

Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

► **Bosnia** North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) foreign ministers 5 Dec agreed to activate Bosnia's Membership Action Plan – initially offered in 2010 but delayed due to unmet conditions – and invited govt to submit its first Annual National Program of reforms needed to bring it in line with NATO standards, despite ongoing opposition from Serb member of tripartite presidency Milorad Dodik to joining NATO. Central Election Commission 18 Dec adopted controversial decision to fix election law, enabling establishment of new govt in country's Federation entity and adoption of budget, although Bosniak political parties said they would appeal against it at Constitutional Court. In Republika Srpska (RS) entity, months-long protests against RS govt, prompted by unsolved death of young man in March and increasingly decrying alleged police interference in case, corruption and weak rule of law, gained in momentum, with thousands rallying peacefully in capital Banja Luka 30 Dec demanding resignation of RS interior minister.

► **Kosovo** Tensions with Serbia spiked over Kosovo parliament's 14 Dec approval of legislation transforming Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a regular army, expanding its competences and doubling its size to 5,000. Kosovo Serb MPs boycotted session, said army would have no mandate in Serb-majority North Kosovo and that they would challenge vote at Constitutional Court. Serbian President Vučić called army "illegal", said Pristina had "jeopardized peace and security". NATO earlier called on Kosovo not to proceed with vote; NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg 17 Dec announced his "regret" over "ill-timed" decision, noting NATO would have to re-examine its engagement with KSF. EU and UN also expressed concern; Russia condemned move, while U.S. said it was "Kosovo's sovereign right". Serbia called urgent session of UN Security Council 17 Dec, at which Vučić called on UN to "curb" and "tame" Kosovo and take greater role in normalisation of relations. Tensions also continued over 100% customs tariffs Kosovo imposed in Nov, with Kosovo Serb MPs occupying parliament early Dec in protest. PM Haradinaj and FM Pacolli attended annual EU-Kosovo Stabilisation and Association Council in Brussels 17 Dec, where reportedly tense meeting saw discussions of tariff increase, and Kosovo expressed frustration over delays in EU visa liberalisation. EU foreign policy chief Mogherini convened meeting of five Western Balkan leaders 19 Dec, during which they expressed "strongest support" for Kosovo and Serbia normalising relations, while U.S. President Trump wrote to Thaçi and Vučić mid-month calling for them to reach "historic accord". Pristina 28 Dec announced extension of 100% customs tariff on imports from Serbia and Bosnia to include internationally-branded goods; EU reiterated its condemnation of tariffs, while Vučić said there would be no normalisation talks until tariffs are withdrawn. Thaçi 26 Dec said "land swap never will be negotiated" as part of normalisation agreement.

► **Macedonia** Parliament 3 Dec approved language of draft constitutional amendment to change country name to implement name deal with Greece; vote on whether to adopt amendment expected 15 Jan, requiring two thirds majority. Parliament 18 Dec approved controversial amnesty bill for some participants

involved in April 2017 violent attack on parliament during country's political crisis; bill initiated by opposition MPs who agreed to support name change deal with Greece; judge 25 Dec reported dozens of people including opposition MPs who have been charged or convicted had submitted pleas to be amnestied.

Caucasus

➡ **Armenia** Snap parliamentary elections held 9 Dec resulted in PM Pashinyan's My Step alliance receiving more than 70% of votes (88 out of 132 seats). Former ruling Republican party and Dashnaktsutyun party did not pass 5% threshold to enter parliament. Prosperous Armenia party won 26 seats and Bright Armenia eighteen seats. International Election Observation Mission reported elections "were held with respect for fundamental freedoms and enjoyed broad public trust" and with just minor problems; some local observers pointed to inaccuracies in voter lists affecting turnout numbers. Meeting with Russian President Putin in Russia 27 Dec, Pashinyan said Armenia "committed to further integration" with Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, of which Armenia's rotating presidency begins 1 Jan. Russia 31 Dec announced 10% increase in natural gas price for Armenia.

➡ **Azerbaijan** Grassroot protests over past two months by around 100 relatives demanding compensation for soldiers who were killed or disappeared in Nagorno-Karabakh war in 1990s saw unusual show of support in social media and from some civil society groups criticising govt; one protestor arrested 11 Dec.

