

Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

➔ **Bosnia** Following declaration of state of disaster in Republika Srpska (RS) entity in March due to COVID-19 outbreak, RS President Željka Cvijanović 7 April announced controversial measures including ban on actions that cause panic or disorder, and fines for individuals or companies that spread fake news through media or social networks. NGO Transparency International 8 April called on RS to withdraw decree, stating that according to RS Constitution president “cannot suspend the right to freedom of opinion and expression”. International Monetary Fund (IMF) 20 April approved \$361mn in emergency assistance to govt in response to COVID-19 outbreak; payment made despite reports that FM and three other Bosniak ministers had not approved request to borrow IMF funds.

➔ **Kosovo** Following collapse of coalition govt in March, President Thaçi 1 April consulted party leaders on formation of new unity govt. Thaçi 19 April announced need for further steps to form new govt, as outgoing PM Kurti’s Vetëvendosje party called for new elections as soon as possible. Isa Mustafa, leader of former coalition partner Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), 14 April said party stood ready to form new governing coalition with smaller parties as soon as it receives official mandate from president; Thaçi 23 April gave LDK mandate to form new govt; LDK same day nominated former Deputy PM Avdullah Hoti as its candidate for PM. Thaçi 30 April formally nominated Hoti as PM; thirty Vetëvendosje party legislators filed legal complaint with Constitutional Court to challenge nomination, claiming Vetëvendosje is only party permitted to form new govt. Kurti 20 April accused U.S. envoy Richard Grenell of being “directly involved” in collapse of his coalition govt. Kurti 1 April confirmed decision to lift 100% tariffs on import of Serbian goods until 15 June; in response to announcement, Director of Serbia’s office for Kosovo Marko Djurić same day said that Kurti “did not abolish fees” and he rather conditionally suspended taxes. Outgoing Health Minister Arben Vitia 13 April announced intensification of COVID-19 prevention measures until 4 May, introducing stricter curfew; LDK condemned new measures as continuation of “legal and constitutional violations”. Despite ongoing bilateral tensions, Serbia 17 April delivered over 1,000 COVID-19 test kits to Kosovo as sign of “solidarity”.

Caucasus

➔ **Armenia** Former president Serzh Sargsyan 16 April testified in closed hearing at parliamentary commission investigating April 2016 deadly escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK); commission, proposed by PM Pashinyan in May 2019 and subsequently established by National Assembly, had previously called on former and current senior and mid-level officials and military representatives from Armenia and de facto NK.

➔ **Azerbaijan** International organisations and human rights groups condemned govt’s alleged crackdown on opposition and critics under pretext of COVID-19 public health emergency; authorities sentenced at least ten activists to up to 30 days detention on charges related to breaking lockdown rules or disobeying police orders. President Aliyev 14 April called opposition “enemies of people” and “traitors”; leader of Popular Front Party opposition party Ali Kerimli

next day said govt had blocked his internet access and mobile communications services.

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh conflict** Former PM Arayk Harutyunyan 14 April won second round of de facto presidential elections in entity; his opponent, current FM Masis Mayilian, called on supporters to abstain from vote to contain spread of COVID-19; turnout lower by nearly 30 per cent in comparison to first round on 31 March. Armenian NGOs serving as election observers in NK capital Stepanakert reported voting violations, but Armenian leadership praised results. Armenian PM Pashinyan faced unprecedented criticism among his supporters who claimed Harutyunyan could turn NK into safe haven for former Armenian officials facing corruption charges, while Mayilian supporters said Pashinyan had “betrayed the revolution”, due to possible increased influence of former political elite. Harutyunyan 1 April proposed cooperation with all politicians and political parties in de facto entity, saying “I am ready to cooperate with any [political] force except for Azerbaijan”, also pledged support for Pashinyan’s policy and development plans in NK. Armenian and Azerbaijani FMs and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group co-chairs 21 April held online conference; parties agreed to postpone implementation of previously agreed humanitarian measures citing COVID-19 crisis. Russian FM Sergei Lavrov 21 April advocated phased approach in NK peace process, starting with return of territories adjacent to NK to Azerbaijan’s direct control and resumption of transport and economic links between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey; Armenian FM denied Lavrov’s claim that plan was discussed in April 2019 and called for more clarity on NK final status; Azerbaijan accused Armenia of disrupting negotiation process.

➔ **Georgia** Concerns continued over vulnerability of breakaway regions in face of COVID-19 outbreak. South Ossetia continued to refuse offers of support from international organisations, including World Health Organization (WHO); since mid-March de facto leadership maintained long-standing requirement that WHO specialists enter region from Russia, not Georgia, despite Russian and Georgian border restrictions rendering it near impossible. South Ossetia de facto leadership and Russia mid-April resumed borderisation activity along line of separation with territory controlled by Tbilisi, drawing condemnation from Tbilisi, Co-Chairs of Geneva International Discussions and Georgia’s foreign partners. In breakaway region Abkhazia, local leadership stepped up international engagement, receiving support from Russia and international organisations including UN Development Programme and WHO.

