is also an open question how much influence Brussels will be able to wield with either on security-related issues; still, it should do what it can. For example, European leaders can and should urge both sides to resume senior and working-level dialogue and com-

mit to communications through defence hotlines, notwithstanding the turbulence in their relations. Whether or not both sides are at fault, Europe should push equally to make clear it is being even-handed.

On Taiwan, too, the EU is not the central player it is on the Ukraine war, but clearly any confrontation over the island would be as catastrophic for Europe as it would for the rest of the world, with the economic fallout dwarfing that of the Ukraine war. Broadly speaking, the U.S. in its defence of Taiwan has to find the right balance between deterrence and reassurance. Building up Taiwan's defences and making clear to China the broader costs of an attempt to take the island by force, notably the sanctions that such a step would trigger, is part of that. But those measures must sit alongside efforts to reassure Beijing that the status quo – ie, commitment to a one China policy that does not recognise Taiwanese independence – is solid and its opportunity to reunify is not slipping away. Thus far, the reassurance side has sometimes looked a bit neglected. Europe should focus on both aspects. It cannot undercut deterrence; indeed, its commitment to sanctions can help. At the same time, European capitals should affirm – and, whenever possible, encourage the U.S. to affirm – their own one China policies and encourage all parties to maintain the status quo.

The EU should also keep its expectations realistic about Beijing's readiness to influence Russia and potential mediating role in Ukraine. Beijing has tried to transmit an image of constructive neutrality despite its "no limits friendship" with Moscow and emphasise its readiness to mediate. There is no reason to dismiss China's offers out of hand. Indeed, European leaders could even signal to Beijing that if Russia backs away from its maximalist goals to seek a sustainable peace – which for now Moscow has given no indication of doing – it is supportive of negotiations. But European leaders should be clear-eyed about Beijing's fundamental interests. Beijing values Moscow as a strategic ally in resisting U.S. pressure and seems unlikely to do anything that risks undercutting the Kremlin or to use any capital to nudge President Vladimir Putin toward a settlement. China's messaging on Ukraine is more about portraying itself as an honest broker to the rest of the world than making a serious attempt to reach peace.

Despite the many high-profile issues on the European agenda, the EU and its member states will need to keep an eye on other conflicts and crises that may be looming, or risk getting much worse, but are not necessarily making headlines. This Watch List Update draws attention to some of these: the crisis in Pakistan, record levels of violence in Burkina Faso and Mali, the brewing standoff over Iran's nuclear program, Latin America's wave of violent crime and the risk of fresh tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. European capitals cannot solve all these crises alone, but they do still have an important role to play in finding ways to end or reduce violence or avert the type of worst-case scenario now playing out in Sudan.

**Comfort Ero**, Crisis Group President & CEO

May 2023

# Maintaining Relations with Transitional Regimes in Bamako and Ouagadougou

The past year was the deadliest on record in [Mali](#) and [Burkina Faso](#), where military transitional governments have struggled to turn back jihadist insurgencies. Although Bamako and Ouagadougou have made significant efforts, particularly in terms of recruiting and equipping their respective armies, which are now in a more offensive posture, the situation continues to be precarious. Jihadist violence persists across northern and central Mali, and it has spread across much of Burkina Faso. Despite triumphalist rhetoric from Bamako and Ouagadougou, it is unclear whether either has made strategic gains against the jihadists over the past few months. State presence is still close to non-existent in rural areas like Ménaka in north-eastern Mali or northern Soum province in Burkina Faso. The two governments have, at best, limited control of their territory outside urban areas, where jihadists remain reluctant to venture. But even those areas are not necessarily secure; many have fallen under protracted jihadist blockades, particularly in Burkina Faso.

Amid this insecurity, as well as political instability and shifting strategic alliances, increasing violence against civilians by all sides, and uncertainty about transitions back to civilian rule, there are major obstacles to cooperation between the European Union and its member states, on one hand, and the two African neighbours, on the other. Still, the EU and its member states may be able to play a constructive role if they prioritise maintaining engagement with the two countries. To this end, they will need to resist the temptation to view relationships with Bamako and Ouagadougou exclusively through the prism of relations with Russia. They will also need to appreciate that isolating either regime risks entrenching hardliners to the detriment of both local civilians and European interests.

*Concretely, the EU and its member states should:*

- ❑ Maintain dialogue about the transition back to civilian rule with the authorities in both Mali and Burkina Faso, while minimising public disputes, notably on choices of diplomatic and security partnerships, as these present a significant risk of backlash and are unlikely to change the authorities' behaviour.
- ❑ Recognise that opportunities to partner on security with either Mali or Burkina Faso are scant at present, focusing instead on keeping military-military channels open (Mali) and civilian protection initiatives going (Burkina Faso), as well as on pressing the governments to explore non-military solutions to insecurity, including through dialogue with disaffected communities and groups.
- ❑ In both countries, help preserve political space through financial and technical support to vulnerable civil society activists and organisations – including women's and youth groups – with a particular focus on developing programming that can help these activists operate safely and securely, as well as on taking appropriate precautions to avoid creating added risks for the beneficiaries.



- ❑ In both countries, explore ways to support the transition back to civilian rule, including (in Mali) through the operationalisation of the *Autorité Indépendante de Gestion des Elections*, the independent electoral management body.
- ❑ In Burkina Faso, continue to help humanitarian actors and relevant ministries provide humanitarian assistance to populations in need, notably internally displaced people, and promote dialogue in an effort to heal intercommunal rifts.

### **Striking Parallels**

As Mali and Burkina Faso continue to fight jihadists moving south through the Sahel, the parallels between the two neighbours are striking, although imperfect. Partly due to the resulting insecurity, both have experienced two military coup d'états in the past three years. The current regimes in Bamako and Ouagadougou have, to different degrees, sought to win public support through self-aggrandising and sovereigntist rhetoric. Both have expelled the troops that France (the former colonial power in the region) sent to assist in the anti-jihadist battle. The Malian authorities have invited in the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group as a new security partner, and the Burkinabé government could eventually do the same, as it appears to be drawing closer to Moscow.

The parallels also relate to the growing vulnerability of civilians in the two countries. In both Mali and Burkina Faso, military operations against jihadists have led to increased violence against civilians by both state forces and their allies, as well as by jihadist groups. There have been frequent allegations by national and international human rights organisations of abuses including arrests, executions and torture of civilians by national armed forces, jihadists, the Wagner Group in Mali and pro-government self-defence groups (known as *Dan Na Ambassagou* in Mali and *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*, or VDPs, in Burkina Faso). Meanwhile, it is unclear whether the authorities in either country intend to give power back to civilians along the timeline each agreed to with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), an important regional bloc, in 2022. The Malian government's announcement that it will hold a constitutional referendum on 18 June is a positive development, but it is not enough to dispel doubt about the authorities' ability to organise the presidential election scheduled for February 2024.

### **A Polarising Regime in Bamako**

In Mali, the colonels who organised the country's 2020 and 2021 coups seem to have more or less unified the security establishment behind them and remain broadly popular, even as they gear up for what appears to be a wave of repression of their critics. As dissonant voices from Malian politics and civil society begin to make themselves heard, the regime can look to a legion of activists ready to harass perceived detractors. One example is the backlash to civil society representative Aminata Dicko's [intervention](#) at the UN Security Council in January 2023. Dicko denounced human rights abuses committed by Malian and Russian forces in the country, stating (contrary to Bamako's official line) that the security situation in the

country had not improved since Wagner's arrival in late 2021. On 5 February, not long after she spoke, the Malian government declared Guillaume Ngefa-Atondoko Andali, head of the human rights division of the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA), [persona non grata](#), asking him to leave the country within 48 hours. The announcement referred specifically to his role in selecting Dicko to appear at the UN. The government also recently [arrested two civil society activists](#), a man and a woman, a few days after they had made perceived criticisms of the transition.

Bamako's authoritarian drift has contributed to concerns that the current authorities may seek to remain in power. These fears are growing due to the government's desire to tighten control of civic space, its attempts to sideline the old political class and the proliferation of initiatives aimed at consolidating the transitional president's political base.

As for Mali's foreign policy, the authorities chose Russia as their main military partner in 2021, turning their backs on France. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Mali has also fallen out with its other Western partners. Moreover, the Wagner Group as well as the government and local militias are increasingly [accused](#) of abuses against civilians, including [sexual violence](#), in conjunction with their intensive operations against jihadists in the country's centre. The state has denied the charges, while refusing to let MINUSMA, on which the regime has imposed a number of restrictions, investigate alleged abuses. Nevertheless, these operations have bolstered the regime's popularity in Bamako, and the regime appears to see its new partnership with Russia as helping stabilise its power. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Bamako in February, and the transitional authorities more than ever seem to view Russia as a key partner and their principal global ally.

At the same time, Bamako's relations with traditional partners in its neighbourhood are rocky. Mali is suspended from ECOWAS, and its relations with key allies, such as Côte d'Ivoire and Niger, remain tense, as Bamako [reorients](#) its diplomacy toward transitional regimes in Ouagadougou and Conakry. It has even clashed with neighbours and long-time partners, notably detaining 49 soldiers from Côte d'Ivoire for around six months, accusing them of being mercenaries intent on destabilising the regime.

