

Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

➔ **Bosnia** **Mostar held first elections in over decade.** Mostar, city in south, 20 Dec held first elections in 12 years after EU, U.S. and UK-sponsored agreement in June broke deadlock between major Croat and Bosniak political parties, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and Bosniak Party of Democratic Action (SDA); central election commission revealed HDZ and SDA won largest vote shares of 35-member city council but fell short of outright majority.

➔ **Kosovo** **EU-led Kosovo-Serbia dialogue resumed and Constitutional Court declared PM Hoti's govt as illegitimate.** Kosovo State Coordinator on Dialogue Skender Hyseni and Serbian Director of Government Office for Kosovo Petar Petkovic 10 Dec met for new round of EU-brokered talks in Brussels led by EU Representative for Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue Miroslav Lajcak; meeting produced no significant narrowing of differences on financial claims and property issues. Constitutional Court 21 Dec ruled that PM Hoti's govt was illegitimate as it received Assembly majority with invalid vote cast by MP Etem Arifi who was convicted for corruption in Aug 2019; acting President Vjosa Osmani 22 Dec began consultations with political parties to set date for snap elections. Kosovo electricity network system operator KOSTT 15 Dec began to operate independently from Serbian operator EMS in newly-established regulatory area covering whole Kosovo territory, including Serb-majority north; Serbian President Vucic warned govt to refrain from such unilateral moves that could hamper ongoing talks. FM Meliza Haradinaj-Stublla 27 Dec accused Serbia of violating Kosovo's national security through "illegal roads" and "unverified pharmaceutical products", said Serbia had "undermined" ongoing normalisation process. Chief Prosecutor in Mitrovica municipality next day revealed investigation was underway into how COVID-19 vaccines from Serbia had reached Kosovo's Serb-run north without prior consultation with local authorities; Vucic same day said distribution of vaccine in northern Kosovo does not violate Brussels agreements.

Caucasus

➔ **Armenia** **Govt completed first prisoner swaps with Azerbaijan as part of Russia-brokered ceasefire, while opposition protests calling for PM Pashinyan's resignation continued.** Baku and Yerevan 14 Dec exchanged first group of prisoners of war and civilians that included over 44 Armenian and 14 Azerbaijani detainees, with active participation of Russian peacekeeping forces deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh under Nov ceasefire deal; second group of four Armenian and two Azerbaijani detainees released on 28 Dec. Clashes 11-12 Dec took place between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces near villages under Armenian control in first violation of ceasefire agreement (see Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict). Govt announced that it had lifted some martial law restrictions imposed in Sept, including restrictions on holding protests and strikes. Hundreds of opposition demonstrators 8 Dec gathered in capital Yerevan after PM Nikol Pashinyan ignored

calls to step down over Nov ceasefire with Azerbaijan. Thousands of Armenians 19 Dec began three days of mourning for victims of hostilities with Azerbaijan, marching through Yerevan. Hundreds of opposition supporters 22 Dec set up protest camp outside govt buildings in Yerevan in response to calls from opposition for national strike. Pashinyan 29 Dec started official discussions about snap parliamentary elections with three main political parties present at National Assembly; no date for possible vote announced yet. Meanwhile, French and American co-chairs of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Minsk Group 14 Dec visited Yerevan for first time since Oct 2019: PM Pashinyan raised with co-chairs need to restore negotiations in format of Minsk Group co-chairmanship with aim of comprehensive settlement, and co-chairs stressed that they remained “committed to providing concrete proposals on issues raised during the meetings for future discussions between the sides.” Lack of clarity on new Armenia-Azerbaijan border 16-17 Dec sparked local protests involving hundreds of residents in southern Syunik region with some briefly blocking roads; defence ministry 17 Dec confirmed that Russian border troops would be stationed along state border in Syunik to ease tensions.

