

# Europe and Central Asia

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## **Balkans**

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➔ **Bosnia** Central Election Commission (CIK) 23 May postponed local elections from 4 Oct to 15 Nov due to disagreement over 2020 budget; Mostar, southern town divided between Bosniaks and Croats that has not held vote since 2008, not included in decision as govt has yet to amend election law in line with 2010 Constitutional Court ruling and Oct 2019 European Court of Human Rights decision; Serbian member of presidency same day called CIK decision “illegitimate”. NGO Transparency International 21 May filed criminal complaint with prosecutor’s office against Milorad Dodik, Serb member of state trilateral presidency, after he told parliamentarians in Republika Srpska that he regularly listened into telephone conversations between opposition politicians; Dodik dismissed charge. Following transfer in April of \$361mn in International Monetary Fund emergency assistance to support COVID-19 response, authorities reportedly unable to reach agreement on distribution of money between various levels of govt within Bosniak- and Croat-majority entity of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

➔ **Kosovo** Tensions continued between caretaker PM Kurti and President Thaçi following collapse of Kurti’s govt in late March and Thaçi’s April nomination of former Deputy PM Avdullah Hoti to form new govt. Following request by Kurti’s Vetëvendosje party (which is calling for new elections) to annul presidential decree that gave Hoti governing mandate, Constitutional Court 28 May ruled that president had not exceeded his authority in nominating Hoti as PM, allowing the nomination to go forward. Around 500 supporters of Vetëvendosje party 13 May staged first demonstration in series of protests in support of new elections despite COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings; second protest 28 May involved around 5000 supporters; other parties including Democratic Party of Kosovo criticised protests for endangering public health amid COVID-19 outbreak. Kurti and Alliance for the Future of Kosovo 6 May condemned remarks reportedly made by EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell to Kosovo newspaper Koha that suggested that EU would not oppose potential land swap deal as resolution of longstanding dispute between Kosovo and Serbia; EU Special Envoy Miroslav Lajcak 11 May clarified land swap “is not on the agenda and should not be on [the EU’s] agenda”; Thaçi 27 May stated he would not participate in EU-led talks with Serbia on normalising relations. Kurti 18 May said January agreement with Serbia on restoring commercial flights between capitals was not yet “fully-fledged agreement” but rather “expression of interest”.

➔ **Montenegro** Tensions between govt and Serbian Orthodox Church increased after authorities 12 May detained Serbian Orthodox bishop and seven priests for holding religious procession in violation of COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings; detention next day sparked nationwide protests and clashes between police and demonstrators in towns of Niksic and Pljevlja; 26 police injured, 60 people arrested. Authorities 15 May released detained clergy.

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## Caucasus

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➔ **Armenia** With highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in South Caucasus, PM Pashinyan 26 May said country was facing second wave of infections, and warned that penalties, including fines, would be toughened for those not following safety rules.

➔ **Azerbaijan** Regarding controversial case that contributed to deadlock in negotiation process over Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia, European Court of Human Rights 26 May ruled that Azerbaijan's decision to pardon, promote and award benefits to soldier convicted of decapitating Armenian officer in Budapest in 2004 violated European Convention on Human Rights; in response, MFA same day stressed that court ruling stated there was no substantive violation of convention's Article 2 (right to life) and no demand for annulment of pardon decree.

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh conflict** Armenia and Azerbaijan continued heated diplomatic exchanges with no visible movement in negotiation process, while sporadic exchanges of fire took place along northern part of border zone. Armenian and Azerbaijan forces 13 May exchanged fire near Armenian village Berkaber with bullets reportedly reaching houses for first time in two years; no casualties. Azerbaijan 18-22 May conducted large-scale exercises in different locations, including near Armenian troops stationed in conflict zone and Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic; exercises involved newly purchased missile systems, airplanes and drones. Armenia 19-22 May conducted large-scale tactical exercises with involvement of artillery and motorised rifle subdivisions. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Minsk Group co-chairs 18-19 May continued virtual contacts with Armenian and Azerbaijani FMs, while Russian FM Sergei Lavrov 19 May telephoned Azerbaijani counterpart for third time in a month to discuss NK issue. Arayik Harutyunyan 21 May sworn in as NK's fourth de facto president at ceremony attended by senior Armenian officials; Harutyunyan called for NK's unification with Armenia and pledged to carry out economic reforms and work more closely with Yerevan to develop the region.

