



## Europe and Central Asia

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### Balkans

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➔ **Kosovo** Discussions on normalisation process between Kosovo and Serbia continued amid breakthrough on license plate dispute.

*Efforts to normalise Kosovo-Serbia relations persisted.* Belgrade 14 Dec told EU that March 2023 agreement with Pristina to normalise relations was “not legally binding”, prompting PM Kurti 22 Dec to accuse Serbia of withdrawing from deal. EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajčák 21 Dec promised EU would formalise “Serbia’s commitments” from March agreement by Jan 2024; he added that Kosovo could advance without Serb signature on EU and U.S. proposal for creation of Community of Serb municipalities – which enables self-governing association for Serb municipalities – as it is Kosovo’s “internal document”. Kurti 22 Dec responded with proposal to draft new proposal on the “Community” and sign normalisation deal with Serbia at European Council summit in March 2024.

*Belgrade moved to allow Kosovo license plates.* Authorities 15 Dec ended amnesty for use of Serb license plates registered before 1999, which marked end of Kosovo-Serbia war. Serbia 25 Dec decided to allow vehicles with Kosovo license plates to enter its territory; EU same day welcomed move, calling it “a positive step” toward normalisation. Dispute over license plates had long stirred tensions between the two.

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### Caucasus

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➔ **Armenia** Yerevan and Baku agreed to confidence-building measures, including prisoner swap, in bilateral deal; Armenia accused Azerbaijani forces of killing soldier.

*Baku and Yerevan announced surprise deal.* PM’s Office and Azerbaijan’s Presidential Administration 7 Dec issued joint statement announcing sides had agreed to seize “historical chance to achieve a long-awaited peace” with bilateral deal on confidence-building measures. Statement said Baku would release 32 Armenian soldiers and Yerevan would release two Azerbaijanis in “gesture of goodwill”; as part of deal, Armenia also voted in support of Azerbaijan’s bid to host UN climate change conference in 2024 (COP29), while Azerbaijan agreed to support Armenia’s candidacy for membership in COP Bureau. EU, U.S., Türkiye and Russia 7-8 Dec welcomed agreement.

*International efforts to resume formal peace talks continued.* U.S. Assistant Sec State James O’Brien 6 Dec met with Azerbaijan’s President Aliyev in Baku; during

meeting Aliyev acknowledged that U.S. “could contribute” to peace process, O’Brien said he looked forward to hosting both countries’ FMs “soon”. PM Pashinyan and Aliyev 26 Dec met informally on sidelines of Commonwealth of Independent States summit in St. Petersburg city (Russia); Kremlin same day announced sides expressed readiness to finalise peace treaty, offered Russian assistance but gave no indication on timeline. Meanwhile, Yerevan 25 Dec confirmed receiving latest peace deal draft from Baku.

*Armenia claimed Azerbaijani forces killed soldier.* Yerevan 4 Dec accused Baku of killing Armenian soldier, which latter denied. Meanwhile, EU 11 Dec agreed to expand civilian mission in Armenia from 138 to 209 staff; Azerbaijan next day criticised move, claiming mission had failed to foster regional stability.

*In other important developments.* Authorities rejected proposal from former Nagorno-Karabakh representatives to create govt-in-exile in capital Yerevan (see Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict).

➔ **Azerbaijan Baku and Yerevan agreed to confidence-building measures in bilateral deal, Armenia accused Azerbaijani forces of killing soldier, and President Aliyev called for snap election in February.**

*Baku and Yerevan announced surprise deal, Baku denied killing Armenian soldier.* Armenian PM’s Office and Presidential Administration 7 Dec issued joint statement announcing sides had agreed to seize “historical chance to achieve a long-awaited peace” with bilateral deal on confidence-building measures. Statement said Baku would release 32 Armenian soldiers and Yerevan would release two Azerbaijanis in “gesture of goodwill”; as part of deal, Armenia also voted in support of Azerbaijan’s bid to host UN climate change conference in 2024 (COP29), while Azerbaijan agreed to support Armenia’s candidacy for membership in COP Bureau. EU, U.S., Türkiye and Russia 7-8 Dec welcomed deal. Earlier in month, Yerevan 4 Dec accused Baku of killing Armenian soldier, which latter denied; Azerbaijan 12 Dec criticised EU decision to expand civilian mission in Armenia, claiming mission had failed to foster regional stability.

