

# Europe and Central Asia

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## **Balkans**

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➔ **Bosnia** Bosnian Serb entity Republika Srpska (RS)'s creation of new gendarmerie police unit prompted concerns, while state-level govt formation remains stalled. RS govt 24 Sept unveiled new gendarmerie police unit, prompting criticism from Bosniak politicians. During unveiling ceremony, Bosnian Serb member of tripartite state presidency Milorad Dodik said in statement perceived as controversial that establishing reservist police force was best way to "protect and defend" territory. State-level govt formation still in deadlock a year after Oct 2018 elections, despite 5 Sept deadline set in Aug between three main parties. Bosniak Party of Democratic Action congress mid-Sept adopted pledge to reorganise country based on economic regions, prompting criticism from Croat and Serb parties and high representative for Bosnia Valentin Inzko and U.S. embassy.

➔ **Kosovo** Newly appointed U.S. envoy for the Western Balkans Matthew Palmer 19 Sept reiterated calls for Kosovo to lift its controversial customs tariff on Serbian imports, and called on Kosovo and Serbia to restart talks after Kosovo's snap legislative elections scheduled for 6 Oct. During visit to Serbia, Czech President 11 Sept said he supports his country withdrawing its recognition of Kosovo.

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## **Caucasus**

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➔ **Armenia** Investigative Committee 26 Sept brought charges against former defence minister Vigen Sargsyan and former police chief Alik Sargsyan for abuse of power. Yerevan court 20 Sept denied bail to former President Kocharyan, who was arrested for third time in June for ordering violent crackdown against opposition protesters after 2008 election. Former police chief and witness in case against Kocharyan, Hayk Harutiunian, found dead 24 Sept, preliminary investigation suggested apparent suicide. PM Pashinyan 16 Sept announced dismissal of National Security Service head and police chief; appointed new chief adviser.

➔ **Azerbaijan** Speculation that govt was considering participation in Russian-led military bloc Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) prompted expression of concern from Armenian parliament and officials; Azerbaijani presidential administration 17 Sept denied govt was considering participating in CSTO "in any form, including as an observer".

➔ **Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan)** Dialogue between Azerbaijan and Armenia on issues related to settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict continued despite deadly incident along front lines, while de facto NK authorities held local elections. Armenian and Azerbaijani FMs 23 Sept held meeting at sidelines of UN General Assembly in New York; no immediate results reported. During talks, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group co-chairs informed FMs about their activities, including recent meetings in Paris and Geneva "on the humanitarian and security dimensions of the conflict"; co-chairs plan

to follow up talks with regional trip. In positive sign ahead of talks, Armenian FM 6 Sept publicly stated that purpose of negotiations is to “discuss numerous parameters of a potential settlement”, adding “neither side can be guided by a maximalist approach”, while FM and defence minister 3 Sept spoke out in support of communication channel with Baku, saying it had helped mitigate shootings along front lines. In incident some observers feared might affect talks, Armenia reported it had prevented special operation by Azerbaijani military trying to approach Armenian positions in south-eastern direction of Line of Contact 23 Sept, resulting in death of Azerbaijani soldier whose body was left in neutral zone. NK 8 Sept held unusually open and competitive de facto local elections for heads of eight main regional centres and their councils; turnout reported at 65%. Armenian PM Pashinyan praised vote as “free, fair and competitive”; Azerbaijani FM denounced election, while OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs in comments to Azerbaijani media said results do not affect legal status of NK nor outcome of negotiations.

➡ **Georgia** Russian and Georgian FMs held first talks since 2008 war, while tensions between Georgia and its breakaway region of South Ossetia continued, and breakaway region Abkhazia saw political dispute over close-run second round of de facto presidential elections. Russian and Georgian FM spoke on sidelines of UN General Assembly in New York 26 Sept, with Swiss mediation; Georgian side reported they discussed problems for people living along separation lines with country’s breakaway regions. Hours earlier, Russian newspaper published interview with FM Lavrov, who said Russia had no intention to start war with Georgia, and favoured possible resumption of direct flights and cancelling visa requirements for Georgian citizens. Talks between Georgian and de facto South Ossetian officials failed to ease tensions over Tbilisi’s erection of police station near separation line, which it said was response to Russian and de facto South Ossetian construction of border fence. Georgia refused to dismantle police station, while de facto South Ossetian officials early Sept installed several observation points nearby, prompting fears over possible fortification of area. Local de facto leadership 9 Sept closed all crossings into Georgia after calls from local opposition to deploy special troops. Co-Chairs of Geneva International Discussions, main forum to resolve conflict over breakaway republics, 15 Sept called for immediate end to closure of border crossings, which they said creates “additional hardship” for locals and risked escalating tensions; Moscow called on both sides to continue talks. In Abkhazia, 8 Sept run-off presidential elections resulted in incumbent Raul Khajimba winning narrow victory (by some 2,000 votes) over Alkhaz Kvitsiniya of opposition Amtsakhara party. De facto supreme court 20 Sept dismissed Amtsakhara’s appeal that local election commission did not follow legal rules for counting votes. Amid small-scale opposition street protests against result, former Abkhaz leader Aleksandr Ankvan 18 Sept proposed Khajimba and Kvitsiniya form coalition govt, however reported conversation between them failed to resolve dispute.

