



## Europe and Central Asia

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### Balkans

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➔ **Kosovo Western envoys sought to advance Kosovo-Serbia normalisation, and tensions over license plates persisted.**

*Western envoys visited Kosovo and Serbia to push for normalisation.* Delegation of representatives from European Union (EU), U.S., France, Germany and Italy 20 Jan met with PM Kurti in capital Pristina and Serb President Vučić in Serb capital Belgrade to discuss Franco-German proposal on normalising relations. Kurti same day said meeting was “good basis for further talks” while Vučić expressed willingness to work on implementing agreement. Vučić 23 Jan claimed that EU had warned of delays to Serbia’s European integration and economic isolation if Belgrade did not accept proposal and said Serbia must “take part in dialogue and continue its European road”. EU Special Envoy Lajčak 20 Jan reiterated that Kosovo’s “overdue implementation of the Association of Serb Municipalities” – which would enable Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo to form self-governing association – is “crucial” for achieving normalisation; Kurti 27 Jan remained defiant over proposal. Meanwhile, European Parliament 12 Jan approved visa liberalisation for Kosovo.

*Kosovo and Serbia exchanged blame for “violating” license plate deal.* Interior Minister Xhelal Sveçla 18 Jan said authorities barred some vehicles with northern Mitrovica city license plates (KM abbreviation) from entering Kosovo, accusing Serbia of renewing these license plates in Dec 2022 and thus breaching 23 Nov EU-brokered deal; Belgrade same day said Kosovo’s actions constituted “flagrant violation” of agreement. EU 19 Jan urged both parties to respect agreement: “This means that Kosovo will refrain from any action against those owners that have KM license plates and effectively maintain the status quo until a more sustainable solution is reached in the dialogue. This also means that Serbia does not issue new KM license plates”.

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### Caucasus

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➔ **Armenia Continued blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) led to standoff in peace talks with Azerbaijan, and European Union (EU) approved civilian monitoring mission to Armenia’s border areas.**

*Blockade of NK brought peace talks with Azerbaijan to near standstill.* Azerbaijan-backed protesters’ continued blockade of Lachin corridor, only road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia (see Nagorno-Karabakh), derailed all diplomacy built around Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. Communication between Yerevan

and Baku throughout Jan was almost non-existent as sides exchanged blame for standoff, despite EU and Georgian attempts to arrange talks. Notably, EU early Jan tried to convene associates of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders, but Baku cancelled participation. Georgia also reportedly proposed trilateral cooperation format after receiving request from Baku. However, Azerbaijani President Aliyev 19 Jan said at World Economic Forum that Yerevan had rejected proposal; FM Ararat Mirzoyan 20 Jan responded, saying “Armenia is greatly interested in developing trilateral dialogue” but that initiative failed due to disagreement with Baku over Armenian demand for joint statement against hate speech. Russian foreign ministry 27 Jan emphasised Moscow’s “readiness to organise talks between the Azerbaijani and Armenian foreign ministers”.

*EU approved monitoring mission to Armenia.* In positive move aimed at preventing new escalation along Armenia-Azerbaijan border, EU 23 Jan announced it will deploy two-year civilian monitoring mission to Armenia in border areas to contribute to “stability”, “build confidence on the ground and ensure an environment conducive to normalisation efforts”. Azerbaijan next day warned that EU mission must not be used “for derailing the normalisation process, including in the context of border delimitation process”.

*In other important developments.* PM Pashinyan 10 Jan said Armenia would not host annual drills for Russian-led military Collective Security Treaty Organisation alliance due to regional instability. Six months after Armenian and Turkish special envoys announced renewed efforts to normalise relations, Türkiye 6 Jan lifted ban on direct cargo flights with Armenia.

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*Baku expressed concern over planned EU monitoring mission to Armenia.* EU 23 Jan announced it will deploy two-year civilian monitoring mission to Armenia in border areas to contribute to “stability”, “build confidence on the ground and ensure an environment conducive to normalisation efforts”; Azerbaijan next day warned

that EU mission must not be used “for derailing the normalisation process, including in the context of border delimitation process”.