*International efforts to resume formal peace talks continued.* U.S. Assistant Sec State James O’Brien 6 Dec met with President Aliyev in Baku; during meeting Aliyev acknowledged that U.S. “could contribute” to peace process, O’Brien said he looked forward to hosting both countries’ FMs “soon”. Armenian PM Pashinyan and Aliyev 26 Dec met informally on sidelines of Commonwealth of Independent States summit in St. Petersburg city (Russia); Kremlin same day announced sides expressed readiness to finalise peace treaty, offered Russian assistance but gave no indication on timeline. Meanwhile, Yerevan 25 Dec confirmed receiving latest peace deal draft from Baku.

*President announced elections in Feb 2024.* Aliyev 7 Dec called snap presidential election for 7 Feb 2024, previously slated for April 2025; several opposition parties announced they would boycott poll. News came amid harsh crackdown on independent media, with around thirteen govt critics and journalists detained in Nov and Dec. EU 21 Dec criticised “narrowing space” for independent journalism and free speech. Meanwhile, Baku 26 Dec expelled two French diplomats for actions “incompatible with their diplomatic status”; Paris next day denied allegations and reciprocated with expulsion of two Azerbaijani diplomats.

➡ **Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict** Nagorno-Karabakh's (NK) former de facto authorities sparked controversy in Armenia over plans for gov-in-exile amid uncertainty over enclave's future.

*Yerevan and exiled de facto NK officials sparred over proposal for gov-in-exile.* After Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan 6 Dec emphasised that his constitutional responsibility is solely for Armenia, NK's exiled former de facto leadership 10 Dec criticised attempts to "finally close" NK issue and promised "to stand up for the rights of the people of Artsakh". Armenian MP and deputy chair of ruling Civil Contract party Gevorg Papoyan 11 Dec ruled out proposal by former de facto NK officials to create gov-in-exile in Armenian capital Yerevan. Vladimir Grigoryan, adviser to NK's former de facto leader, 22 Dec described Sept decree dissolving enclave's de facto institutions as void, saying "Republic of Artsakh, its government and other bodies will continue to operate after 2023". Comments elicited strong reactions from some Armenian gov officials, prompting Grigoryan to clarify his comments were his personal opinion and that he was no longer an adviser.

*Political and public organisations from NK proposed UN-led transition for region.* Around 200 civil society and political organisations from NK, now based in Armenia, 10 Dec issued statement calling for region to be placed under UN administration for transition period before referendum on its future; proposal indicated reluctance to return under Azerbaijani rule.

➡ **Georgia** EU granted Georgia candidate status, prompting thousands to celebrate in capital as PM Gharibashvili hailed "historic victory"; breakaway Abkhazia's FM declared U.S. official persona non grata.

*European Council granted Georgia long-awaited candidate status.* European Council 14 Dec granted EU candidate status to Georgia. PM Gharibashvili hailed decision and thanked European leaders, members of ruling Georgian Dream party and gov for their contributions to "historic victory". Gharibashvili next day spoke in front of thousands gathered in capital Tbilisi to celebrate, saying victory "belongs to you". Georgian Dream did not invite President Zourabichvili, currently embroiled in bitter dispute with ruling party, onto stage after accusing her of "doing everything to prevent Georgia from obtaining candidate status".