➔ **Russia/North Caucasus** In North Caucasus, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov 5 April closed administrative border with rest of Russia, while reports emerged of police beatings of people violating self-isolation rules within Chechnya; PM Mikhail Mishustin 6 April said closing regional borders was unacceptable, prompting public argument with Kadyrov. In Vladikavkaz, capital of North Caucasus republic North Ossetia, at least 1,500 people joined violent protest against lockdown measures; protestors demanded resignation of regional head Vyacheslav Bitarov and appointment of interim regional govt headed by opposition politician Vitaly Kaloyev; police dispersed rally with teargas and arrested 69 people, of whom thirteen 21 April sentenced to prison. Vote on proposed constitutional changes previously planned for 22 April remained on hold.

Eastern Europe

➔ **Belarus** Following settlement of dispute over price of Russian oil supplies in March, Russian oil company Transneft 6 April resumed crude oil supplies to

Belarusian refineries, ending freeze that began 1 Jan. President Lukashenko 13 April asserted “no one would die of coronavirus in our country”, stating that govt had found “combinations of drugs to save people” and refuting Health Ministry’s figures showing that virus had already killed 29 people.

➔ **Ukraine** Despite hopes of ceasefire amid COVID-19 outbreak, deadly fighting in Donbas continued, while sides made limited progress toward political resolution to conflict. In conflict zone, fighting near standard hotspots along central part of contact line – near Donetsk, Debaltseve, Horlivka, and Mariupol cities – killed five govt soldiers and eleven Russian-backed fighters throughout month according to official and unofficial data; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) reported four civilians injured and one killed. OSCE monitors reported consistent denials of access by authorities to so-called People’s Republics. Kyiv and de facto authorities 16 April swapped prisoners in “Easter exchange”; Kyiv received twenty prisoners for releasing fourteen separatist fighters. At 22 April meeting of Trilateral Contact Group (TCG), sides reportedly agreed to establish new working group – with representatives of border guard and customs services of Russia and Ukraine and OSCE mediators – to discuss compromise formulas for resumption of govt control of eastern border with Russia. Govt 6 April tightened COVID-19 restrictions, prohibiting outside meetings of more than two people and introducing large fines and prison terms for offenders; opposition members and human rights activists criticised measures. President Zelenskyy 13 April signed law allowing govt agencies to access and exchange citizens’ personal data without consent until end of lockdown, which govt 23 April extended until 11 May, as death toll in govt-controlled areas passed 260 end-April. In separatist-held areas, following closure of checkpoints for civilians in March, govt and Russia-backed forces allowed delivery of humanitarian aid; de facto authorities by 29 April announced total 229 cases and four deaths. Representatives of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France 30 April held virtual Normandy Four meeting, noting lack of progress on de-escalation measures agreed at 9 Dec summit; Moscow reiterated demands for Ukraine to negotiate terms of breakaway areas’ return to Kyiv’s jurisdiction directly with de facto leaders; Kyiv expressed readiness for dialogue with the areas’ residents, but not Russian-backed authorities.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➔ **Cyprus** No progress was marked on UN efforts to relaunch reunification talks, while tensions between Turkey, Greece, and Republic of Cyprus on gas drilling in eastern Mediterranean continued. Turkish FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu 14 April said Greece had rejected President Erdoğan’s proposal for high-level dialogue mechanism to discuss fair distribution of revenues from energy in eastern Mediterranean, maritime delimitation disagreements, and resolution of Cyprus dispute. Amid rapid fall in oil prices, Cypriot energy minister 13 April confirmed U.S. company Exxon Mobil decision to postpone planned drilling in Block 10 of Republic of Cyprus’ Exclusive Economic Zone until Sept 2021; other oil companies could follow suit.

➔ **Northern Ireland (UK)** National Union of Journalists 8 April condemned threats of violence toward journalist from *Irish News* by suspected dissident Republicans. Police 19 April launched investigations into two separate paramilitary-style attacks in east Belfast and Coleraine in which two men were hospitalised.