Internally, implementation of the 2015 peace agreement between the government and separatist non-state armed groups in Mali's north appears to have stalled. Tensions between the signatory armed groups and the government are at a high, with the two sides [accusing](#) each other of abandoning the treaty, and the government recently [flying](#) military planes over Kidal, the armed groups' headquarters. The overflight was widely viewed as a provocation, and some suspect that Bamako's colonels, several of whom fought in the 2012 rebellion, are eager for a rematch against the groups. In February, a member of the transitional legislature said war with the armed groups was "[inevitable](#)".

Meanwhile, security in the north continues to deteriorate. The state has little presence in the region, where jihadists affiliated with the rival Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) coalitions regularly

clash with each other as well as the signatory armed groups. It is difficult to tell who has the upper hand in this fighting, although IS Sahel seems to have made significant gains, particularly in the Ménaka region.

### **A Fragile Regime in Ouagadougou**

In Burkina Faso, President Ibrahim Traoré remains vulnerable to some of the same dynamics that brought down his predecessors, including divisions within the armed forces, and has attracted increasing concern from national and international observers regarding his authoritarian management of the transition. Ouagadougou has also clashed with France and the [UN](#), even if it has not become embroiled in disputes with them or (at least yet) embraced Russia to the same degree as Bamako.

As concerns governance, the transitional authorities have taken an authoritarian approach. Having made the reconquest of territory their overwhelming priority, they consider the state and the population to be in a posture of total war, permitting them to subordinate respect for civil rights to the imperative of recapturing territory lost to the jihadists. A “[general mobilisation](#)” announced in April gives the president wide-ranging legal latitude to do whatever he deems necessary to curb insecurity, including requisitioning people and goods and restricting basic freedoms. The authorities have arrested several civil society activists and [expelled two](#) French journalists reporting on human rights abuses. Meanwhile, it is unclear whether the authorities are willing or able to respect the July 2024 deadline for a presidential election, agreed on with ECOWAS, given persistent insecurity.

The Ouagadougou regime is less stable than its counterpart in Bamako. One explanation may be that the regime in Bamako is composed of actors more or less representative of the Malian armed forces. By contrast, President Traoré is much younger and, as a captain, lower in rank than Bamako’s colonels. He enjoys only shaky support from within the strongly divided Burkinabé military. Traoré’s two [predecessors both](#) fell following deadly jihadist attacks on the army, and the military is now suffering its highest death toll since the beginning of the conflict, with at least five massive assaults on state forces between February and April in the Nord, Centre-Nord, Sahel and Est regions. Traoré thus remains vulnerable to internal military rivalries threatening the stability of his regime.

On the international front, the Burkinabé transitional authorities have (like their Malian counterparts) ruptured relations with France – in December 2022 [requesting](#) that Paris recall its ambassador and in February 2023 [asking](#) the French Operation Sabre to leave the country. While they have drawn closer to non-Western partners such as Türkiye and Russia, they have not as of this writing contracted with the Wagner Group, and it remains unclear if they plan to do so. Several Burkinabé officials, including the defence minister on 3 May, have suggested that Moscow’s help is not yet needed, saying [the VDPs are the Wagner of Burkina Faso](#). But if the security situation does not improve soon, Ouagadougou may look to external military support and find it with a private military company, perhaps Wagner.

Looking at the internal security situation, jihadist violence is at unprecedented intensity. It is widespread, afflicting all of Burkina Faso's regions except the capital. True, President Traoré inherited a difficult security situation, but he seems to have found no way to improve it since taking power. While the government has ramped up military operations, including those using [drones](#), the strategic impact has yet to be felt and the security situation has continued to deteriorate. Meanwhile, the government's total war policy seems to have given rise to a degree of military licence and contributed to a spike in violence against civilians, with troops often targeting rural communities, mostly but not only Fulanis. A [massacre](#) in the village of Karma (Yatenga province, Nord region) on 20 April, where a statement by residents accused the armed forces of killing at least 147 civilians (including women and children, mainly from the country's majority Mossi ethnic group), is indicative of the escalation of violence against civilians.

The new authorities have made the VDP paramilitaries the main pillar of their response to insecurity, [and are aiming to recruit](#) 50,000 new members. While this move is a response to the Burkinabé military's limited capacity to confront jihadist groups, the decision to lean heavily on the VDPs has been a factor in placing civilians at the centre of violence and exacerbated communal tensions. Jihadists have raided villages they accuse of supplying VDPs, while the authorities tend to suspect that those who do not suffer insurgent attacks or vocally support the VDPs are accomplices of the jihadists, reportedly making them personally or sometimes their villages military targets.

### **What the EU and Its Member States Can Do**

Notwithstanding these challenges, the EU and member states will gain more by staying engaged with Mali and Burkina Faso than by pulling further back from them. Isolating the regimes in power could lead them to even more hardline positions, which could prove harmful for the two populations and will not serve European interests. At the same time, European actors must take a clear-eyed view of the region's dramatically changing political dynamics – both its increasing tendency toward authoritarian governance, and even mass abuse, and a tense socio-political climate around questions of sovereignty and Western partnerships. For these reasons, the EU's ability to influence the situations and regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso faces significant constraints. It should seek to work within these as follows:

**Mali:** In the security realm, only narrow military cooperation with Bamako remains possible. While the effectiveness of the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali is limited, especially after it suspended the majority of its training activities given Wagner's growing presence, it still helps maintain a channel for dialogue between Malian and European military officers. As the EU remains strongly committed to security in the Sahel, and particularly given Mali's central role therein, keeping this channel open should remain useful. That said, in light of the strategic choices made by the transitional authorities, the conditions are not in place to enhance European security assistance to Mali.

Instead, the EU should continue to engage in other sectors by supporting governance reforms, economic development, civil society and work to facilitate an effective transition back to civilian rule. This dialogue should be mostly conducted at the level of the EU delegation in Bamako, which has useful experience working with the current authorities. The EU should seek to combine short-term actions in support of the transition with a longer-term commitment to the country's economic development. It should consider investing in the operationalisation of the *Autorité Indépendante de Gestion des Elections*, the independent electoral management body. To help maintain space for political expression, the EU should also offer discreet financial and technical support to [vulnerable](#) civil society activists, journalists, and women's and youth groups, including those working outside the capital. This support should focus on helping civil society operate more safely and securely; it should be offered in a way that does not itself increase the risks to beneficiaries.

Above all, the EU should avoid framing its engagement with Mali through the lens of competition with Russia. Bamako's privileged partnership with Paris seems at this moment to be a thing of the past. But it remains possible to maintain and nurture relations with other Western actors, such as Brussels. As Crisis Group laid out in a recent [briefing](#), the EU should encourage the transitional authorities to explore non-military solutions to insecurity. They might start by prioritising political dialogue, including potentially with the jihadists, so that the state can be deployed in rural areas, before undertaking broader governance reforms.

**Burkina Faso:** Concerning the security sector, while the EU's options will again be limited, it should explore cooperation with the ministries in charge of the VDPs, focusing on the development of coordination and monitoring mechanisms to better protect civilians (rather than on the delivery of equipment). Crisis Group will further examine the VDP question in a later report.

In the diplomatic realm, the EU should maintain engagement mostly through its Ouagadougou-based delegation, which has so far proven a more effective channel than higher-level engagement. It should focus on privately convincing the authorities of the need to develop non-military solutions to insecurity, such as promoting social cohesion through community dialogue, and (as in Mali) encourage the transition back to civilian rule through support for the electoral process and other assistance. At the same time, it should avoid public criticism of the government's strategic choices, including with respect to external security partners, as it is unlikely to sway the authorities' thinking on these issues and risks provoking a backlash.

Finally, as the regime is increasingly isolated amid partial disengagement by its traditional partners, the EU should maintain its activities focused on supporting civilians, who are paying the highest price for the government's strategy of total war. Specifically, the EU should prioritise humanitarian assistance, taking into account that an estimated [10 per cent](#) of the population is internally displaced and violence against civilians is only escalating. The EU can also play an important role in promoting social cohesion, notably through the support of local organisations that work on non-violent conflict resolution and the promotion of community dialogue (especially between herders and farmers). Lastly, as in Mali, the EU should stand

ready to offer discreet technical and financial support to civil society activists and organisations, subject to appropriate precautions, and with a focus on assistance that can help them operate more safely and securely.

# Striking the Right Balance with Iran

Relations between Europe and Iran are more fraught than at any time in years. Three main factors explain the friction: the impasse in negotiations over restoring the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 nuclear deal, as Tehran continues to expand its nuclear activity; Iran's deepening military cooperation with Russia in the wake of its all-out invasion of Ukraine; and the regime's brutal crackdown on the anti-government protests taking place across the country since mid-September 2022. In parallel, the persistent tensions between Iran and its allies, on one side, and the U.S. and Israel, on the other, are trending in a worrying direction that could see tit-for-tat exchanges, notably in the Levant, escalate into a broader conflagration.

Amid all this turmoil, the European Union and its member states lack a clear overall direction in their Iran policy. For years, they have broadly pursued de-escalation between Iran and its various adversaries, notably by helping broker the nuclear agreement and striving to salvage it since the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from it, under President Donald Trump, in 2018. They have sought to address other serious concerns as well, for instance maintaining sanctions on Iran for its horrid human rights record, but they have largely tried to keep these policies separate from the tasks of saving the JCPOA and calming Middle East tensions. In the last eight months, the regime's relentless assaults on protesters and supply of weapons to Russia have led the EU to shift tack somewhat. Nonetheless, it should try to reinvigorate its efforts to contribute to reducing frictions in the region – particularly at a time when relations between Tehran and its Gulf Arab rivals are improving – even as it keeps working to contain Iran on other fronts. Bad as the present situation is, a nuclear crisis leading to an armed escalation in the Middle East would be much worse.