*In important developments in breakaway Abkhazia.* Police in breakaway Abkhazia region 6 Dec reportedly beat up Georgian citizen Temur Karbaia, who died from injuries three days later. Abkhazia's de facto FM Inal Ardzinba 7 Dec accused U.S. development agency of "non-transparent activities" and "perceived misinformation", declared its South Caucasus director John Pennell persona non grata and announced foreign ministry would not certify new projects partially or fully funded by agency. European Court of Human Rights 19 Dec found Russia responsible for murder of Georgian citizen Giga Otkhozoria, killed in 2016 on Georgian side of line separating Abkhazia from Georgia proper.

➡ **Russia (Internal)** President Putin reiterated objectives of war in Ukraine, campaign for presidential election in March 2024 kicked off, and Kyiv shelled Belgorod city in largest attack since full-scale invasion.

*Putin confirmed Russia's goals in Ukraine remain unchanged.* In televised press conference, Putin 14 Dec proclaimed there will only be peace in Ukraine “when we achieve our goals”, which remain “Ukraine’s denazification, demilitarisation and neutral status”; he said 617,000 military personnel are in combat zone, of which 244,000 are mobilised soldiers. Putin 19 Dec reiterated remarks during meeting with top defence officials, said Moscow is upgrading its nuclear arsenal as west wages “hybrid war” against it but emphasised Russia will not attack NATO countries. Meanwhile, mothers and wives of mobilised soldiers organised more protests during month, 18 Dec called on Putin to end war for first time.

*Putin announced presidential bid.* Federation Council 7 Dec approved resolution setting date of presidential election for 17 March 2024. Putin next day announced bid for fifth presidential term; ten others announced their participation in poll, though some have yet to collect enough signatures to run. Independent candidate Yekaterina Duntsova, who has called for end to Ukraine conflict, announced bid but authorities 27 Dec barred her from running. Team of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny 7 Dec sponsored billboards in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other Russian cities urging Russians not to vote for Putin.

*Kyiv launched deadliest attack on Belgorod since full-scale invasion of Ukraine.* Ukraine 30 Dec attacked Belgorod city in heaviest shelling of Russian city since full-scale invasion, killing at least 24 and injuring over 100; Putin promised to retaliate (see Ukraine). Meanwhile, Freedom of Russia Legion (Russian combatants fighting for Ukraine) 17 Dec claimed responsibility for cross-border attack into Belgorod region. Former Ukrainian parliamentarian Ilya Kiva, who fled to Russia early 2022 ahead of full-scale invasion, was shot dead 6 Dec in Moscow region; media reports alleged Ukrainian special services carried out operation.

*Japan and EU introduced further sanctions on Russia.* Japan 15 Dec imposed new sanctions against Russia. EU 18 Dec adopted twelfth sanctions package; Russia next day expanded list of EU representatives banned from entering country.

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## **Eastern Europe**

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➔ **Belarus U.S. and UK issued new sanctions amid continued domestic repression, and President Lukashenko embarked on diplomatic tour in Asia, Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.**

*Lukashenko held intelligence summit, repression campaign continued.* Lukashenko 14 Dec hosted intelligence chiefs of regional bloc Commonwealth of Independent States, claiming “foreign intelligence” operations on “our territory” were becoming “increasingly aggressive”. Meanwhile, crackdown on dissent continued. Notably, police 8 Dec detained two journalists in south-east city of Svetlahorsk on extremism charges; court in Hrodna city (west) 19 Dec sentenced human rights activist Alyaksandra Kasko to ten years in prison for participating in 2020 election protests.

*President embarked on major diplomatic tour.* Lukashenko 4 Dec met President Xi in Chinese capital Beijing before 8 Dec visiting United Arab Emirates for talks with Emirati President Mohammed bin Zayed. Lukashenko next day travelled to

Equatorial Guinea, signing cooperation agreements with President Obiang, concluded tour with 10 Dec visit to Kenya.