*International actors condemned repression of dissent.* U.S. State Dept 9 Jan said it was “deeply troubled” by arrest of opposition leader Tofiq Yagublu and activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev and urged authorities to “release them expeditiously”. EU 13 Jan condemned detention of four human rights defenders and political activists, including Yagublu and Hajiyev.

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh Lachin corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) with Armenia remained blocked, exacerbating humanitarian crisis and provoking international condemnation.**

*Blockade of NK remained in place, deepening humanitarian crisis.* Azerbaijani-govt-backed “environmental activists” throughout month continued blocking Lachin corridor, which links NK with Armenia. Amid diminishing food and medical supplies in mountainous enclave, de facto authorities 17 Jan began rationing food using coupon system. Reports of hours-long queues to purchase food products from rural areas in de facto capital Stepanakert, home to around roughly half the entity’s population, also emerged. Local energy company ArtsakhGaz 17 Jan reported disruptions to gas and electricity supplies, forcing civilians to begin installing wood stoves for cooking and heating homes. De facto authorities 19 Jan closed schools over gas and electricity disruptions.

*Despite international pressure, Baku warned blockade could last for long time.* Russian peacekeepers 15 Jan facilitated meeting between representatives from Azerbaijan and de facto leadership to resolve crisis, but came away empty-handed. Armenian FM Ararat Mirzoyan mid-Jan embarked on diplomatic offensive in Europe to spotlight “humanitarian crisis”, meeting with European Union (EU) institutions and EU member states, NATO and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. European Parliament 19 Jan condemned blockade, urging Azerbaijan “to immediately reopen” road. Armenia 30 Jan urged International Court of Justice to break up blockade, calling it part of an act of “ethnic cleansing”; Azerbaijan next day rejected claim, accusing Armenia of using dispute to create leverage at peace talks. Despite mounting pressure, President Aliyev 10 Jan told reporters blockade could continue for long time but did not clarify what actions could be taken to unblock corridor.

*In other important developments.* De facto NK leader Arayik Harutyunyan 11 Jan appointed Sergey Ghazaryan, previously Stepanakert’s envoy to Yerevan, as de facto foreign minister. Azerbaijan 18 Jan filed interstate arbitration against Armenia under Bern Convention on Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats for destruction of environment and wildlife in NK.

➔ **Georgia Authorities debated possible resumption of Russian flights, and protesters took to streets demanding transfer abroad of imprisoned former President Mikheil Saakashvili.**

*Russian plans to resume direct air traffic with Georgia fuelled debate.* Russian FM Sergei Lavrov 17 Jan said Moscow was considering resumption of air traffic with Georgia, suspended since 2019 at annual press conference in Moscow; Lavrov praised Georgia’s authorities for having “courage” to resist Western “pressure” on sanctions against Russia and for prioritising “the interests of their own economy”.

Lavrov's statement renewed debate about govt's susceptibility toward Russia. Ruling party Georgian Dream 19 Jan welcomed "any such decision" on resumption of flights, insisting that Georgia was standing up for its "national interests". However, President Salome Zourabichvili 20 Jan dismissed govt's "incomprehensible" position while U.S. Ambassador Kelly Dignan same day said "most Georgians" would oppose resumption of flights. Meanwhile, after initially refusing requests from Ukraine to supply power generators amid Russian attacks on its energy infrastructure, govt 6 Jan sent 25 big power generators to Ukraine.

*In other important developments.* Amid mounting concern around health of imprisoned former President Saakashvili, street rallies 4 Jan took place in number of towns and cities, including Tbilisi, and foreign capitals, calling for his transfer abroad for medical treatment. Meanwhile, de facto Abkhaz authorities 31 Jan denied delegation of co-chairs from International Geneva discussions, who were planning visit 8-9 Feb, entry to breakaway region; Abkhazia's de facto FM Inal Ardzinba cited "unilateral" decision to cancel 57th round of Geneva discussions, slated for 21 Feb, as reason for announcement.

