

# Europe and Central Asia

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## **Balkans**

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➔ **Bosnia** Briefing UN Security Council 8 May, Office of the High Representative, international overseer of implementation of 1995 peace agreement, expressed concern over continuing deadlock over appointments to state-level and federal govt posts seven months after Oct 2018 elections, and criticised Republika Srpska (RS) authorities' rejection of judgements of state and constitutional courts. Bosnian Serb member of presidency Milorad Dodik during ceremony in RS capital Banja Luka 12 May suggested that Serb regiment in Bosnian army should wear uniform of wartime Bosnian Serb Army at future ceremony, prompting condemnation from other members of state presidency.

↓ **Kosovo** Tensions within Kosovo and with Serbia spiked after police 28 May conducted raid on organised crime suspects in ethnic Serb-dominated part of Mitrovica in north, detaining more than two dozen people including local police, and prompting Serbia to put its army on alert. Two UN officials among those arrested during raid, including Russian national who was released same day and later declared persona non grata; UN expressed "great concern". Belgrade accused Pristina of aiming to intimidate and provoke panic; President Vučić put Serbian army on "combat alert" near border to protect Serbs, while Russia called Kosovo's actions "provocation". Kosovo police reported five officers and six civilians injured as police attempted to break through barricade constructed by local Serbs to obstruct operation. Hundreds of Serbs protested in north Mitrovica against raids 29 May. UN and EU called for calm. Amid tensions, Pristina 30 May banned Serbian PM for life from entering Kosovo due to "racist comments toward Albanians" previous day. Vučić 27 May told Serbian parliament that Serbia has lost control of Kosovo and suggested "a possible compromise solution in a referendum". Snap local elections in four Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo 19 May won by Srpska Lista, the only Serb party contesting polls, reportedly gaining more than 90% of vote, with voter turnout 42%; Western embassies expressed concern over "restricted electoral competition" and reports of "intimidation". U.S. embassy 14 May expressed concern over series of recent controversial govt appointments of allegedly unqualified senior officials "including individuals convicted of war crimes". Parliament 16 May approved resolution condemning crimes committed by Serbian forces during 1998-99 war, and calling on govt to criminalise denial of genocide in Kosovo.

➔ **North Macedonia** In second round of presidential election, pro-Western candidate Stevo Pendarovski, backed by ruling Social Democrats, won with 51.7% of the vote, beating opposition-backed Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova; turnout reported at 46.6%. European Commission in annual enlargement report 29 May again recommended launch of EU accession talks with North Macedonia.

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## Caucasus

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➔ **Armenia** PM Pashinyan faced growing criticism from current and former de facto Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) officials, and clashed with judiciary over court case against former president. Pashinyan 10 May warned against possible counter-revolutionary developments in NK, and 20 May accused “former corrupt [political] system” of developing conspiracies and provoking Karabakh; de facto NK leader Bako Sahakyan denied “treason” and problems with Yerevan. Court 18 May ordered release from pre-trial custody of Robert Kocharyan, country’s second president who is facing criminal charges for overturning constitutional order in 2008 in case he says is politically motivated, after current and former NK de facto leaders vouched for him; state prosecutors appealed Kocharyan’s pre-trial release at constitutional court. PM Pashinyan criticised court’s decision and called for protests in front of court offices all around country. Media reported over 1,000 protesters blocked courts 20 May in response to call by Pashinyan, who later asked demonstrators to restore access. Human rights ombudsman 19 May denounced Pashinyan’s actions as “dangerous for the security and stability of the country’s legal system”. Pashinyan 20 May announced five-step plan for reform of judicial system, including “vetting” of judges; promised open parliamentary investigation into circumstances of four-day fighting in April 2016. Head of EU Delegation to Armenia and President of Venice Commission proposed support to judicial reform.

➔ **Azerbaijan** NGOs Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International criticised country’s poor human rights record ahead of Baku hosting prominent Europa League football final 29 May. Yerevan and Baku exchanged harsh statements around decision by Armenian football player Henrikh Mkhitaryan not to play in Europa League final in Baku, citing concerns over his safety despite guarantees from Azerbaijani authorities.

