



Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

➔ **Kosovo** **Violent protests erupted in northern Kosovo following arrest of Serb police officer, but tensions eased late Dec and protesters removed barricades.**

Arrest of Serb police officer sparked violent protests in northern Kosovo. Authorities 10 Dec arrested former Serb police officer Dejan Pantic for alleged attacks on municipal election commission offices in North Mitrovica town; Pantic had resigned in Nov along with some 600 Serb officers over license plate dispute before Pristina and Belgrade reached deal on 23 Nov. Pantic's arrest prompted hundreds of Kosovo Serb protesters 10 Dec to erect roadblocks in northern Kosovo; security forces reported exchanges of fire with protesters and said one stun grenade targeted vehicle of European Union (EU) Mission in Kosovo. EU High Representative Josep Borrell 11 Dec said EU "will not tolerate attacks on EULEX Kosovo or the use of violent, criminal acts in the north" and urged protesters to remove barricades. Thousands 22 Dec demonstrated in Rudare locality, calling for withdrawal of Kosovo police units from Serb-majority north.

Tensions eased late Dec and protesters removed barricades. Serb President Vučić 16 Dec submitted request to NATO-led force KFOR to send up to 1,000 police and military forces to northern Kosovo to "defuse tensions and protect Serb population"; KFOR same day said they are "evaluating" demand but Kosovar President Osmani dismissed idea. Serbia 26 Dec placed security forces at border with Kosovo in "full state of combat readiness" while Kosovo 28 Dec closed Merdare border crossing with Serbia. Vučić 28 Dec announced barricades would be removed after authorities released Pantic and placed him under house arrest; protesters following day began removing barricades, while some border crossings reopened, reducing tensions.

Kosovo formally applied to join EU. Pristina 15 Dec formally submitted application for EU membership, although normalisation with Serbia remains crucial condition for Kosovo's candidacy. EU ambassadors 20 Dec approved text on visa liberalisation for Kosovo, still to be ratified by European Parliament and EU Council.

Caucasus

➔ **Armenia** **Situation along Armenia-Azerbaijan border stabilised but tensions rose over blockade of Lachin corridor; sides missed end-of-year deadline for peace treaty.**

Situation at border with Azerbaijan calmed as tensions rose over Lachin Corridor. After numerous reports of ceasefire violations along Armenia-Azerbaijan border in Nov, situation stabilised in Dec, possibly due to reduced military activity during winter season. Elsewhere, tensions rose over blockade of only road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia, known as Lachin Corridor (see Nagorno-Karabakh).

Baku and Yerevan missed deadline for peace deal. Despite hope for peace agreement by end of 2022, sides missed deadline due to delays in drafting treaty, gap in vision for terms of deal, lack of outside mediation and worsening relations since Sept border clashes. Sides offered new proposals for peace treaty during month but tensions over Lachin corridor hindered diplomatic efforts; notably, Yerevan requested postponing meeting between Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian FMs scheduled for 23 Dec in Russia. Still, Russian President Putin 26 Dec met with PM Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Aliyev separately on sidelines of Commonwealth of Independent States summit in Russia's St. Petersburg city; Putin also said three leaders met, but gave few details on what was discussed.

In other important developments. European Union (EU) temporary civilian monitoring team, deployed after Sept border clashes along Armenian side of international border with Azerbaijan, 19 Dec completed activities; EU, in agreement with authorities, same day announced new transitional team to "prepare the ground for a possible longer term EU mission in Armenia". Azerbaijani FM Bayramov 27 Dec said Baku had received no report on Oct-Dec monitoring mission and that any new mission should be done in coordination with Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Armenia and Hungary 1 Dec agreed to restore diplomatic relations.

➡ **Azerbaijan Situation along Armenia-Azerbaijan border stabilised but tensions rose over blockade of Lachin corridor; sides missed end-of-year deadline for peace treaty.**

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↓ **Nagorno-Karabakh Azerbaijan-backed protesters blocked vital transport link between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (NK), fuelling fears of looming humanitarian crisis.**

Blockade of Lachin corridor fuelled concerns over humanitarian situation. While Armenia-Azerbaijan border stabilised in Dec (see Armenia, Azerbaijan), new crisis emerged at Lachin corridor, only road connecting Armenian-populated NK with Armenia. Tensions rose after Azerbaijani officials and AzerGold mining company 3 Dec started negotiations with Russian peacekeepers to allow inspections of two mines in NK due to alleged "illegal economic activity" and "damage to the environment". Russian peacekeepers failed to secure visit, prompting dozens of Azerbaijani govt-backed "environmental activists" 12 Dec to conduct round-the-clock protests near Shusha town. Protesters blocked road during month, preventing movement of people and goods into and out of NK and fuelling fears of humanitarian crisis. Disruptions 12 Dec in natural gas supplies further aggravated situation, with de facto NK authorities 13 Dec announcing school closures due to weather conditions; gas supply 16 Dec resumed. Armenian PM Pashinyan 29 Dec announced Yerevan had approved additional \$10mn in aid to ethnic Armenian population in NK.

