

# Europe and Central Asia

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## **Balkans**

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➔ **Bosnia** Federation entity 20 Feb formed its upper chamber of parliament, four months after Oct 2018 elections, allowing it to adopt delayed 2019 budget and appoint delegates to state-level House of Peoples. U.S. embassy and Office of the High Representative, international overseer of implementation of 1995 peace agreement, criticised Republika Srpska (RS) entity's 7 Feb announcement that it has set up controversial commission to investigate 1992-1995 wartime crimes in Srebrenica, which international and domestic courts have ruled a genocide; RS Aug 2018 annulled previous report into Srebrenica massacre.

➔ **Kosovo** Govt faced growing pressure from U.S. and EU to withdraw its 100% tariff on Serbian imports that has amplified tensions with Serbia. Senior U.S. State Department officials 12 Feb sent letter to govt warning that its position was putting bilateral relations at risk, and confirmed cancellation of planned visit by U.S. National Guard commander; PM Haradinaj reiterated that Kosovo would only scrap tariff once Serbia recognises Kosovo's independence. U.S. also criticised govt for hiring newly-released convicted war criminal as adviser to Haradinaj. President Taçi continued to discuss "correction" of border with Serbia in context of ongoing normalisation dialogue with Serbia, and in 14 Feb interview said he saw "good momentum" in dialogue. Kosovo's new negotiating team for dialogue 15 Feb presented its negotiating platform to parliamentary speaker to be put to vote, including demand that Belgrade pledges to recognise Kosovo and agree on new tribunal for wartime crimes, and principle that Kosovo's territory will not be altered. Kosovo marked eleven year anniversary of its declaration of independence 17 Feb with parade by its new Kosovo Security Force.

➔ **North Macedonia** Country changed name to "North Macedonia" 12 Feb in accordance with June 2018 Prespa agreement with Greece, after Greek parliament 8 Feb ratified North Macedonia's NATO accession protocol, which was signed 6 Feb. North Macedonia to become full NATO member once all member countries ratify protocol. Police 20 Feb arrested former parliament speaker and two former govt ministers allegedly involved in violent invasion of parliament by govt supporters in April 2017, constituting "terrorist conspiracy to undermine constitutional order and security".

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## **Caucasus**

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➔ **Armenia** Defence Ministry 8 Feb sent 83 doctors and demining experts to Syria to support ongoing humanitarian operations in and around Aleppo, previously populated by local ethnic Armenian population, requested by Syrian govt and with strong support from Russia; U.S. State Department criticised move saying U.S. did not support any engagement with Syrian military.

➡ **Azerbaijan** In rare interview with national TV channel, President Aliyev 12 Feb announced new stage of reforms aiming to improve socio-economic situation, in line with recent govt attempts to shrink state apparatus and promote social benefits. Aliyev 8 Feb signed order to increase minimum monthly wages by 38.5% to 180 Azerbaijani manat (\$106), and issued decree 28 Feb ordering state budget to cover dollar loans that were not paid back following 2015 devaluation of national currency.

➡ **Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan)** Preparations continued for first official meeting of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders, as Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group co-chairs 20-21 Feb visited the two leaders to monitor progress of their recent informal meetings and discuss possible official summit between them on Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) peace process. Other positive steps included de facto NK's 2 Feb release of Azerbaijani soldier arrested after crossing Line of Contact in 2017; and Armenia's accreditation to journalist from leading Azerbaijani news agency to conduct interviews with officials and experts in Yerevan. Tens of thousands marched with Azerbaijani leadership in Baku 26 Feb to commemorate 1992 Khojaly massacre, which took place during NK war and in which hundreds of ethnic Azerbaijani civilians including women and children died. In ongoing arms race, Armenia 4 Feb announced new deliveries of light rifles and fighter jets from Russia, and Azerbaijan 17 Feb signed new contract with Israeli drone maker.

➡ **Georgia** Both breakaway republics maintained controversial restrictions on crossing points with regions controlled by Tbilisi, which are mostly used by ethnic Georgians. Abkhazia de facto authorities 5 Feb agreed to soften limits and allow people to use crossings, subject to further consideration in two months. In South Ossetia, de facto authorities 20 Feb gave people three days to leave region before closing border again.