➔ **Georgia** Amid efforts to prevent COVID-19 spread in region, newly elected de facto leadership of breakaway Abkhazia took steps to resume initiatives for regular contacts with Georgian govt. During online conference with co-chairs of Geneva International Discussions (GID), Abkhaz de facto govt 13 May voiced readiness to resume work of Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism, forum for Georgian, Russian and de facto local security officials to discuss situation on line of separation; forum halted in 2018 due to disagreements over issues including refusal of Abkhaz de facto govt to punish border guard responsible for death of ethnic Georgian in May 2016. At same meeting, representatives of de facto South Ossetian leadership reasserted their refusal to accept international support to prevent COVID-19 spread unless it enters from Russian border. Georgian Security Service 16 May reported new signs of borderisation at village of Saberio near Abkhaz administrative boundary line; EU Monitoring Mission neither confirmed nor denied reports. In domestic politics, President Zourabichvili 16 May pardoned two prominent opposition politicians as step in implementation of 8 March

agreement between opposition and ruling party that lays out agreed electoral reforms.

➔ **Russia/North Caucasus** In North Caucasus, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov 5 May reportedly hospitalised in Moscow for potential COVID-19 infection. President Putin 18 May recognised severity of COVID-19 situation in southern republic of Dagestan, stating health care system under “heavy burden”; his remarks followed local mufti Akhmad Abdulayev’s appeal to devote attention to “catastrophe”. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) 26 May reiterated call for Russia to address “climate of impunity” and “very serious” human rights violations by authorities in Chechnya documented in Nov 2018 OSCE fact-finding report. Internationally, in response to U.S. announcement that it will exit Open Skies arms control treaty, Russian Deputy FM Alexander Grushko 21 May said move would deal blow to “key security interests of the allies of the U.S.” (see also U.S./Russia).

➔ **U.S./Russia** U.S. President Trump 21 May confirmed U.S. will exit Open Skies arms control treaty, citing Russia’s alleged violations of agreement; Russian Deputy FM Alexander Grushko same day said withdrawal would “not only deal a blow to the foundation of European security [...] but to the key security interests of the allies of the U.S.”.

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## Eastern Europe

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➔ **Belarus** Govt 10 May held large military parade in capital Minsk to mark 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory in Europe Day despite COVID-19 outbreak, prompting domestic and international criticism; President Lukashenko 4 May said he refused to set up protective measures or to cancel parade partly because people “would say we were scared”; former head of state Stanislav Shushkevich condemned decision as “not only ignorance, but a crime” while former parliament speaker Mechislav Grib compared Lukashenko’s remarks with Soviet attitudes “when human life was not valued”. NGO Committee to Protect Journalists reported that foreign ministry 6 May cancelled accreditations for two journalists reporting on COVID-19 outbreak for disseminating “information that did not correspond with the reality”. In line with commitment made during Feb visit of U.S. Sec State Pompeo to Belarus, U.S. sent first ever crude oil shipment to Belarus.

➔ **Moldova** Constitutional Court 7 May cancelled parliament’s approval of Russian loan totalling €200mn over ten years, ruling credit agreement unconstitutional. European Parliament 15 May approved proposal for emergency assistance to ten countries to overcome economic consequences of COVID-19 pandemic; Moldova will receive €100mn.

➔ **Ukraine** Deadly fighting continued in Donbas as sides conducted online negotiations and Ukrainian and Russian-backed separatist leadership moved to lift COVID-19 quarantine restrictions. Violence along Donbas front lines remained concentrated near Donetsk, Horlivka, Zolote disengagement area, and east of Mariupol, according to Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE); govt forces lost at least five servicemen, and Russian-backed forces lost up to 22 people according to pro-Ukrainian non-government source, while one civilian

killed and at least twelve injured, according to OSCE and UN reports. First week of May saw more civilian casualties than any single week over past two years, according to 8 May UN appeal calling for all sides to respect humanitarian law; appeal was “addressed to a greater extent [...] to the command of the Joint Forces Operation of the Armed Forces of Ukraine”, as all casualties had been reported in separatist-held areas. Dmitry Kozak, Russia’s chief negotiator for Donbas conflict, 13 May visited Berlin to meet with German counterpart; said meeting had produced “agreements on mutual next steps” for conflict resolution. Kyiv 14 May brought newly beefed-up delegation to online Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) negotiations, during which its representatives reiterated their refusal to amend constitution to guarantee self-governing status for areas currently held by separatists within Ukraine, and to hold elections in these areas while Russia and proxy forces controlled country’s eastern border. Following 28 May TCG meeting, Zelenskyy said Russian delegation did “not object” to full Ukrainian control in present-day separatist-held areas before elections.

