



Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

➔ **Kosovo** European Union (EU) announced Kosovo and Serbia had struck deal to normalise relations, but sides stopped short of signing final agreement.

Despite progress, Kosovo and Serbia failed to sign final deal on normalisation. After tacitly approving EU proposal on normalising relations late Feb, PM Kurti and Serb President Vučić 18 March reached verbal agreement on implementing annex, which provides further details on path to normalising relations and outlines plans for Joint Monitoring Committee. EU High Representative Josep Borrell also noted that Kosovo had agreed to begin negotiations to ensure “self-management for the Serbian communities in Kosovo”. Sides, however, failed to sign final deal; Borrell 18 March also admitted parties had not accepted “a more ambitious text” but that agreement nonetheless “will become an integral part of their respective EU paths”. U.S. 20 March hailed “historic” and “legally binding” agreement. Deal saw some opposition. Notably, leader of largest opposition party, Democratic Party of Kosovo, 20 March criticised Kurti for accepting agreement that maintains “frozen conflict with Serbia for years to come”, while Serb demonstrators 5, 17, 24 March protested deal in Serb capital Belgrade.

In other important developments. EU 10 March approved visa-free travel for Kosovar citizens. Serbian List – largest political party of Serbs in Kosovo – 21 March reconfirmed non-participation in local elections scheduled for April.

Caucasus

➔ **Armenia** Tensions with Azerbaijan ran high as sides exchanged blame for attacks along border; peace talks remained stalled amid increasingly hostile rhetoric.

Armenia and Azerbaijan reported number of incidents along border. Azerbaijan 9 March claimed Armenian troops 8-9 March fired at its forces stationed along border in order to provoke reaction and create “a false opinion” about Azerbaijani forces among representatives of EU civilian mission. Azerbaijan 20 March also reported one soldier injured at border, suggesting Armenia was “abusing the presence” of the EU mission “to increase tensions in the region and cover up its military provocations”; Armenia same day rejected “disinformation”. Armenia 22 March announced “enemy fire” had “lethally wounded” serviceman at Yeraskh town near Azerbaijani exclave Nakhichevan. Meanwhile, tensions escalated in Nagorno-Karabakh (see Nagorno-Karabakh).

Sides made no progress on diplomatic front and ramped up aggressive rhetoric. No in-person meetings occurred in March, and although sides continued exchanging draft peace treaty, their increasingly hostile public statements suggested little progress on diplomatic front. Notably, PM Pashinyan 14 March confirmed receiving Azerbaijan's reaction to Armenia's draft agreement, but claimed Baku was using it to try and "form territorial claims" in Armenia and "obtain a mandate for genocide or ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh"; Pashinyan then warned that "the danger of a new escalation is very high". Azerbaijani President Aliyev 18 March responded that "Armenia must accept our conditions [...], sign a peace treaty with us and carry out [border] delimitation" if it is "to live comfortably".

Foreign mediation produced no breakthrough. EU Special Representative for South Caucasus Toivo Klaar and U.S. Senior Adviser for Caucasus Negotiations Louis Bono 5, 6 March visited Azerbaijan's capital Baku to advance peace process. FM Mirzoyan 20 March met with Russian FM Lavrov, who same day said date for trilateral meeting would be decided "in the near future". European Council President Charles Michel 25 March called Pashinyan and Aliyev separately to advance "Brussels process".

➔ **Azerbaijan Tensions with Armenia ran high as sides exchanged blame for attacks along border; peace talks remained stalled amid increasingly hostile rhetoric.**

Armenia and Azerbaijan reported number of attacks along border. Azerbaijan 9 March claimed Armenian troops 8-9 March fired at its forces stationed along border in order to provoke reaction and create "a false opinion" about Azerbaijani forces among representatives of EU civilian mission. Azerbaijan 20 March also reported one soldier injured at border, suggesting Armenia was "abusing the presence" of the EU mission "to increase tensions in the region and cover up its military provocations"; Armenia same day rejected "disinformation". Armenia 22 March announced "enemy fire" had "lethally wounded" serviceman at Yeraskh town near exclave Nakhichevan. Meanwhile, tensions escalated in Nagorno-Karabakh (see Nagorno-Karabakh).

