

Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

➡ **Bosnia** Republika Srpska (RS) entity 9 Jan celebrated its annual “RS statehood day” which included parade by police, fire fighters, civil protection force and pro-Putin Russian motorbike club, attended by Serbian PM Brnabić and Russian ambassador to Bosnia. Bosniak and Bosnian Croat leaders again condemned celebration, which Constitutional Court banned in 2015 declaring it unconstitutional. Main Bosniak Party of Democratic Action 23 Jan said it would challenge name of RS, which it claims has been used to discriminate against non-Serbs, at constitutional court, in move criticised by Office of the High Representative, international overseer of implementation of 1995 peace agreement that ended the war as “irresponsible and counterproductive”.

➡ **Kosovo** International community increased pressure on govt to revoke controversial 100% customs tariff imposed on Serbian and Bosnian goods in Nov 2018 amid divisions on issue within Kosovo between President Thaçi, who wants to lift tariffs in return for progress on EU-facilitated normalisation talks with Serbia, and PM Haradinaj, who conditioned lifting of tariff on Serbian recognition of Kosovo, but faces opposition from his ruling coalition partner party. EU foreign policy chief Mogherini called for lifting of tariff in 8 Jan meeting with Kosovo’s new negotiating team for normalisation dialogue, while U.S. embassy 25 Jan issued statement calling for immediate suspension of tariff. Haradinaj 28 Jan laid out further conditions for revoking tariff including international conference backed by EU and U.S. to work out final agreement with Serbia, rejecting any redrawing of borders; and that any association of Serb municipalities in Kosovo should have no executive powers. Serbian President Vučić in letter to U.S. President Trump 31 Jan said Serbia would resume normalisation dialogue only after Kosovo revokes tariff. Russian President Putin 17 Jan criticised Kosovo’s move to form national army during visit to Serbia, also criticised role of Western countries in Balkans. New Kosovo Specialist Chambers, which was created in 2015, 14 Jan began work in The Hague, to try Kosovo war crimes committed 1998-2000.

↑ **Macedonia** Macedonia and Greece took final steps to implement June 2018 Prespa agreement resolving 27-year dispute over Macedonia’s name. Following several days of negotiation between PM Zaev and opponents to name change, Macedonian parliament 11 Jan passed four constitutional amendments (with 81 out of 120 votes) to change country name to Republic of North Macedonia, its final step in implementing June 2018 agreement, under which Athens would lift its opposition to Macedonia’s EU membership negotiations and NATO membership in return for Macedonian name change. Days later, Greek parliament 25 Jan voted to ratify Prespa agreement by 153 votes to 146. Zaev said “historical victory”, widely acclaimed by international partners including EU and NATO, would promote peace and progress in region, while Greek PM Tsipras called Macedonia “friend and ally” in efforts for regional security, stability and development. Opposition to deal continued in both countries, with small protests outside Macedonian parliament and continued criticism over govt’s Dec changes to criminal code reducing punishments

on cases at Special Prosecutor's Office relating to 2015 wiretapping scandal, which some portrayed as move to secure sufficient support for deal. In Greece, defence minister resigned and PM survived confidence vote ahead of parliamentary vote, while estimated 60,000 joined protest against deal 20 Jan, with violence breaking out between police and some protesters. Separately, law extending official use of Albanian language across Macedonia entered into force 15 Jan.

Caucasus

➡ **Armenia** PM Pashinyan reappointed PM 14 Jan after landslide victory in Dec snap parliamentary elections. Pashinyan announced planned structural change to cabinet with merger and abolition of several ministries; re-appointed most key ministers from his pre-election cabinet.

➡ **Azerbaijan** Case of jailed anti-corruption blogger Mehman Huseynov attracted international attention as several local journalists, opposition activists and human rights advocates joined him in hunger strike to protest what he alleges are trumped up charges against him. EU Parliament 17 Jan passed resolution calling for Huseynov's immediate release, and thousands joined opposition-organised protest in Baku 19 Jan; authorities 22 Jan dropped new charges against Huseynov.

➡ **Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan)** Armenia and Azerbaijan both issued unusually conciliatory statements following meeting of their foreign ministers in Paris 16 Jan for talks mediated by Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group co-chairs. Azerbaijani foreign ministry stated "importance for building more understanding and confidence", while Armenian foreign ministry spoke of need to build contact to help in "establishing broader mutual understanding and trust". Co-chairs' statement discussed need to launch work to prepare populations for peace, importance of possibly mutually beneficial economic initiatives, and plan to visit regional capitals to launch preparations for possible official summit of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders. Media on both sides speculated about agreement on major concessions, however both sides reiterated that no change to their core demands will be possible in the near future. Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders held unofficial face-to-face meeting while attending World Economic Forum in Davos late Jan, reportedly exchanging views on peace process. Situation in conflict zone remained calm with no fatalities reported in Dec and Jan, which in past three years has been deadliest period of year.

