

Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

♦ **Bosnia** Clash between lawmakers from mainly Serb territorial entity Republika Srpska (RS) and Constitutional Court led Serb representatives to walk out of state-level institutions. Constitutional Court 7 Feb ruled that Law on Agricultural Land passed by RS was unconstitutional; law stipulated that public agricultural land formerly owned by Yugoslav state should be RS property. In reaction, representatives of all Serb parties 12 Feb walked out of state-level institutions, suspending most govt work; they objected to presence of three foreign judges in Constitutional Court and called for adoption of Constitutional Court law which excludes foreign judges. Bosniak leaders condemned Serb representatives' actions, saying that disrespect for Constitutional Court's decisions constituted violation of 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. Serb member of three-person Bosnian presidency Milorad Dodik 13 Feb said RS was heading toward "leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina [...] because we believe that the Dayton agreement has been broken, primarily by the intervention of an international factor". In Banja Luka, de facto capital of RS, Serb lawmakers 17 Feb voted (72 votes to two) to formally suspend work of RS representatives in state-level institutions; gave govt sixty days to reform Constitutional Court and end foreign judges' mandates. Dodik 20 Feb voted against all items on state-level presidential agenda, blocking decision-making in govt.

▶ **Kosovo** Kosovo and Serbia continued to normalise bilateral relations and parliament approved new govt. President Thaçi and Serbian President Vučić 14 Feb signed agreement to restore rail and road connections on margins of Munich Security Conference in Germany and under U.S. mediation. New PM Kurti 27 Feb announced provisional 90-day suspension of tariffs on raw materials imported from Serbia from 15 March as sign of "goodwill" to urge Serbia to halt campaign against recognition of Kosovo's statehood. Two main parties in ruling coalition, Vetëvendosje (Self Determination) and Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), 2 Feb agreed that new coalition govt would have fewer ministries (fifteen instead of 21) and would prioritise reciprocal trade, economic and political measures toward Serbia. With 66 of possible 120 votes, parliament 3 Feb approved new govt, confirming Kurti's appointment as PM and ending three-month political deadlock; MPs from Serb minority party Srpska Lista reportedly abstained from vote. PM Kurti 26 Feb wrote in letter to parliament that President Thaçi violated constitution by signing in 2013 "secret agreement" with NATO to limit powers of national security forces; agreement gave NATO peacekeeping mission in Kosovo "absolute veto powers" over all security force actions in Serb-dominated areas in north. In anti-corruption efforts, govt withdrew several decisions of former govt which new FM Konjufca described as "unlawful", and dismissed board of state-owned company Kosovo Telecom on allegations of corruption.

▶ **Montenegro** President Đukanović continued to oppose Serbian Orthodox Church over controversial Dec 2019 Freedom of Confession Act, as Church followers sustained mass protests against law. Đukanović 4 Feb instructed members of ruling Democratic Party of Socialists to stay away from Church-organised protests,

threatening expulsion from party for any politicians caught participating. PM Marković 14 Feb met with senior bishop to review religious law; Church delegates offered list of alterations to law including withdrawal of section requiring registration of all religious sites in Montenegro; govt reported “constructive and open atmosphere” of talks. Church officials claimed over 100,000 followers protested nationwide 16 Feb against new law; thousands marched against law again 29 Feb. Đukanović 27 Feb claimed Serbia and Russia were using protests to weaken govt and impede Montenegro’s application for EU membership; Belgrade and Moscow denied.

➡ **North Macedonia** During Munich Security Conference in Germany, French President Macron 8 Feb said he was ready to lift French opposition to opening of EU accession negotiations, pending positive results in European Commission’s report on North Macedonia suitability for EU accession due in March. PM of caretaker govt Spasovski 18 Feb urged EU to start accession talks before April elections, saying delay “stimulates the people to lose faith in the European perspective”. Parliament 15 Feb passed legislation (with required minimum of 80 out of 120 votes) proposed by ruling Social Democrat party and strongly supported by EU, which gives control over cases of major corruption and organised crime to public prosecution office; opposition VMRO-DPMNE party objected to manner of vote. FM Dimitrov 9 Feb said labour minister and VMRO-DPMNE member Rashela Mizrahi was jeopardising country’s Euro-Atlantic future after she appeared in press conference next to sign reading Republic of Macedonia, in violation of terms of 2018 agreement with Greece on country’s name; Mizrahi claimed she was correcting “injustice” given her party’s opposition to deal; parliament 23 Feb voted 62-26 to dismiss Mizrahi for violating constitution. Parliament 11 Feb unanimously ratified agreement to make North Macedonia member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), opening way for ratification by NATO members.