Sides made no progress on diplomatic front and ramped up aggressive rhetoric. No in-person meetings occurred in March, and although sides continued exchanging draft peace treaty, their increasingly hostile public statements suggested little progress on diplomatic front. Notably, Armenian PM Pashinyan 14 March confirmed receiving Azerbaijan's reaction to Armenia's draft agreement, but claimed Baku was using it to try and "form territorial claims" in Armenia and "obtain a mandate for genocide or ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh"; Pashinyan then warned that "the danger of a new escalation is very high". President Aliyev 18 March responded that "Armenia must accept our conditions [...], sign a peace treaty with us and carry out [border] delimitation" if it is "to live comfortably".

Foreign mediation produced no breakthrough. EU Special Representative for South Caucasus Toivo Klaar and U.S. Senior Adviser for Caucasus Negotiations Louis Bono 5, 6 March visited capital Baku to advance peace process. Armenian FM Mirzoyan 20 March met with Russian FM Lavrov, who same day said date for trilateral meeting would be decided "in the near future". European Council President Charles Michel 25 March called Pashinyan and Aliyev separately to advance "Brussels process".

Relations with Iran remained strained. Baku 11 March summoned Iranian ambassador over alleged violation of its airspace by Iranian military aircraft.

↓ **Nagorno-Karabakh Tensions soared in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) as sides reported multiple incidents along front line and Russia accused Azerbaijan of violating 2020 ceasefire agreement.**

Multiple attacks occurred, Azerbaijan accused of violating ceasefire deal. Amid elevated tensions over blockade of Lachin corridor, serious incident 5 March occurred between Azerbaijani soldiers and de facto police, leaving five dead. De facto authorities said Azerbaijani soldiers had fired at police car first, which Russian peacekeepers corroborated; Baku said Russia had “distorted the facts”, claiming its soldiers had attempted to search vehicle suspected of transporting weapons from Armenia to NK via alternative road and were fired upon from NK positions. Tensions further escalated after Azerbaijan 25 March announced its forces had cut off alternative roads to prevent transport of “manpower [and] military equipment” into NK; Russia’s defence ministry same day said Azerbaijan had violated 2020 ceasefire deal. De facto authorities 30 March reported that Azerbaijani troops had blocked road used to transport humanitarian supplies to NK. Elsewhere, Russian peacekeepers and de facto authorities reported attacks on farmers near military positions in conflict zone, while Armenia and Azerbaijan reported incidents along border (see Armenia and Azerbaijan).

Talks between Stepanakert and Baku failed to resolve Lachin blockade. De facto authorities and Azerbaijan 1 March met to discuss issues “exclusively of a humanitarian nature”, which led to fixes on pipeline supplying gas from Armenia to NK via Azerbaijani-controlled territory. Talks, however, failed to produce steps toward Lachin corridor’s unblocking. Azerbaijan 13 March proposed third meeting take place in Baku; Stepanakert next day rejected proposal, requesting “same venue as on 1 March” and insisting on “an internationally recognised and established format”, which Baku refused.

Yerevan and Baku made no progress on talks and ramped up aggressive rhetoric. Armenia and Azerbaijan exchanged draft peace treaty, but no in-person meeting occurred in March and sides made harsh public statements (see Armenia and Azerbaijan). Most notably, Azerbaijani President Aliyev 18 March urged Armenia to “accept our conditions [and] officially recognize Karabakh as the territory of Azerbaijan and carry out delimitation work according to our conditions. Only under these circumstances can they live comfortably”.