*The EU and its members states should:*

- ❑ Support the emerging rapprochement between Iran and Gulf Arab states as a path to greater regional stability. European initiatives that help advance technical dialogue on, for example, joint health and environment projects can foster confidence and potentially pave the way to talks on regional security cooperation.
- ❑ Continue to urge Tehran to stop deepening its military cooperation with Moscow, while reviewing the efficacy of restrictive measures on the transfer of drone and missile technology to Iran.
- ❑ Complement punitive measures aimed at regime officials and organisations involved in human rights violations with proactive measures – specified below – that help ordinary Iranians, while keeping diplomatic channels open despite the multiplicity of friction points with the regime.
- ❑ Work to avoid the prospect of a peaking nuclear crisis by quietly conveying red lines to Tehran that keep the situation below a threshold that might trigger either European snapback of UN sanctions that could prompt an Iranian withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) or U.S. and/or Israeli military action while formulating viable diplomatic alternatives, such as a more limited arrangement

capping Iran's most proliferation-sensitive activities, if efforts to revive the 2015 nuclear agreement remain stalled.

### **Turmoil and a Timely Détente**

Since September 2022, the Iranian regime's actions at home and abroad have significantly hardened European attitudes toward the Islamic Republic. Attention in Europe has shifted away from the nuclear issue, which had previously been the focus of European policymaking, toward Tehran's supply of arms to Moscow and its serial violations of Iranians' human rights amid nationwide anti-government protests.

One reason for Europe's tougher stance toward Iran is the deadlock in the nuclear talks. As the JCPOA's custodian, the EU has been deeply involved in efforts to keep the pact alive ever since the Trump administration put it in mortal peril by pulling the U.S. out of it. Europe was enthusiastic about President Joe Biden's plan to rejoin the JCPOA. The subsequent negotiations have come close to conclusion on more than one occasion, but they have been stagnant since September 2022, when Tehran rejected a proposal largely agreeable to the U.S., as well as the deal's remaining parties, namely Russia, China and the so-called E3 (France, Germany and the UK). In the meantime, Iran has stepped up its nuclear activities, which present a growing non-proliferation risk, with the estimated breakout time (the period for accumulating one weapon's worth of enriched uranium) below two weeks and international monitoring of facilities limited. In March, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Iran's atomic energy organisation agreed to work on improving IAEA access in light of increasing safeguards concerns, but progress has been slight. The IAEA Board of Governors will meet next in early June, at which time Western governments could decide to call once again for a vote censuring Iran for non-compliance, ratcheting up tensions. Another flashpoint looms in October, when UN restrictions on Iran's ballistic missile program will expire. While the U.S. and the three European JCPOA signatories have reportedly discussed alternatives to the 2015 agreement should the diplomatic stalemate continue, there is no consensus among them on what those might be, much less concurrence from Russia and China – or Iran itself.

Tehran has additionally infuriated European capitals by reportedly shipping conventional weapons, including armed drones, to Russia for use in its war in Ukraine. While Iran denies sending (and Russia denies receiving) these weapons, Western governments believe that such transfers have occurred, that they violate UN restrictions, that Moscow has used the Iranian drones to hit civilian targets and that Tehran may get Russian armaments, notably advanced aircraft and missile defence systems, in return. European capitals have collaborated with Washington in efforts to curb the transfer of drones and warned Tehran not to give Moscow ballistic missiles, which so far it has not done.

The third reason for Europe's harder line is the human rights crisis in Iran. For the last eight months, the country has seen an explosion of deep-seated domestic discontent, to which the regime has responded with a combination of severe repression and superficial tactical concessions. While the protests that began in Septem-



ber 2022 have diminished in scale and scope, the underlying social and political grievances, especially among women and youth, remain largely unaddressed. The economic hardship resulting from high inflation and unemployment could also fuel further unrest. Thus far, the leadership appears unwilling to take any of the structural measures that would help defuse the popular anger driving the protest movement, while remaining all too ready to rely on coercion to clear the streets.

The regime's harsh treatment of peaceful protesters, many of whom are women, has done great damage to European-Iranian relations. It has also mobilised Iranians in the European diaspora in an unprecedented fashion, increasing the pressure on elected officials to adopt a tougher line against the leadership in Tehran. For several EU member states, the concerns are all the greater because some of their own citizens are detained in the Islamic Republic's jails, with one Swedish-Iranian national recently executed and a German-Iranian citizen also facing the death penalty. The EU has responded to the human rights violations with seven rounds of sanctions since October 2022, the latest going through on 24 April. Member states have also used public messaging and international forums to hold the Iranian government to account.

There is a bright spot in this bleak tableau. Normalisation efforts between Iran and Saudi Arabia, kicked off by a Chinese-mediated agreement in March, could help lower tensions in the Gulf, which have mounted in recent years as Iran and its local allies face off against Western-aligned governments. Warmer Iranian-Saudi relations, alongside Tehran's détente with other Gulf Arab capitals, could contribute to de-escalating the Yemen war and limiting threats to international shipping. They could also create space for regional security dialogue as well as better economic and technical cooperation on issues of mutual interest, such as public health and the environment.

Still, much about the regional picture is troubling. While the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement is a positive development, it is too soon to judge whether the two countries will be able to resolve all their disagreements, much less commence working together at the bilateral or sub-regional level. At the same time, Iran and Israel remain at daggers drawn in several theatres, notably over the advances in Iran's nuclear program and what Israel views as Tehran's support for, and coordination with, various groups in Lebanon, Syria and the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories, notably Hamas and Hizbollah, that Israel sees as a threat. In the short to medium term, perhaps the best that can be anticipated between Iran and Israel is a highly unstable equilibrium punctuated by airstrikes, cyber operations and occasional covert action – more or less the status quo of recent years. At worst, however, nuclear and/or local triggers could lead to sudden and significant escalation.

### **What the EU and Its Member States Can Do**

To a certain extent, the reorientation in Europe's approach – away from the nuclear issue toward others – is overdue, but not if the resulting policy consists only of attempts to penalise Iran, a course Europe rightly criticised when the U.S. attempted it under Trump. Europe should also look for off-ramps and areas of potential en-

agement. To this end, Brussels and member state capitals should make the most of their existing lines of communication with the Iranian government, including their diplomatic missions in the country, while concurrently pursuing strategic concerns through both coercive and constructive means.

The forward movement along the Saudi-Iranian diplomatic track offers an opportunity to re-engage Iran as part of a sub-regional effort to develop cooperation in areas of common interest, such as health and environmental projects. European initiatives that help advance technical dialogues between Iran and Gulf Arab states can foster confidence among long-time rivals and perhaps eventually mature into discussions about regional security cooperation.

The EU and its member states should send a consistent, coordinated message to Iran that it needs to stop deepening its military cooperation with Russia. In parallel, and in coordination with the U.S., they should pursue policies, including restrictive export control measures, that can limit access to components used in drone development and assist Ukraine in defending itself from these weapons more effectively. Though Tehran is unlikely to reverse course, especially as tensions with Washington remain elevated and the regime calculates that its strategic interests are best served by closer ties to Moscow, European actors retain influence, especially when speaking in concert, and an interest in avoiding a further deterioration in relations.

Regarding human rights violations, the EU and member states have raised the stakes for the regime with the seven sanctions packages, but they can do more to help Iranian citizens directly. Initiatives that support internet access, offer visas for at-risk Iranian activists and journalists, and provide financing for non-governmental or multilateral projects in fields such as women's rights, health and environmental protection are all worthy of consideration if European actors want to make a positive difference on the ground.

Finally, Europe should persevere in trying to persuade Iran to halt its escalation on the nuclear front. Raising uranium enrichment levels, which are already perilously close to weapons-grade, or curbing international monitoring could precipitate an E3 move to restore pre-JCPOA UN sanctions, which could in turn prompt Iran to withdraw from the NPT. Avoiding this high-stakes standoff should be the minimum short-term objective. If Tehran does not allow UN inspectors greater visibility into its nuclear sites, as it agreed to do in March, Western governments may consider pressing for a censure resolution at the June IAEA Board of Governors meeting and referring Iran's non-compliance to the Security Council, again escalating the stakes. But the strategic predicament runs deeper: eight years after the nuclear deal was reached, half a decade after the U.S. withdrew from it and two years into unsuccessful efforts to revive it, the JCPOA appears unsalvageable. Yet no one has laid out a compelling alternative. The EU and E3 in particular should engage with the U.S. and other JCPOA signatories to develop credible fallbacks to the 2015 agreement if, as seems to be the case, efforts to restore it are unlikely to succeed. If nuclear diplomacy is in a "deep slumber", as the EU's senior diplomat puts it, Iran's nuclear activity is anything but at rest.