Caucasus

➡ **Armenia** Yerevan city court 25 Feb started investigation into case of former President Sargsyan accused of involvement in embezzlement of over \$1mn of govt funds allocated in 2013 to subsidise diesel fuel for farmers in rural regions. Sargsyan dismissed corruption charges as politically motivated.

➡ **Azerbaijan** According to preliminary results, ruling party won most seats in 9 Feb snap parliamentary elections, and election monitors found significant procedural faults. According to early election results released by Central Election Commission (CEC) 10 Feb, only one independent candidate won seat in new 125-seat parliament, while over 70 MPs, mainly long-time govt loyalists, kept their seats. CEC same day reported 47% voter turnout, but independent observers estimated it to be less than 15%. Preliminary report from Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) monitoring mission 10 Feb noted “significant procedural violations” in vote counting and tabulation. After polls, political parties and independent candidates filed complaints with CEC. President Aliyev 11 Feb said there was no reason to doubt results. CEC annulled results in four constituencies 13 Feb, where new elections to be held. Crowd 16 Feb protested against alleged electoral fraud in front of CEC building.

➡ **Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict** Ceasefire violations in conflict zone remained at low ebb but Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders used hostile rhetoric. Azerbaijani president and Armenian PM 15 Feb met on sidelines of Munich Security Conference in Germany, and in first ever public debate on NK issue expressed irreconcilable positions on history of conflict; domestic audiences in Baku and Yerevan considered their leader to have won debate. Azerbaijan same day reported death of one of its soldiers at line of contact. International Committee of Red Cross 19 Feb evacuated remains of Azerbaijani soldier, who went missing in mined area close to military positions at border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan 24 Feb reported one of its border guards killed in exchange of fire with Armenian army near Gazakh region. Joint meeting of de-facto NK and Armenia Security Councils 22 Feb discussed security situation in conflict zone. Armenia 17 Feb reported record number of at least thirteen non-combat deaths in army since 1 Jan mainly due to poor conditions in military facilities in conflict zone; in response, govt dismissed two senior officials in Armenian defence ministry and de facto NK govt 24 Feb replaced its defence minister.

➡ **Georgia** After Raul Khajimba resigned from his position as leader of Abkhazia in Jan, three candidates registered for snap presidential elections scheduled for 22 March, including front runner opposition leader Aslan Bzhania. Food shortages worsened in South Ossetia, caused by Russia's hike in customs to align them with those of Eurasian Economic Union which considers South Ossetia a "foreign state". Georgia 20 Feb accused Main Directorate of General Staff of Russia's armed forces of major cyber-attack 28 Oct that targeted hundreds of govt, NGO, company and individual websites; Russia denied involvement.

➡ **Russia/North Caucasus** After President Putin proposed in Jan constitutional changes reportedly aimed at shifting power balance between president, cabinet and parliament, working group overseeing voting process late Feb said that parliament would first approve legislation and then citizens would be asked in 22 April vote to say whether they agree with proposed amendments. Russian court 10 Feb sentenced seven members of anarchist and anti-fascist groups to six to eighteen years in prison for alleged plans in 2015 to form militant groups to attack law enforcement authorities, govt buildings, military offices and HQ of pro-Kremlin United Russia party. Defendants at first confessed to allegations, but later retracted testimonies saying authorities had extracted them by torture. Independent body, Public Monitoring Commission, later confirmed suspects had been tortured; lawyers, artists and public figures signed petitions protesting prosecution, while members of Kremlin public councils lodged official complaints. In North Caucasus, twelve more people were detained 5 Feb for taking part in demonstrations in Magas, capital of Ingushetia, in March 2019; nine of them were released after questioning, while three remained in detention end-month.