➔ **Georgia Ruling party withdrew controversial “foreign agents” law following days of large-scale protests; de facto authorities in Abkhazia and Russian officials blamed West for fomenting unrest.**

Major protests prompted ruling party to drop foreign agents law. Parliament deliberations early March about controversial foreign agent’s bill, backed by ruling Georgian Dream party, triggered unrest in capital Tbilisi. Notably, demonstrators 2, 6 March took to streets to protest bill, which would oblige NGOs and media outlets receiving over 20% of funding from abroad to register as “agents of foreign influence”. Despite unrest, ruling party pressed ahead to pass legislation, with parliament 7 March adopting law in first reading. Thousands of Georgians same day spontaneously gathered in front of parliament to protest, leading to violent confrontations with riot police, who used water cannons and tear gas to disperse protesters. Second, larger protest 8 March also ended in violent dispersal and police detained over 130 people. European Union and U.S. same day urged authorities to

respect right to protest and expressed concern about draft law. Ruling party 9 March withdrew bill and police released all those detained during protest.

Breakaway Abkhazia organised drills in response to protests. De facto officials in breakaway Abkhazia and Russian officials 9-10 March accused Western countries of instigating coup in Georgia, aimed at creating “a second front against Russia”. De facto leadership of Abkhazia 12-14 March organised military drills along line of separation, citing need for more training in face of “changing geopolitical situation in the region”. De facto Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania 21 March raised “combat readiness” of de facto armed forces, alleging more protests “are being prepared” in Georgia in April. Abkhazia and Russia 24 March held “defensive” joint military exercise. Meanwhile, EU Special Representative Toivo Klaar 16-17 March travelled to Abkhazia, where de facto leadership declared readiness to participate in Geneva International Dialogue planned for early April.

↓ **Russia (Internal) Authorities arrested U.S. journalist on espionage charges in worrying escalation of Russia’s media crackdown; rumours swirled of forthcoming mobilisation.**

Authorities arrested foreign journalist as crackdown continued. In worrying sign for foreign journalists working in Russia, security services 30 March detained *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, a U.S. citizen, on suspicion of espionage, first such case since Cold War; court same day ordered his pre-trial detention until 29 May. U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken condemned “Kremlin’s continued attempts to intimidate, repress and punish journalists and civil society voices”; U.S. same day urged its citizens to immediately leave country. Meanwhile, President Putin 18 March tightened punishment for “discrediting” or spreading misinformation (“fakes”) about volunteer forces – such as Wagner Group; criminal code already prohibits “fakes” about Russian army. Court in Tula region 28 March sentenced single father to two years in prison for “discrediting” Russian army and placed his daughter in orphanage. Authorities throughout month declared several foreign NGOs and think tanks “undesirable organisation[s]”, 20 March ordered liquidation of Moscow-based SOVA think-tank.

Prospect of second mobilisation loomed. Authorities in at least 43 regions summoned individuals military deems subject for mobilisation to military offices throughout month, citing need to update contact information, digitise personal data and conduct military training, fuelling speculation authorities could announce second mobilisation for Ukraine war.

International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrant for Putin. ICC 17 March issued arrest warrant for President Putin and Commissioner for Children’s Rights Maria Lvova-Belova for “war crime of unlawful deportation” of children from occupied territories in Ukraine to Russia. Kremlin same day called decision “outrageous” and noted that Russia does not recognise court’s jurisdiction. Russian Investigative Committee 20 March opened criminal case against ICC prosecutor and three judges.

In other important developments. Russia and Ukraine 18 March agreed to extend UN-brokered Black Sea grain deal by 60 days. Chinese President Xi Jinping 20 March arrived in capital Moscow for three-day visit, during which leaders reaffirmed close ties and readiness to promote “multipolar world”. Putin 25 March announced plans to store tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus (see Belarus).