# Kosovo-Serbia: Finding a Way Forward

After helping calm months of escalating tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, the EU is now struggling to make progress in defusing the two neighbours' longstanding disputes. The sharpest point of friction is the level of self-rule in four northern Kosovo municipalities, which are home to a Serb majority, and their connection to Serbia. Residents of this region began protesting Pristina's control two years ago, with demonstrations becoming increasingly violent. In November 2022, northern Serb representatives withdrew from Kosovo government institutions. The protests paused in late December 2022, as the EU became involved in peacemaking efforts. On 27 February 2023, Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić agreed to the outlines of a deal, thanks to EU mediation spearheaded by High Representative Josep Borrell and Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue Miroslav Lajčák. The deal is memorialised in the vaguely worded [Agreement on the Path to Normalisation](#).

Since the end of February, however, the parties have moved at a snail's pace in carrying out the 27 February agreement, as well as a subsequent annex, and talks on next steps have bogged down. Ultimately, Pristina and Belgrade must find a way forward not just on northern Kosovo but also on broader normalisation issues such as Kosovo's political status. But for now the key is to make at least some progress toward implementation of the 27 February deal and prior commitments, however halting, and to keep talks going. A collapse in discussions would almost certainly lead to new crises.

*To energise mediation efforts and keep security from deteriorating further, the EU should:*

- ❑ Sustain talks, including through high-level EU participation, while bringing representatives from the Serb municipalities to the table so that they have a voice in determining how they will be governed.
- ❑ Press the parties to flesh out and develop a timeline for meeting the commitments the parties have already accepted in the 27 February deal and prior agreements. If the parties have trouble settling on next steps and how to sequence them, Brussels may need to nudge them along by putting its own timeline on the table, in coordination with EU member states and partners such as the U.S.
- ❑ Work closely with the parties (including northern Kosovo Serb representatives) as well as other influential actors, such as the U.S., to reach agreement on a suitable model for northern Serb autonomy that allows for the northern municipalities to receive certain services from Serbia while also linking the region to national Kosovar governance.
- ❑ Recognising the important role that NATO's KFOR peacekeeping mission plays in deterring conflict, look for ways to demonstrate political backing for the mission – such as directing EU representatives in Kosovo, including in its EULEX rule of law mission, the European Commission's liaison office and member state embassies, to make their support clear.

## **Crisis in the North**

The long-running dispute between Kosovo and Serbia was a major driver of conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s, and led to the separation of Kosovo (with its ethnic Albanian majority) from Serbia at the end of that decade. While most EU member states worked with the U.S. to bring about Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, Belgrade and Pristina have never normalised relations with each other. Two major issues have continued to plague relations between the two neighbours. One is Serbia's persistent refusal to join over 100 other countries (including all but five EU member states) in recognising Kosovo's independence. The other is the question of how to integrate Kosovo's minority Serb population into its government architecture, particularly in the four northernmost municipalities where Serbs form the majority.

The political status of Kosovo's northern Serbs will be the toughest challenge in negotiations and poses the greatest risk of violence at present. Although Serbia formally continues to claim sovereign right to all of Kosovo, it has in practice given up trying to exercise its writ in most of Kosovo's territory. This is not true in the north, however, where Belgrade and Pristina both hold elements of state power, and where local authorities, who retain close ties to Serbia, enjoy substantial self-rule, all in an uneasy equilibrium.

Serbia wants the north's autonomy expanded, and made official, but Kosovo is dragging its feet. In 2013, and again in 2015, Pristina agreed to form an "Association/Community" of Serb municipalities in the north. The awkward hybrid term reflects an unresolved dispute between the parties about what they agreed to create and is emblematic of the extent to which the two sides are at loggerheads. Serbia wants the entity to enjoy executive powers and constitute a separate level of government, between central and local authorities. Kosovars – government and opposition alike – fear that such an arrangement would open the door to either the northern municipalities' secession or internal fracturing and dysfunction reminiscent of neighbouring [Bosnia](#). They insist that the Association/Community be no more than a coordinating body for the municipalities that compose it. As a result, despite the 2013 and 2015 deals, and related provisions in the February 2023 agreement, nothing has yet been done to make the foreseen entity real.

The issue is a growing irritant in part because, since 2011, Pristina has been slowly bringing Serb-majority areas of Kosovo under its full jurisdiction. Previously, those territories had two parallel municipal authorities, one set reporting to Pristina and the other to Belgrade, with the latter in effect serving as the city administrations. But then the EU began pressuring Serbia to make the reluctant northerners integrate into the Kosovo administrative system. In 2013, Belgrade formally dissolved its Kosovo municipal authorities and pushed the Kosovo Serbs to turn out for elections organised by Pristina. In exchange, both Pristina and the EU turned a blind eye to, and indeed somewhat facilitated, the almost complete subordination of the Kosovo Serb political leadership to Belgrade's ruling Serbian Progressive Party.

The result was a jumble of criss-crossing jurisdictions and loyalties. On one hand, by 2015, municipal governments, police and the judiciary were all officially answering to Pristina. On the other hand, their ethnic Serbian leaders were still beholden to Belgrade. Important Serbian institutions remained in place, including a large university and medical centre in North Mitrovica, one of the majority-Serb municipalities, and the Serbian social security and pension schemes continued to operate in the region. Northerners clung to elements of Serbian identity even as they grudgingly accommodated to the Kosovo system, retaining Serbian personal documents and driving cars with Serbian licence plates.

Soon after coming to power in Pristina in March 2021, Prime Minister Kurti's government took more assertive steps toward integrating the north with the rest of Kosovo, resulting in a backlash that set the scene for escalating protests. The new leadership cracked down on smuggling schemes in which several northern leaders are implicated. It also prohibited the use of Serbian licence plates. Arrests of several prominent Serbs fed fears among the local population that it was being unfairly targeted and that worse would follow. In response, northern Serbs revolted, blocking roads, setting fire to government offices and shooting at police. Protesters included both women and men, with women more likely to be on the barricades during the day and men at night.

Each round of protests brought escalation. Pristina sought to protect its troops by deploying militarised special police units and setting up fortified bases. The protesters increasingly took up more arms of their own. By late July 2022, their ranks had been bolstered by serving Serbian military personnel, a violation of [UN Security Council Resolution 1244](#) (1999), which required all Serbian armed forces to withdraw from Kosovo. On 31 July, the leadership of KFOR, the NATO peacekeeping force in place in Kosovo since 1999, and trusted by both sides, stepped in by pushing Belgrade to withdraw its troops (most if not all are now back across the border) and warning Pristina to ratchet down its response.

By the end of 2022, what limited trust had been built between northerners and Pristina was gone, along with a decade's worth of progress in integrating the north. In November 2022, after the government fired the northern district police commander for refusing to enforce rules against driving with Serbian licence plates, all northern Serb officials – mayors, assembly members, police, judges and other civil servants, the vast majority of whom were men – resigned from their posts. As of this writing, the police officers continue to be ineligible to reapply for their old jobs and the elected officials are also unable to return to work, which, in a context in which men are the main breadwinners, has implications for their families' living standards and puts additional pressure on other members of their families to find work.

Serbs then boycotted the early elections held on 23 April 2023 to replace those who had quit. With only the tiny non-Serb minority in the four northern municipalities voting, the elections brought in a slate of new local officials comprising exclusively ethnic Albanians. Serbia revived its vestigial municipal governments. Meanwhile, the former ethnic Serb police have continued to patrol, albeit out of uniform, taking care not to cross paths with the Albanian officers who took their jobs.

## New Deal or New Limbo?

Concerned about escalating tensions, the EU brought the parties together for talks in 2011. Starting out as technical discussions, the talks were raised in level several times and are now under the leadership of High Representative Borrell and Special Representative Lajčák. In late February, the parties reached a deal, which was announced but not signed. The agreement was inspired by the Cold War-era [German state treaty](#) signed in 1972 by the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. That treaty paved the way for third parties to open relations with both states, though neither formally recognised the other, and allowed both to join the UN. The Kosovo-Serbia accord copies extensively, at times verbatim, from the German treaty and similarly aims to permit the five EU member states that do not recognise Kosovo's independence to change their positions, without demanding the same of Serbia.

While short on specifics, the deal includes some notable commitments. Kosovo agreed to establish “an appropriate level of self-management” for its Serb community and to “formalise” the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Both steps are seen as a way of refreshing past promises to grant the northern municipalities a measure of autonomy. For its part, Serbia agreed to recognise Kosovo's passports, diplomas, licence plates and customs stamps (on paper, the agreement provides for mutual recognition, but as a practical matter Kosovo already accepts Serbian documents). Belgrade also pledged not to object if Pristina were to seek membership in “any international organisation”, a commitment that was understood to pave the way for Kosovo to join the Council of Europe and eventually other bodies including the UN. Both sides affirmed that past agreements remain in effect.

The EU-brokered talks stopped the downward spiral, but following the February agreement's signature progress has slowed. Brussels has for the most part been unable to nudge Belgrade and Pristina to start putting the February agreement into effect. There is no sense of when either side might follow through with its commitments. Neither wants to move first, for fear of both domestic political backlash and the chance that the other side will go back on its word. Serbia, at least, is acting as though the agreement is not yet binding; it voted against Kosovo's application to join the Council of Europe on 24 April. It is not honouring other parts of the agreement, either. For its part, Kosovo's main obligation is to establish the Association/Community, which it has not taken steps to do. As noted, that obligation dates back to 2013 and is repeated in the February 2023 agreement. The parties signed an “[implementation annex](#)” on 18 March, but only after stripping it of most of its [draft provisions](#) and a corresponding timetable. The only tangible post-February achievements so far have been setting up a “[joint monitoring committee](#)”, on 18 April, and agreeing to a [declaration on missing persons](#) that commits them to a [range of steps](#), such as allowing mutual access to classified documents and cooperating on finding burial sites, on 2 May, with operational details to be settled later.