Eastern Europe

➡ **Belarus** Amid heightened tensions with Russia following President Lukashenko's declaration in Jan that Belarus would seek oil elsewhere following halt of Russian oil supplies, U.S. Sec State Pompeo 1 Feb said during historic visit to Minsk that U.S. stands ready to deliver all Belarussian oil needs at competitive

prices. Lukashenko and Russian President Putin 7 Feb met in Sochi, Russia, but failed to reach agreement on oil supplies; Lukashenko 14 Feb was quoted saying that during Sochi meeting, Russian leadership had hinted at “incorporation of Belarus [into Russia] in return for unified energy prices”. Amid shortages of crude oil and oil products, state energy company Belneftekhim 11 Feb started tapping oil from Russia’s Druzhba pipeline to Europe. Lukashenko 14 Feb said Belarus would siphon off oil from Druzhba pipeline unless Moscow restarted supplies of crude oil. In sign of potential progress in talks, Lukashenko 21 Feb said Putin had offered \$300mn to compensate for Belarus’s reported \$330mn loss in 2019 that resulted from 1 Jan 2019 change in Russian oil taxation. Russia 21 Feb said proposals by Russian companies had been sent to Minsk laying out pricing of future oil supplies and that Moscow was ready to keep same oil supply terms as in 2019; Lukashenko 21 Feb said “it was an unexpected proposal”.

↓ **Ukraine** Violence increased in Donbas conflict zone, while Moscow and Kyiv remained split on measures to enable local elections there in Oct. Clashes between govt forces and Russia-backed fighters spiked at contact line near Zolote disengagement area in Luhansk region 18 Feb and clashes erupted periodically near Svitlodarsk city and Shyrokyne village in Donetsk region. According to govt and independent Ukrainian sources, Russia-backed fighters 18 Feb stormed army observation post set up in Jan in buffer zone between opposing positions. Citing attack, govt adviser Serhiy Sivokho postponed launch of National Platform for Dialogue and Unity scheduled for 19 Feb. Four govt soldiers and 16-38 Russian-backed troops killed during month according to various Ukrainian sources, and two civilians injured in non-govt-held territory according to Organization for the Security and Co-operation in Europe. FM Prystaiko 20 Feb told UN General Assembly that govt believed deployment of UN peacekeepers to uncontrolled part of border with Russia could enable local elections in Donbas in Oct. Russian FM Lavrov 26 Feb said that Kyiv had failed to fulfil 9 Dec Normandy Summit commitments, including those paving way to elections, precluding plans for next summit on conflict. Kremlin’s spokesman 11 Feb said Deputy Head of Presidential Administration Dmitry Kozak will take over responsibility for “Ukrainian affairs and integration issues” while in Ukraine Andriy Yermak, who is in bilateral talks with Kozak, replaced Andriy Bohdan as Head of Presidential Office 11 Feb. Three Western think tanks and one Russian group 14 Feb published “Twelve Steps” plan on de-escalation in Ukraine ahead of Munich Security Conference in Germany; FM Prystaiko assailed plan’s lack of reference to international law, Ukrainian opposition denounced plan as pro-Kremlin; Myrotvorets site, linked to prominent officials, added signatories to database of “pro-Russian terrorists”; sources close to Kremlin described plan as out of step with Moscow’s positions.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➔ **Cyprus** Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı 6 Feb said Cyprus faces risk of permanent partition if Turkish and Greek Cypriot parties fail to reach deal under federal framework; Akıncı said that if no deal is made Turkey could subsume northern part of island as de facto Turkish province; his remarks drew harsh criticism from Ankara. UN Sec-Gen 24 Feb confirmed his intention to relaunch Cyprus reunification talks after April presidential election in “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus”. As tensions persisted between Turkey and Republic of Cyprus

over drilling for hydrocarbons in Eastern Mediterranean, European Council 4 Feb imposed travel bans and asset freezes on two Turkish nationals involved in drilling business; EU 27 Feb imposed sanctions on Turkish Petroleum Corporation's VP and Deputy Director of Exploration. Turkey 9 Feb acquired from UK its third offshore drilling vessel; drillship set to join two Turkish vessels operating in Eastern Mediterranean, including in maritime zones claimed by Republic of Cyprus.

