

# Europe and Central Asia

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## Balkans

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➔ **Bosnia** In response to COVID-19 outbreak, Federation entity and Republika Srpska (RS) 16 March separately declared state of disaster, enabling emergency measures to slow spread of virus; state-level PM Tegeltija 17 March declared nationwide state of emergency for coordination of emergency activities. State-level presidency 18 March adopted decision on engagement of domestic armed forces to assist civilian authorities in preventing spread of COVID-19 for 30 days. RS People's Assembly 28 March voted to impose state of emergency but Bosniak delegates in Council of Peoples blocked decision.

⬇ **Kosovo** New coalition govt collapsed as parliament passed no-confidence vote following divisions over response to COVID-19 outbreak and lifting of import tariff on goods from Serbia. COVID-19 response raised tensions after President Thaçi 17 March proposed state of emergency with “full and maximum mobilisation of the Kosovo Security Forces”; Serb minority party Lista Sprska objected, describing proposal as “silent occupation of Serb municipalities”. PM Kurti 18 March dismissed Internal Affairs Minister Agim Veliu (from coalition partner Democratic League of Kosovo, LDK) for creating “unnecessary cause of panic” on COVID-19 after Veliu insisted on state of emergency in TV interview. LDK leader Isa Mustafa 20 March said dismissal was unacceptable and that he had not been consulted, gave Kurti ultimatum to retract dismissal and remove import tariffs on Serbian goods by 25 March, or his party would file no-confidence motion against govt in parliament. LDK 25 March filed no-confidence motion, which passed 82 to 32; Thaçi to nominate new candidate for PM. Political tensions started to rise earlier in month over 100% tariff on imports from Serbia: Kurti 5 March sent letter to European Commission president announcing partial abolition of tariffs from 15 March. Thaçi 10 March urged Kurti to abolish tariffs to avoid jeopardising Kosovo-U.S. relations; U.S. 13 March announced suspension of \$50mn aid program due to refusal to lift tariffs. PM Kurti 31 March said that govt would lift 100% tariff on all goods imported from Serbia as of 1 April.

⬆ **North Macedonia** EU leaders gave North Macedonia long-awaited green light to start formal EU accession talks and it joined NATO. Following French President Macron's Feb announcement that France was ready to lift opposition to opening of EU accession negotiations, EU Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi 2 March confirmed his recommendation that EU open talks with North Macedonia, stating govt had taken “significant steps to strengthen the independence of the judiciary”, including recent adoption of EU-sought Law on Prosecution. EU leaders 26 March gave approval for North Macedonia (and Albania) to start formal membership talks. President Pendarovski 20 March signed NATO accession agreement after Spain 17 March ratified accession protocol, final NATO member state to do so. Party leaders 17 March agreed to postpone 12 April elections over concerns about COVID-19, without setting new date for polls. Pendarovski 19 March declared state of emergency over outbreak.

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## Caucasus

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➔ **Armenia** In response to COVID-19 outbreak, govt 16 March declared state of emergency, closed borders to all foreign citizens and prevented Armenian citizens from leaving. Govt same day also postponed indefinitely referendum on constitutional changes due 5 April that could lead to dismissal of seven of nine Constitutional Court judges seen by PM Pashinyan to be maintaining ties to former leadership.

➔ **Azerbaijan** In response to COVID-19 outbreak, govt 24 March declared strict restrictions countrywide on mass events and use of public transport. Azerbaijani investigative journalist Afgan Mukhtarli released from prison 17 March and went to Germany; Mukhtarli was arrested in Georgia in 2017 and taken back to Azerbaijan, where in early 2018 he was sentenced to six years in prison for allegedly smuggling contraband.

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict** Ceasefire violations in conflict zone continued early March, and Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders exchanged harsh statements. Two Azerbaijani border guards killed 5 and 7 March near border areas of Gazakh region, two Armenian soldiers and one 14-year-old Armenian civilian wounded 30 March in same area, and one Armenian soldier killed 10 March in clash at Armenia's border with Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhchivan. In opening session of new Azerbaijani parliament, President Aliyev 10 March reiterated traditional understanding of conflict's origins and called on MPs to reinforce efforts to promote such views internationally; Armenia condemned remarks 13 March and questioned whether Baku was ready to proceed with peace process. De facto NK authorities held presidential and parliamentary elections 31 March as planned despite calls by many political forces in Armenia and civil society to postpone them due to COVID-19. By end-month 27 political parties had named their candidates for 33 parliamentary seats and fourteen people had stepped forward as presidential candidates. In attempt to prevent spread of coronavirus, NK closed its crossings, initially 20 March for all foreign citizens and one week later for all residents of Armenia except for those engaged in transporting goods, journalists and local poll observers.