↓ **Russia/U.S. Frosty U.S.-Russia relations deteriorated as sides traded accusations over downing of U.S. drone and Russia detained U.S. journalist.**

U.S. accused Russia of downing drone. U.S. military's European Command 14 March said Russian fighter jet struck propeller of U.S. military surveillance drone, forcing U.S. to down drone in international waters; U.S. immediately summoned Russia's Ambassador Anatoly Antonov over incident. Russia same day denied accusations its fighter jet made contact with drone, insisting it had entered area near Russia-occupied Crimea, declared "off-limits" by Moscow, causing Russian military to scramble fighters to intercept it and that, "as a result of sharp manoeuvre", drone crashed. U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin 15 March held phone call with Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu to discuss incident and avert further escalation. Austin said collision was part of "pattern of aggressive, risky and unsafe actions by Russian pilots" and that U.S. will "continue to fly [...] wherever international law allows"; Shoigu reportedly said such actions, which violate Russia's flight restrictions, risked further escalating situation and that Russia will "continue to respond proportionately to all provocations". Shortly after incident, Russia reportedly sent ships to recover wreckage of drone.

Russian authorities arrested U.S. journalist. In worrying sign for foreign journalists working in Russia, security services 30 March detained *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, a U.S. citizen, on suspicion of espionage, first such case since Cold War; court same day ordered his pre-trial detention until 29 May. U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 30 March condemned "Kremlin's continued attempts to intimidate, repress and punish journalists and civil society voices". U.S. same day urged its citizens to immediately leave country.

Eastern Europe

➔ **Belarus Crackdown on opposition continued, Russia announced plans to store nuclear weapons in Belarus, and President Lukashenko called for ceasefire in Ukraine.**

Court handed down heavy prison sentences to opposition figures. Court in Minsk 6 March sentenced in absentia opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and four associates to between 12 and 18 years in prison for treason and conspiracy to seize power; European Parliament 15 March condemned "show trials". President Lukashenko 7 March announced authorities had arrested "terrorist" and over 20 accomplices involved in 26 Feb drone attack on Russian military aircraft near capital Minsk, and accused Ukraine and U.S. Central Intelligence Agency of training detainee.

Russia announced plans to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. Russian President Putin 25 March announced he will station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, likening move to U.S. deploying nuclear arsenal in Europe and stating it would not violate "international obligations on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons" as Belarus would not control the weapons; Lukashenko 31 March said Moscow's plans would help "safeguard" country, which he claimed was under threat from West. In same speech, he also called for ceasefire in Ukraine and urged Russia and Ukraine to start negotiations "without preconditions".

➡ **Moldova** Authorities accused Russian-backed actors of plot to incite unrest during anti-govt protest; leadership in Transnistria accused Ukraine of planning terrorist attack.

Thousands participated in opposition-led protest. Some 4,500 anti-govt protesters 12 March gathered in capital Chişinău, organised by populist opposition Sor Party, to denounce rising cost of living; sporadic, small-scale clashes broke out and police detained over 50 people on public order violations. Head of police Viorel Cernauteanu same day said they had foiled plot devised by Russian-backed actors to cause mass unrest at protest and detained seven people. Accusations came amid mounting concern about Russian destabilisation efforts in Moldova; notably, U.S. 10 March said Russia “is pursuing options to weaken the Moldovan government probably with the eventual goal of seeing a more Russian-friendly administration in the capital”.

Authorities in Transnistria accused Ukraine of plotting terrorist attack. Security services in breakaway region of Transnistria 9 March claimed they had thwarted Ukrainian plot to kill local officials and civilians in main town of Tiraspol; Ukraine same day dismissed allegations as “a provocation orchestrated by the Kremlin”. Russian FM Sergei Lavrov 28 March accused Ukraine of preparing to “intervene in Transnistria, including with the use of force”.

➡ **Ukraine** Poland and Slovakia pledged fighter jets as battle for Bakhmut wore on, new revelations about Nord Stream pipeline blasts emerged, and UN presented evidence of war crimes.