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## **Western Europe/Mediterranean**

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➔ **Cyprus** Amid ongoing tensions over hydrocarbon exploration in eastern Mediterranean, Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece and United Arab Emirates 11 May issued joint declaration denouncing Turkey’s drilling activities, calling on Ankara to “fully respect the sovereignty and the sovereign rights of all states in their maritime zones”; Ankara accused countries of “attempting to create an axis of malice”. EU foreign ministers 15 May condemned Turkey’s unilateral actions in eastern Mediterranean, confirming they stood “in full solidarity with Cyprus”; Ankara dismissed statement. Following April decision by U.S. company Exxon Mobil to postpone planned drilling in eastern Mediterranean due to falling demand for oil and gas, Republic of Cyprus’ energy ministry 5 May announced French company Total and Italian company Eni also postponing planned exploration operations. Republic of Cyprus president and Turkish Cypriot leader 21 May agreed to permit Turkish Cypriot students, workers and those seeking health treatment to cross border from 8 June as part of relaxing of COVID-19 restrictions, which had prevented such movement since late Feb.

➔ **Northern Ireland (UK)** Police 8 May warned journalists from Sunday Life and Sunday World newspapers that loyalist paramilitary group Ulster Defence Association had planned attacks against them, reportedly over their coverage of paramilitary activity; local politicians who condemned planned attacks against reporters also received threats. Suspected dissident republicans 17 May murdered man in his home in west Belfast. Police 28 May reported hospitalisation of young man following “paramilitary-style” shooting in west Belfast.

➔ **Turkey** Hostilities between Turkish military and Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in northern Iraq intensified, while fatalities from PKK conflict in Turkey’s south east decreased slightly. In northern Iraq, Turkish military conducted ten air raids targeting PKK, eight more than in April; PKK 14 May attacked Turkish base in Dahuk province with no reported casualties. Turkish air raids targeted PKK militants in northern Iraq’s Sulaymaniyah province 27 May (see Iraq). In Turkey’s south east, military continued small-scale ground operations targeting PKK in rural

areas; PKK 14 May reportedly killed two aid workers in Van province, authorities arrested at least 38 suspects in response. During visit to Şırnak's Cizre district for opening of military command centre, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu reiterated Turkey's determination to pursue hardline policies, saying "this year we will either be present there [referring to south-eastern Cudi, Gabar, Besta, Kel Mehmet and Kato areas] or die". Govt continued pressure on pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). During month, interior ministry removed five more elected HDP mayors from office (two province, three district mayors). Out of 65 municipalities HDP won in March 2019 elections, 45 now run by state-appointed "trustees". Police 20 May also reportedly detained in capital Ankara at least 18 HDP members, including HDP's Ankara provincial head, protesting govt crackdown. Dozens of HDP members and representatives of pro-Kurdish women's rights groups 22 May detained in Diyarbakır. In northern Syria, Turkish military 3 May reportedly returned fire at People's Protection Units (YPG) militants in Turkish-controlled Tel Abyad and blocked three YPG militants attempting to "infiltrate" "Operation Peace Spring" area; Defence ministry 30 May said security forces "neutralised" five YPG fighters who attempted to infiltrate into same area. In Idlib, Turkey and Russia continued joint patrols in effort to uphold their fragile March ceasefire; improvised attack 27 May killed Turkish soldier during patrol along M4 highway (see Syria). Foreign ministry 10 May warned Libyan Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar against attacking diplomatic missions in Libyan capital Tripoli after Haftar-aligned forces previous day shelled areas close to Turkish and Italian embassies (see Libya). Detentions of fourteen Islamic State suspects reported this month.

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## Central Asia

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➡ **Kazakhstan** President Tokayev 2 May dismissed former president Nazarbayev's daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva as senate member and chair, second-highest govt office, replacing her with Deputy Chief of Presidential Administration Maulen Ashimbaev; move prompted speculation over dynamics in top leadership. Lower legislative chamber 6 May passed bill decriminalising libel; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe called move "important step forward" and called for further reforms to improve freedom of expression. Senate 28 May approved bill giving parliamentary parties greater agenda-setting power; critics said bill inadequate given widespread govt repression of opposition. International NGOs, including World Organisation Against Torture, 11 May accused govt of using COVID-19 state of emergency "as an excuse to prosecute its critics and opponents", citing smear campaigns against activists critical of controversial draft assembly law adopted in late March; President Tokayev 25 May signed assembly legislation into law. Deputy governor of southern region Turkistan 2 May criticised Uzbek officials for withholding information on 1 May collapse of dam in Uzbekistan's Sirdayo region, which forced thousands of Kazakhs to evacuate; Uzbek President Mirziyoyev in telephone call with President Tokayev same day apologised for incident, sent personnel and equipment to help repair damage.