➔ **Georgia** Responding to COVID-19 outbreak, govt 18 March closed borders, prohibiting foreign citizens from entering country. Authorities 23 March declared lockdown in two regions in south west bordering Azerbaijan and Armenia, Marneuli and Bolnisi, after Marneuli official diagnosed with COVID-19. Breakaway region Abkhazia 5 March closed crossings with Georgia, joining other secessionist territory South Ossetia which closed crossings late Feb. Both regions declared emergency situation 27 March. Next day Russia closed its borders with both regions. Abkhazia 22 March held de facto presidential election despite early March hospitalisation of leading candidate and opposition leader Aslan Bzhania after brief visit to Moscow, and fears surrounding COVID-19 outbreak; Georgian govt same day criticised elections, saying they "fully contradict the fundamental norms and principles of international law" and violate Georgia's sovereignty. Abkhaz election commission 23 March declared Bzhania winner with 56.5% of vote (voter turnout reported as 71.6%).

➡ **Russia/North Caucasus** Citing COVID-19 as factor, President Putin 10 March put his bid to reset presidential two-term limit, which would allow him to run again for president in 2024, to vote of Constitutional Court; Court 16 March approved bid. Kremlin refused permit for demonstration against changes, citing need to prevent spread of COVID-19. In North Caucasus' Ingushetia republic, amid widespread discontent with Kremlin's rule, at least ten clan leaders 22 March urged boycott of nationwide vote planned for April on Putin's proposed constitutional reforms, citing anger over land transfer to Chechnya in 2018-2019, as well as historical grievances. Putin 25 March announced that vote on proposed constitutional changes scheduled for 22 April would be postponed indefinitely citing COVID-19.

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## Eastern Europe

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➡ **Belarus** Months-long oil supply contract dispute with Russia which began in Jan settled amid global crash of oil prices, and following expressions of support for Minsk from other countries including UK, Poland and U.S.. PM Rumas 11 March stated sudden global decline in oil prices had given Minsk more space in oil supply negotiations with Kremlin; Russia 23 March increased discount on prices as initially requested by Minsk, with Russian oil companies confirming they stood ready to restore supplies in full as soon as 1 April.

⬇️ **Ukraine** As fighting continued in Donbas and civilian cross-line movement ceased due to COVID-19 restrictions, creation of Minsk Trilateral Contact Group advisory council (which Kyiv said would give residents of conflict-affected areas opportunity to input into implementation of 2015 Minsk II agreements) led to split within ruling party, potentially derailing conflict-resolution process. In conflict zone, eleven govt soldiers reported killed and seven Russian-backed fighters killed according to unofficial data. Two civilians were killed in shelling, gunfire and landmine incidents per Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In unprecedented move, head and deputy head of Ukraine's and Russia's presidential administrations respectively 11 March signed working protocol for new advisory council within Minsk Trilateral Contact Group for Donbas negotiations; council will adopt non-binding recommendations on implementation of 2015 Minsk II agreements; OSCE, Russia, France and Germany will have consultative powers; representatives of non govt-controlled areas identified as "plenipotentiary". Decision divided ruling party: 50 MPs from President Zelenskyy's "Sluha Narodu" party signed appeal to retract agreement. Kyiv police say 1,000 protesters 14 March marched against what organisers called Zelenskyy's "capitulation" to Russia. Amid spread of COVID-19, military 16 March stopped movement at all civilian entry-exit checkpoints at contact line in Donbas for two weeks, except permanent residents; Russia-backed fighters took same measures starting 21 March. Kyiv closed its state borders 27 March. Zelenskyy 4 March replaced his cabinet. Parliament 31 March passed laws forbidding past owners of insolvent banks from regaining assets; permitting sale of land, paving way for \$8bn in credit from International Monetary Fund.

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## Western Europe/Mediterranean

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➔ **Cyprus** Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı 2 March criticised decision by Republic of Cyprus govt to close four of eight checkpoints on dividing line separating Republic of Cyprus from self-declared “Turkish Republic of North Cyprus” (“TRNC”) to combat spread of COVID-19. Pro-federalist activists 7 and 9 March staged protests on either side of closed border crossing leading to small-scale clashes between police, Greek and Turkish Cypriots and UN soldiers. “TRNC” officials 19 March said they had postponed “presidential” elections from 26 April to 11 Oct due to COVID-19; Akıncı to continue in caretaker capacity. Tensions between Turkey and Republic of Cyprus and Greece over gas drilling in eastern Mediterranean remained high: Turkey’s third drillship, dubbed Kanuni and newly acquired from UK, arrived in Turkey 15 March.