The state of play is worrying. Continued talks and a steady trickle of progress is necessary for keeping things quiet in the north. If the dialogue breaks down, the parties will face strong temptations to confront each other again in the northern municipalities.

### **What the EU Can Do**

The challenge for EU mediators is first and foremost to keep the dialogue going – including through high-level participation that makes clear the priority that Brussels places on it – and to ensure that it is sufficiently participatory. Certainly, Belgrade and Pristina must both continue to be at the table. Given the past two years' events, it is difficult to fathom that northern Kosovo Serbs could accept a return to reintegration unless pushed to do so by Belgrade. But without some level of northern buy-in, even that might not be enough. While the northerners depend on Serbia's good-will in many ways, elements among them might reject a deal between Belgrade and Pristina that they see as offering too little autonomy. The risk of this will be greater if northern Serb representatives are not at the table helping shape whatever deal is struck. The EU should accordingly press Pristina and Belgrade to include Kosovar Serb representatives in the dialogue.

As for the tasks that will face the mediators, the primary one will be to turn the lengthening list of concluded but unfulfilled, and in some cases ambiguous, agreements between the parties from both February and before into a sequence of short-, medium- and long-term practical steps for building a sustainable bilateral Serbia-Kosovo relationship. A measure-for-measure approach will likely be the most constructive. For example, the short-term goal could be for Kosovo to take a credible step, such as acknowledging a willingness to amend its legislation if needed, toward Kosovo Serb self-rule. In return, Serbia could begin accepting all Kosovo documents. The next stage could see Serbs ending their boycott and returning to Kosovo institutions in return for Pristina's flexibility on taking back those who resigned and holding new municipal elections in the north. The ethnically Albanian special police should be withdrawn from Serb-majority areas and their bases dismantled in that process. That would clear the way for a final stage in which Kosovo would enact the Association/Community and Serbia fully normalise its relations, including endorsing other states' opening to Kosovo.

Membership in international organisations for Kosovo should also be on the table within this framework. Some – like the Council of Europe – are within reach; notwithstanding Serbia's no vote, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers approved Kosovo's application on 24 April, forwarding it to the Parliamentary Assembly. (States do not have a veto in the Committee of Ministers.) Others like the UN and NATO will take longer, though intermediate steps like observer status (granted by the General Assembly) and the alliance's Partnership for Peace are possible in the medium term.

Given the lack of trust between the parties, securing their agreement on a timetable for these actions may prove difficult or impossible. The EU may have to nudge them, by making its own best guess about a reasonable set of first steps and then

coordinating diplomatic pressure by its member states and allies. The growing demands by Washington and EU capitals that Pristina follow through on its commitments on the Association/Community are an example that could be expanded into a strategy aimed at Kosovo and Serbia equally.

Once a rough timetable is in place, the EU's negotiator, Lajčák, should help the parties stick to it. Working with the U.S., which has made the issue a priority, he should help the parties work out a measure of self-rule for the Serbs throughout Kosovo that allows them to retain some Serbian government services they currently enjoy (schooling, health care, social security and pensions) while integrating them into the Kosovo state administration. This arrangement would represent a formalisation of some of the privileges they enjoy now and a rollback of some of the Kurti administration's more provocative attempts to enforce its authority over them.

It will be important for both mediators and the parties to approach the question of autonomy with something of an open mind. The original concept of an association or community of municipalities may or may not be the best framework for self-rule, and the EU should not hesitate to explore alternatives with the parties. Ten years have passed without progress toward creating the Association/Community, which suggests the concept may need updating. Brussels should push back against Kosovo's fear that any step toward autonomy would invite the problems Bosnia faces, by stressing the unusual nature of Bosnia's framework (adopted to end a shattering war) and pointing to examples where a degree of autonomy has helped communities coexist peacefully in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

Making this process work may also require legal changes in Kosovo to give effect to whatever is agreed about Serb self-rule, as well as fresh local elections in the four northern municipalities, so that mayors and municipal assembly members who have stepped down can return to work. Pristina needs to offer a system by which police officers and other non-elected public servants can get their positions back, and thus begin to rebuild public trust in institutions that has eroded over the past year. If Kosovar lawmakers need to take legislative action to this effect, they should do so.

Even as negotiations continue, the situation in northern Kosovo will likely remain fraught. KFOR's peacekeeping presence will therefore be a crucial backstop. The mission enjoys unique respect in Serb areas due to its formal neutrality with respect to Kosovo's independence, and among Kosovars because it represents NATO, the alliance that rescued them from Serbian oppression. More than a traditional peacekeeping mission, KFOR plays an important diplomatic role, warning both sides quietly when it believes their actions risk bloodshed. Its presence has helped deter local actors from going too far and usually helps keep protests from getting out of hand. The EU delegation, the EULEX rule of law mission, with its heavily armed police unit in Mitrovica, and all member states should continue to publicly support KFOR's leading role in ensuring a safe environment. Giving the mission the credit it deserves will bolster both local confidence in KFOR and the peacekeepers' own capacity to continue performing their vital tasks.



# Latin America Wrestles with a New Crime Wave

Across Latin America, organised crime and a concomitant rise in violence have threatened the residents' safety and left governments grappling for effective responses. Although overall homicide rates have plateaued in recent years (albeit at the highest levels in the world), and even fallen in notoriously violent countries such as Colombia and El Salvador, the picture is still grim. Around a third of all murders around the world occur in Latin America each year, with many or most of them attributed by national authorities to organised crime. Rates of [gender-based murders have increased](#) in several countries. The predatory behaviour of criminal groups has also triggered and aggravated existing humanitarian emergencies such as mass displacement.

Geography is a major reason why Latin America emerged as a hotspot of global crime. Home to three of the largest cocaine-producing countries in the world – Colombia, Peru and Bolivia – as well as the main exit points for cocaine exports to Europe and the U.S., the region has played a key role in illicit drug markets for more than four decades. While Central America, Colombia and Mexico have long been plagued by violence, changes to the routes and networks underpinning the drug trade have brought flareups of violence in countries such as Ecuador and Costa Rica – which traditionally were considered secure and peaceful compared to some of their neighbours.

Many factors have contributed to real and perceived rises in public insecurity. Unprecedented rates of drug production and profitable new narcotic trafficking routes in countries such as Paraguay and Argentina play a role. Widespread economic hardship in Latin America, which became particularly acute during the pandemic, lured more individuals into organised crime. Meanwhile, the prevalence of corruption in the region has allowed an array of illicit markets to take root. These markets are not limited to drug trafficking: crime rings are engaging in human smuggling, fuel theft, illegal logging and mining, and extortion. Some outfits are attempting to deepen their influence over legal businesses and consolidate their control of communities as a means of acquiring new recruits and sympathisers and expanding their geographical base.

Latin America's new criminal landscape has repercussions beyond its borders. EU member states are struggling with a surge in cocaine trafficking to European shores as the continent becomes a preferred [export destination](#) for the drug. High-level intra-regional cooperation in responding to drug trafficking and organised crime is largely dormant. Meanwhile, U.S. security cooperation continues to play an important role across Latin America, but its significance appears to be diminishing, as [financial assistance](#) for narcotics control and law enforcement in the region – especially in [Mexico](#), [Central America](#) and [Colombia](#) – has fallen slightly in recent years.

*To help address these challenges, the EU and its member states should:*

- ❑ Help partner governments take aim at bribery and corruption through a combination of strong policies and effective enforcement – backed up by intelligence-based policing and supported by stronger cross-border information exchange.
- ❑ In order to increase human security, support efforts to: reduce impunity through investment in prosecutorial capacity; protect victims and witnesses by backing the establishment of secure reporting channels and safehouses; and create alternatives to crime through social and employment programming.
- ❑ Reinforce EU technical assistance and capacity-building programs for combating crime – including the Europe Latin America Programme of Assistance against Transnational Organised Crime (EL PAcCTO) and the Cooperation Programme between Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union on drug policies (COPOLAD).
- ❑ Use the forthcoming July summit between the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) to establish a working agenda on organised crime with the region’s leaders, with a focus on challenging topics like intra-regional cooperation; negotiations with criminal gangs; and ways to guide counter-narcotics efforts away from the poorest and most vulnerable, where they too often focus.

## **New Trends and Old Crimes**

Weak democratic institutions, high levels of corruption and extreme inequality have made Latin America fertile ground for organised crime. Major insecurity and instability linked to organised crime first took root in the 1980s. While elements of traditional organised criminal activity endure – notably, the use of selective violence and complicity with political forces and legitimate businesses – the landscape of illegal profit-making today bears little resemblance to its original incarnation.

In particular, state crackdowns, often carried out with strong support from the U.S., have broken up the traditional hierarchical organisations that operated under a central command and participated in multiple illicit markets, for instance producing and trading drugs as well as carrying out killings and kidnappings. Archetypal drug cartels – such as Medellín or Cali in Colombia, or the Gulf or Guadalajara in Mexico – have given way to enterprising, smaller criminal groups intent on seeking out new illicit opportunities rather than relying on stable markets. Colombia now hosts an array of purely criminal groups alongside other armed outfits that combine ostensibly revolutionary goals with the extraction of illicit revenue. An estimated 24,000 combatants are enrolled in both armed groups and organised crime, in urban and rural areas. The number of criminal groups in Mexico doubled between 2010 and 2020, reaching over 200 according to [Crisis Group data analysis](#).