Baku denied involvement in blockade and underplayed humanitarian risks. Azerbaijani foreign ministry 13 Dec blamed Russian peacekeepers for blocking corridor while Azerbaijani pro-govt media 16, 25 Dec released videos of Russian peacekeepers' vehicles passing unhindered through Shusha to show that activists are not "blocking the road". Azerbaijani state-owned Azariqaz gas company 14 Dec denied Azerbaijan's role in disruption of gas supplies to NK. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's FM Bayramov 15 Dec dismissed fears of imminent humanitarian crisis as "an exaggeration", saying Azerbaijan is "always ready to meet humanitarian needs of the Armenian residents living on our territories".

Local and international pressure failed to resolve crisis. International actors, including European Union, U.S., Russia and UN Sec-Gen António Guterres called on Azerbaijani authorities to ensure free movement through corridor, while UN Security Council 20 Dec convened emergency session. Russian FM Sergei Lavrov 23 Dec said Russian peacekeepers were working tirelessly to secure free passage through corridor amid criticism from Pashinyan. Meanwhile, thousands 25 Dec rallied in de facto capital Stepanakert, but Lachin corridor remained blocked by end of Dec.

➔ **Georgia Controversy over fate of imprisoned former President Mikheil Saakashvili grew, and Russia and breakaway Abkhazia signed cooperation agreement.**

Authorities remained defiant over calls to transfer Saakashvili abroad for medical treatment. Amid mounting concern around health of imprisoned former President Mikheil Saakashvili, authorities 14 Dec released footage of Saakashvili inside

hospital where he has been receiving treatment as “proof that his life is not in danger”. Move triggered backlash from opposition. Notably, four MPs from United National Movement party 15-16 Dec went on hunger strike and demanded his transfer abroad for treatment, which Saakashvili’s family have long demanded. Meanwhile, U.S. 12 Dec said govt is responsible for ensuring Saakashvili’s “health is respected and human rights are protected”; European Parliament 14 Dec voted for resolution calling for release of Saakashvili on humanitarian grounds; and Ukrainian President Zelenskyy 19 Dec urged authorities to permit Saakashvili’s transfer abroad. Hearing on transfer 22 Dec began but Saakashvili’s lawyer said Saakashvili felt unwell and trial proceeded without him. Next hearing on whether to defer or suspend Saakashvili’s case for health reasons expected 9 Jan.

Govt condemned senior Russian figure’s visit to breakaway Abkhazia. Russian State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin 1 Dec paid “first official” visit to breakaway Abkhazia; Volodin and de facto Abkhazian counterpart Lasha Ashuba 2 Dec signed cooperation agreement; Georgian foreign ministry same day condemned visit.

In other important developments. PM Gharibashvili 7 Dec ruled out military assistance to Ukraine, saying “we will never get involved in this war”; comments followed criticism from acting Ukrainian Ambassador to Georgia Andriy Kasyanov over repeated requests for military assistance.

➡ **Russia (Internal) Govt announced reforms to army, crackdown on dissent continued, and Ukraine struck military bases hundreds of miles inside Russia.**

Authorities announced reforms to strengthen military. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu 21 Dec announced increase in maximum number of army servicemen from 1.15mn to 1.5mn. Shoigu also proposed changes to conscription age – currently between 18 and 27 – to 21 and 30 and outlined plans to form new military units. He added that “priority” task for 2023 is continuing “special military operation until its full completion”. Meanwhile, President Putin 9 Dec said Russia could abandon “no first use” nuclear doctrine; Kremlin 12 Dec clarified that Russia does not intend to take “quick actions”.

Crackdown on opposition persisted. Court in Moscow 9 Dec sentenced politician Ilya Yashin to over eight years in penal colony for spreading disinformation about Russian army. Justice ministry 20 Dec filed lawsuit to liquidate Moscow Helsinki Group, Russia’s oldest human rights organisation. Prosecutor general’s office 22 Dec declared NGO Russian Anti-war Committee in Sweden “undesirable organisation”. Police 29 Dec arrested politician Mikhail Lobanov. Meanwhile, law expanding definition of “foreign agent” to include any individual or organisation that is “under foreign influence” 1 Dec entered into force.

Ukraine launched strikes deep into Russia. Authorities 5 Dec accused Ukraine of attacking air bases in Saratov and Ryazan regions, which killed three and damaged several aircrafts; Kyiv acknowledged attacks but did not publicly claim responsibility. Attacks on military bases hundreds of miles inside country reveal Ukraine’s long-range capabilities, which Russia’s air defence appeared unprepared for (see Ukraine). Further strikes on air base near Saratov 26 Dec, although reportedly intercepted by Russian air defence, killed three. Meanwhile, Belgorod and

Kursk regional governors 6 Dec announced formation of “territorial defence units” amid continued Ukrainian shelling in border regions.