➡ **Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan)** Armenia and Azerbaijan continued to exercise restraint along front lines, with no casualties or major attacks reported since end of Sept, when they established new direct communication channel to prevent and resolve incidents. Azerbaijani and Armenian foreign ministers met in reportedly positive meeting 6 Dec, confirmed readiness to continue efforts for restraint; expected to meet again in coming weeks to possibly start preparations for senior leaders' talks. Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders again informally met on sidelines of an international summit 7 Dec in Russia, after which both tweeted readiness to engage in negotiations. Tensions continued to grow between new Armenian govt and de facto NK leadership after statement by ally of PM Pashinyan calling country's April 2018 revolution more important than Armenian military victory in NK war in 1990s, prompting cascade of protest statements in NK. Pashinyan criticised reaction and called for resignation of all de facto officials involved; de facto NK defence minister announced his resignation soon after elections.

➡ **Georgia** At swearing-in ceremony of newly-elected President Salome Zourabichvili in Telavi 16 Dec, thousands reportedly attempted to join rally called by defeated opposition candidate Grigol Vashadze but were prevented as police blocked some roads; in ensuing clashes eight police officers and several protestors reportedly injured, one former opposition MP arrested 17 Dec for attack on police vehicle. During 46th round of Geneva International Discussions (GID, main negotiation forum for Georgian conflicts since 2008) 11-12 Dec participants agreed to resume Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM, aimed at defusing tensions) in South Ossetian conflict zone after three-month break, with first meeting held 18 Dec, discussing recent detentions along boundary line and other security-related issues. UN, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), EU co-chairs urged participants of GID to resume IPRM meetings in Abkhazia conflict zone.

➡ **North Caucasus (Russia)** Amid ongoing security operations against militants, month saw continued tensions over late Sept border agreement between republics of Chechnya and Ingushetia. After Russia's Constitutional Court 6 Dec ruled land deal legal, Central Electoral Commission same day rejected initiative for border referendum. Two suspected militants 12 Dec allegedly detonated grenade while police attempted to arrest them at shopping centre in Nazran, Ingushetia; two security personnel were injured and alleged attackers were killed; media and local civil society speculated at possible ulterior motive of attack, since one victim was reportedly an activist helping protesters against land deal. Sufi activist Ibragim Belkharoyev shot dead in Nazran 31 Dec. In Dagestan, National Anti-terrorism Committee 7 Dec said one suspected militant killed in counter-terrorism operation in Khasavyurt region. Authorities 13 Dec reported they had detained seven militants suspected of financially supporting Islamic State (ISIS) and Fath al-Sham (previously called Nusra Front) in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia and Moscow region; six arrested, one put under house arrest. Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) fact-finding report on human rights violations and abuses in Chechnya, commissioned in Nov and presented 20 Dec, found authorities in region have committed torture, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions and other "very serious" violations and abuses, with victims including members of LGBT community, rights defenders, lawyers, journalists and civil society; called on Russia to ensure Chechen authorities comply with domestic and international legislation and obligations.

Eastern Europe

➡ **Ukraine** Heightened tensions with Russia following late Nov confrontation between Russian and Ukrainian naval vessels continued, as did hostilities in Donbas despite new truce, while establishment of unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church independent from Russia moved to final stages. U.S. Congress 11 Dec approved resolution condemning Russian use of force in 25 Nov incident in shared waters off Crimea. European Parliament 12 Dec adopted resolution condemning same incident, also called for increased sanctions against Russia if it does not release 24 Ukrainian sailors; encouraged Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to extend mandate of its Special Monitoring Mission for Ukraine to Azov Sea and Kerch Strait; and noted "concern" at Kyiv's failure to disarm right-wing groups. NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg 13 Dec pledged support for Ukraine, including delivery of secure communications equipment. UN General Assembly 17 Dec passed resolution condemning militarisation of Crimea and surrounding waters. All 24 captured sailors declared themselves prisoners of war as of 27 Dec. Martial law imposed by govt in ten provinces 28 Nov expired 26 December as planned, although restrictions maintained on Russian males aged sixteen-60 entering country. Trilateral Contact Group for implementation of Minsk agreements pledged to renew ceasefire in Donbas beginning 29 Dec, but sides accused each other of violations; about twenty combatants reported killed, four civilians injured 1-31 December. UN announced national Humanitarian Response Plan, which targets Donbas civilians and IDPs, only 38% funded in 2018. Orthodox clergy held Unification Council 15 Dec and appointed head of new unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church; new head 29 Dec announced that Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople would officially grant