➡ **Georgia** Breakaway region of Abkhazia 11 Jan imposed limits on crossing points with Georgian regions, while South Ossetia same day closed all crossing points with Georgian regions entirely, in both cases citing reason as spike in swine flu cases; eighteen people reportedly died in Georgian-controlled territory in Jan. Georgian govt protested decision and requested intervention from foreign allies, saying outbreak was at similar level to previous year. Move followed de facto leaderships' repeated expressions of concern, highlighted again during Geneva talks in Dec, over "biological experiments" at U.S.-founded medical laboratory near Tblisi. Closure also comes in context of growing pressure on ethnic Georgians living in breakaways ahead of de facto elections in 2019, who are main users of crossings. Tens of ethnic Georgian residents of Abkhazia 23 Jan held rare protest in front of de facto Gali

governor's office demanding opening of crossing points and new documents and regulations for those who cross.

➔ **North Caucasus (Russia)** Amid ongoing security operations against militants, month saw continued tensions over land deal between Chechnya and Ingushetia and increased human rights violations. Despite 18 Jan submission to Kremlin of petition signed by more than 51,000 Ingush residents demanding cancellation of controversial Oct 2018 border deal, speakers of Chechen and Ingush parliaments 22 Jan held first meeting of new border commission and agreed to clarify "historical boundaries". Russian LGBT Network human rights group 14 Jan reported that Chechen authorities have resumed large-scale arrests and torture of gay men and women with some 40 detained and two killed since Dec, sparking fears of renewed crackdown. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov oversaw return of 30 Russian children from Iraq 30 Dec, marking resumption of efforts to repatriate family members of insurgents fighting for Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria as part of broader deradicalisation strategy; the 30 children are out of total of 115 expected to be returned soon. In Dagestan, authorities 11 Jan reported law enforcers shot dead three suspected militants who attacked patrol post in Karabudakhkent district. In Ingushetia, gunfire on car of head of Ingush Centre for Combating Extremism in Sunzha district left one policeman dead. In Kabardino-Balkaria, four assailants reported killed in attack on police post 24 Jan, one policeman injured. Elsewhere in Russia, speculation grew that 31 Dec explosion in Magnitogorsk which killed 39 was work of ISIS despite official denials.

Eastern Europe

➔ **Belarus** Tensions increased between Belarus and Russia late Dec/early Jan over Minsk's demands that Moscow compensate budget losses caused by a change in Russian tax system for oil exports making them more expensive for Belarus, and Russia's counter demands for faster integration under 1999 plan for Union State between the two countries. Tensions sparked speculation that Russia sought to "annex" Belarus; meanwhile President Lukashenka moved to thaw relations with U.S. by lifting limit on number of U.S. diplomats in country, although many observers downplayed likelihood that Moscow harbours plans for annexation.

➔ **Ukraine** Campaigning for presidential elections scheduled for 31 March kicked off following expiration of martial law late Dec, as low-level hostilities continued in Donbas and tensions with Russia continued over 25 Nov attack on Ukrainian vessels off Crimea. As of 16 Jan all 22 sailors and two security agents captured by Russian authorities during attack had their pre-trial detention periods extended to late April. Russian FM Lavrov 18 Jan said that Moscow had agreed to German and French offer to monitor traffic in Kerch Strait but questioned need for Kyiv's approval; Ukrainian FM Klimkin said release of captured sailors should remain primary focus. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed resolution 24 Jan supporting German and French monitoring proposal, calling on Russia to apply Geneva Conventions to Ukrainian captives. OSCE Chairman-in-Office Martin Sajdik 28 Jan spoke to Austrian newspaper about plans to implement 2014-2015 Minsk Agreements via local elections overseen jointly by OSCE and UN in areas currently held by Moscow-backed armed groups, along with formation of European

agency for rebuilding Donbas; Saijdik suggested proposal should be subject to approval by Ukrainian and Russian parliaments. Ukrainian FM called plan “same old thing” but praised call for international oversight; de facto FM of so-called Donetsk People’s Republic termed it “attempt to sabotage the Minsk process”. Three civilians injured in Donbas conflict zone over month, while seven elderly people died waiting to cross Line of Separation in harsh weather conditions; at least three Ukrainian military members and seven armed group fighters killed, at least 28 injured. With over 100 religious communities leaving Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate to join newly-formed Orthodox Church in Ukraine since mid-Dec, Kyiv passed legislation 28 Jan outlining procedures for congregations to switch allegiance and handle disputes over use of worship sites. Kyiv district court sentenced ex-President Viktor Yanukovych in absentia 24 Jan to thirteen years in prison on charges of committing state treason and colluding to wage war against Ukraine and undermine its territorial integrity.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➡ **Cyprus** Discussion on possible resumption of talks on reunification of island continued to evolve around different modes of governance. After meeting with UN Secretary-General Special Representative and Head of UN’s Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) Elizabeth Spehar 11 Jan, Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı said that nearest date that all parties will be ready for reunification talks would be in June, referring to municipal elections in Turkey in March and European Parliament elections in Republic of Cyprus late May. UN Security Council 30 Jan voted to extend UNFICYP mandate. Tensions over hydrocarbon explorations in Eastern Mediterranean continued.