Smaller criminal enterprises are not always assured of survival, of course. In Guerrero and Michoacán in Mexico, or Cauca and Nariño in Colombia, illegal groups regularly engage in turf wars. Criminal bosses tend to have short careers: death,

arrest and extradition are common denouements. But broader criminal economies have become more resilient, in part because these groups' revenue streams – which help buy them political protection and judicial impunity – have become less vulnerable to sudden fluctuations.

A large part of criminal groups' power can now be traced to the increasing influence they wield over the communities in which they operate. In Colombia, groups such as the Gulf Clan – now the most important criminal organisation in the country – offer benefits such as new school buildings and even give out toys to win over supporters in the territories they expand into. These groups do not rely on perks alone to establish dominance, however: the use of [forced confinement](#) – by which the groups require that residents remain in their homes and refrain from going to work or school – has become widespread. More than 100,000 people were victims of confinement in 2022, many of them members of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities along the Pacific coast. Criminal and other armed groups are particularly keen to take over these communities from rivals because they tend to be clustered near export points to international markets or crucial territories for illicit businesses.

In some cases, local criminal groups rent territories to entrepreneurs seeking to produce or transport drugs, which are then dispatched to global markets. This franchising and partnership model has enabled illicit drug markets to grow and diversify. Although the production and transportation of plant-based drugs remains an important criminal activity in Mexico, the country has also become a major player in the production and trafficking of methamphetamine and synthetic opiates to the U.S. Fentanyl seizures in Mexico have increased by more than 1,000 per cent since 2018. Huge profits from the synthetic drug trade fund turf wars between the Jalisco and Sinaloa Cartels, driving much of the lethal violence in the country. In Colombia, the Gulf Clan reportedly charges taxes on third-party drug traffickers that pass through its territory, according to the [plea bargain](#) offered to U.S. courts by its extradited former leader Dairo Antonio Úsuga, aka Otoniel. At the same time, the Clan runs migrant smuggling routes through the Darién Gap between Colombia and Panama. It also operates extortion rackets and enjoys numerous connections to legitimate private businesses across the north of the country.

Elsewhere in Latin America, new crime hubs have emerged in areas that offer strategic benefits to drug traffickers and enable novel connections to be forged among transnational outfits, local gangs and corrupt officials in courts, prisons and police forces. Extraordinary upsurges in violence have plagued the port cities of Guayaquil and Rosario, in Ecuador and Argentina respectively, as well as [Costa Rica](#), Panama and Paraguay. Criminal groups in Ecuador have intimidated local communities by engaging in violent tactics such as hanging bodies from a pedestrian bridge, bombing shops and residential areas, and beheading rival group members. The country now has one of the fastest-rising homicide rates in the region, with 2022 its deadliest year since statistics were first recorded. The expansion of Brazil's First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital) – the country's largest criminal force and one of the most powerful in Latin America – accounts for much of the recent spike in lethal violence in eastern Paraguay, just across the Brazilian border.

The spread and diversification of criminal groups across Latin America has brought with it a surge of extortion and environmental crime. These illicit activities are less profitable than drug trafficking, but they have become increasingly attractive because they generate relatively stable incomes at lower risk and provide the opportunity to reinforce control of communities. In the countries of [northern Central America](#) – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – extortion rackets have been calculated to be worth up to \$1.1 billion annually. In Colombia, meanwhile, reported cases of extortion have risen 40 per cent in the first three months of 2023 compared with the same period the previous year, according to military sources.

Home to approximately half of the world's tropical forests, Latin America – in particular the [Amazon rainforest](#) – is also a hotspot for environmental crime. In many cases, this illicit trade intersects with other criminal economies, such as drug trafficking: hollowed-out tree trunks, for example, are used to conceal shipments of cocaine. Traffickers have also used cattle ranching to launder money, which has the additional effect of contributing to deforestation in Brazil, Colombia and Bolivia. Journalists and environmental defenders – including Indigenous leaders – are prominent among the victims of criminal groups operating in the jungle.

Gender-based violence has also increased in some areas, exacerbated by the general climate of impunity and brutal violence fostered by criminal groups. [Zacatecas](#), whose location in northern Mexico has made it a coveted site for gangs operating trafficking routes, experiences the fourth highest murder rate of the country's 32 states. Rates of disappearance of women in Zacatecas state rose by 50 per cent in 2022, with most of the victims between ten and nineteen years old. Other types of gender-based violence have also become more widespread as criminal operations have expanded.

These shifts in the structures and workings of organised crime have coincided with changes in the relations between organised crime groups and the political system. Rather than seeking to appropriate state institutions or confronting security forces in defence of their rackets, criminal groups have quietly woven networks of influence with local authorities and communities, combining violent intimidation with sophisticated techniques of co-option, including financing electoral campaigns for their preferred local candidate or preventing certain candidates from campaigning in certain areas. In so doing, they make it more likely that the authorities will turn a blind eye or even collude with these groups' activities.

### **The Quest for an Effective Approach**

When policies aimed at curbing organised crime in Latin America have had positive effects, the impact tends to dissipate quickly. Latin American governments desperate to placate fearful citizens have gravitated to “iron fist” (*mano dura*) approaches, which combine coercive law enforcement, deployment of military forces in domestic policing, mass detentions and increasingly severe punishments. Over the medium and long term, however, these approaches have not eradicated organised crime but rather caused it to shift to new configurations that allow it to avoid or weather state crackdowns, sometimes through complicity with public officials. For example,

tough law enforcement policies in northern Central America turned prisons into hubs where gangs organised, consolidated their identity and expanded extortion rackets. The *mano dura* approach has also spurred rises in extrajudicial killings, often by para-police forces.

A radically different approach – namely, engaging in dialogue with criminal groups in order to demobilise them – also has a disappointing track record over the long term. Most criminal demobilisation initiatives have been undermined by high rates of recidivism among former rank-and-file members. Consider what happened after Colombia’s paramilitaries laid down their weapons between 2003 and 2006: of an estimated 55,000 [demobilised combatants](#), 20 per cent of them committed crimes between 2003 and 2012.

Against the backdrop of these experiences, Latin American governments have adopted a range of strategies for addressing criminal violence. President Nayib Bukele in El Salvador has attracted both regional renown and international criticism for bringing murder rates in his country down to historic lows over the past year through use of a “state of exception” that has seen the arrest and imprisonment of 65,000 suspected gang members, of whom [15 per cent are women](#). El Salvador now has the largest per capita jail population in the world, with some 2 per cent of its adult population behind bars. Human rights advocates have raised legitimate concerns about Bukele’s mass incarceration policies, arguing that they have been carried out with excessive force, led to the erosion of suspects’ legal rights and chipped away at the country’s democratic institutions. Crisis Group and others have also [voiced concern](#) as to how long the improved security may last. The tangible effects on public safety, however, have brought Bukele extraordinary popularity. Despite a constitutional prohibition on his running for another term, he is likely to be re-elected in 2024.

Politicians elsewhere in the region are seeking to replicate the El Salvador security model. The front runners in the Guatemalan presidential election in June – Carlos Pineda, Sandra Torres and Zury Ríos – have explicitly drawn inspiration from Bukele. Honduras’ left-leaning president has also taken [emergency security measures](#) to battle extortion.

By contrast, Colombian President Gustavo Petro has taken a very different route to address his country’s security dilemmas. A broad set of policies known as “[total peace](#)” aims to reduce violence and protect civilians, above all in conflict-affected rural areas, by seeking talks and conditions for ceasefires with armed groups and criminal groups, notably the National Liberation Army (ELN), dissidents of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Gulf Clan. There are, of course, many complications in engaging in dialogue with so many distinct armed organisations. Colombian law prohibits holding political dialogue with organised criminal groups, meaning the purpose of any talks must be to seek the demobilisation and prosecution of members through the regular justice system. Washington, meanwhile, remains sceptical about conversations with criminal groups, particularly when a number of these groups’ leaders face charges in the U.S.

Still, the policy remains Petro's hallmark initiative. Negotiations are set to continue with the ELN in Cuba in May, and talks may soon begin with a dissident (ie, splinter) group of the now demobilised FARC. But the government has quashed a precarious ceasefire with the Gulf Clan after [alleging that the group incited violence](#) in a mining strike, including burning trucks, blocking roads and attempting to attack an aqueduct in Tarazá, Antioquía.

Part of Petro's approach is motivated by an understanding that the causes of the resilience and sway of armed groups derive from the lack of other economic opportunities for rural residents, as well as the failings of the global drug prohibition regime. In his government's opinion, the counter-narcotic strategies applied by Latin American governments since the 1980s and backed by Washington have created huge economic incentives for illicit activity while punishing the weakest and most vulnerable participants in the drug supply chain, creating the conditions for illegal armed groups to gather recruits and resources. With his total peace effort, Petro is seeking to break this cycle.