➡ **North Caucasus (Russia)** Following controversial Sept 2018 border agreement between republics of Chechnya and Ingushetia, Chechen and Dagestani officials 5 Feb agreed in Chechen capital Grozny to clarify their border by end of 2019; officials reported that they did not discuss any territorial concessions but Dagestani residents expressed concerns that delimitation process is unfolding without their consultation. Dagestani commission on demarcation reported dispute between local businessman who was developing a construction project on border and Chechen residents. European Parliament 14 Feb passed resolution calling on Chechen authorities to release Oyub Titiyev, director of human rights group Memorial who was arrested in Chechnya in Jan 2018 and is being held on drug possession charge. In Dagestan, authorities 19 Feb reported counter-terrorism operation in Derbent district resulted in one suspected militant killed. In Kabardino-Balkaria, three militants reportedly killed in shootout during counter-terrorism operation in capital Nalchik 27 Feb. North Caucasus district military court 28 Feb sentenced five Ingushetian men, alleged to have ties to Islamic State (ISIS), to prison terms ranging from twelve to twenty years for conspiring to commit terror attacks on French embassy in Moscow and in Ingushetia in 2016; the five men previously said they had testified under torture.

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## Eastern Europe

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➔ **Belarus** Tensions with Russia over Moscow's demand for faster integration between the two countries eased; after talks with Russian President Putin in Sochi, President Lukashenka 15 Feb stated Belarus "is ready to integrate with Russia to the extent the Russian and Belarusian peoples would want". Lukashenka 18 Feb told visiting EU Commissioner that Belarus will "always be a reliable partner of the EU". EU 20 Feb extended for another year 2011 arms embargo against Belarus and sanctions on four citizens.

➔ **Moldova** Preliminary results of 24 Feb parliamentary elections saw pro-Russia Socialist Party win 35 out of 101 seats, ruling Democrats 30 seats and pro-European ACUM 26 seats, with turnout reported at 49%. Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) monitors 25 Feb declared elections "competitive" but "tainted by allegations of pressure on public employees, strong indications of vote buying and the misuse of state resources". Media reported dozens of buses from pro-Russia breakaway region Transnistria – where vote was not held – brought over 30,000 voters, allegedly paid to cast ballots.

➔ **Ukraine** Month saw concerns around integrity of 31 March presidential elections and potentially disputed poll amid allegations of high-level corruption in the defence sector, along with rise in casualties among military and separatists in conflict zone and continued tensions with Russia over Azov Sea. Military reported ten soldiers killed in fighting with Russian-backed separatists in east since end-Jan; about 20 separatist fighters also reported killed. Two civilians killed and three injured after bus hit anti-tank mine near checkpoint in Donetsk People's Republic 23 Feb; at least three elderly civilians died while waiting to cross contact line. As of 20 Feb, number of explosions recorded by Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) had tripled since end-Jan. OSCE monitors also reported several aircraft sightings in apparent violation of Minsk agreements. In 20 Feb address to UN General Assembly, Poroshenko called for fact-finding mission for a peacekeeping contingent in Donbas. Interior Ministry announced investigations into reports of attempted vote-buying ahead of presidential elections, particularly by incumbent's campaign; Poroshenko and various govt institutions also warned of possible Russian interference through disinformation, agent provocateurs; Kyiv and its Western allies concerned about possible Russian cyberattacks; official sources claim govt may stage military provocation ahead of vote. Front runners remain comedian Volodymyr Zelensky, incumbent Petro Poroshenko, and former PM Yulia Tymoshenko. Media investigation published 25 Feb outlined scheme, allegedly overseen by deputy head of Security and Defence Council, to supply military with contraband equipment from Russia at inflated prices; presidential challenger Tymoshenko 26 Feb called for Poroshenko's impeachment. Constitutional Court 26 Feb abolished criminal liability for illegal enrichment, possibly putting IMF funding at risk. Tensions continue to simmer between Russia and Ukraine in Azov Sea, Kerch Strait and Black Sea; EU 18 Feb confirmed new sanctions against eight Russian citizens due to Russia's Nov 2018 use of force on Ukrainian naval vessels and ongoing imprisonment of 24 sailors and security personnel.

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## Western Europe/Mediterranean

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➔ **Cyprus** Trying to forge dialogue on possible resumption of reunification talks, UN Special Envoy Jane Holl Lute met separately with Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades and Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı early Feb, as well as with representatives of guarantor states; discussed terms of reference for resumption of talks and issues related to guarantor states but no progress reported. Anastasiades and Akıncı came together at informal meeting hosted by the UN 26 Feb. Tensions over hydrocarbon explorations in Eastern Mediterranean continued; ExxonMobil reportedly expected to announce finding of major gas resources as a result of three months of explorations in Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which could further increase tensions.

