

Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

➔ **Kosovo Parliament confirmed new govt led by Albin Kurti as PM, while EU special representative sought to reignite Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.** Following landslide win of Vetëvendosje party in snap parliamentary elections in Feb, Central Election Commission 4 March ratified results and parliament 22 March approved new govt headed by Vetëvendosje party leader Albin Kurti. Newly confirmed PM Kurti said govt would prioritise fight against corruption, economic development and missing persons issue in dialogue with Serbia. Serbian President Vučić 23 March accused Kurti of violating Kosovo constitution by not including two Serbian ministers in newly formed govt. Prior to formation of new govt, EU Special Representative for Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue Miroslav Lajčák 1-2 March visited capital Pristina and met with Kurti, then Acting President Vjosa Osmani and then Acting PM Avdullah Hoti. After meetings, Lajčák 2 March stated that under incoming govt “there are no obstacles to reaching a comprehensive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia”; Osmani said that end goal of dialogue should be EU membership for both countries, and that Kosovo could “no longer make concessions”. Lajčák 3 March met with Serbian President Vučić in Serbian capital Belgrade, and stated that “dialogue is key for [Kosovo and Serbia] to advance on their European path”. Belgian authorities 16 March arrested former commander of Kosovo Liberation Army Pjeter Shala under indictment issued by Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague.

Caucasus

➔ **Armenia Amid ongoing standoff between govt and army, PM Pashinyan announced intention to resign and snap elections for June to pave way out of political crisis.** Amid widespread popular anger over govt’s handling of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in Sept-Nov 2020, handful of anti-govt protesters 1 March stormed govt building in capital Yerevan demanding that Pashinyan step down as PM; group left shortly thereafter. Tensions subsequently remained high between Pashinyan and army. Following PM’s request in Feb to dismiss Chief of General Staff Onik Gasparyan for alleged attempted military coup, govt 10 March announced dismissal legally valid as President Armen Sarkissian failed to officially approve request within allotted time; in response, Gasparyan called dismissal “unconstitutional”, confirmed he had appealed to administrative court. Yerevan administrative court 19 March declared that Gasparyan had right to stay in current position; in response Pashinyan 23 March said ruling was unlawful and proposed new candidate for chief of general staff position. Pashinyan’s continued assertion that Gasparyan’s dismissal was effective despite Sarkissian’s refusal to approve it prompted dozens of senior military commanders to join calls for PM to step down. Pashinyan 18 March announced snap elections scheduled for 20 June – subject to parliamentary confirmation – and 28 March said he will resign as PM in April but stay in office as acting PM; Pashinyan 18 March added “snap

parliamentary elections are the best way out of the current internal political situation". Opposition 23 March ceased street protests and removed tents in front of parliament. Constitutional Court 26 March ruled that article 300.1 of Criminal Code is illegal, effectively ending court investigation into former President Robert Kocharyan launched by Pashinyan's govt in 2018 to investigate Kocharyan's order to disperse street protests in 2008.

➔ **Azerbaijan De facto Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) and Azerbaijani officials cooperated on searching for remains of soldiers and civilians.**

Azerbaijani and de facto NK security services continued coordination on field missions in search of remains of soldiers and civilians in Azerbaijani-controlled areas (see Nagorno-Karabakh). EU Special Representative for South Caucasus Toivo Khaar 10-13 March visited Azerbaijan, meeting with President Aliyev, among others.

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan) Russian-brokered ceasefire continued to hold in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict zone, as de facto NK and Azerbaijani officials cooperated on searching for remains of soldiers and civilians.**

In NK conflict zone, situation remained stable during month. Azerbaijani govt reported that mine explosions killed at least 18 military and civilians, with 79 others seriously injured, since Nov ceasefire agreement, mainly along pre-war front line. Azerbaijani and de facto NK security services continued coordination on field missions in search of remains of soldiers and civilians in Azerbaijani-controlled areas. NK resident 20 March reported one man missing in village of Karmir Shuka (Krasny Bazar), located at line of separation; de facto authorities 21 March said his body had been found burnt several hundred metres from village and are conducting investigation. Sides made no progress toward releasing Armenian detainees and prisoners held by Azerbaijan; Baku 10 March released one ethnic Armenian woman. In first military drills since Autumn 2020 escalation, Azerbaijan 15-17 March and Armenia 16-20 March held exercises in their respective territories. Swedish FM and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe chairperson-in-office 15-16 March visited Azerbaijan and Armenia to discuss NK issue and situation after recent war, meeting with de facto NK FM David Babayan in Yerevan, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, as well as Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan and Armenian President Armen Sarkissian. Russian President Putin 11 March had phone conversation with Aliyev, and 12 March with Pashinyan, reportedly to discuss practical implementation of ceasefire agreements; Putin and Pashinyan 26 March again spoke after Armenian govt held joint Security Council session with de facto NK leadership on situation in conflict zone.