➡ **Russia/North Caucasus** Russia held local elections 8 Sept without incident, following mass protests in Moscow in July-Aug (and cases of police brutality against protesters) after govt blocked more than 30 independent candidacies from ballots. Ruling United Russia party candidates won 25 seats out of 45-seat Moscow city council, down from 40, but retaining slim majority; turnout reported at 21.8%. Opposition leader Aleksei Navalny said results presented “fantastic victory” for “strategic voting” (practice in which voters were encouraged to cast ballots against

United Russia). Navalny 12 Sept said authorities staged over 200 raids across country on homes and offices linked to his Anti-Corruption Fund, calling them politically motivated; authorities claimed searches related to money-laundering investigation. Investigative Committee opened criminal proceedings against at least fourteen people in connection to 27 July protest; court 4 Sept sentenced four to at least two years in prison. Actor Pavel Ustinov sentenced to three and half years 16 Sept, but released 20 Sept after widespread calls for leniency. Estimated 25,000 protesters demonstrated against repressions in authorised Moscow rally 29 Sept; no arrests or police violence reported. United Russia largely dominated in polls outside Moscow, with all sixteen pro-Kremlin governors retaining posts, but major losses in Khabarovsk regional parliament (far east) and Irkutsk in eastern Siberia. In North Caucasus region, Federal Security Service 18 Sept shot dead two suspected militants in Kabardino-Balkaria republic during security operation. After arrest of Russian national in Germany for 23 Aug murder of Chechen ex-commander Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, Interfax news agency reported that Russian diplomats met with suspected killer, fuelling suspicions raised by media of connections between suspect and Russian military intelligence.

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## **Eastern Europe**

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➔ **Ukraine** Moscow and Kyiv made shaky progress advancing long-stuck conflict resolution process: Moscow and Kyiv freed 35 prisoners each in an exchange heralded as a step forward; Ukrainian returnees included filmmaker Oleh Sentsov and sailors captured near Kerch Strait in Nov 2018. Those whom Kyiv freed include journalist Kirill Vyshinsky and Vladimir Tsemakh, a key witness in trial over 2014 downing of flight MH-17 over eastern Ukraine. July ceasefire, hailed as unprecedentedly wide-ranging, frayed as violations roughly doubled over August levels. At least twelve Ukrainian soldiers and fourteen members of armed groups killed; five civilians injured from shelling and small arms fire, two civilians dead at entry-exit points along the Line of Contact, and one killed and two injured by explosives, according to reports from Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) and de facto leaders. Minsk Trilateral Contact Group considered so-called Steinmeier formula, which foresees simultaneous holding of local elections in areas currently controlled by Russia-backed separatists, and granting of special status to these areas. Minsk envoys also discussed plans for trial disengagement of forces along front line. Failure to agree on these issues, however, cast doubt on hopes for new Normandy summit in Oct, while SMM reports showed new military activity in would-be disengagement zones. U.S. govt unblocked \$391mn of military aid to Ukraine; President Zelenskyy stated during 25 Sept press conference with President Trump that he had no intent to interfere in U.S. elections after scandal erupted in U.S. Congress over Trump's allegedly pressuring Ukraine to investigate business dealings of Democratic rival Joe Biden's son during July phone call, and possibly conditioning aid on said investigation. After transcript of call released 25 Sept showed Zelenskyy assuring Trump that Ukraine's new Prosecutor General would be "100% my person" and would "look into the company that you mentioned", European Commission emphasised that financial support to Ukraine was premised on conditions such as

independence of the judiciary. U.S. envoy to Ukraine Kurt Volker resigned 27 Sept, as did Ukrainian defence council head Oleksandr Daniliuk.

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## **Western Europe/Mediterranean**

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➡ **Cyprus** Following meetings over previous days with Greek Cypriot President and Turkish Cypriot leader, UN Secretary-General's special envoy for Cyprus Jane Holl Lute 6 Sept reported that the two leaders were unable to agree on terms of reference that would form basis of new talks for a resolution of the Cyprus problem. Tensions over hydrocarbon explorations in the East Mediterranean continued with a new Turkish drillship deployed to area and new licences issued for Western energy companies by the Republic of Cyprus.