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan)** Dialogue continued between Azerbaijan and Armenian leaderships despite ongoing incidents along front lines, while visit by Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group mediators late month included discussions of possible support to recently agreed humanitarian and security measures. Armenian and Azerbaijani leadership continued dialogue with another brief informal meeting in Brussels 13 May during EU Eastern Partnership Summit; Armenian side reported that they discussed two incidents at countries’ state border and in southern direction of Line of Contact (LoC) in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict zone that left two Armenian soldiers wounded 30 April and 4 May. Both sides allegedly preparing to implement commitments made at March meeting of leaders in Vienna and April meeting of FMs in Moscow. OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs late May visited Yerevan, Stepanakert and Baku to discuss possible support to humanitarian and security measures agreed by sides during Vienna and Moscow meetings; reciprocal visits by journalists; also reportedly discussed support to relatives of detainees kept by parties to conflict. Co-chairs’ 30 May statement announced upcoming meeting of the two countries’ foreign ministers. On last day of co-chairs’ visit, Azerbaijan 30 May reported one soldier killed at central location of LoC; Armenian side denied responsibility. With both leaderships continuing to face domestic public criticism over their contacts with other side, including growing criticism by de facto NK leadership of Armenia’s PM

Pashinyan, latter's spokesperson 6 May produced rare media comment on details of communication with Baku over recent incidents along front lines.

➔ **Georgia** De facto leadership of breakaway region Abkhazia 21 May reached agreement with opposition to postpone presidential elections from 21 July to 25 Aug, after opposition mobilised two days of street protests with demand to postpone until Nov and current leadership to resign. De facto authorities deployed riot police for first time in recent history against protesters. Crisis came after opposition late April accused leadership of poisoning one of its candidates who was hospitalised along with two bodyguards and transferred to Moscow after sudden respiratory and heart problems; presidential administration denied accusations.

➔ **North Caucasus (Russia)** Authorities in Ingushetia continued to detain activists involved in March protests over controversial Sept 2018 border delineation deal between Ingushetia and Chechnya, including two activists deported from Belarus at Moscow's request. Court in Kabardino-Balkaria regional capital Nalchik 22 May reportedly extended arrest of five Inguish activists. Security operations against militants continued; security forces clashed with militants in Dagestan's Kizilyurt District 24 May, reportedly killing three suspected militants and finding automatic weapons and munitions. Human Rights Watch early May reported police in Chechnya engaged in renewed campaign of "unlawful detentions, beatings, and humiliation of men they presume to be gay or bisexual", citing alleged detention of four men Dec 2018-Jan 2019. Following reports, U.S. Treasury Department 16 May announced new financial sanctions on Chechen law enforcement agency linked to abuse; Russian embassy said it would implement reciprocal measures. Russian national 24 May lodged official complaint with European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) over alleged abduction and torture by police in Chechnya.

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## Eastern Europe

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➔ **Ukraine** President Zelensky's call for snap parliamentary elections and sweeping changes to administration caused stir, while fighting continued in conflict zone. During his 20 May inauguration speech, Zelensky announced he was disbanding parliament and calling snap elections, anticipated 21 July. Zelensky requested resignation of prosecutor general, defence minister and head of security services (SBU), and urged other key officials to quit; resignations included PM and FM. Appointments included Ivan Bakanov, who heads Zelensky's comedy studio and political party, as SBU deputy head; and lawyer Andriy Bogdan as head of presidential administration; Bogdan signalled possible referendum on whether to negotiate with Moscow to end Donbas conflict. Zelensky signed decree returning Ukrainian citizenship to former Georgian President Saakashvili 28 May. Zelensky and deputy from outgoing President Poroshenko's party both submitted to parliament separate draft laws outlining impeachment procedures 29 May. Reported casualties in conflict zone 1-31 May included eleven Ukrainian military, at least 22 armed group fighters, and three civilians; over 50 combatants and six civilians reportedly injured. Ukrainian military 22 May reported eight soldiers who unintentionally entered separatist-held territory in Donbas had been detained by Russian-backed forces. Several civilians reported wounded by shelling and explosives, including in Horlivka and Pervomaisk (controlled by armed groups); two

elderly men died crossing line of separation 10 and 22 May; one man killed by explosive in Velyka Novosilka (govt-controlled) 4 May. Zelensky visited Donbas war zone 27 May. Poroshenko 7 May appointed 75 new Supreme Court judges, including fifteen previously vetoed by Public Integrity Council. Hamburg-based International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea 25 May announced decision on lawsuit that Ukraine filed against Russia regarding 24 Ukrainian sailors captured in Kerch Strait in Nov 2018, ordering Russia to “immediately” release sailors; Russia announced it will not carry out judgment.