➔ **Azerbaijan Govt completed first prisoner swaps with Armenia as part of Russia-brokered ceasefire and bolstered ties with Turkey.** Baku and Yerevan 14 Dec exchanged first group of prisoners of war, detainees and civilians that included over 44 Armenian and 14 Azerbaijani detainees, with active participation of Russian peacekeeping forces deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh under Nov ceasefire deal; second group of four Armenian and two Azerbaijani detainees released on 28 Dec. Govt 10 Dec held victory parade in capital Baku with participation of Turkish political and military leadership, including group of Turkish soldiers joining Azerbaijani troops in parade; govt 28 Dec revealed it had lost 2,823 soldiers during war. President Aliyev 10 Dec discussed opening of Turkey’s borders with Armenia with Turkish President Erdoğan; Erdoğan stated that Turkey was ready to reopen border with Armenia if Yerevan takes unspecified “positive steps”, and later recited poem lamenting division of Azerbaijani lands along Aras river that runs between Azerbaijan and Iran, prompting Iranian lawmakers 13 Dec to condemn such “unacceptable and divisive” remarks (see Iran). Clashes 11-12 Dec took place between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces near villages under Armenian control in first violation of ceasefire agreement (see Nagorno-Karabakh). Govt 15 Dec signed memorandum of understanding with Turkey, under which Ankara is due to supply natural gas to Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan via new gas pipeline from Turkey’s Igdir region; deal could reduce Nakhchivan’s current dependence on Iranian gas. French and American co-chairs of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Minsk Group 12 Dec visited Baku for first time since start of Oct 2019; Aliyev 12 Dec told co-chairs that they had not been invited. Govt 18 Dec closed land border with Russia until 1 March 2021 due to stark rise in COVID-19 cases in both countries.

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh Armenia and Azerbaijan completed first prisoner swaps as part of Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement, and some clashes erupted mid-month.** After several weeks of discussion, Baku and Yerevan 14 Dec exchanged first group of prisoners of war, detainees and civilians that included over 44 Armenian and 14 Azerbaijani detainees, with active participation of Russian peacekeeping forces deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) under Nov ceasefire deal; second group of four Armenian and two Azerbaijani

detainees released on 28 Dec. In first violation of ceasefire agreement, clashes 11-12 Dec took place between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces near villages of Hin Tagher and Khtsaberd in Hadrut region under Armenian control; shortly after, Russian peacekeepers deployed to area to stabilise situation. President Aliyev 12 Dec raised incident in his meeting with Minsk Group co-chairs, holding Armenia responsible for new clashes; Armenian MFA next day said Azerbaijani troops exploited absence of peacekeeping forces in area. De facto authorities 16 Dec confirmed handover of nine corpses of its soldiers killed in clashes, and 73 others captured by Azerbaijani forces. Azerbaijan's defence ministry and State Security Service 13 Dec issued joint statement announcing launch of "anti-terror operation" in response to "acts of provocation" against their servicemen in village of Sur in Nov and on 8 Dec, during which four Azerbaijani soldiers were killed and two injured. French and American co-chairs of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Minsk Group 12-14 Dec visited Baku and Yerevan, but did not travel to NK capital Stepanakert; co-chairs' meeting with de facto leader of NK Arayik Harutyunyan in Yerevan was cancelled last minute for no clear reason.

➔ **Georgia** **Newly-elected parliament held first session, boycotted by opposition parties still demanding snap election.** President Zourabichvili 12 Dec inaugurated first session of new parliament, attended only by members of ruling Georgian Dream party amid boycott by opposition parties that demand snap election, release of "political prisoners", electoral reforms and replacement of electoral administration; five out of eight parties 11 Dec signed symbolic declarations confirming their refusal to enter parliament and cancellation of their party list as talks with Georgian Dream party, facilitated by U.S. and EU ambassadors, had yet to resolve standoff. U.S. embassy and EU delegation 11 Dec issued joint statement expressing "regret that it was not possible to reach a broad-based agreement before the first convocation of the new parliament". In breakaway South Ossetia, protesters throughout month rallied in front of main governmental headquarters of regional capital Tskhinvali demanding justice for local man reportedly beaten to death in police custody in late Aug, and resignation of de facto Prosecutor General Uruzmag Dzhagayev.