➔ **Georgia EU-facilitated talks between govt and opposition concluded without deal, while opposition lawmakers in de facto South Ossetia ended six-month boycott of parliament.**

After court last month sentenced leader of main opposition party United National Movement Nika Melia to pre-trial detention, prompting PM Giorgi Gakharia to resign in protest, European Council President Charles Michel 1 March arrived in capital Tbilisi and, without prior notice, invited both ruling party and opposition to joint meeting; following talks, both sides declared their commitment to continue discussions on contentious issues, including recent parliamentary elections, arrest of opposition members and need to reinforce role of opposition in parliament. Michel 8 March appointed Christian Danielsson as special envoy to continue talks; Danielsson 12-19 March held meetings

with both parties and announced that discussions concluded without deal; opposition said ruling party refused to demonstrate flexibility regarding their demands for snap elections and release of those detained, while ruling party said opposition had put forward “anti-state ultimatums”. Michel 23 March announced that Danielsson will return to Tbilisi by 27 March to continue talks; following further talks between govt and opposition on EU proposal for agreement that included provisions of electoral and judicial reform as well as addressing “politicised justice”, Danielsson 31 March said he was “sad to report that none of the political parties could agree to this solution in whole.” In breakaway South Ossetia, opposition parliamentarians 16 March returned to parliament for vote on candidacy for new PM after six-month boycott; de facto President Anatoliy Bibilov’s candidate Gennady Bekoyev was confirmed as PM. De facto leader early 4 March announced constitutional reforms subject to possible referendum.

➔ **Russia (internal) Supporters of imprisoned opposition politician Alexei Navalny planned for new mass rally in coming months, while security forces conducted operations in North Caucasus.** With dwindling momentum for street protests following Navalny’s imprisonment, Navalny’s team 23 March announced new drive to demand his release with plans for largest rally “in the history of modern Russia” in Spring, encouraging citizens to register support. In letter publicised 31 March, Navalny announced hunger strike to protest lack of access to medical treatment amid reports of his deteriorating health, and highlighted abuse through “sleep deprivation” during detention. In North Caucasus, head of federal domestic security force 10 March stated that “the main centers of terrorist activity and all gang leaders were liquidated” in region. In Dagestan’s Makhachkala city, security forces 11 March killed suspected militant accused of preparing attack on law enforcement officers. In Adygea, security forces 17 March detained suspected supporter of Islamic State from Central Asia who confessed to suicide attack plot. Security forces 19 March detained 14 participants of Ukrainian youth group accused of promoting neo-Nazi propaganda and provoking inter-ethnic conflict in Black Sea town of Gelendzhik and in Yaroslavl city.

➔ **Russia/U.S. Moscow recalled its ambassador to U.S. following remarks by President Biden.** U.S. President Biden 16 March said he believed Russian President Putin is “a killer” and Putin would “pay a price” for interfering in U.S. elections; Moscow next day recalled its ambassador for emergency consultations and to assess U.S.-Russian relations. In following days, Russian officials, members of ruling United Russia party, governors and members of parliament condemned Biden’s remarks.

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Eastern Europe

➔ **Belarus** **Opposition leader sought to reignite anti-govt protests and announced bid to hold talks with govt amid concerns over ongoing crackdown on dissent.** In attempt to restart anti-govt protests that began after disputed presidential election in Aug 2020, exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya 18 March called for “second wave of protests” to begin 25 March; police 25 March reportedly arrested over 200 protesters. Tsikhanouskaya 18 March said UN and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe were “ready to organize a platform and act as mediators, as well as to force the regime to negotiate” and announced online poll aimed at delivering democratic mandate for pursuing talks with President Lukashenka; as of 19 March, over 450,000 people had signed poll. General Prosecutor’s Office 5 March said it filed extradition request with Lithuania for Tsikhanouskaya’s return to Belarus; Lithuanian FM next day responded that “hell will first have to freeze over before we consider your requests”. Tsikhanouskaya 17 March addressed U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee and urged U.S. to apply pressure on govt by expanding sanctions to include “judges, state-owned enterprises, security officers, oligarchs” and other officials. Prosecutor General 29 March opened terrorism investigation into Tsikhanouskaya alleging plot to conduct arson and plant explosives in capital Minsk and other cities. Lukashenka 2 March said: “The [new] constitution... we will adopt in January-February next year. And that is all that the transfer of power will be about”, and 19 March said: “There will be other presidents. I can guarantee this”. Meanwhile, UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders 19 March expressed concern over “increasing crackdown against human rights defenders in Belarus” amid reports of “raids on offices, arrests of human rights defenders and the hampering of lawyers’ work”; authorities 22 March reportedly detained leader of opposition United Civil Party. U.S. House of Representatives’ Human Rights Commission 13 March called on Minsk to immediately release jailed blogger Ihar Losik who has been detained since June 2020.