➡ **Russia (Internal) Govt shuffled military command, lawmakers and medical professionals decried imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny's treatment, and Western states and Moscow imposed tit-for-tat measures.**

*Govt made changes to military command and sketched out army reforms.* Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu 11 Jan appointed Valery Gerasimov commander of Joint Group of Forces; Gerasimov will lead war in Ukraine, replacing Sergei Surovikin who is now Gerasimov's deputy. Fourth shuffle of Russia's command structure since Feb invasion indicates Moscow may be preparing new offensive in Ukraine. Shoigu 17 Jan revealed new details about planned military reforms from 2023-2026; changes include forming army corps in Karelia region near Finland, creating new force groupings in occupied areas of Ukraine and strengthening combat capabilities of Navy, Air and Space Forces, and Strategic Missile Forces. Meanwhile, reports 19 Jan began emerging of authorities deploying air defence systems atop several defence and administrative buildings in Moscow, suggesting Kremlin is preparing for possible future attacks on capital.

*Concern grew over treatment of imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny.* Navalny's lawyer 9 Jan warned of politician's deteriorating health at penal colony in Vladimir region; 481 doctors next day signed open letter to President Putin demanding end to abuse and provision of medical care. By 20 Jan, over 80 current and former lawmakers had signed appeal urging end to unjustified disciplinary punishments for Navalny and provision of adequate medical assistance. Meanwhile, crackdown on media and NGOs continued. Notably, Moscow City Court 25 Jan ruled to liquidate Moscow Helsinki Group, Russia's oldest human rights organisation; General Prosecutor's Office 26 Jan declared media outlet Meduza "undesirable organisation".

*Western countries and Russia imposed tit-for-tat measures.* Head of European Commission Ursula von der Leyen 17 Jan announced plans to introduce tenth sanctions package against Russia in Feb; Russia same day sanctioned number of European Union security agencies' leaders, businesses and individuals helping provide military assistance to Ukraine. Moscow 23 Jan ordered Estonian

ambassador to leave Russia by 7 Feb; Lithuania and Latvia same day ordered Russian ambassadors to leave their countries and recalled their ambassadors. U.S. Treasury Dept 26 Jan declared Russian paramilitary Wagner Group a transnational criminal organisation.

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## **Eastern Europe**

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➔ **Belarus Military cooperation with Russia continued, authorities began trial in absentia of opposition figures, and govt sought ways to strengthen cooperation with Tajikistan.**

*Military activities with Russia continued amid fears of more Belarusian support in Ukraine.* President Lukashenko 6 Jan visited training ground in south-western Brest region bordering Ukraine where Russian troops are stationed. Defence ministry same day announced arrival of more Russian military equipment and aircrafts. Authorities 16 Jan-1 Feb held joint tactical flight exercises with Russia; govt 15 Jan said drills were “purely defensive” amid growing fears Belarus plans to deepen involvement in Ukraine. Former security official 29 Jan warned army could face mass desertion if Belarus invades Ukraine. Meanwhile, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen 10 Jan announced new sanctions against Belarus for “role in this Russian war”.

*Authorities proceeded with trial in absentia of leading opposition figures.* Amid govt’s continued crackdown on dissent, trial in absentia of opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and four associates, indicted among other charges for treason and conspiring to seize power, 17 Jan began in capital Minsk. European Union High Representative Josep Borell same day condemned “fabricated charges” and Belarus’s “brutal persecution” of opposition leaders, while U.S. imposed visa restrictions on 25 officials for continued repression and “politically motivated trials”.

*In other important developments.* News agency Belta 4 Jan reported that Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin met with Tajik counterpart Serali Mirzo in Belarus; two reportedly discussed “security matters in the responsibility area of the Collective Security Treaty Organization” and ways to advance bilateral cooperation.