➡ **Northern Ireland (UK)** Deputy leader of Sinn Féin Michelle O'Neill 11 Jan said she and her party "will not be deterred" following warnings by police that dissident republicans are planning attacks against her and Northern Ireland Assembly member Gerry Kelly.

↓ **Turkey** In Syria's Idlib province, fighting escalated between Turkish troops and Syrian rebels on one side and Russian-backed regime forces on other, leaving at least 54 Turkish troops dead; Turkey continued to ship arms to Libya and military maintained low-level operations against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In Syria, as Russian-backed regime offensive to take Idlib province continued to drive displaced people toward Turkish border, Turkey reinforced its troops. Syrian regime attacks and Russian airstrikes left eighteen Turkish soldiers and three civilian contractors dead early Feb. Following killing of seven Turkish soldiers and one contractor 3 Feb, President Erdoğan gave Syrian regime forces until end of Feb to withdraw behind Turkish observation posts and threatened direct military action. Russian FM 19 Feb announced failure of Russia-Turkey talks to reach agreement over Idlib. After Turkish-backed Syrian rebels 26 Feb recaptured strategic town of Saraqib, Erdoğan same day vowed to "liberate" remaining Turkish observation posts encircled by Syrian regime. Suspected Syrian regime airstrike (possibly backed by Russia) 27 Feb killed at least 33 Turkish troops in Idlib province; Turkey said that in subsequent days it targeted hundreds of regime soldiers in retaliatory strikes. Turkish official 28 Feb announced Ankara would no longer prevent refugees in Turkey from entering Europe; Greek police 29 Feb used tear gas to disperse group of people attempting to cross Greek-Turkish border, flow of people to Greek islands also increased. As Turkey continued to ship military equipment to Libya to support Tripoli-based Govt of National Accord against Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's forces, Turkey 18 Feb criticised EU foreign ministers' decision previous day to launch naval mission to enforce UN arms embargo on grounds that Haftar's allies would still be able to deliver support by land and air. Erdoğan 25 Feb confirmed deaths of two Turkish soldiers in Libya. Military continued small-scale operations against PKK militants in south east and reportedly carried out airstrike targeting PKK militants in northern Iraq.

Central Asia

↓ **Kazakhstan** Eleven people killed in ethnic violence in south, while police detained dozens of people participating in opposition protests. Violence erupted in several villages in Zhambyl province in south between ethnic Kazakhs and minority Dungan 7-8 Feb following alleged road-rage incident; eleven killed, reportedly mostly Dungan, and dozens wounded, tens of properties and vehicles also destroyed, and more than 23,000 mostly Dungan fled, including at least 4,500 into Kyrgyzstan's Chui region, with some reportedly returning in subsequent days. In response, govt

dismissed many senior regional officials and launched inquiry. Police 18 Feb arrested three Dungan brothers allegedly involved in road-rage incident, charged with assaulting police officers. Amid ongoing anti-govt protests, authorities mid-Feb reportedly harassed supporters of newly-founded opposition Democratic Party of Kazakhstan. Party leader Zhanbolat Mamay announced rally in Almaty 22 Feb; police detained him 21 Feb, while Deputy Prosecutor-General 20 Feb called on citizens not to take part in rally of opposition party Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan. Police 22 Feb detained over 100 people planning to attend unauthorised opposition rallies across country. More protests broke out following death in custody 24 Feb of civil rights activist Dulat Aghadil, who had been arrested for contempt of court; authorities claimed he died from heart failure, but protesters took to streets across country 25-26 Feb demanding more information; video emerged 27 Feb allegedly showing Aghadil's body with bruises and injuries. U.S. Sec State Pompeo 2 Feb met President Tokayev, former President Nazarbayev and FM Mukhtar Tleuberdi in capital Nur-Sultan; Pompeo lauded Kazakhstan's "real reforms" while praising govt for not repatriating ethnic Kazakhs from China who sought refuge in Kazakhstan. Pompeo and all five Central Asian FMs met in Uzbekistan 3 Feb (see Uzbekistan).