### **Charting a Way Forward**

The EU and its member states should support regional efforts to reduce the impact organised crime has on human security in the region, as well as the challenges it poses for respect for the rule of law and peaceful, democratic politics. They should also try to act as a counterweight to heavy-handed approaches, which can too easily gain political support when communities live in fear. By way of an alternative, the EU and member states should champion initiatives that combine building the capacity for humane and effective law enforcement with economic and social programs, including ones that aim to provide licit livelihoods for impoverished communities. In particular:

First, the EU and member states should give support to robust anti-bribery and anti-corruption policies – including the establishment of stronger financial controls and independent audit agencies to oversee public finances – and seek to strengthen intelligence-led policing to help ensure these policies are being enforced. Law enforcement efforts can also be bolstered by systematic information exchange between European and Latin American governments. The EU should also back prison reform initiatives that aim both to curb criminal groups' use of jails as operation centres and provide inmates with more training and education opportunities ahead of their release.

Secondly, European and other donors should focus on helping regional governments reduce impunity rates and enhance the security and safety of victims. To this end, they should support efforts to improve prosecution services' investigative capacities; establish new channels for victims and witnesses to share information about crimes; and create safe houses for vulnerable individuals who have reported violent crimes, including women. They should also focus on community-based initiatives that seek to reduce violence, such as employment and social programs for youth in vulnerable situations to counter crime and the violence it generates.

Thirdly, the EU and member states should explore additional support and promotion of existing regional cooperation efforts to combat drug trafficking. These include Ecuador's and Colombia's [incipient partnership](#) to protect their shared border and a Brazilian-led effort to [reduce deforestation](#) in the Amazon, which could serve as a stepping stone toward larger-scale regional partnership programs. In parallel, European donors could increase investment in technical assistance initiatives to combat organised crime and drug trafficking, such as [EL PAcCTO](#) and [CO-POLAD](#); continue to back the efforts to achieve greater Latin American police cooperation, including the embryonic Ameripol agency; and update programming in response to the region's changing criminal landscape.

Fourthly, the EU-CELAC summit to be held in July, after an eight-year hiatus, represents an opportunity to establish a working agenda on organised crime with the region's leaders. Topics for the agenda might include how the EU can help promote greater intra-regional security cooperation; questions surrounding negotiations with criminal groups – including the narrow conditions under which these might be appropriate; and how to reframe international counter-narcotics efforts so the focus moves away from low-ranking individuals in trafficking schemes (who often include highly vulnerable subsistence farmers) and instead targets higher-value segments of the supply chains, including by seeking to interrupt financial flows more effectively.

# Pakistan: At the Tipping Point?

Pakistan confronts three spiralling and interconnected crises as general elections scheduled for October draw closer. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's coalition government is locked in a dispute with former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) over how to conduct the polls, differing even over the timetable for the vote. The rhetoric has become so heated that violence is possible before and during the ballot. On 9 May, authorities arrested Khan on corruption charges, prompting his supporters to take to the streets and making prospects for dialogue even slimmer. Equally worrying is Khan's clash with the country's powerful military, which could have alarming implications for political stability. Meanwhile, the economy is in dire straits, with a current accounts imbalance raising the risk that the country will default on its debt and inflation lowering living standards – all when millions of citizens have yet to recover from 2022's devastating floods. Pakistan will need to undertake major reforms to get on the path to economic stability, but in the short term it simply needs external support to avoid collapse, most urgently to shore up social safety nets for the most vulnerable. Thirdly, Islamist militancy is resurging, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province bordering Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, exacerbating tensions between Islamabad and Kabul. Militant attacks since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021 have claimed the lives of hundreds of Pakistanis, mainly police. It is vital that outside powers step in to offer assistance on all three fronts.

*The EU and its member states can help Pakistan by:*

- ❑ Providing funds to Pakistan's election commission, particularly to reduce the gender gap in voter registration, in the interest of transparent, credible contests. The EU should also maintain its plans to send an election expert mission to Pakistan for the polls, in order to convey its commitment to a stable, democratic Pakistan, for which a peaceful transfer of power is an essential prerequisite.
- ❑ Urging the Sharif government to make economic reforms paving the way for an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout and reminding Islamabad that future access to tariff concessions under the EU's new Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP+) depends on respect for democratic norms and international conventions. At the same time, European officials should maintain close contact with Khan, which will allow for dialogue about the risks of political confrontation.
- ❑ Continuing to assist with building infrastructure more capable of withstanding climate-induced and other environmental challenges, while providing more humanitarian aid to the poorest in areas hardest hit by the 2022 floods, such as Sindh province, and particularly for women and girls.
- ❑ Pressing the Afghan Taliban's security forces to fulfil pledges to prevent militants from using Afghan havens to carry out attacks, including in Pakistan; and supporting collaboration between Pakistan and Afghanistan in countering common threats, particularly from the Islamic State's local affiliate. The EU or member states could also offer technical assistance on border management to the Afghan de facto authorities. Those EU member states that can should give similar assistance, along with counter-insurgency training, to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's



police force to help contain militancy. The EU should also redouble humanitarian and development assistance to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's merged tribal districts, among the poorest regions in the country and the most prone to militant expansion.

## Political Crisis in an Election Year

Political tensions have been mounting in Pakistan since Khan's ouster in a parliamentary no-trust vote in April 2022. Accusing the West of engineering the ex-premier's removal, supporters have held rallies to demand snap elections, some of which have erupted into violence. In another effort at forcing early polls, Khan dissolved the PTI-led parliaments in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces in mid-January. But Sharif's coalition government has not budged: it refuses to hold a vote ahead of the scheduled October date, and it insists that all elections, provincial and national, be held in tandem. The country's senior-most judges have become embroiled in the standoff.

The tussle between Khan and Sharif is now focused on elections in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous and politically powerful province. The controversy began in 2022, when Sharif's son Hamza won a no-trust vote against Punjab's PTI-led government with the backing of PTI dissidents. He was, however, de-seated and replaced by Khan's allies, the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q) after the Supreme Court ruled out the party defectors' votes in verdicts that some of its judges said amounted to rewriting the constitution. On 11 January, Punjab's chief minister won a vote of confidence but, under pressure from Khan, dissolved the legislature three days later; on 18 January, the PTI-led legislature in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa disbanded as well. Provincial assembly elections were due in 90 days, but governors in both provinces, who represent the federal government, refused to set dates citing constitutional and security constraints. The Supreme Court got involved after Chief Justice Ata Bandial took *suo moto* (original jurisdiction) notice of the issue. A split verdict in March ruled that elections in both provinces must be held within 90 days. On 4 April, after the election commission delayed Punjab polls until October, a three-member bench (instead of the nine judges who first heard the *suo moto* case), overruled the commission's decision, fixing 14 May as the date instead.

The election commission had announced the delay after the Sharif government refused to provide funds and security personnel required for polling stations. The government insists that all elections, provincial and national, be held on the same date in October, within two months of the National Assembly completing its five-year term. The government and its allies caution that early elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa would violate the constitution, as both provinces would already have new governments in place during the general elections. The national charter requires that caretaker governments oversee polls, so as to reduce the likelihood of political interference with the vote.

The chief justice's interventions have widened rifts between the government and judiciary and also within the top jurists' ranks. The government calls the 4 April verdict a minority judgment since Bandial removed or disregarded the opinions of dis-

senting judges, leaving only a bench of three. Many dissenting judges back this argument: under current rules, the chief justice has the authority to assemble benches in *suo moto* cases, but the jurists and many legal observers think Bandial abused it in this instance. Bandial and likeminded colleagues also threw out an order by the two senior-most judges calling for all *suo moto* cases to be put on hold pending legal decisions to reduce the chief justice's powers. Meanwhile, parliament, at Sharif's behest, refused to fund the Punjab polls. It also enacted a bill to deprive the chief justice of sole authority over *suo moto* cases, including the power to appoint benches to hear them. In a pre-emptive strike, the court has curbed enforcement of that law, which came into force on 20 April. The institutional clashes could extend to the military, which continues to decline the court's demands for security personnel for the Punjab vote, citing rising militant threats. The court has stuck by the 14 May date unless politicians can agree on an alternative.

In these circumstances, the election commission may not be able to oversee transparent, credible and peaceful elections. The potential for violence is high, with few signs that political contenders are willing to compromise. The government's clampdown on the former prime minister and his supporters has further poisoned the atmosphere. The Sharif government has lodged dozens of charges against Khan, many of them serious, such as terrorism, and on 9 May, the controversial National Accountability Bureau arrested him on corruption charges. The arrest came a day after the military had debunked Khan's allegations, which he made to a PTI rally, that a major general now serving in the formidable Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate had orchestrated plans to murder him on two occasions, including in Punjab in November 2022. Khan's enraged followers began protesting across the country, attacking law enforcement personnel and destroying property. They soon turned their ire on the military, targeting the homes of high-ranking officers, such as the Lahore corps commander, and attempting to besiege army headquarters in Rawalpindi. Such incidents raise the risk of deadly confrontation between soldiers and PTI activists.

Khan's arrest has also undermined the chances of political compromise as Pakistan inches toward elections. The ex-premier is even less likely now to accept the government's preference for general elections in October; Sharif, for his part, will be even more adamant in rejecting Khan's demands as his supporters attack security personnel and institutions. Khan says the government refuses to hold polls because it fears defeat. His mix of ultra-nationalist and Islamist rhetoric appears to resonate with many voters, as do his swipes at the government for IMF-prescribed austerity measures leading to economic hardship. Khan could win at the polls, but should he fail to obtain an absolute majority, he would likely hold the election commission – and, indeed, the entire establishment, including the military – responsible, accusing it of pro-Sharif bias. A bitterly contested electoral process could spark street protests that might spin out of control.