➔ **Turkey** Intensity of Turkish military's security operations against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in south east remained low with few fatalities, while air raids by Turkish military targeting PKK positions in northern Iraq continued. Ahead of 31 March municipal elections, govt intensified crackdown on pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) members and suspected PKK sympathisers. Court 14 Feb sentenced two HDP MPs to fifteen and eighteen months in prison over terrorism charges. Differences between Ankara and Washington over U.S. withdrawal and "safe zone" in north east Syria (see Syria) continued; President Erdoğan 5 Feb criticised U.S. for delays in withdrawal of militants belonging to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from U.S.-patrolled town of Manbij and for lack of clarity on safe zone; also renewed threats to carry out military offensive in area to clear YPG, and vowed to set up "terror-free zone". Erdoğan 14 Feb discussed situation in Syria's Idlib province with Iranian and Russian presidents in Sochi, Russia, stressing that joint operations by Turkey, Russia and Iran against jihadist alliance Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) possible if needed. Inside Turkey, detentions of alleged Islamic State (ISIS) and HTS-linked individuals continued, including armed forces' capture of four ISIS suspects 3 Feb and four HTS suspects 7 Feb attempting to enter Syria.

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## Central Asia

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➔ **Kazakhstan** President Nazarbayev 21 Feb dismissed govt citing failure to diversify economy and raise incomes, in response to public anger and protests in Astana and other cities over living conditions, triggered by death in housefire early Feb of five children while their parents were working night shifts. Govt 15 Feb published controversial proposed amendment to media legislation, imposing additional requirements for journalist's accreditation and empowering authorities to set standards of coverage; union of journalists criticised proposal.

➔ **Kyrgyzstan** Amid tensions between President Jeenbekov and his predecessor Almazbek Atambayev, Atambayev 22 Feb issued statement admitting "many mistakes" while in office. Bishkek court 19 Feb initiated preliminary hearings for corruption trial of eight former senior govt officials, including two former PMs.

➔ **Tajikistan** International rights groups 24 Feb claimed Russian security services had aided Tajik counterparts in kidnapping and forcible return to Tajikistan of Tajik opposition activist Sharofiddin Gadoev, who has asylum status in the

Netherlands, while he was visiting security official in Russia. During early Feb visit to Dushanbe, Russian FM Lavrov said Moscow ready to assist with modernisation of Tajik military and strengthening of border in light of continued threats from Afghan territory. Tajik foreign ministry 12 Feb said it was trying to repatriate all children born to Tajiks who travelled to Syria or Iraq to join Islamic State (ISIS), as well as women, estimated to number at least 50.

➡ **Turkmenistan** Meeting in Ashgabat, President Berdymukhamedov and Afghan President Ghani 21 Feb signed strategic partnership; Berdymukhamedov reportedly offered to help bring Taliban negotiators and Afghan officials together for peace talks. Opposition news website 8 Feb alleged that govt figures on 2018 cotton and wheat harvests were highly inflated, with real figures less than half those reported.

➡ **Uzbekistan** President Mirziyoyev 11 Feb announced State Security Chief Ikhtiyor Abdullayev had resigned for health reasons; media reported that authorities 8 Feb had opened criminal investigation into Abdullayev over bribery and abuse-of-office allegations.

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## Regional

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↓ **Russia/U.S.** U.S. suspension of 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and Russian rhetoric regarding possible deployments of new weapons marked further deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations and raised concerns about future of arms control. U.S. 1 Feb said it was suspending its obligations under INF starting 2 Feb, giving Russia six months to return to “real and verifiable” compliance before U.S. ultimate withdrawal from INF. Washington earlier announced plans of withdrawal in Oct 2018, arguing Russia has been developing 9M729 missile system in violation of INF, and amid years of mutual accusations of non-compliance. President Putin 2 Feb announced Moscow would follow suit and in his 20 Feb state of the nation address promised deployment of new and powerful missiles targeting U.S. and European countries, although only in response to any U.S. deployments of intermediate-range missiles on European continent; NATO accused Russia of “unacceptable” threat and called on Russia for full compliance.