➡ **Kyrgyzstan** Tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan heightened following 12 Feb provocative statement by police chief in Tajikistan's Sughd region that Kyrgyzstan's southern Batken region "historically had never been a land of Kyrgyz"; prompted outcry among Kyrgyz officials and citizens. FM met with Tajikistan ambassador 14 Feb, while Tajikistan FM 18 Feb said statement not Dushanbe's official position. Following mid-Jan joint protocol, Kyrgyz and Tajik joint working group 24 Feb reportedly agreed to swap 23 hectares of land along disputed border segment. After ethnic violence erupted in Kazakhstan's Zhambyl region 7-8 Feb (see Kazakhstan), at least 4,500 people – mostly ethnic Dungans – fled across border to Chui region in north, some reportedly returning in subsequent days. Hundreds of people 17 Feb protested near At-Bashi village in central Naryn region against Chinese investment project; authorities next day announced cancellation of project. U.S. Sec State Pompeo and all five Central Asian FMs met in Uzbekistan 3 Feb (see Uzbekistan). Deputy chief of armed forces 13 Feb confirmed deployment of Russian air-and-missile-defence system to Kant base in north.

➡ **Tajikistan** Amid tensions with Kyrgyzstan, FM distanced govt from provocative statement by police chief of Sughd region which prompted outcry in Kyrgyzstan (see Kyrgyzstan). Following mid-Jan joint protocol, Kyrgyz and Tajik joint working group 24 Feb reportedly agreed to swap 23 hectares of land along disputed border segment. International NGO Committee to Protect Journalists 6 Feb condemned arrest of journalist Daler Sharifov on charges of inciting ethnic or religious discord; Prosecutor-General 1 Feb accused Sharifov of publishing "more than 200 articles and notes of extremist content and nature aimed at inciting religious intolerance". Prosecutor-General 28 Jan announced efforts to extradite four Tajikistani militants linked to Islamic State (ISIS) attacks and recruitment in Syria; marks first time govt has sought extradition of former fighters. U.S. Sec State Pompeo and all five Central Asian FMs met in Uzbekistan 3 Feb (see Uzbekistan).

➡ **Turkmenistan** President Berdymukhammedov 3 Feb confirmed allocation of \$1.5bn for import of materials and equipment needed for construction of new city in

southern region Ahal. In cabinet reshuffle, Berdymukhammedov appointed his son Serdar to head Ministry of Industry and Construction; other changes included new national security minister, finance minister and deputy PM. Govt 24 Feb published draft bill on constitutional reforms amid speculation about Berdymukhammedov's health and succession plans; amendment would create second chamber of parliament, reserving seats for former presidents in new upper chamber. RFE/RL's Turkmen service Radio Azatlyk 10 Feb reported shepherds in eastern Turkmenistan frequently witnessing armed militants crossing from Afghanistan. U.S. Sec State Pompeo and all five Central Asian FMs met in Uzbekistan 3 Feb (see Uzbekistan).

➔ **Uzbekistan** U.S. Sec State Pompeo 3 Feb met President Mirziyoyev and FM Abdulaziz Kamilov in capital Tashkent; Pompeo praised Uzbekistan's "progress" on human rights issues. Pompeo and all five Central Asian FMs met in Tashkent same day, where they discussed Central Asian contributions to peace process in Afghanistan, border security, and regional efforts to improve economic and energy connectivity. Deputy Prosecutor-General Svetlana Artykova in 7 Feb interview with Uzbek news agency admitted govt made "mistakes" in 2005 Andijon killings that killed hundreds of civilians; reportedly first such admission by govt official, with Artykova citing "new style of politics" as reason for remarks now. Clashes erupted between police and residents of village in south 14 Feb over planned demolition of homes; three people injured, including two police. Interior Ministry 19 Feb announced detention of 21 suspected supporters of banned Islamist militant group Katiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, which operates in Syria. Govt 20 Feb announced plan that will force Facebook, Google and Russian search engine Yandex to store personal data of Uzbek users within territory of Uzbekistan; critics view law as attempt to impose greater control over Internet users. Supreme Court 25 Feb jailed two former high-level officials on corruption charges, including former Prosecutor-General and former chief of State Security Service.