➔ **Ukraine Heavy fighting persisted in Donetsk as Russian forces captured Soledar, Western allies ramped up military support, and Zelenskyy dismissed senior officials in anti-corruption sweep.**

*Fighting continued in eastern Donetsk region as Ukraine withdrew from Soledar.* Ukrainian artillery 1 Jan attacked Russian military base in occupied Makiyivka city. Russian defence ministry 4 Jan admitted that 89 soldiers had been killed, highest number of deaths it has acknowledged since full-scale invasion; Russian military bloggers criticised Russian planning and logistics. Russian paramilitary Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin 11 Jan claimed his troops had fully captured Soledar town just north of embattled Bakhmut town. Claim appeared premature and fighting continued, but Kyiv 25 Jan admitted its troops had pulled out, marking Russia’s first major battlefield advance since July 2022; loss of Soledar further complicates Ukraine’s defence of Bakhmut. Heavy fighting continued elsewhere in Donetsk, with British intelligence 31 Jan warning of “concerted” Russian assault on Vuhledar coal-

mining town. Meanwhile, Russia continued targeting critical infrastructure, notably killing 11 people on 26 Jan.

*Ukraine secured major breakthroughs in Western military support.* France 4 Jan announced plans to equip Ukraine with armoured AMX-10 RC combat vehicles. Germany next day said it would provide around 40 Marder infantry fighting vehicles while U.S. said it would deliver 50 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles. UK became first western nation to pledge supply of main battle tanks, 19 Jan announcing “Tallinn Pledge”, military aid package coordinated with Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic. Germany 25 Jan announced it would send Leopard 2 tanks amid mounting international pressure; hours later, U.S. declared it would send 31 M1 Abrams tanks. Russia same day said decision takes conflict “to a new level of confrontation”.

*Zelenskyy cracked down on corruption.* President Zelenskyy 22 Jan dismissed senior official Vasyl Lozynskiy following his arrest on embezzlement charges. Days later, Zelenskyy 24 Jan dismissed over a dozen senior officials, saying state “will be cleaned up”. Meanwhile, presidential adviser Oleksiy Arestovych 17 Jan resigned after wrongly claiming Ukrainian air defence had shot down Russian missile that killed 45 civilians in Dnipro city on 14 Jan.

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## **Western Europe/Mediterranean**

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➡ **Cyprus** **Republic of Cyprus sought German mediation for Cyprus issue amid bleak prospects of resolution, while UN Security Council renewed peacekeeping mandate.**

UN Sec-Gen Antonio Guterres 3 Jan reported to UN Security Council that harsh rhetoric and “a significant hardening of positions” posed obstacle to dialogue and reconciliation between Greek and Turkish Cypriots; UN Security Council 30 Jan renewed UN peacekeeping force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) for one year. Meanwhile, Republic of Cyprus FM Ioannis Kasoulides 10 Jan said he asked Germany to act as mediator on Cyprus question; German FM Annalena Baerbock previous day said that two-state solution “cannot be an option for Cyprus”. Echoing Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar’s 1 Jan remark that “federation talks are over and ... two-state politics is settling in”, de facto foreign ministry of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) 13 Jan stated “no common ground” existed between two sides and UN must recognise “current realities on the island”. Republic of Cyprus President Anastasiades 15 Jan said country will continue to seek “liberation and reunification” of island despite threats and challenges. Türkiye’s VP Fuat Oktay 17 Jan said Türkiye will continue to fight for solution in Cyprus based on sovereign equality of two entities.