*Opposition leader renewed drive for international support.* Exiled opposition head Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya 5 Dec testified before U.S. Congress, calling for increased support for opposition and expansion of sanctions against govt; Washington same day issued new sanctions targeting entities generating revenue for regime. UK 6 Dec announced new sanctions related to govt support for Russian invasion of Ukraine. Tsikhanouskaya 10 Dec met with EU FMs and EU High Representative Josep Borrell, who announced €30mn opposition support package.

➡ **Ukraine Russia pounded Ukrainian cities in largest wave of airstrikes since full-scale invasion, govt sought to reform mobilisation system, and U.S. approved military aid to Ukraine amid uncertainty about future assistance.**

*Russia launched wave of deadly airstrikes on Ukrainian cities.* Russia 8 Dec launched nineteen cruise missiles in attack on capital Kyiv and Dnipro city, killing one; 28-29 Dec conducted largest wave of air attacks since full-scale invasion, striking cities across Ukraine using cruise and ballistic missiles, killing at least 40 and wounding over 160. Three-month pause in cruise missile use prior to strikes had raised fears that Moscow was stockpiling for massive attack that could overwhelm air defences. In Donetsk region, Russian forces advanced in pincer movement around Avdiivka town, which remained under Ukrainian control; Moscow 25 Dec claimed capture of Marinka town. Meanwhile, Ukrainian troops retained hold of bridgehead on Russian-occupied left bank of Dnipro River in southern Kherson region, but were unable to advance under heavy Russian fire. Kyiv 26 Dec destroyed Russian warship during air raid in Russian-annexed Crimea.

*Tensions emerged over conscription system and plans for demobilisation.* President Zelenskyy 1 Dec announced plans to reform conscription system amid increasing recruitment difficulty. Zelenskyy 19 Dec said military proposal to mobilise up to 500,000 additional troops required revision, citing lack of information on funding or plan for demobilisation and rotation of long-serving soldiers; announcement came amid several protests in Dec calling for demobilisation of troops fighting since beginning of war. Govt 25 Dec submitted conscription reform bill to parliament; Defence Minister Umerov previous day said document would give clarity about rotation but would not lead to demobilisation of long-serving soldiers.

*U.S. approved military assistance to Kyiv while EU faced setback.* EU member states 14 Dec voted to initiate accession talks with Ukraine, but Hungary next day vetoed €50bn military support package. U.S. 27 Dec approved more military aid to Ukraine, but future assistance will require Congressional approval and prospects for deal are uncertain. Senior army commander 18 Dec announced his troops had begun rationing artillery shells and scaling back operations due to uncertainty about Western assistance.

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## Western Europe/Mediterranean

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➔ **Cyprus** Tensions persisted over activity in buffer zone, while Greek and Turkish Cypriots appeared to inch toward agreement on new UN envoy.

*Tensions continued in buffer zone and over other issues.* Strains between Republic of Cyprus and “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) remained high over buffer zone activities following what Republic of Cyprus in Nov called Turkish Cypriot “violations”, including installation of camera and antenna on uninhabited house; after late Nov announcing “invisible and visible” measures in response to activity, Republic of Cyprus President Christodoulides 1 Dec discussed situation in Ayios Dhometious area with UN Sec Gen Antonio Guterres and 3 Dec visited area. Meanwhile, Republic of Cyprus parliament 21 Dec approved “Maritime Spatial Plan” concerning maritime resource exploitation off Cyprus; Turkish Cypriot “foreign ministry” 23 Dec denounced plan as “unacceptable”, saying it ignored Turkish Cypriot rights. Republic of Cyprus 22 Dec said it was closely monitoring property developments in “TRNC” concerning appropriation of Greek Cypriot properties. Christodoulides 7 Dec suggested improved Greek-Turkish ties could help progress on Cyprus issue (see Türkiye).

*Parties reportedly moved closer to appointing first UN envoy in six years.* Greek sources announced Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot sides had agreed on new UN envoy, vacant since 2017, but Ankara, “TRNC” or UN did not officially confirm appointment during Dec; Republic of Cyprus 6 Dec announced its consent to appoint envoy, rumoured to be former Colombian FM Maria Angela Holguin Cuellar.

