

# Europe and Central Asia

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## **Balkans**

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➡ **Bosnia** Parliament 5 Dec approved Zoran Tegeltija as new PM; Tegeltija told parliament his govt will focus on reforms needed for EU membership and “catch up on lost time” with 2020 budget and reactivating frozen investments. Tegeltija 17 Dec finalised cabinet, which contains nine ministers from three largest ethnic parties and two ministers from junior partners; parliament approved new govt 23 Dec, ending fourteen-month stalemate. Several thousand 26 Dec gathered in Banja Luka, administrative centre of majority Bosnian Serb entity Republika Srpska (RS), some demonstrated in support of RS authorities, and others against them, after RS parliament’s heated session over Reform Program that sets out Bosnia’s future relations with NATO. An expert report on the rule of law presented to EU and Bosnian officials 5 Dec said criminal justice system “failing to combat serious crime and corruption”, called on “systemic reforms in important rule of law areas”. NGO Human Rights Watch 13 Dec called on govt to reform “discriminatory” constitution to end “second-class status” of Jews, Roma, and other minorities who are not allowed to run for president or parliament.

➡ **Kosovo** President Thaçi 12 Dec called for new parliament to hold “constitutive session” 24 Dec between Vetëvendosje (“Self-Determination” party) and Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK); talks on new coalition govt between Vetëvendosje and LDK 25 Dec failed over agreement on candidate for next presidential elections; LDK 26 Dec said in unexpected turn of event it is willing to vote for minority Vetëvendosje govt without joining it, would stay in opposition. More than 20 officials from main Serb party Srpska Lista 17 Dec took on positions assigned by Serbian govt in Serb-controlled north. Pristina condemned claim by Serbian President Vučić 5 Dec that 1999 wartime massacre in southern village Račak was fabricated; Thaçi 10 Dec called for Belgrade to acknowledge its blame for “crimes against humanity”; Pristina court 5 Dec convicted Kosovo Serb MP Ivan Todorosijević of incitement to ethnic, racial or religious intolerance for claiming massacre was staged. Albania and Kosovo 3 Dec agreed to merge their electricity power grids, ending Kosovo dependence on Serbia; Belgrade accused them of pursuing “Greater Albania of energy”, urged international community to intervene. Kosovo’s Special Prosecution 2 Dec indicted six people in connection with 2018 murder of Kosovo Serb politician Oliver Ivanović; trial postponed 30 Dec until 11 Feb. Journalist Ensar Ramadani said Acting Trade Minister, Endrit Shala, assaulted him 17 Dec.

➡ **North Macedonia** Parliament 22 Dec passed budget for 2020 with 5% increase in expenditure from 2019 mainly going into increased salaries, pensions, and other social transfers; govt claimed budget to be investment in “human capital” while opposition said salary increase “bribe” ahead of April’s snap general elections. Formation of caretaker govt stalled after opposition VMRO-DPMNE party 30 Dec proposed as interior minister a military official, army lieutenant-colonel Dragan Kovacki, contrary to the constitution. North Macedonia participated in London NATO summit 3-4 Dec, even though Spanish parliament has yet to ratify its membership. Govt 8 Dec reversed pledge to act on advice of Venice Commission to

review 2018 language law, which Venice Commission said “goes beyond European standards” and may impose “unrealistic legal obligations on public institutions” and slow down functioning of judiciary, and discard some agreements on bilingualism, as junior governing coalition partner Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) vice-PM in charge of European issues, Bujar Osmani, warned that changing 2018 law could return country to pre-2001 rights situation for ethnic Albanians.

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## Caucasus

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➔ **Armenia** Special Investigative Services 4 Dec announced it had charged former President and PM Serzh Sargsyan with embezzlement of public money from state assistance program for farmers in 2013; Sargsyan’s Republican Party of Armenia condemned indictment as political persecution aimed at silencing opposition. Prosecutors 27 Dec charged Constitutional Court Chairman Hrayr Tovmasian with two counts of abuse of power during his time as justice minister in 2010-14, Tovmasian said charges were part of “political process” trying to force his resignation. U.S. Senate 12 Dec passed resolution formally recognising mass killings of more than one million Armenians in Ottoman empire as genocide. Defence Ministry 27 Dec displayed new Su-30 fighter jets and anti-aircraft missile systems purchased from Russia.