➔ **Russia/North Caucasus** **Weekly protests continued in Far East, while several security incidents occurred in North Caucasus.** Demonstrations 5, 12, 19 and 26 Dec continued in Khabarovsk city in Far East to protest July arrest of former local governor and member of populist Liberal Democratic Party Sergei Furgal; police 19 and 26 Dec detained several protesters. Russian President Putin 17 Dec said that Furgal's case was not politically motivated. Meanwhile in Karachay-Cherkessia republic in North Caucasus, suicide bombing 11 Dec outside regional domestic intelligence directorate in village of Uchkeken injured six law enforcement officers. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov 15 Dec announced that member of illegal armed group, Kazbek Baidulaev, was killed during security operation in Achkhoy-Martanovsky district of Chechnya. Interfax news agency 17 Dec reported that Chechen security services killed two unidentified men in return fire who had thrown explosive device at police in Kurchaloevskii district in Chechnya.

➡ **U.S.-Russia Arms control negotiations remained deadlocked while U.S. accused Russia of major cyberattack on its govt agencies.** President Putin 17 Dec emphasised commitment to “continue dialogue with the U.S.” on nuclear arms control treaty New START, which is set to elapse 5 Feb 2021, and blamed Washington for starting new arms race; U.S. same day reiterated demand to extend treaty and blamed Russian MFA for “rejecting” all meetings. U.S. officials 13 Dec reported major data breach of several U.S. govt agencies and departments, including commerce, state and treasury, as well as U.S. non-govt organisations and firms; U.S. Sec State Mike Pompeo 18 Dec directly blamed Russia for attack. U.S. State Department next day announced decision to permanently close two remaining consulates in Russia, leaving Moscow embassy as sole diplomatic representation; U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan 23 Dec blamed Moscow for closures, citing Russia’s decision to impose visa restrictions on U.S. diplomatic personnel.

Eastern Europe

➡ **Belarus Mass protests over disputed Aug presidential elections continued.** Thousands throughout month protested in capital Minsk, calling for free and fair elections and challenging govt’s Nov ban on mass demonstrations. Police 6 Dec arrested more than 300 people during protests, using water cannons, armoured vehicles and military trucks to disperse crowds; police 13 Dec detained 135 people and 20 Dec arrested over 100 demonstrators during opposition protests. Hundreds 27 Dec marched in Minsk demanding resignation of President Lukashenka amid heavy police presence; police detained 13 protesters. U.S. 23 Dec sanctioned four entities and 40 individuals for role in disputed election, while EU 17 Dec imposed third round of sanctions targeting seven entities and 29 individuals. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 4 Dec urged govt to cancel results of disputed Aug election, immediately cease all violence against peaceful protesters and organise new presidential elections. Belarus opposition leader Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya 16 Dec received European Parliament’s 2020 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in Brussels on behalf of opposition Coordination Council. Prosecutor General’s Office 22 Dec opened criminal case against Tsikhanouskaya, accusing her and Coordination Council of forming extremist group to overthrow govt.

↓ **Ukraine July ceasefire wore thin following escalation of fighting along line of contact in Donbas conflict zone.** Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) recorded over 200 ceasefire violations in Donetsk oblast on three separate days – 11, 19 and 29 Dec – following months in which recorded daily ceasefire violations had ranged from single digits to just below 100. Areas around Donetsk Filtration Station in Avdiivka, Zolote and Popasna suffered shelling throughout month. Sniper fire and shelling injured seven Ukrainian soldiers; Ukrainian forces sustained one non-live-fire injury. Armed groups 17 Dec captured Ukrainian reconnaissance commander in Luhansk region; body of another Ukrainian soldier was passed to armed forces 17 Dec. Russian-backed forces said shelling killed four of its fighters 18 Dec and one 22 Dec. One civilian was injured 20 Dec after anti-tank missile hit his vehicle; govt forces said missile was launched from area of enemy control. Prisoner swap negotiations remained stalled. Chief OSCE representative to Minsk Trilateral Contact Group, Ambassador Heidi Grau, 16 Dec