↓ **Ukraine** **Conflict escalated further in east as Donbas ceasefire showed cracks, with over 20 killed amid deadlocked peace talks.** In Donbas conflict zone, fighting during month killed up to 11 Russia-backed fighters and one civilian, according to data from de facto heads and social media, and at least nine Ukrainian govt servicemen, per official reports; latter included four killed by sniper fire 26 March, prompting Ukraine’s parliament 30 March to adopt resolution calling for increased Western pressure on Russia. During videoconference same day with French and German heads of state, Russian President Putin expressed “concern at the military escalation provoked by Ukraine”. Earlier in month, press service of so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) 3 March granted troops permission to launch “preventative fire”, undermining July 2020 ceasefire provisions; Head of Ukrainian Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) delegation Leonid Kravchuk same day said that Russian-backed forces were escalating violence in response to Kyiv’s sanctions in Feb on Ukrainian pro-Russian opposition politicians and U.S. and EU “increased pressure” on Moscow. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief 30 March accused Russia of building up military forces near Ukraine’s borders. President Zelenskyy’s Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak 9 March announced that French and German officials had helped produce new roadmap for peaceful reintegration of breakaway parts of

Donbas; Dmitry Kozak, Russian President Putin's deputy chief of staff, 16 March called new peace plan "a myth", reflecting Feb recommendations made by Germany and France which Russia had largely rejected. Ukraine's Security and Defence Council 11 March approved draft strategy "for the deoccupation and reintegration" of Crimean Peninsula; Russian MFA 15 March said "all of Kyiv's efforts to return Crimea are illegitimate" and constitute "direct encroachment on [Russia's] territorial integrity". Gathering in support of imprisoned activist Serhiy Sternenko 30 March ended in damage to façade of Presidential Administration; interior minister attributed damage to possible plot by ex-President Poroshenko while supporters of Sternenko and Poroshenko blamed interior ministry. Western Europe/Mediterranean

➔ **Cyprus Expectations for next month's high-level talks on resolving longstanding conflict remained tempered.** Ahead of five-plus-one talks – which will include UN, leaders of two Cypriot communities, and three guarantor powers Greece, Turkey and UK – scheduled for 27-29 April in Geneva, sides remained far apart on desired outcomes: Turkey/Turkish Cypriots favour solution based on equal sovereignty of two states, while Greece/Republic of Cyprus continue to voice support for return to settlement talks for bi-zonal, bi-communal federation. Turkish President Erdoğan 19 March called for debate around new and realistic options "instead of dictating to the sides past models that have proven to be unsuccessful". Republic of Cyprus, Greece and Israel 8 March signed Memorandum of Understanding on project to establish new energy grid transporting electricity from Israel-Cyprus to Europe through Greece; Ankara 16 March issued verbal note requesting information and that its approval be sought for "works in areas within [Turkey's] continental shelf". EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrel 8 March said: "The relative calm we are currently experiencing at sea in the Eastern Mediterranean and on settlement-related issues is fragile. Progress in the Cyprus talks is more important than ever".

➔ **Eastern Mediterranean Greece and Turkey held second round of talks amid continued regional tensions, notwithstanding improved ties between Turkey and Egypt.** Greece and Turkey held 62nd round of "exploratory talks" on Aegean issues in Greek capital Athens on 16-17 March. Following talks, Greek FM Nikos Dendias conditionally agreed to invitation by his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu to visit Turkey's capital Ankara on 14 April, saying: "We hope that it will lead to finding common ground for resolving the only bilateral dispute we have with Turkey, namely the delimitation of the [Exclusive Economic Zone] and the continental shelf in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean". NATO Sec Gen Jens Stoltenberg 4 March said: "We must avoid going back to the 1990s" when "similar tension resulted in casualties and aircraft crashes". EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrel 8 March said: "The relative calm we are currently experiencing at sea in the Eastern Mediterranean and on settlement-related issues is fragile". Leaders at European Council summit 25-26 March abstained from imposing sanctions against Turkey and pledged conditional progress to improve trade ties and cooperation on other issues. Despite ongoing exploratory talks between Athens and Ankara, numerous incidents during month led to irritation on both sides. Notably, Turkey 25 Feb-7 March conducted large-scale military exercises in undisputed waters combined with hydrographic research of vessel "Çeşme" in international waters in Central Aegean; six Saudi fighter jets 13 March arrived in

Greek island Crete for exercises with Greek air forces, prompting Turkish President Erdoğan 12 March to criticise move, saying: “Saudi Arabia’s joint exercise with Greece has saddened us. We would not want to see Saudi Arabia make such a decision”. Meanwhile, in sign of thawing relations between Turkey and Egypt, President Erdoğan’s office 8 March said Turkey wants to turn new page with Egypt and Gulf countries and Turkish FM Çavuşoğlu 12 March declared that diplomatic contacts between Turkey and Egypt had started; partial rapprochement could pave way for understanding on Eastern Mediterranean dispute.