➡ **Kyrgyzstan** Violence flared along disputed border with Tajikistan in Batken region, when clashes erupted 8 May between dozens of Kyrgyz and Tajik residents over rival claims to land; Kyrgyz and Tajik armed forces exchanged fire, which reportedly injured three Kyrgyz border guards and two Tajik villagers; countries

blamed each other but reportedly engaged in talks as hostilities ceased same day. Amid ongoing border tensions over water usage in south, clashes over water dispute 31 May erupted between Kyrgyz and Uzbek villagers near Uzbekistan's Sokh exclave in Kyrgyzstan's Batken region. District court 6 May again adjourned trial of former President Almazbek Atambayev and thirteen co-defendants citing Atambayev's poor health; defendants face multiple charges including attempted murder related to deadly clashes with security forces at Atambayev's compound in Aug 2019. Supreme Court 13 May upheld life sentence of ethnic Uzbek rights defender Azimjon Askarov despite human rights groups' calls for his release on grounds of ill health; Askarov was convicted for alleged involvement in murder of police officer and stirring ethnic hatred during deadly clashes in south Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

➤ **Tajikistan** After clashes erupted 8 May between dozens of Tajik and Kyrgyz residents over rival claims to land along disputed border with Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz and Tajik armed forces exchanged fire that reportedly injured three Kyrgyz border guards and two Tajik villagers; countries blamed each other for escalation but reportedly engaged in talks as hostilities ceased same day. Kyrgyz resident 27 May allegedly shot and wounded Tajik citizen on disputed border in northern Sughd region; Tajikistan's border guard directorate same day accused Kyrgyzstan of "attempting to destabilise" border. Dozens of residents of Khuroson district in west 17 May blocked key road and demanded govt aid following flooding and mudslides that killed one person, injured several and damaged dozens of houses. In northern Sughd region, police 20 May used gunfire to disperse protest by dozens of Chinese mine workers reportedly demanding payment of salaries and return to China; no injuries reported. Authorities reported first COVID-19 cases 30 April, confirmed 2,140 cases, including 47 deaths, as of 31 May; activists claimed number far higher.

➤ **Turkmenistan** Several hundred people gathered in rare protest mid-May in Lebap regional capital Turkmenabat in east to demand govt help after storms and heavy rains in eastern Lebap and Mary provinces late April-early May reportedly killed at least 30 people, severely damaged property and cut off utilities; protest occurred amid ongoing reports of economic crisis including food shortages and inflation. Govt continued to claim it had not registered any COVID-19 cases, 15 May approved COVID-19 prevention plan and imposed restrictions on mass gatherings. World Health Organization (WHO) early May reportedly cancelled visit to Turkmenistan after it did not receive official invitation; FM Meredov 8 May told reporters country was willing to host WHO delegation. Following ban of foreign currency cash withdrawals in April, state media 18 May announced govt will force local companies to sell all foreign currency proceeds to country's sovereign fund.

➤ **Uzbekistan** Authorities 3 May launched criminal probe into "official negligence" and potential violations of construction rules following 1 May collapse of Sardoba Reservoir dam completed in 2017 in eastern region Sirdayo, which led to evacuation of at least 70,000 people, hospitalisation of 56 and four deaths. Deputy governor of Kazakhstan's Turkistan region 2 May criticised Uzbek govt for withholding information on resulting flooding that spilled over into Turkistan and forced thousands of Kazakh citizens to evacuate; President Mirziyoyev apologised to his Kazakh counterpart and reportedly sent personnel and equipment to help repair damage. Interior ministry 3 May announced investigation into temporary

police detention of two journalists reporting on aftermath of dam collapse. Clashes over water dispute 31 May erupted between Kyrgyz and Uzbek villagers in Uzbekistan's Sokh exclave in Kyrgyzstan's Batken region. Interior ministry 28 May announced security forces detained suspected members of proscribed Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir in Ferghana Valley. On fifteen-year anniversary of Andijon massacre, human rights groups 13 May urged govt to investigate killing of demonstrators by security forces.