urged sides to finalise identification of new demining areas. Kyiv 16 Dec opened its second administrative centre for civilians at crossing in Novotroitske, south of Donetsk city, and reopened all entry-exit checkpoints; however, corresponding checkpoints in de facto republics remained closed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Representatives of so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics 2 Dec participated in informal UN Security Council meeting, proposing referendum on status of territories under their de facto control. President Zelenskyy 16 Dec stated that U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's understanding of Russia-Ukraine dynamics would "add to resolving Donbas war". President Putin 17 Dec blamed Kyiv for deepening stalemate in Donbas, warning Ukrainian govt against attempts to unilaterally revise Minsk agreements and promising greater infrastructure and economic support for so-called republics. International Criminal Court Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda 11 Dec announced that following preliminary examination of "a broad range of conduct constituting war crimes and crimes against humanity [...] statutory criteria for opening investigations into the situation in Ukraine has been met."

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➔ **Cyprus** **Prospects for relaunching UN talks remained dim amid gap between Turkey and Turkish Cypriots on one hand and Greece and Greek Cypriots on the other.** UN Special Envoy to Cyprus Jane Holl Lute throughout month met relevant stakeholders to lay foundations for relaunching UN-sponsored talks. Lute 1 Dec met Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar, who spoke in favour of restarting talks but stressed that federal solution – on which talks in past were based – had not led to any result and that "it [was] time for a solution to be based on sovereign equality; where there are two states co-existing side by side". Following 16 Dec meeting with Lute in Ankara, Turkish FM Çavuşoğlu echoed sentiment, tweeting that "federation project is no longer sustainable. In line with realities on island, Turkish side promotes two-state settlement based on equal sovereignty". In contrast, following meetings with Lute, Greek Cypriot officials 1 Dec and Greek officials 2 Dec reiterated position that talks should resume where they left off in previous round. In "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus", PM Ersan Saner 9 Dec formed new govt following fall of previous one in Oct.

➔ **Eastern Mediterranean** **Tensions between Greece and Turkey cooled, raising prospect of resumption of exploratory talks.** Tensions between Greece and Turkey tempered after Ankara late Nov withdrew its seismic survey vessel *Oruç Reis* from disputed waters, raising prospect that bilateral exploratory talks could resume. Following 10 Dec two-day summit, EU Council refrained from anticipated sanctions on Turkey and instead reaffirmed support for Greece and Republic of Cyprus, condemned Turkey's "provocative" behaviour in East Med and stated positive agenda remained if Turkey "showed readiness... to resolve differences through dialogue and in accordance with international law". In phone call with EU Council President Charles Michel on 15 Dec, Turkish President Erdoğan said steps by EU constituted "a new window of opportunity", stressing Turkey's intent "to turn a new page with the EU". Meanwhile, military activities continued. Greece 13-15 Dec held military drills near the easternmost Aegean islands

of Samothrace, Limnos, Chios, Samos, Tilos and Halki; Turkey 13 Dec responded with three advisory announcements for demilitarisation of these islands. Turkey 13 and 19 Dec issued advisories disputing Greece's jurisdiction over airspace south of Kastellorizo, where Greek air force 15 and 21 Dec conducted aeronautical exercises. FMs of Cyprus, Greece and Jordan 8 Dec met in Jordan's capital Amman to lay groundwork for establishment of permanent secretariat to facilitate regional cooperation. United Arab Emirates (UAE) participated for first time alongside France in joint Greek, Egyptian and Cypriot training exercises held 30 Nov-6 Dec off Egyptian coast. Egypt 17 Dec announced that UAE had joined the East Med Gas Forum as observer.

➔ **Turkey Military continued operations against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in country's south east and northern Iraq.** Military operations targeting PKK militants in rural areas of country's south east as well as in northern Iraq continued but at lower intensity owing to harsher winter conditions; military also launched air raids targeting PKK positions in northern Iraq. Govt efforts to criminalise pro-Kurdish opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) persisted: police detained more than 60 HDP officials and members throughout month. Court 21 Dec sentenced HDP MP Leyla Güven to 22 years in prison for "terrorist propaganda" and "membership to a terrorist organisation". Govt continued operations targeting Islamic State (ISIS) throughout month. Police detained over 150 individuals for their alleged ISIS links; notably, police operation in capital Istanbul 16 Dec led to detention of 18 ISIS-linked suspects accused of planning attacks on Turkey. Meanwhile, tensions with Greece cooled following late Nov withdrawal of Turkish seismic survey vessel (see Eastern Mediterranean).