➔ **Northern Ireland Loyalist paramilitary groups temporarily withdrew support for Good Friday Agreement.** Loyalist Communities Council (LCC), umbrella group representing paramilitary groups, 3 March temporarily withdrew support for 1998 Good Friday Agreement in protest of Northern Ireland Protocol – provision of UK-EU “Brexit” agreement in effect since 1 Jan 2020 that creates regulatory border in Irish Sea; Chairman of LCC David Campbell warned that EU and UK would be “responsible for the permanent destruction of agreement” if not honoured in its entirety. Campbell 19 March warned that if “core guarantees” were not honoured, this would lead “to significant protest, to the bringing down of the Northern Ireland executive and then into significant political crisis”.

➔ **Turkey Military slightly reduced operations against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey and northern Iraq while authorities actively sought to proscribe pro-Kurdish party.** Govt escalated efforts to criminalise pro-Kurdish opposition Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP): chief prosecutor 17 March filed indictment with Constitutional Court seeking ban of HDP, calling it undemocratic party that colludes with “terrorist” PKK and seeks to “destroy unity of state”, as well as five-year ban on over 600 HDP members. Meanwhile, operations continued in south-eastern Şırnak, Siirt, Van and Hakkari provinces and around northern Iraq’s Hakurk and Qandil areas during month. Missiles 18 March landed in Turkey’s Kilis province in south, reportedly fired from Tel Rifat city in Syria’s Aleppo province controlled by Kurdish-led People’s Protection Units (YPG); Turkish defence ministry same day announced retaliatory attacks on surrounding villages. Security forces continued operations against Islamic State (ISIS) operatives; police during month detained over 100 individuals for their alleged ISIS links, including Syrian and Iraqi nationals. In sign of thawing relations between Turkey and Egypt, FM Çavuşoğlu 12 March declared that diplomatic contacts between Turkey and Egypt had started (see Eastern Mediterranean).

Central Asia

↑ **Kyrgyzstan Govt and Uzbekistan struck deal to resolve longstanding border disputes while lawmakers approved April referendum on constitutional reforms.** Following state visit to Uzbekistan’s capital Tashkent, President Japarov and Uzbek President Mirziyoyev 12 March agreed to complete demarcation of sections of border within three months and improve access between Uzbekistan and its exclave of Sokh inside Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz and Uzbek PMs 25 March approved deal that includes land swaps and opening multiple checkpoints to improve access in and out of Sokh exclave; head of

Kyrgyz security services next day said “issues around the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border have been resolved 100 percent” and “there is not a single patch of disputed territory left”. Separately, Tajik and Kyrgyz officials 15-18 March held talks on demarcation of Kyrgyz-Tajik border and agreed to hold further talks, which took place on 26 March. Meanwhile, lawmakers 11 March approved referendum, scheduled for 11 April, on constitutional amendments that include greater powers for president and reducing number of lawmakers from 120 to 90; President Japarov 15 March said “I believe this constitution will establish order in the country”. NGO Human Rights Watch 5 March criticised draft constitution, said it “undermines human rights norms and weakens checks and balances”. Dozens of protesters 9 March held rally in capital Bishkek against proposed amendments; police 15 March detained protest organiser Tilekmat Kudaibergenov. Govt 16 March repatriated 79 children born to Kyrgyz parents who in recent years travelled to Iraq to join Islamic State or other extremist groups; UN children agency UNICEF same day commended govt’s decision while U.S. said “Kyrgyz government deserves praise for its commitment to help the returned children”.

➔ **Tajikistan Govt held talks with Kyrgyzstan on border delimitation while concerns rose over instability of Afghan border.** Tajik and Kyrgyz officials 15-18 March held talks over demarcation of Kyrgyz-Tajik border and agreed to hold further talks, which took place on 26 March. Governor of Shamsiddin Shohin district in south, at border with Afghanistan, 6 March confirmed that authorities engaged with local residents, including hunters and army reservists, to encourage them to “take up arms to defend our country” amid concerns

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