➔ **Northern Ireland (UK)** Police 18 March reported hospitalisation of two men following two “paramilitary-style” attacks in Creggan area of Londonderry and town of Ballymena.

➔ **Turkey** President Erdoğan reached deal with Russian President Putin to cease hostilities in Syria’s Idlib province, and govt continued military operations against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in south east Turkey and northern Iraq. Erdoğan and Putin 5 March agreed temporary ceasefire deal to end hostilities in Syria’s Idlib province (see Syria). Protesters 15 March blocked joint Turkish-Russian patrol along M4 highway in Idlib province; Turkish and Russian media accused militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham of mobilising local population to obstruct patrol. Govt 19 March announced deaths of two Turkish soldiers in rocket attack by “radical groups” on M4 highway. In PKK conflict, military continued small-scale ground operations in south east Turkey and operations against PKK in northern Iraq. PKK 31 March attacked gas pipeline near Turkey’s border with Iran; Iran said attack halted flow of gas from Iran. Govt maintained efforts to criminalise pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP); authorities 9 March sentenced former HDP mayor of Diyarbakır to nine years imprisonment on PKK-related terrorism charges. Authorities 23 March dismissed eight HDP co-mayors. Turkey and EU engaged at highest level to resolve spat following Ankara’s decision to allow migrants to cross its borders to Greece. Govt sustained crackdown on individuals with suspected links to Islamic State (ISIS); police detained at least 28 people in March with alleged ties to ISIS, including Turkish and foreign nationals.

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## Central Asia

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➔ **Kazakhstan** Visiting area affected by 7-8 Feb deadly ethnic clashes in Zhambyl region in south, in which eleven people were killed and dozens injured, President Tokayev 1 March blamed violence on “criminal groups” and called for perpetrators to be punished regardless of ethnicity; meeting with ethnic minority Dungan representatives, he promised state protection of their culture while urging them to take measures to lessen tensions with ethnic Kazakhs, including learning Kazakh language. Authorities late March detained 25 people for involvement in clashes, including ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and members of Dungan minority. According to

govt 80 people briefly detained following continued protests 1 March over late Feb death in custody of civil rights activist Dulat Aghadil; rights activists said police detained 144. National Security Committee 26 March announced arrest of alleged Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated terrorist suspected of plotting attack in capital Nur-Sultan. Govt mid-March introduced state of emergency and sealed off Nur-Sultan and Almaty city in attempt to limit spread of COVID-19.

➡ **Kyrgyzstan** Police and protesters clashed in capital Bishkek 2 March as hundreds gathered to demand release of jailed politician Sadyr Japarov; 24 police officers reported injured, 166 people detained including former lawmaker and rally organiser Kanybek Osmonaliev. Trial began 23 March of former President Atambayev and thirteen co-defendants for charges including murder, over clashes between security forces and Atambayev and his supporters at his compound in Aug 2019 that resulted in one killed and scores injured; trial adjourned until 30 March due to Atambayev's poor health. Court 30 March announced postponement of trial after govt 24 March declared state of emergency in Bishkek and several other cities and regions to limit COVID-19 outbreak; not clear when trial will resume. Interior Ministry 30 March said police had detained 1,087 people for violating curfew imposed to contain COVID-19.

➡ **Tajikistan** Ruling People's Democratic Party won 1 March parliamentary elections with 50.4% of vote and 47 of 63 seats in parliament, while country's only opposition party failed to meet 5% threshold to gain a seat; turnout reported at 86%; Radio Free Europe reported voting irregularities. Russia's closure of its border with Tajikistan to stem spread of COVID-19, as well as wider closure of regional borders, raised concerns over economic impact of collapse in remittances from Tajik migrant workers in Russia.

➡ **Turkmenistan** Govt denied reports of COVID-19 cases at hospital near capital Ashgabat early March, but mid-month sealed off capital and restricted travel; reports of spike in food prices late month.

➡ **Uzbekistan** President Mirziyoyev 6 March signed decree abolishing state quota system for cotton production, long linked to labour abuses; Mirziyoyev also signed decrees loosening Soviet-era restrictions on internal migration and purchasing property in capital. Govt 9 March registered Uzbek NGO advocating for rights of prison inmates and U.S. humanitarian NGO Mercy Corps. Govt 7 March said it would take up observer role in Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union prior to deciding on possible membership. Supreme Court 18 March sentenced Gulnara Karimova, jailed daughter of former President Karimov, to additional thirteen years in prison for corruption and financial crimes. To limit spread of COVID-19, govt 23 March closed borders, and next day locked down capital Tashkent.