➔ **Azerbaijan** President Aliyev 5 Dec ordered snap parliamentary election for 9 Feb. Among opposition, Republican Alternative Party (ReAl), Umid Party, and Musavat party confirmed their participation in election, while National Council of Democratic Forces coalition, led by Popular Front party, announced boycott on basis of poor environment for free and fair election. ReAl leader Ilgar Mammadov publicly urged Aliyev to allow free and fair elections to address negative international perception of country and thus strengthen its negotiating position on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Municipal elections held 23 Dec, with for first time active campaign, including on social media, involving former political prisoners and youth. Central election commission said voter turnout was at 32.72%; independent observers reported numerous electoral violations and falsification of results at several polling stations. Prominent anti-corruption blogger Mehman Huseynov said police 27-28 Dec detained and beat him and five others without explanation in downtown Baku; Interior Ministry 28 Dec called accusations “untrue” and “fabricated”. Huseynov ran as candidate in 23 Dec municipal elections and had denounced vote irregularities.

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh conflict** No breakthrough in talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan early month, however relative calm continued in conflict zone. Armenian and Azerbaijani FMs met during Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Ministerial Summit in Bratislava 4 Dec. Armenian FM Mnatsakanyan presented Yerevan’s approach to peace process, including support for NK’s right of self-determination, NK security, need for NK participation in negotiating process, and implementation of OSCE mechanisms for monitoring ceasefire and investigating violations. Azerbaijani circulated memorandum on its position on NK status, return of adjacent territories and security provisions. Azerbaijani FM Mammadyarov said in media interview 5 Dec Armenia’s side’s emphasis on addressing status is pointless before return of internally displaced

persons, also said Armenia has not defined security; Yerevan responded claiming it remains sole guarantor of NK security, and reiterated NK right to self-determination. FMs agreed to continue talks early Jan 2020. After summit, OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs 5 Dec released joint statement praising Nov exchange of journalists between Armenia and Azerbaijan and June release of detainees, but also urged both sides to assist International Committee for Red Cross with data on missing persons and to resume discussions on expanding Office of Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office responsible for monitoring along front lines. Azerbaijan and Armenia 17 Dec reported exchange of fire with light weapons in Noyemberyan-Gazakh border region close to civilian-populated areas, first time in more than a year.

➔ **Georgia** Latest round of Geneva International Discussions (GID) talks 10-11 Dec, main forum to resolve conflict over Georgia's breakaway republics, went badly amid continuing crisis around contested Georgian police outpost near South Ossetian separation line, which led to closure in Sept of main crossing point with Georgia-controlled territory. GID co-chairs reported "deteriorating situation on the ground" and participants' "diverging positions on key issues of the agenda have become further entrenched", with rising tensions leading to increase in incidents including detentions. Several prominent figures appealed to Moscow to support release of Georgian doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili, held in South Ossetian prison since 9 Nov; de facto South Ossetian court 20 Dec sentenced him to 1 year and 9 months' imprisonment; de facto leadership 28 Dec granted him pardon, paving way for his immediate release. In positive development, following diplomatic efforts of GID, de facto South Ossetian leadership 2 Dec relieved restrictions on leaving territory for retired people and those with serious health conditions, although entrance to region still restricted; leadership also released local residents detained for accidental or first-time crossing into breakaway region. In Abkhazia, following fatal Nov shooting in central Sukhumi café, de facto govt 2 Dec dismissed interior minister and prosecutor general, same day as mass street protests by local opposition and activists. Elsewhere, united opposition parties and activists 6 Dec held anti-govt protest in western city Kutaisi calling for fully proportional parliamentary elections in 2020; ruling Georgia Dream party organised pro-govt rally in Tbilisi 14 Dec attended by tens of thousands, mainly employees of state-run organisations.

➔ **Russia/North Caucasus** Authorities foiled alleged terrorist plot planned for Constitution Day 12 Dec in Moscow, arresting five suspects (four Tajik nationals and one Russian) reportedly affiliated with Islamic State (ISIS). A gunman opened fire on headquarters of Federal Security Service (FSB) in central Moscow 19 Dec, killing two FSB officers and wounding five other people, four of whom were law enforcement authorities; the attacker, 39-year-old former security guard Yevgeny Manyurov, was killed in a subsequent shootout. Three gunmen attacked a road patrol checkpoint 31 Dec outside Ingushetia's Magas, North Caucasus, police killed two and wounded a third, one policeman was also killed and two injured.