In other important developments. Group of Seven 3 Dec agreed to price cap of \$60 per barrel of Russian oil, which 5 Dec came into force; Moscow 4 Dec said it would not sell gas to any country participating in cap. Meanwhile, U.S. 9 Dec accused Russia of providing Iran with “unprecedented” level of military assistance in exchange for drones.

Eastern Europe

➡ **Belarus** **Increased military activities and Russian President Putin’s visit to capital Minsk raised concerns in Ukraine; crackdown on opposition persisted.**

Putin visited Minsk amid stepped-up military activity, fuelling concern in Kyiv. State news agency BelTA 7 Dec reported govt plans to move troops and military equipment 7-8 Dec as part of “counterterrorism” exercise, 13 Dec reported “sudden check of combat readiness” had begun. Meanwhile, Russian President Putin 19 Dec met with President Lukashenko in Minsk as Russian news agency Interfax, citing Russia’s defence ministry, same day reported that around 9,000 Russian soldiers, stationed in Belarus since Oct, will conduct “tactical exercises”; announcement fuelled fears that Belarus plans to deepen its involvement in Ukraine. Exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya same day warned that chance of govt sending troops to Ukraine “might increase in coming weeks” while authorities 21 Dec temporarily restricted access to parts of south-eastern Gomel region bordering Russia and Ukraine. Lukashenko 22 Dec said exercises were defensive.

Ukrainian missile entered Belarusian airspace. Minsk 29 Dec said it downed Ukrainian S-300 air defence missile close to Ukraine border; foreign ministry summoned Ukrainian ambassador, demanding Ukraine “conduct a thorough investigation”. Ukraine’s military same day acknowledged missile was Ukrainian, saying it was “the result of air defence”.

Repression of dissent continued. Court in Minsk 2 Dec sentenced journalist Dzmitry Luksha to four years in prison and two associates to over two years and 18 months in prison for activities that “disrupt social order”; 13 Dec sentenced four activists to between five and ten years in prison for “facilitating extremist activities”, among other charges. Court in Gomel 27 Dec sentenced three activists to over 20 years in prison each for sabotaging railway line used by Russia for transporting military equipment and weapons for Ukraine war in Feb 2022.

➡ **Ukraine** **Fighting raged in east as parts of front line descended into trench warfare, Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure continued, and authorities investigated role of Russian-affiliated churches.**

Hostilities intensified in east as Bakhmut became war’s new epicentre. Following Ukraine’s liberation of southern Kherson city in Nov, Russian troops redeployed further east where fierce fighting continued throughout month. Notably, clashes around Bakhmut town in Donetsk region descended into trench warfare, with hundreds of dead and injured reported daily. Kremlin-linked private military

company Wagner Group assumed high-profile role in attempted conquest of city, which President Zelenskyy 20 Dec visited. Meanwhile, senior officials gave media interviews throughout Dec, warning of new Russian offensive in early 2023 with stepped-up support from Belarus.

Russian attacks on energy infrastructure persisted, Ukraine hit Russian airbases. Russia launched strikes on critical infrastructure throughout month, often using Iranian loitering munition, severely hindering energy supplies throughout Ukraine; power outages can now last over one day, leaving homes cold and water supplies compromised. Russian authorities 5 Dec also accused Ukraine of attacking air bases in Russia's Saratov and Ryazan regions hundreds of miles from border (see Russia); Kyiv acknowledged attacks but did not publicly claim responsibility. Strikes reveal Ukraine's long-range capabilities, which Russia's air defence appeared unprepared for. Media outlet The Times 9 Dec reported that U.S. has tacitly endorsed Ukrainian air strikes not only in occupied Ukrainian territory but inside Russia as well, representing major shift in its risk assessment.

Authorities searched churches affiliated with Moscow Patriarchate. Ukrainian Secret Service (SBU) during month conducted searches at over a dozen churches and monasteries aligned with Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate across country; SBU says measures seek to prevent church from being used to extend Russian influence inside Ukraine. Zelenskyy 2 Dec signed decree giving govt two months to present parliament with draft law restricting activities of religious groups with links to Russia. Meanwhile, parliament 13 Dec approved law granting state authority to shut down media outlets without court hearing; law drew criticism from activists, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and journalists.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➡ Cyprus Tensions between Republic of Cyprus and Turkish Cypriot leaders persisted.