## **Closing the Gender Gap**

Another problem Islamabad should address is the glaring gender gap – 10.1 million fewer women than men – in the country’s voter rolls. Authorities have made progress since the last general elections in 2018, adding around ten million women to the registry, but the gap in at least two provinces, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, still exceeds 10 per cent. Millions of women do not have national identity cards, a prerequisite for registration (though attempts to address this problem, including through mobile offices, have added ten million women to the civil registry). Cultural constraints play a role, and in socially conservative parts of the country, women voters and candidates often face violence or threats thereof. The elections’ credibility hinges as much on women’s participation as it does on a level playing field for the parties. The commission should, for instance, enforce the minimum legal requirement of 10 per cent turnout among women in each constituency or else invalidate results and order fresh polls. The authorities should have a policy of zero tolerance for attempts at intimidation of women voters and candidates.

## **An Economy in Freefall**

Political polarisation has heightened amid an unprecedented economic crisis, which is bound to worsen – along with the danger of Pakistan defaulting on its debt – should Islamabad fail to reach agreement on an IMF bailout in the fiscal year ending in June. Even if such a deal is struck in time, it alone cannot stabilise the economy, which could require a capital infusion nearly 50 per cent larger than what the IMF would provide. Lenders are unlikely to disburse such sums amid so much political turmoil. The investment risk would be too high, especially at a time when credit markets are tightening globally.

Sharif’s government inherited an economy plagued by distortions, including unsustainably high levels of debt, a low tax base and over-reliance on external finances. Populist measures taken under Khan’s PTI government, particularly fuel and energy subsidies, had stalled a \$6.5 billion IMF Extended Fund Facility program, which began in 2019 and was due to conclude in September 2022. Though Sharif restarted negotiations, election-year calculations appear to have dictated his economic policies. Negotiations over a staff-level agreement paused for months as the government hesitated to act on IMF recommendations, including for a market-based currency, tax increases, and an end to fuel and power subsidies, fearing – to some degree understandably – that such steps could fuel unrest and might build support for Khan. The delay was damaging, however: Pakistan could not tap other sources of external funding, and global agencies downgraded its sovereign credit rating to the lowest level in three decades.

Meanwhile, Pakistan’s foreign currency reserves have plummeted, reaching a low of \$4.3 billion, barely enough for a month of imports. The country must buy several essential commodities, such as wheat, from abroad, a dependency that deepened after the 2022 floods, which wiped out 40 per cent of its crops. The reserves have since rebounded somewhat, but only because of what economists call “import compression”: imports have dropped due to government restrictions aimed at sav-

ing precious foreign exchange. Inflation, at 35.7 per cent, is the highest since 1965; Pakistan's local currency, the rupee, continues to weaken, exports are fast declining, and formal and informal curbs on imports have adversely affected supply chains, including in the manufacturing sector. International financial institutions project Pakistan's economic growth at less than 1 per cent during the current fiscal year, and industries and businesses are closing down or operating under par. As the crisis deepens, millions could end up jobless, sinking into poverty.

Inflation, the 2022 floods and commodity price shocks have contributed to growing food insecurity. Women and girls, who already lack adequate nutrition, are among the worst affected. Most women work in the informal sector, which contributes close to 36 per cent of GDP and is somewhat insulated from the downturn in the formal economy. That sector is prone to gender discrimination, however, with women paid less and often working in worse conditions. Moreover, as household poverty increases, girls are likely to be the first to be taken out of school and women deprived of access to medical care. The 2022 floods also disproportionately hurt women. In Sindh, for example, with many people living in temporary shelters, the risks of gender-based violence have increased, and hundreds of health facilities and schools serving women and girls were destroyed. The government has expanded the social safety net, particularly through the Benazir Income Support Program, which makes cash transfers to women heading households that fall below the poverty line. But as needs grow faster than available resources, external assistance is urgently needed to fill the widening gap; according to government estimates, the country requires \$16.2 billion for flood recovery.

### **Resurgent Militancy and Border Tensions**

Pakistan is also facing a serious security threat, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, but also Balochistan, both of which border Afghanistan. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, better known as the Pakistani Taliban) have gone on a killing spree since the Afghan Taliban took power in 2021. According to one estimate, within a year of that event, militant attacks in Pakistan had increased by 51 per cent, with more than 75 per cent of them taking place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The surge in militancy has soured Islamabad's relations with Kabul. Pakistan insists that the TTP's central command is based in Afghanistan and that TTP militants operate from Afghan havens. A Pakistani delegation led by the defence minister, which included an intelligence agency chief, visiting Kabul, reportedly passed detailed information to the Taliban authorities about the locations of TTP camps and leaders. Yet Kabul denies that any TTP fighters are present on Afghan soil. In the fall of 2022, the Taliban made a bid to mediate between Pakistani authorities and the TTP leadership, but the initiative appears to have backfired. The Pakistani authorities made concessions to forward the negotiations, including allowing armed Pakistani militants to come home from Afghanistan during a ceasefire. Emboldened, the militants called off the ceasefire in late November and regrouped, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In April, Pakistan's defence minister warned that Pakistan might strike TTP targets in Afghanistan if the Afghan Taliban fail to bring the mili-

tants to heel. Islamabad could decide that, unconstrained, the Pakistani insurgents pose a greater threat than confrontation with Kabul.

In early April, Pakistan's civilian and military leaders opted to launch "all-out comprehensive operations" to root out the TTP from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Such campaigns come with risks. Past counter-insurgency efforts displaced hundreds of thousands, alienating residents and fuelling militant recruitment. Women in camps for internally displaced people were deprived of even the meagre health and other facilities available in the area, while social constraints prevented them from getting government assistance. Certainly, military operations are neither feasible nor desirable in the province's urban centres, such as the capital Peshawar, where the TTP killed more than 80 people, mostly police, in a January bombing. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's police force is now the TTP's prime target; since September 2022, more than 300 officers have died in militant attacks. Holes in police defences were responsible for allowing the suicide bomber access to the highly sensitive Peshawar location. The police are too lightly armed, poorly trained and thinly dispersed to stand up to the TTP.

### **What the EU and Its Member States Can Do**

The EU and its member states have limited but important opportunities to lessen political polarisation in Pakistan. Khan has reached out to influential member states in hopes of fixing the harm done by his anti-Western conspiracy narratives. These governments can, at the very least, hold conversations with him about the risks associated with his confrontation with the Sharif government. In dealings with Sharif, Europe should emphasise that Pakistan's application to the new GSP+ scheme requires adherence to democratic norms, including respect for free speech and the freedom of association. The EU should also continue efforts to strengthen the capacities of civil society organisations and the media in exercising such fundamental freedoms.

Islamabad has urged its partners, including EU member states, to exercise their influence with the IMF to fast-track the requested bailout. While advocating with the IMF for better loan terms, including targeted subsidies that ease hardship for the poorest, the EU and member states should, in exchange, urge Islamabad to pursue the economic reforms that would put Pakistan on a path to sustainable recovery. They should likewise press Sharif to resist the temptation to roll out populist schemes in hopes of gaining votes. But they need to be realistic about how far they can push Islamabad on reforms. Removal of fuel subsidies amid widespread suffering, during a heated electoral campaign, is a recipe for more violence in the streets. In addition, the EU's future provision of GSP+ tariff concessions should not be made contingent on such reforms. Pakistan will continue to be in great need of such concessions from one of its largest trading partners.

EU member states can also help with the elections themselves. They should assist the election commission and other government agencies, through technical expertise and financial aid, in reducing the gender gap in voter registration. In its dialogue with political parties, the EU should also raise the importance of protecting the

rights of women candidates and voters. The credibility of elections hinges as much on women's participation as it does on providing all competing parties an even playing field. Brussels should also proceed with its plans to send an election expert mission. Such expert missions are much smaller and less visible than the EU's robust Election Observation Missions, but they are nevertheless important for signalling the bloc's commitment to a stable, democratic Pakistan, for which a peaceful transfer of power is a prerequisite.

The EU and a number of other countries pledged around \$10 billion to assist Pakistan's flood recovery efforts, mainly in project loans over a three-year period, and the EU has redirected some of its bilateral development assistance for this purpose. Such international assistance should focus on helping the country build a resilient infrastructure, one more capable of withstanding floods and other climate-induced disasters, including by helping Pakistan improve early warning systems. The EU should also work with provincial governments in Sindh and other inundated locales, providing assistance to repair damaged health and education facilities, as well as expanded aid that targets the poor, particularly women and girls. Such assistance could be channelled through Sindh's provincial government and through UN agencies such as the World Food Programme and World Health Organization.

Finally, European actors should help address concerns about insecurity in Pakistani regions that border Afghanistan, particularly Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In both quiet and public diplomacy, they should hold the Afghan Taliban to their pledge to prevent militants from attacking other countries, which they made in the 2020 peace agreement they signed in Qatar. Insisting that the Taliban keep the peace will also require giving them the tools for the job, such as technical assistance with border management. The EU and its member states should also encourage dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan about other security concerns, such as threats posed to both countries by the Islamic State Khorasan Province, the Islamic State's local affiliate. The member states that have the means should also offer technical assistance and counter-insurgency training to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's police. The EU and member states should continue humanitarian and development support to Pakistan's merged tribal districts. As the economy contracts, such assistance will be crucial in these regions, which are among the poorest in the country.