Russian advance into Bakhmut ground on, missile barrage killed scores. Russian forces and paramilitary Wagner Group fighters continued to slowly encroach on embattled town of Bakhmut; Ukraine still controls around one third of town, which President Zelenskyy 6 March vowed to keep defending. Russia 9 March carried out its biggest air raid in months, killing at least nine and disrupting power supplies. In occupied Melitopol city (Zaporizhzhia region), car bomb 14 March killed Russian-installed official amid ongoing partisan attacks; Ukrainian forces 29 March reportedly shelled city, damaging electricity supply. Defence Ministry 21 March said explosion in Russian-annexed Crimea destroyed Russian missiles, but did not claim responsibility; Russia claimed attack targeted civilians. Meanwhile, media outlet *The New York Times* 7 March revealed pro-Ukrainian nationals may have blown up Nord Stream pipelines in Sept 2022; German news site t-online 26 March presented evidence pointing to Russian culpability.

Kyiv secured more Western military support. News website Axios 15 March reported that Israel approved export of its drone jamming system to Ukraine; Poland and Slovakia 16, 17 March respectively became first NATO countries to pledge fighter jets; European Union 20 March approved €2bn plan to boost ammunition deliveries; Japan’s PM Kishida 21 March visited Kyiv and pledged \$30mn in non-lethal military aid. 18 Leopard 2 tanks 29 March arrived in Ukraine from Germany.

Independent commission found evidence of war crimes. UN Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine 16 March presented evidence of Russian war crimes, and said that attacks on critical infrastructure and use of torture may amount to crimes against humanity; it documented two incidents by Ukrainian army that qualify as war crimes. International Criminal Court 17 March issued arrest warrant for Russian President Putin for “unlawful deportation” of children from occupied territories in Ukraine to Russia (see Russia).

Zelenskyy ordered priests and monks to clear pilgrimage site. Authorities 10 March ordered monks and priests of Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate to vacate Kyiv Cave Monastery by end of March, citing church's ties to Moscow.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➔ Cyprus Republic of Cyprus sought to kickstart moribund dialogue with Turkish Cypriots via greater European Union (EU) involvement, as sides reiterated long-held positions.

Republic of Cyprus began efforts to reignite talks, seeking federation solution. Following his election in Feb, Republic of Cyprus President Christodoulides 22 March travelled to Belgian capital Brussels for European Council Summit where he presented his proposal for more active EU involvement in Cyprus issue to presidents of three main EU institutions and UN Sec-Gen António Guterres. Christodoulides next day remarked that talks should resume “from where they left off in Crans-Montana” and announced that Republic of Cyprus and EU agreed to lay groundwork for resuming dialogue immediately after 14 May Turkish elections (see Türkiye). Earlier, Republic of Cyprus FM Constantinos Kombos 9 March remarked that state “will never accept a divisionary solution or a two-state solution”, and drew attention to Turkish activity in ghost resort town Varosha/Maraş, warning “any development other than the transfer of Varosha under UN administration” would be illegal. Republic of Cyprus Defence Minister Michalis Giorgallas 12 March said Türkiye’s “persistence and expansionist aspirations” are holding back resolution and urged Ankara to demonstrate “required will” for talks. Meanwhile, Christodoulides 10 March pledged to increase military spending to 2% of GDP, citing need to “bolster deterrent capabilities”; pledge followed end of U.S. arms embargo in Sept 2022.

Turkish Cypriots reiterated desire for two-state solution. “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) leader Ersin Tatar 6 March reiterated aim of two-state solution, asserting “TRNC will never accept an agreement that would make the Turkish Cypriot people a minority”. Tatar 15 March stated that he would “never accept the EU becoming involved in the Cyprus issue”. Earlier, Tatar 1 March announced nearly 5,000 Turkish earthquake victims had arrived in “TRNC”, prompting concern among Greek Cypriots about increased population of settlers in north.

➔ Türkiye Military targeted Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) after group had pledged in Feb to halt military actions in Türkiye, parties prepared for May elections, and tensions eased with Greece.