Central Asia

➔ **Kazakhstan Authorities continued harassment of opposition groups and activists ahead of parliamentary elections in January.** Central Election Commission (OSK) 10 Dec launched parliamentary campaign, due to run until 9 Jan, with no opposition parties listed on ballot; opposition movement Halyq Biligi (People's Rule) 22 Dec demanded postponement of parliamentary elections, citing lack of opposition parties' participation. In Almaty city, opposition groups 16 Dec marched in unauthorised protest to demand release of political prisoners, fair parliamentary elections and registration of opposition parties. Meanwhile, authorities continued to target civil society and opposition. Notably, coalition of international NGOs 3 Dec said that tax authorities had notified 13 human rights organisations for alleged financial reporting violations in Oct-Nov, including "incorrectly completed declaration forms relating to foreign income", which carries fine and suspension of activities penalties. Court in north-western city of Aqtobe 21 Dec sentenced activist Alibek Moldin to one year of "freedom limitation" for leading banned Koshe party, associated with proscribed opposition party Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan. Authorities in Aqtobe same day forcibly admitted activist Asanali Suyubaev to psychiatric clinic; Suyubaev accused of tearing down poster of ruling Nur Otan party. In city of Keles, district court 22 Dec sentenced activist Marat Duisembiev to three and a half years of "freedom limitation" for involvement with banned Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party.

➡ **Kyrgyzstan Parliament confirmed constitutional referendum, which would strengthen presidential powers, to be held on same day as presidential elections in January.** Constitutional Chamber of Supreme Court 2 Dec approved ruling by parliament which 22 Oct extended legislature's term by up to six months without calling for new elections; prolongation of parliament's term came under criticism due to concerns over authoritarian tendencies. Lawmakers 10 Dec approved law to hold referendum on 10 Jan, same day as presidential elections, despite constitutional amendments seen as controversial as they could give excessive powers to president; dozens previous day rallied in front of parliament to protest amendments. Former acting President and PM Japarov, along with 17 other candidates, 15 Dec launched electoral campaigns for presidency. Meanwhile, Supreme Court 7 Dec overturned 18-year prison sentence of former PM Sapar Isakov who was convicted on corruption charges in June, sent case for retrial to Birinchi Mai District Court in capital Bishkek.

➡ **Tajikistan Amid concerns over widespread food insecurity, reports over harassment of opposition leaders and their relatives emerged.** After relatives of opposition leader Mahmurod Odinaev, deputy chairman of Social Democratic Party, said he was missing late Nov after placing Facebook post asking to stage protest over rise in food prices in capital Dushanbe, Prosecutor General's Office 5 Dec announced arrest of Odinaev on hooliganism charges in capital Dushanbe; authorities same day also reportedly detained Odinaev's nephew in Hisor city. Meanwhile, NGOs Human Rights Watch and Norwegian Helsinki Committee 4 Dec urged govt to "stop harassing" family of exiled opposition activist Fatkhuddin Saidmukhidinov in apparent move "to force him to cease his online criticism of the government"; authorities late Nov interrogated, summoned and threatened Saidmukhidinov's relatives. U.S. 7 Dec included Tajikistan on list of ten countries with which it has "particular concern" over religious freedom. After video surfaced in early Dec showing Tajik insurgents who appeared to be fighting against Afghan govt forces in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province, govt deployed additional troops along southern border with Afghanistan. After 8-9 Dec visit to Al-Hawl and Al-Roj camps in north-eastern Syria, Tajikistan's Ambassador to Kuwait Zubaidullo Zubaidzoda 9 Dec announced plan to repatriate families of Tajik Islamic State fighters "within weeks". World Bank 23 Dec released survey revealing widespread food insecurity and poverty associated with COVID-19 epidemic.