➡ **Türkiye** **Govt continued operations against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and affiliates as well as Syrian govt positions in northern Syria, while tensions with Greece remained elevated.**

*Military continued operations in south-eastern Türkiye, northern Syria and northern Iraq.* Operations against PKK continued in rural areas of Diyarbakır, Bingöl, Muş and Batman provinces, while military continued airstrikes against

militants in northern Iraq and Syria; presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalın 14 Jan asserted ground operation into Syria was “possible any time”. As military shelled Syrian govt positions, Ankara signalled openness to normalise ties with regime (see Syria); after Syrian FM 14 Jan said Türkiye had to end its “occupation” of Syria to normalise relations, senior Turkish official 18 Jan said everything could be negotiated, including total or partial withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syria.

*Tensions with Greece remained elevated.* Greek coast guard 5 Jan said one of its patrol boats fired warning shots to deter Turkish coast guard vessel trying to ram it in eastern Aegean sea. Greek media 8 Jan reported that Turkish UAV violated Greek airspace by flying over island of Kandeliousa. Greek FM Nikos Dendias 12 Jan called for European Union import ban on fish from Türkiye due to what he referred to as illegal fishing practices by Turkish vessels in Greek territorial waters. Greek PM Mitsotakis 19 Jan said two countries can “resolve differences”, while President Erdoğan 20 Jan responded “as long as you act wisely, we have no thought of attacking Athens”. As Greek news reports indicated Athens was planning to extend its territorial waters to 12 nautical miles south of island of Crete, Turkish officials voiced opposition.

*Erdoğan announced elections for May, authorities arrested suspected Islamic State (ISIS)-linked individuals.* Erdoğan 18 Jan said presidential and parliamentary elections would take place on 14 May; date yet to be confirmed. Constitutional Court 5 Jan blocked bank accounts of pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP), depriving party of receiving election grants from treasury. Police detained some 80 individuals with alleged links to ISIS, primarily foreigners. Meanwhile, govt condemned Quran-burning incident at protest in Sweden; govt yet to ratify Finland’s and Sweden’s NATO membership bids.

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## Central Asia

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➡ **Kyrgyzstan** **President finalised border delimitation agreement with Uzbek counterpart, and police arrested relatives of detained activists and politicians protesting in capital Bishkek.**

*Kyrgyz and Uzbek leaders completed border delimitation process.* President Japarov and Uzbek President Mirziyoev 27 Jan signed over 20 documents aimed at strengthening bilateral relations during Mirziyoev’s state visit to Bishkek. Most notably, leaders finalised border delimitation agreement, which Japarov hailed as “truly historic event”.

*Authorities detained dozens of demonstrators in Bishkek.* Police 10 Jan arrested dozens of relatives of 26 politicians and activists detained late Oct for protesting border delimitation agreement with Uzbekistan; relatives demanded release of jailed politicians and activists during rally in Bishkek. Police same day released demonstrators.

➡ **Tajikistan** **Tajik and Belarusian defence ministers met in Minsk.**

Belarusian news agency Belta 4 Jan reported that Defence Minister Serali Mirzo met with Belarusian counterpart Viktor Khrenin in Belarus; two reportedly

discussed “security matters in the responsibility area of the Collective Security Treaty Organization” and ways to advance bilateral cooperation.

➔ **Uzbekistan President finalised border delimitation agreement with Kyrgyz counterpart; prosecutors handed down lengthy prison term for Karakalpak activist.**

*Uzbek and Kyrgyz leaders completed border delimitation process.* During two-day trip to Kyrgyz capital Bishkek, President Mirziyoev and Kyrgyz counterpart Sadyr Japarov 27 Jan signed over 20 documents aimed at strengthening bilateral relations. Most notably, leaders finalised border delimitation agreement, which Japarov hailed as “truly historic event”.

*Court sentenced Karakalpak activists to between three and 16 years in prison.* During trial of 22 people charged with instigating deadly violence in autonomous Karakalpakstan region in July 2022, prosecutors 11 Jan called for 20 defendants to receive sentences of between five and 18 years. Bukhara city regional court 31 Jan sentenced lawyer and journalist Dauletmurat Tajimuratov to 16 years in prison. Court sentenced 15 others to prison terms of between three and eight and a half years, released five and handed one a suspended prison sentence.