➔ **Turkey** Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) intensified attacks in south east while Turkish military targeted PKK within Turkey and in northern Iraq. PKK

launched attacks on state-contracted workers in Nusaybin city 3 April, Kulp district 8 April, and Silopi city 14 April. Turkish military continued small-scale ground operations against PKK in rural areas of south east and carried out two air raids on PKK in northern Iraq, including airstrikes 15 April destroyed PKK base south of Qandil and armed drone attack same day targeted the Makhmur camp south west of Erbil. Within Turkey, prosecution on terrorism-related charges continued of eight pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) mayors who govt dismissed in March. In north east Syria, Turkish military targeted Kurdish-led People's Protection Units (YPG) militants; YPG-attributed car bomb attack in Afrin on 28 April killed at least 42 civilians (see Syria). In Syria's Idlib province, rebels continued to oppose fragile March Moscow-Ankara ceasefire agreement; Turkish security forces 13 April dispersed sit-in protests, apparently organised by jihadist coalition Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), aimed at halting joint Turkish-Russian patrols. In response, HTS briefly abducted Turkey-backed rebel fighters. Nonetheless, Russia and Turkey 28 April conducted sixth joint patrol in area. As conflict in Libya continued to escalate, Turkey stepped up military support to Tripoli-based Government of National Accord; Turkish F16 fighter jets 18 April carried out first ever military exercise over Misrata (see Libya). Detentions of Islamic State (ISIS) suspects decreased, with only twelve individuals with suspected ISIS links detained during month, including six foreigners. Concerns grew over potential impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable Syrian refugee population in Turkey, as well as strain on economy.

Central Asia

➔ **Kazakhstan** Head of Almaty-based human rights foundation 8 April said govt is “doing everything to muzzle activists to prevent their criticism of the govt’s anti-coronavirus measures”; police 7 April reportedly detained activist in Oral city, court early April sentenced activist in Zhambyl region to up to 28 days’ imprisonment, and court 18 April sentenced activist in capital Almaty to two months in prison in relation to lockdown measures. In response to increasing economic pressure due to COVID-19 and fall in global oil prices, govt 15 April paid out compensation for lost income to more than 2.7m people.

➔ **Kyrgyzstan** Govt 14 April extended state of emergency imposed in response to COVID-19 in major cities and several districts until 30 April; earlier, President Jeenbekov 1 April dismissed Deputy PM and health minister over COVID-19 response. Amid economic strain, govt 14 April reported President Jeenbekov asked Chinese President Xi Jinping for debt relief.

➔ **Tajikistan** Upper legislative chamber 17 April elected Rustam Emomali, son of President Rahmon, as their chair, second-highest govt office; move comes as country prepares for presidential elections scheduled for 2020. State media 9 April reported Supreme Court’s decision to block independent news website Akhbor on grounds it allegedly offered platform to “terrorists and extremists”. Court 16 April sentenced journalist Daler Sharifov to one year in prison following late Jan arrest on charges of inciting ethnic and religious discord. Russian govt 3 April said over half a million Tajik labour migrants were stranded in Russia following COVID-19-related border closures; President Putin 18 April signed decree temporarily lifting requirements for migrants to renew work permits and permitting workers to stay in Russia without extending residency registration. World Health Organization’s local representative in capital Dushanbe 1 April confirmed all COVID-19 tests conducted in Tajikistan were negative but 22 April said it was impossible to confirm absence of COVID-19, citing restricted diagnostic and treatment capacity; Tajik authorities

30 April confirmed country had fifteen registered cases; late April temporarily closed schools, banned mass-attendance events and suspended exports of grain.

➔ **Turkmenistan** Amid longstanding reports of food shortages, dozens of women held protest near Mary city 3 April; officials reportedly distributed bags of flour in effort to calm protesters. In official speech, President Berdymukhammedov same day referred to COVID-19 for first time publicly; urged cabinet to adopt action to alleviate its impact on economy and criticised several senior officials for mismanagement of food shortage situation. Central Bank 1 April banned withdrawal of cash in foreign currencies in response to concerns over falling global price of natural gas, while authorities in Darganata district (east) early April further reduced limits on daily cash withdrawals. Govt continued to claim it had not registered any COVID-19 cases and throughout month hosted mass public events. Media watchdog NGO Reporters Without Borders mid-April ranked Turkmenistan joint bottom in the world (with North Korea) in its annual review of press freedom.

➔ **Uzbekistan** UN Human Rights Committee report findings published 2 April expressed concern over reports of civil and political rights violations, including prison officials and law enforcement torture and abuse of detainees, and detention of journalists and activists on politically-motivated charges; first review of country's human rights record since President Mirziyoyev took office in 2016. Mirziyoyev in public address 3 April said his govt's heavy-handed approach in response to COVID-19 was necessary to prevent its rapid spread; law enforcement registered 2,200 rule violations by early April. Labour Minister 15 April asked global human rights coalition Cotton Campaign to end campaign for international boycott of Uzbek cotton and textiles in place since 2006, citing country's progress in eliminating forced labour and "unprecedented dual threat" on public health and economy due to COVID-19; Cotton Campaign 16 April however rejected request saying it was too early to lift boycott.