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## **Western Europe/Mediterranean**

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➡ **Cyprus** Tensions rose between Republic of Cyprus and Turkey over hydrocarbon explorations in East Mediterranean, with escalating rhetoric from Greek Cypriots, new Turkish naval manoeuvres, and 9 May breakdown of de facto Turkish Cypriot coalition govt. Following April announcement of imminent Turkish offshore drilling, Greek Cypriot President Anastasiades 6 May likened Ankara’s actions to “second invasion”. Greek Cypriot media same day reported Nicosia had sought international arrest warrant for crew of Turkish vessel preparing to drill in Republic of Cyprus’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ); 10 May reported Nicosia had granted new concession for France’s Total and Italy’s ENI to expand hydrocarbon exploration in EEZ. Turkey 13-25 May carried out “Denizkurdu-2019” naval exercise in East Mediterranean; Turkish FM Çavuşoğlu 20 May said Ankara would exercise its “sovereign right” to drill for hydrocarbon resources off coast of northern Cyprus. U.S. State Department 5 May said Turkey’s intention to drill was highly provocative; EU Council President Tusk 9 May said EU “stands united” behind Republic of Cyprus; Ankara dismissed statement. Turkey’s National Security Council 30 May reaffirmed determination to protect rights and interests of Turkey, “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” and Turkish Cypriots, warned against “provocative acts” and “irresponsible statements”, and said Turkey will continue activities in line with international law and not allow *faits accomplis* in East Mediterranean.

➡ **Turkey** Military operations against Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) and cross-border air raids against targets in northern Iraq continued, electoral board ordered re-run of Istanbul local election in which ruling party had been defeated, and U.S.-Turkey relations remained strained over purchase of Russian missiles. Fatalities from security operations against PKK in south east increased slightly. Authorities allowed jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan to meet his lawyers for first time in eight years 2 May; Öcalan released statement calling for thousands of Kurdish movement supporters on hunger strike to end strike, which they did. Authorities 16 May lifted ban on lawyer and family visits to Öcalan. Turkish military 27 May launched “Operation Claw” carrying out land and air raids against PKK targets in northern Iraq’s Hakkari region. High Election Board 6 May cancelled 31 March mayoral polls in Istanbul and ordered re-run on 23 June due to alleged irregularities, annulling victory of opposition Republican People’s Party’s (CHP); caused small-scale protests in various districts of Istanbul. Ankara’s purchase of Russian S-400 air defence missile system continued to strain relations with Washington. President Erdoğan 18 May proposed to Russia co-production of S-500s once delivery of S-400s is complete. Authorities 17-18 May detained eleven suspected Islamic State (ISIS)

members in Konya and Mersin, and arrested nine suspected ISIS members in Şanlıurfa 27 May.

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## Central Asia

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➡ **Kazakhstan** Police 9 May arrested dozens of protesters in capital Nur-Sultan and in Almaty staging anti-govt demonstrations ahead of 9 June snap presidential elections and demanding release of political prisoners; social-media apps and news websites reportedly not accessible same day. Govt reported it had repatriated 231 citizens linked to Islamic State (ISIS) including 156 children from Syria early May. European Council President Donald Tusk 31 May met interim President Toqayev, called Kazakhstan “important and stable partner”.

➡ **Kyrgyzstan** President Jeenbekov 16 May ratified legislation under which former presidents can be prosecuted if suspected of “serious crimes”, amid ongoing tensions between Jeenbekov and former President Atambayev; law came into force 27 May. Atambayev stepped down from opposition Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan 25 May. Military Prosecutor’s Office 30 May launched probe into claims by Atambayev that his office was bugged by State Committee for National Security, which denied claim.

➡ **Tajikistan** Govt late April repatriated from Iraq 84 children of women jailed on charges of belonging to Islamic State (ISIS). 29 prisoners and three guards killed in Vahdat prison riot 19 May, including two members of banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), and son of late former police commander-turned-ISIS war minister Gulmurod Khalimov; IRPT said death toll higher. President Rahmon discussed military cooperation with visiting Russian Defence Minister 28 May, and 29 May discussed regional and bilateral cooperation with European Council President Donald Tusk, starting his four-day tour of Central Asia.

➡ **Uzbekistan** Head of Information and Mass Communication Agency 10 May reported govt had restored local access to a dozen major news and human rights websites which had been blocked for years. During three-day visit late May, German President Steinmeier met President Mirziyoyev, discussed enhancing bilateral cooperation.