Disputes over UN peacekeeping force and energy exploration continued. Turkish Cypriot FM Ertuğruloğlu 8 Dec reiterated that "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" ("TRNC") will continue to allow UN peacekeeping force "on its territory" only if "mutually acceptable legal arrangement between the two parties" is concluded. Hydrocarbon exploration remained contentious: Republic of Cyprus's energy ministry 21 Dec announced that consortium of French and Italian energy companies found more natural gas off Cyprus; "TRNC" next day dismissed legitimacy of Republic of Cyprus-claimed Exclusive Economic Zone and asserted exploration activities "coincide with the continental shelf of [Türkiye]", while Türkiye 23 Dec said Republic of Cyprus's hydrocarbon activities threatened peace and stability in eastern Mediterranean. Meanwhile, Republic of Cyprus President Anastasiades 22 Dec hinted progress on peace settlement may materialise once Turkish President Erdoğan leaves office and next day said "national dignity" cannot accept any solution ensuring permanent presence of Türkiye in Cyprus.

➡ Türkiye Govt continued operations against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Syrian affiliate amid threat of ground operation in Syria, while tensions with Greece remained elevated.

Military continued operations against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-linked militants. Security operations, including drone strikes targeting upper echelons of PKK and its Syrian affiliate People's Protection Units (YPG), continued in both northern Syria and northern Iraq, albeit at lower intensity than in Nov (see Syria). Amid ongoing concern that Ankara remains intent on new ground incursion into northern Syria, possibly aimed at YPG-held town Tal Rıfat, west of Euphrates River, President Erdoğan 11 Dec requested Moscow to prioritise withdrawal of PKK/YPG elements from 30km border strip and 26 Dec said Türkiye will "enter a new phase of struggle that will destroy [their] entire infrastructure and resources". In south eastern Türkiye, car bomb attack in majority Kurdish province of Diyarbakır 16 Dec injured eight police officers and one civilian.

Maritime tensions with Greece continued despite dialogue. National Security Council 1 Dec announced it expected Greece to immediately demilitarise Aegean islands off Turkish coast, while Greek foreign ministry 7 Dec rejected Türkiye's "unilateral claims" and "threats of war". Erdoğan 11 Dec stated that "TAYFUN missile will hit Athens ... unless you behave"; Greek FM Dendias next day called rhetoric "unacceptable" from NATO ally. Turkish and Greek officials 16 Dec met in Belgian capital Brussels for Germany-brokered talks. Sides continued mutual accusations of airspace violations.

Political tensions heightened ahead of 2023 elections. Ahead of elections due between April and June, criminal court 14 Dec sentenced Istanbul metropolitan mayor and potential presidential candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu to two years and seven months in jail and banned him from politics for insulting members of Supreme Electoral Council, with appeal process underway. In response, tens of thousands of citizens 15-16 Dec rallied before Istanbul municipality.

In other important developments. Police detained some 85 individuals countrywide during month with alleged links to Islamic State. Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and intelligence chief Hakan Fidan 28 Dec met with Russian and Syrian counterparts, marking first official ministerial-level engagement between Türkiye and Syria in 11 years (see Syria).

Central Asia

➡ Kyrgyzstan Detained activists protesting border delimitation agreement with Uzbekistan went on hunger strike.

Following crackdown late Oct when authorities detained 26 activists and politicians protesting border delimitation agreement with Uzbekistan, court in capital Bishkek 13 Dec extended pre-trial detention for number of detainees until at least 20 Feb. Four detainees next day announced hunger strike to protest "against mass political repression accompanied by fabricated criminal cases, injustice and lawlessness being conducted against a wide number of politicians, activists, journalists and bloggers"; in following days, 15 more detainees joined hunger strike. Court 27-28 Dec extended custody for 20 detainees, whose health reportedly began to deteriorate. Meanwhile, relatives of all detainees 20 Dec rallied in Bishkek, demanding their release and calling for meeting with President Japarov to resolve issue.

➡ **Tajikistan** UN condemned treatment of human rights defenders.

During two-week visit to Tajikistan, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders Mary Lawlor 9 Dec raised concerns about deteriorating situation for human rights defenders across country and urged govt to eliminate “the intensifying climate of fear”. Meanwhile, prosecutors 1 Dec called on court in capital Dushanbe to sentence Faromuz Irgashev, activist from Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region detained following region’s deadly May protests, to 30 years in prison.

➡ **Uzbekistan** Authorities stressed that Russian proposal for “gas union” with Kazakhstan contains no “political conditions”.

Following Russian proposal late Nov to form “gas union” with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, aimed at facilitating shipments between three countries, speculation grew around Moscow’s political objectives amid its ongoing war in Ukraine. Energy Minister Jorabek Mirzamahmudov 7 Dec sought to ease fears, saying any agreement to import gas is “a commercial, sales contract. We will never agree to political conditions in exchange for gas”. Russia’s govt 9 Dec emphasised that “there are no political conditions here” and that Russia’s only consideration in proposing union is “the commercial interests of the three countries”.