➡ **Northern Ireland (UK)** Several incidents of suspected republican dissident violence reported, amid growing concerns over possible implications of UK’s scheduled 29 March departure from EU for arrangements on border with Republic of Ireland and Good Friday Agreement. Car bomb exploded outside courthouse in Londonderry 19 Jan, following earlier hijacking of vehicle; police arrested five men in connection with bomb, releasing four 21 Jan. Masked men 21 Jan hijacked two more vehicles in separate incidents in Londonderry, raising fears of further bombs. No group claimed responsibility for incidents but police blamed “new IRA” republican dissidents.

➡ **Turkey** Intensity of military’s security operations against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in south east remained low with few fatalities, while deadly Turkish air raids against PKK in northern Iraq prompted angry response by alleged PKK-sympathising Iraqi group. Major cross-border air raid in northern Iraq 20 Jan reportedly killed six; sources close to PKK claimed they were civilians, Turkish army said they were PKK militants. Hundreds of protesters 26 Jan stormed Turkish military base in Iraq’s Dohuk province; at least one killed and ten injured in clashes. Crackdown on individuals allegedly linked to PKK continued across Turkey. Authorities 12 Jan allowed imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan to be visited by his brother Mehmet for first time in two and a half years. Hundreds of figures from the People’s Democratic Party (HDP)’s municipal affiliate party remain imprisoned ahead of March municipal elections. Strains in Turkish-U.S. relationship continued

following U.S. statements that its planned withdrawal from Syria was conditional on Turkish guarantee not to attack “Kurdish fighters” (see Syria). Ankara expressed anger at remarks, renewing threat to carry out military offensive in north east Syria and reiterating Turkey’s main goal to clear “terrorist groups”. President Erdoğan and U.S. President Trump 14 Jan discussed possible 20-mile “safe zone” in north east Syria; following 16 Jan Islamic State (ISIS)-claimed bomb in Manbij that killed sixteen including four U.S. soldiers, Erdoğan said Turkey would start military takeover of Manbij if U.S. did not protect its borders via safe zone. Erdoğan and Russian President Putin met in Moscow 23 Jan; agreed on closer military cooperation in Syria’s Idlib, however Putin reaffirmed Moscow’s support for dialogue between Damascus and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). As alternative to U.S. safe zone, Putin also said 1998 Adana agreement between Turkey and Syria could serve as basis of Ankara’s efforts to secure its borders and “fight terrorism”. Inside Turkey, security forces 13 Jan conducted first crackdown against jihadist alliance Hei’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – which currently controls most of Idlib zone – targeting “civilian” cells in Adana, Istanbul and Ankara allegedly providing support to militants in Syria.

Central Asia

➡ **Kazakhstan** During 9 Jan address to nation, President Nazarbayev said 47 Kazakh citizens including 30 children had been evacuated from Syria, where they were “held hostage by terrorists”; security services say hundreds of citizens have joined militant groups in Syria since 2011. Foreign ministry statement 9 Jan confirmed media reports that China has allowed 2,000 ethnic Kazakhs to renounce Chinese citizenship and leave for Kazakhstan, amid ongoing reports of mass Muslim internment camps (see China) and Kazakhs being released into house arrest.

➡ **Kyrgyzstan** Several hundred people 7 and 17 Jan protested in Bishkek against Chinese migrants, urged authorities to deport illegal Chinese migrants, and expressed support for ethnic Kyrgyz detained in Xinjiang re-education camps (see China). President Jeenbekov 11 Jan warned people “trying to disrupt Kyrgyz-Chinese partnership” could be prosecuted; 21 protesters fined for disrupting public order. Human Rights Watch annual report 17 Jan noted fewer attacks on media and free speech in first year of Jeenbekov’s presidency, but said other long-term rights concerns not addressed.

➡ **Tajikistan** Human Rights Watch annual report 17 Jan noted negative trends in human rights in Tajikistan in 2018 with more repressive policies; urged Central Asian leaders seeking international investment to improve human rights.

➡ **Turkmenistan** President Berdymukhammedov 2 Jan appointed son Serdar deputy governor of south-central region of Ahal. Defence ministry source 14 Jan told media conscriptions commissions were instructed to register males younger than 50, reportedly linked to tense situation along border with Afghanistan. Human Rights Watch annual report 17 Jan noted negative trends in human rights in Turkmenistan in 2018 with more repressive policies.

➡ **Uzbekistan** During visit in Germany, President Mirziyoyev 21 Jan expressed hopes for closer ties and increased German investment in Uzbekistan. Human Rights

Watch annual report 17 Jan noted improvements in Uzbekistan human rights situation in 2018, including govt's release of some political prisoners, relaxing some restrictions on freedom of expression and increasing govt accountability; urged Central Asian leaders seeking international investment to improve human rights.