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## **Eastern Europe**

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➔ **Belarus** President Lukashenko 5 Dec dismissed fears voiced by domestic political opponents that economic integration with Russia could result in loss of

country's post-Soviet independence from Moscow. Lukashenko met with Russian President Putin in Sochi, Russia 7 Dec to discuss economic agreements, sparking two days of protests in Minsk with over 1,000 people denouncing "deepening integration" with Russia; two activists reportedly detained two days ahead of planned 20 Dec rally; over 1,000 demonstrators 20 Dec rallied in Minsk to show opposition to second meeting of Lukashenko and Putin in St. Petersburg, Russia, scheduled on same day. Following 20 Dec meeting, Russian Economics Minister Maxim Oreshkin said parties had "failed to resolve key differences over oil and gas". Belarus Energy Ministry and Russia's Gazprom 31 Dec signed protocol on gas prices for Jan-Feb, but govts have yet to agree on oil transit to Europe.

➡ **Ukraine** Kyiv, Moscow, and de facto leaders moved tentatively to fulfil pledges of 9 Dec Normandy summit prompting celebration and controversy in Ukraine, while low-level fighting continued in Donbas. Leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany met 9 Dec at their first Normandy Format summit since Oct 2016 to discuss moves toward peace in Donbas. Kyiv and Moscow agreed to conclude new demining action plan, facilitate exchange of prisoners held by Kyiv and de facto authorities before end of 2019, withdraw troops at three locations by March 2020, plan for new civilian crossing points, and continue to discuss controversial elements of a political solution. The sides exchanged 200 prisoners 29 Dec, with de facto authorities receiving 124 detainees, while Kyiv welcomed 76. Those whom Kyiv handed over included five riot police suspected of killing unarmed protestors during the 2014 Maidan uprising, prompting fresh protests involving families of those killed. Kyiv authorities indicated investigations into the five former officers will continue, but UN warned this would be difficult and criticised govt for narrowing path to justice for 2014 killings. Others exchanged included two Ukrainian Radio Free Europe journalists held by de facto authorities, and people accused of conflict-related crimes by both sides with various degrees of evidence. Ukrainian pro-govt forces lost 10 soldiers 28 Nov-1 Jan per official reports; at least nine Russia-backed fighters were killed according to an anti-separatist non-govt source. Per official and independent sources, 111 Ukrainian government troops died in battle in 2019, nearly equal to 2018 levels but down from 198 in 2017. Independent experts estimate 250-300 Russian-backed fighters were killed in battle. Monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe stated that as of 25 Dec, 18 civilians had been killed in 2019 and 127 wounded, down from 43 killed and 179 wounded in 2018. Moscow and Kyiv agreed 21 Dec to prolong transfer of Russian gas through Ukraine for five years; Russia's Gazprom will pay Kyiv \$2.9 billion to settle past dispute.

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## **Western Europe/Mediterranean**

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➡ **Cyprus** Tensions over drilling activities in eastern Mediterranean increased following controversial maritime border deal between Turkey and Libya's Govt of National Accord in Nov, condemned by Cyprus, Greece and Egypt. Turkish President Erdoğan 10 Dec announced intention to carry out joint hydrocarbon exploration activities with Libya under maritime deal, and claimed Cyprus, Greece, Egypt and Israel required Turkish permission to carry out exploration operations in disputed maritime zone. EU 12 Dec rejected agreement and voiced full support for Cyprus and Greece. Turkish drone 16 Dec landed at Geçitkale airport in northern Cyprus after Turkish Cypriot de facto govt gave Ankara permission to use airport for hydrocarbon

exploration. With National Defence Authorisation Act signed into law on 21 December, U.S. conditionally removed arms embargo on Republic of Cyprus; Turkish FM denounced move as “dangerous escalation”.

➡ **Northern Ireland (UK)** Suspected dissident republicans 4 Dec carried out grenade attack on police vehicle in west Belfast; no police officer injured in attack. Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin 16 Dec recommenced negotiations to restore devolved powers to Stormont following 12 Dec UK general elections; assembly elections set for 13 Jan 2020 if no power sharing agreement reached.

➡ **Spain** European Court of Justice 19 Dec ruled Catalan leader Oriol Junqueras had immunity under EU law as Member of European Parliament when he was detained by Spanish authorities in Oct; state attorney 30 Dec recommended to Supreme Court release of Junqueras. Pro-Catalan independence group Democratic Tsunami held mass protest outside main stadium in Barcelona 18 Dec; protesters clashed with police leaving dozens injured prior to match between Barcelona and Real Madrid, which had already been rescheduled from Oct due to violent separatist protests.