➡ **Northern Ireland (UK)** Attempted attacks on police continued, leading to growing concerns over dissident violence following UK's planned departure from EU. Mortar bomb found strapped to wall in residential area overlooking police station in Strabane, County Tyrone 7 Sept, with police stating dissident republicans New IRA planned to fire device into police station; media reported incident was seventh attempted murder bid against security forces in Northern Ireland in 2019. Police 9 Sept found IED during security search in Creggan area of Londonderry, blaming device on New IRA; crowd of dozens gathered, some attacking police vehicles with over 40 projectiles, including several petrol bombs; no injuries reported. Head of police 11 Sept asked govt for funding to recruit 800 more officers to deal with "rise" of attacks and "changing types of engineering and capability".

➡ **Turkey** Intensity of conflict between military and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in south east rose slightly, air raids and land operations targeting PKK militants and positions in northern Iraq continued, joint Turkey-U.S. patrols got underway in north east Syria, and security forces detained prominent Islamic State (ISIS) militants reportedly planning attacks. Amid ongoing clashes between military and PKK, concentrated in Hakkari, Şırnak and Van provinces, roadside IED attack 12 Sept killed seven in Diyarbakır province's Kulp district. PKK 20 Sept claimed responsibility for attack, saying the individuals targeted were working as informants for state against PKK; attack triggered wave of small-scale anti-PKK protests across south-eastern towns 16 Sept. Govt continued efforts to criminalise and delegitimise pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party. In north-eastern (NE) Syria, Turkish and U.S. forces began joint military operations to set up "safe zone", carrying out first ground patrol around Tel Abyad 8 Sept. On various occasions during month, Turkish officials threatened to carry out offensive against Kurdish-led People's Protection Units (YPG) in NE Syria if U.S. fails to keep promises to create "safe zone"; Turkish military reinforcement along border with NE Syria continued (see Syria). Erdoğan 5 Sept requested more support from EU countries both for Syrian refugees in Turkey and to meet needs within Syria of those displaced from Idlib, threatening to open Turkey's borders to Europe if EU fails to increase assistance. As crackdown on ISIS operatives continued, including arrest of senior ISIS figure and two others reportedly planning attack in Istanbul, ISIS circulated several threat messages across some Turkish provinces pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi and insinuating future attacks.

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## Central Asia

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➔ **Kazakhstan** Anti-govt protests broke out in several cities 2-9 Sept and 23 Sept, voicing opposition to increasing Chinese investment and loans, and continued influence in govt of former President Nazarbayev. Protests involving dozens of people broke out in Zhanaozen (south west) 2 Sept and spread to other cities over several days, calling for President Tokayev to cancel planned official trip to China. Coalition of Civil Initiatives rights group in Almaty reported dozens of activists fined or jailed following rallies. Authorities reported around 100 people detained during unsanctioned opposition rallies in capital Nur-Sultan, Almaty and other cities 21 Sept, including a teenage girl according to news reports; nine people jailed for several days, in addition to several people jailed ahead of planned rallies. Rallies reportedly organised by banned opposition party Kazakhstan's Democratic Choice. Dozens of women rallied in Nur-Sultan 19 Sept calling for govt to meet pledges on benefits for families. In speech to parliament 2 Sept, first since his June election, President Toquayev said future elections should "pave the way for the development of a multiparty system", and peaceful demonstrations should be allowed in designated place.

➔ **Kyrgyzstan** Four people reported killed and dozens wounded in shoot-out between Kyrgyz and Tajik border guards 16 Sept, along disputed section of border in Kyrgyzstan's Leilek district and Tajikistan's Bobojon Ghafurov district in Ferghana Valley. Both sides blamed each other, citing alleged construction work in disputed area. Dead reportedly included one Kyrgyz border guard and three Tajik border guards. Countries' PMs met 17 Sept and agreed to take measures to avoid further violence, while officials next day agreed to remove constructions. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan exchanged land comprising several square km in Ferghana Valley mid-Sept.

➔ **Tajikistan** Four people reportedly killed and dozens wounded in shootout between Tajik and Kyrgyz border guards 16 Sept, along disputed section of border in Tajikistan's Bobojon Ghafurov district and Kyrgyzstan's Leilek district in Ferghana Valley. Both sides blamed each other, citing alleged construction work in disputed area. Tajik govt said Kyrgyzstan deployed up to 300 troops to site, who fired toward Tajik village, prompting Tajik retaliation. Dead reportedly included one Kyrgyz border guard and three Tajik border guards. Countries' PMs met 17 Sept and agreed to take measures to avoid further violence, while officials next day agreed to remove constructions.

➔ **Turkmenistan** Reports emerged that Turkmen border patrols in Lebap province along country's border with Afghanistan were regularly being bombarded from Afghanistan's Jowzjan province, where Afghan troops are fighting Taliban (see Afghanistan).

➔ **Uzbekistan** Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan exchanged land comprising several square km in Ferghana Valley mid-Sept. Military court 27 Sept sentenced Ikhtiyor Abdullayev, who held posts including adviser to late President Karimov, General Prosecutor and head of security services until Feb 2019, to eighteen years' prison on charges including bribery and extortion, and forming a criminal enterprise; several other former officials also sentenced to prison terms.