canonical status to Ukrainian Orthodox Church 6 Jan. Law “on freedom of conscience and religious organisations”, requiring Russia-affiliated Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate to change its name to reflect its Moscow-based leadership, entered force 27 Dec. Russia’s Federal Security Service 28 Dec reported that it had completed 60-km fence dividing Crimea from mainland Ukraine to ward off “sabotage”, contraband, and illegal crossings. International Monetary Fund 18 Dec announced new \$3.9bn loan agreement.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➔ **Cyprus** Prospects for resumption of talks on reunification of island still considered dim despite parties continuing to discuss “new paths forward” around different modes of governance: Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades expressing support for “loose federation”, Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı for “federal” solution, and Ankara for “confederation” or “two-states within the EU” solution. UN special envoy Jane Holl Lute, visited the island 16-18 Dec to discuss terms of reference for way forward with Anastasiades and Akıncı. Tensions over hydrocarbon explorations continued.

➔ **Turkey** President Erdoğan said Ankara would postpone planned military offensive against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in north-eastern Syria following unexpected U.S. announcement of withdrawal of troops from Syria. Following series of statements by U.S. officials during month suggesting U.S. was determined to continue backing SDF in Syria, Erdoğan 12 Dec said Ankara would launch an offensive against SDF east of Euphrates River “within days”. Announcement initially prompted U.S. to voice “grave concern” over risks for U.S. military personnel; then on 19 Dec, U.S. President Trump unexpectedly announced full and rapid withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, following call with Erdoğan during which they also agreed on sale of U.S. Patriot air defence system to Turkey. Erdoğan 21 Dec said Turkey would postpone the announced offensive against the SDF “for a while”; also said relations with U.S. now at “desired level”. Despite statement, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 23 Dec reported Turkish military build-up at front line of SDF-controlled town of Manbij; Syria’s military 28 Dec entered Manbij area amid calls from Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) for help against threat of attack by Turkey. In Turkey’s south east – likely due to harsh winter conditions – clashes between military and Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) saw a downturn, while Turkish air raids against PKK in northern Iraq intensified. Turkish military carried out five major cross-border air raids against PKK in northern Iraq; Iraqi authorities 14 Dec summoned Turkish ambassador in Baghdad to protest airstrikes; Turkey 15 Dec said it remained determined to continue cross-border “anti-terror” operations against PKK in Iraq’s Sinjar region. Efforts for constructive engagement between EU and Turkey continued with EU foreign policy chief Mogherini’s late Nov visit to Ankara resulting in some progress toward visa liberalisation.

Central Asia

➡ **Kazakhstan** Astana court 1 Dec charged leader of unregistered Alash People's Social Democratic Party, Syrym Abdirakhmanov, with distribution of false information, assaulting a public official, offending a public official, and obstructing justice. Came one day after Almaty district court 30 Nov sentenced opposition activist Aset Abishev to four years in jail on charges of supporting activities of banned Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK) movement.

➡ **Kyrgyzstan** Amid ongoing reports of harassment and detention of minorities in "re-education" camps in China's Xinjiang province (see China), activists in Bishkek end Nov created Committee to Protect Kyrgyz People in China, and organised protests outside UN 5 Dec and Chinese embassy 20 Dec denouncing "persecution" of Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Uyghurs. Following persistent tension between President Jeenbekov and his predecessor Almazbek Atambayev, parliament 13 Dec approved on first reading bill eliminating immunity for ex-presidents; two more readings needed before Jeenbekov can sign it into law; Jeenbekov 19 Dec denied he was fighting with Atambayev. Authorities 10 Dec arrested former deputy PM Duishenbek Zilaliev on corruption charges.

➡ **Tajikistan** In 10 Dec joint statement, embassies of UK, Germany, France, U.S., and EU delegation in Dushanbe expressed concern over govt's blocking of online news and social media sites and urged govt to "provide for press freedom in accordance with Tajikistan's international obligations".