↑ **Türkiye** President Erdoğan’s visit to Greece marked significant improvement in bilateral ties following months of engagement.

*Summit in Greece produced numerous agreements.* Relations with Greece further improved as Erdoğan and Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis 7 Dec met in Greek capital Athens, signing fifteen agreements alongside “Athens Declaration on Friendly Relations and Good Neighbourliness”, committing to military confidence building measures, consultations on political issues and cooperation on issues of mutual interest. Leaders agreed to continue dialogue and spoke of turning Aegean into “sea of peace and cooperation”.

*Military clashed with Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and affiliates, leaving dozen soldiers dead in Iraq.* In Türkiye, security forces 4 Dec killed two wanted PKK militants in rural area of Mardin province. Main focus of anti-militant efforts remained concentrated in northern Iraq and northern Syria, with authorities claiming to have killed, including with targeted strikes, several high-ranking insurgents. In northern Iraq, attacks included 1 Dec drone strike that killed five, while militants 12 Dec killed Turkish second lieutenant. Marking escalation in casualties, clashes with PKK 22-23 Dec killed twelve Turkish soldiers; Turkish Defence Minister 27 Dec said retaliatory attacks struck 71 sites in Iraq and Syria, “neutralising” 59 PKK/People’s Protection Units militants. In Syria, Turkish forces 19 Dec said they had killed seven militants in Türkiye-controlled area.

*Tensions continued with Israel and U.S. over Gaza.* Ankara continued war of words with Israel over latter's military campaign in Gaza (see Israel-Palestine); Erdoğan 8 Dec asserted all perpetrators of "genocide" must be punished, including Israeli PM Netanyahu. Events in Gaza also increased strains on U.S.-Türkiye relationship; Erdoğan 8, 14 and 19 Dec criticised Washington's policy. Turkish parliamentary commission 26 Dec approved Sweden's NATO membership bid, which awaits parliamentary ratification.

*Operations against Islamic State (ISIS) continued.* Security forces in Dec detained at least 630 individuals with alleged links to ISIS, marking notable increase compared to Nov. Notably, security forces 29 Dec apprehended three allegedly senior ISIS members and 29 others who were suspected of planning attack on churches and synagogues in Istanbul.

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## **Central Asia**

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➔ **Kyrgyzstan Bishkek repatriated 96 Kyrgyz nationals from displaced persons camp in Syria; talks between Tajik and Kyrgyz security officials on disputed border issue continued.**

*Authorities repatriated 96 women and children from Syria.* Authorities 8 Dec announced they had repatriated 96 women and children from al-Hol displaced persons camp in north-east Syria, bringing total number of Kyrgyz nationals repatriated in 2023 to 333. U.S. same day welcomed announcement, praising Kyrgyzstan's "tremendous commitment to both its nationals and to alleviating a security and humanitarian crisis".

*Bishkek and Dushanbe made further progress on border demarcation.* Chief of State Committee for National Security Kamchybek Tashiev and his Tajik counterpart Saimumin Yatimov 12 Dec said 90% of Kyrgyz-Tajik border had been agreed upon following negotiations in Batken city, and promised talks on remaining parts of disputed border would continue; earlier, pair 1 Dec announced progress on issue after talks in Tajikistan's Buston town. President Japarov 11 Dec said he hoped sides could finalise border demarcation by spring of 2024.

➔ **Tajikistan Talks between Tajik and Kyrgyz security officials on disputed border issue continued.**

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➔ **Uzbekistan Jailing of lead activist raised concerns over media freedom.**

Following 1 Dec sentencing of popular blogger from Ferghana region to eight years in prison for "insulting" and "slandering" public officials, NGO Human Rights Watch 5 Dec warned decision "will have a chilling effect on free speech and media freedoms

in Uzbekistan”; statement added that “respect for freedom of speech and media freedoms has taken a negative turn and these rights are increasingly coming under attack”.