Military continued operations against PKK. After PKK pledged to “stop military actions in Türkiye” in Feb following earthquakes, Turkish security forces claimed to have killed and captured numerous PKK militants during March in Mardin, Tunceli, Şırnak, Şanlıurfa and Konya provinces. In northern Iraq, Turkish drone strike 1 March killed another PKK-linked senior militant and his guard near Sinjar (see Iraq).

Parties prepared for elections in May. Authorities set parliamentary and presidential elections for 14 May. Six-party opposition alliance 6 March named Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as its joint presidential candidate, while second biggest

opposition alliance, formed by six left-wing parties, decided not to field candidate, tacitly supporting Kılıçdaroğlu. Constitutional Court 9 March unfroze funds of pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP); fearing ban from politics as authorities pursue closure case against it, HDP decided to enter election under "Green Left Party".

Atmosphere of good-will persisted between govt and Greece. Amid increased diplomatic contact between Ankara and Athens following earthquakes, Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis 13 March observed "de-escalation and a more positive attitude and behaviour" after "a long period of unacceptable provocation". Greek and Turkish defence ministers 9 March held call, reiterating commitment to positive atmosphere. After meeting FM Cavusoglu 20 March, Greek FM Nikos Dendias announced Türkiye will support Greece's bid to become non-permanent member of UN Security Council in 2025-2026, while Greece will support Türkiye's bid for post of secretary general of International Maritime Organisation. Govt and Greece 22 March held fourth meeting for Positive Agenda in Ankara, announcing progress on 25 agenda topics.

In other important developments. Death toll of devastating earthquakes 23 March rose above 50,000, as damage likely exceeded \$100bn. Security forces during month detained around 100 individuals with alleged links to Islamic State. In sign of thawing ties, FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu 18 March visited Egyptian capital Cairo in first such visit in decade. Parliament 30 March ratified Finland's NATO membership.

Central Asia

➡ Kyrgyzstan Calls to release activists detained over border demarcation disagreement continued.

Relatives of over 20 politicians and activists who were detained late Oct for protesting border demarcation agreement with Uzbekistan 17 March held protest in capital Bishkek; protesters demanded detainees' immediate release among other things, including judicial reforms and clampdown on corruption. Echoing their demands, NGO Human Rights Watch 20 March called for immediate release of activists, raising concerns about conditions in pre-trial detention facilities.

➡ Tajikistan Court charged journalist with calling for changes to constitutional order; Russian PM promised deeper bilateral ties with Tajikistan during two-day trip to capital Dushanbe.

Journalist charged with calling for changes to constitutional order. Authorities 6 March arrested journalist Khurshed Fozilov in Panjakent city, 13 March charged him with "public calls to change the constitutional structure by force"; Fozilov next day rejected charges.

Russian PM sought to deepen ties and boost economic cooperation. President Rahmon 2 March met with Russian PM Mikhail Mishustin in Dushanbe, where Rahmon expressed readiness to continue developing Russian-Tajik relations. Mishustin next day met with his Tajik counterpart Kokhir Rasulzoda to discuss opportunities to strengthen cooperation in trade, energy, industrial production, transport and culture.

➡ **Uzbekistan** **Lawmakers voted in favour of April referendum on new constitution; prosecutors handed down lengthy sentences to 39 Karakalpak activists.**

Lawmakers backed referendum on constitutional amendments. Months after President Mirziyoyev first proposed constitutional amendments that, among other things, allow him to seek third term in office, lawmakers 10 March overwhelmingly backed proposed amendments and voted in favour of referendum, provisionally set for 30 April; Senate 15 March approved bill and confirmed date of referendum.

Authorities handed down more sentences to Karakalpak activists. Court in Bukhara city 17 March sentenced 39 Karakalpak activists to between five and 11 years in prison for their participation in July 2022 protests in autonomous Karakalpakstan region, which broke out in response to govt's proposed constitutional amendment that would have ended region's right to seek independence.