➡ **Turkey** Military operations against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) reduced in intensity in country’s south east and northern Iraq, relations soured with U.S. over further sanctions, and were strained with Russia over Idlib escalation. Fatalities in PKK conflict remained low; security forces focused operations in Tunceli province in south east and maintained air raids and land operations against PKK militants in northern Iraq. Govt sustained efforts to criminalise pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). Besides continued arrests/detentions of HDP officials and members, eight more trustees were appointed to HDP-run municipalities during month (32 out of 69 municipalities HDP won in March 2019 are now run by trustees). Cooperation continued with Russia in north east (NE) Syria, but was strained over escalation in north west (NW): Turkish defence ministry 8 Dec announced deal with Russia to connect areas under control of Turkish-backed Syrian forces to Syrian regime-controlled power plant and demilitarise M4 highway across northern Syria, while Turkish forces continued joint patrols with Russian military units in NE Syria. Ankara reacted harshly to intensified regime and Russian military operations in Syria’s NW which displaced thousands. The fourteenth round of Syria talks with Turkey, Russia and Iran was held in Kazakhstan 10 Dec (see Syria). Relations with U.S deteriorated as U.S. Congress 17 Dec passed National Defense Authorization Act banning transfer of U.S. F-35 fighter jets to Turkey. Senate 12 Dec passed previously blocked resolution recognising mass killings of Armenians in Ottoman Empire as genocide. President Erdoğan 15 Dec threatened to shut down İncirlik Air Base and Kürecik Radar Station used by U.S and NATO forces. Govt continued crackdown on Islamic State (ISIS) networks; police detained over 100 suspected ISIS-linked individuals in Dec including Turkish and foreign nationals. Relations with EU still strained particularly over Cyprus/East Med gas drilling. Following controversial maritime border deal between Turkey and Libya’s Govt of National Accord (GNA) in Nov, parliamentary debate took place 30 Dec on bill that (if approved 2 Jan) would authorise Turkey to send troops to Libya in support of GNA (see Cyprus and Libya).

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## Central Asia

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➔ **Kazakhstan** Dozens of people demonstrated in Nur Sultan and commercial capital Almaty 16 Dec, calling for more rights and release of political prisoners; police arrested dozens of protesters. Authorities 9 Dec reportedly jailed three human rights activists ahead of planned protests. In address to National Council for Social Trust's Advisory body President Toqaeu 20 Dec suggested easing regulations on public protests, simplifying process for creating new political parties, and decriminalising hate speech and libel.

➔ **Kyrgyzstan** Court 6 Dec sentenced former PM Sapar Isakov, close associate of former president Atambayev, to fifteen years imprisonment on corruption charges; Isakov appeared before court again 17 Dec to face new corruption charges. Interior Minister 13 Dec accused Atambayev of shooting dead security officer during 7 Aug raid on his compound by security forces. Court 10 Dec froze bank accounts of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and other media following publication of story on alleged billion-dollar fraud scheme in country's customs service implicating senior officials; court unfroze accounts three days later but media still face lawsuits. Hundreds of protesters rallied in Bishkek 18 Dec demanding more freedom of speech and examination of corruption claims; also demanded resignation of Prosecutor-General Otkurbek Jamshitov for not investigating case. State officials 20 Dec arrested Syrgak Kenzhebayev, partner of well-known anti-corruption activist Shirin Aitmatova on suspicion of fraud; Aitmatova claimed arrest as retaliatory move for her campaign against corruption. Clashes erupted along border with Tajikistan 18 Dec; six Kyrgyz nationals and three Tajik nationals reportedly wounded (see Tajikistan).

➔ **Tajikistan** Clashes erupted again on Tajik-Kyrgyz border in southern Batken region 18 Dec; six Kyrgyz nationals, including four border guards and a local politician, and three Tajik nationals, all civilians, reportedly wounded.

➔ **Turkmenistan** Former interior minister Isgender Mulikov (fired by President in Oct) and ex-chief of migration service Meilis Nobatov 3 Dec made televised confessions of their involvement in corruption case. Court charged Mulikov with abuse of power and fraud, reportedly sentenced him to 20-25 years in prison. President Berdymukhammedov 13 Dec signed new anti-corruption law excluding prisoners convicted of corruption from state amnesties and pardons.

➔ **Uzbekistan** President Mirziyoyev's Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan won most seats in 22 Dec parliamentary elections, first since Mirziyoyev took power in 2016; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe noted that despite much improved legislation and "greater tolerance of independent voices", still "numerous, serious irregularities" in electoral process. Ahead of election, report emerged that Justice Ministry had drafted legislation to increase penalties for people using Internet to organise unsanctioned demonstrations. Severe energy shortages sparked rare small protests in parts of country early Dec.