



CrisisWatch 2023 – November Trends and December Alerts

Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

➔ **Kosovo** EU pushed for progress on normalisation with Serbia, NATO mulled expanding peacekeeping force amid tensions in north, and Kosovo Serb participation in Serbia's Dec poll remained uncertain.

EU reiterated normalising relations with Serbia “essential”. In 8 Nov reports on EU enlargement, EU Commission reiterated normalisation process “essential” for both parties, pledged for “more serious commitment” on both sides; EU report on Kosovo also called on authorities to organise “fully inclusive” local elections “as soon as possible” in Serb-majority northern municipalities. Meanwhile, EU 13 Nov confirmed existence of proposal for establishing Community of Serb Municipalities (CSM); FM Donika Gërvalla 24 Nov said European CSM proposal was “good basis” for discussions.

Kosovo warned of continued threat from Serbia. Following deadly attack in northern Kosovo late Sept, PM Kurti 19 Nov warned of continued threat emanating from Serbia. NATO Sec Gen Jens Stoltenberg 20 Nov confirmed NATO is considering “more enduring increased presence” in Kosovo, while warning Belgrade to avoid another military build-up near border. German FM Baerbock 29 Nov announced deployment of “150 additional troops” to NATO-led force in Kosovo.

Uncertainty over Kosovo Serb participation in Serbia's elections persisted. After Serbia 13 Oct scheduled snap parliamentary elections for 17 Dec, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) 3 Nov received Serb request to support participation of voters living in Kosovo; OSCE made support conditional on Pristina's approval. After PM Kurti 19 Nov insisted on need for “special agreement”, Serbia 22 Nov changed tack, allowing voters to cross border to cast their ballot.

Six arrested in Pristina at protest against Head of Hague-based War Crimes Court. Protesters 29 Nov reportedly used smoke grenades to protest at visit of Ekaterina Trendafilova, President of Kosovo Specialist Chambers, Hague-based court with jurisdiction over crimes “either commenced or committed” in Kosovo 1998-2000; police subsequently arrested six members of Social Democratic opposition party.

Caucasus

➔ **Armenia** Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks remained on hold amid latter's cooling relations with EU and U.S., ties with Russia deteriorated further, and fears of border escalation simmered.

Peace talks with Azerbaijan remained on hold. Azerbaijan's drift away from EU and U.S.-facilitated peace talks continued. Having twice cancelled participation in EU-mediated meetings in Oct, Baku 16 Nov withdrew from meeting between Azerbaijani and Armenian FMs slated for 20 Nov in Washington DC, criticising "one-sided and biased" remarks by Assistant Sec State James O'Brien; O'Brien earlier that day had spoken publicly about U.S. decision to pause bilateral cooperation with Azerbaijan until peace deal was reached with Armenia. Instead, Azerbaijan 21 Nov proposed direct negotiations with Armenia in "mutually acceptable" location. In meantime, Armenia 21 Nov returned sixth draft of peace treaty to Azerbaijan. Deputy PMs of Azerbaijan and Armenia 30 Nov held fifth meeting of border-delimitation commissions, agreed to "intensify" talks.

EU boosted support to Armenia, whose relations with Moscow kept worsening. EU High Representative Josep Borrell 13 Nov announced decision to expand EU Mission in Armenia with "more observers and more patrols" along border with Azerbaijan; Borrell also said EU would consider military support and visa liberalisation options for Armenia. Baku next day responded to "biased policy" by cancelling bilateral projects and visits to EU. French delivery of 50 armoured vehicles 13 Nov arrived in Armenia, which Azerbaijan same day "strongly" condemned. Meanwhile, Armenia 14 Nov announced it would skip Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization summit in Belarus amid deteriorating relations with Moscow; Kremlin next day said West was "obviously behind" decision.

Yerevan worried about potential border escalation. As fears of new escalation along border due to stalled talks persisted, Yerevan 18 Nov reported one soldier injured close to Azerbaijani exclave Nakhichevan. Yerevan next day hosted Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe summit, where PM Pashinyan reiterated desire for peace but warned Baku was preparing for "new armed aggression".

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EU announced renewed support to Armenia, including along border with Azerbaijan. EU High Representative Josep Borrell 13 Nov announced decision to expand EU Mission in Armenia with "more observers and more patrols" along border with Azerbaijan; Borrell also said EU would consider military support and visa liberalisation options for Armenia. Baku next day responded to "biased policy" by cancelling bilateral projects and visits to EU. French delivery of 50 armoured

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In other important developments. Authorities late Nov arrested four leaders of media channels AbzasNews and Kanal 13 TV over alleged cash smuggling and illegal property use; Govt 28 Nov summoned ambassadors of U.S., France and Germany, accusing them of “illegal contributions” to AbzasMedia, which U.S. next day rejected.

➡ **Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled on provisional measures for ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh (NK).**

International Court of Justice announced provisional measures for NK. Following Armenia’s Oct submission to ICJ requesting provisional measures against Azerbaijan for what it calls “ethnic cleansing” in NK, ICJ 17 Nov published preliminary order: court decided that Azerbaijan should ensure free return and departure of ethnic Armenians from NK, along with protection of those who decide to stay; it also called on Azerbaijan to preserve their “registration, identity and private property documents”. ICJ ordered Azerbaijan to submit report to Court in two months. Baku same day welcomed decision, highlighting how court had “reconfirmed Azerbaijan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” and rejected Armenia’s call for Azerbaijan to withdraw troops from NK, protect cultural sites and release all military and civilian detainees.

Azerbaijan handed out fifteen-year sentence for war crimes in first NK war. Baku court 7 Nov sentenced ethnic Armenian from NK Vagif Khachatryan, arrested in July while travelling along Lachin road to Armenia for medical treatment, to fifteen years in prison for alleged involvement in 1991 Meshali massacre; according to court, Armenian armed attack on Meshali village killed 25 Azerbaijanis, injured fourteen and forcibly expelled 358 people. Khachatryan has repeatedly denied all charges.

➡ **Georgia European Commission recommended Georgia be granted long-awaited candidate status; Russian border guards killed Georgian civilian in breakaway South Ossetia.**

European Commission recommended EU candidacy status for Georgia. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen 8 Nov announced that “Commission recommends that the (European) Council grants Georgia the status of a candidate country on the understanding that certain reforms steps are taken”; European Council will take formal decision in Dec 2023. Both PM Garibashvili and President Zourabichvili welcomed decision as thousands took to streets of capital Tbilisi to voice support for EU membership. Head of EU Delegation to Georgia, Paweł Herczyński, same day congratulated country but noted that candidate status is contingent on “fulfilling important steps”, including need to align Georgia’s foreign policy on Russia with EU.

Russian border guards killed Georgian civilian in South Ossetia. Russian troops 6 Nov shot dead Georgian civilian Tamaz Ginturi and detained another near line that separates breakaway South Ossetia from Georgia proper; de facto South Ossetian officials next day published statement claiming civilians had “illegally crossed” into breakaway region, “displayed an extreme level of aggression” and that Ginturi was killed “during the measures taken to detain the violators”. EU Monitoring Mission 6 Nov assembled officials from Georgia, Russia and breakaway South Ossetia, next day announced increased presence along separation line; de facto officials 9 Nov released second civilian.

➔ **Russia (Internal) Moscow withdrew from several arms treaties and announced record military expenditures in 2024; Finland closed border with Russia.**

Russia withdrew from two arms treaties, ramped up military spending. President Putin 2 Nov signed legislation revoking ratification of Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, though Russian officials reportedly said withdrawal did not mean Russia would resume nuclear testing; Russia 7 Nov withdrew from Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty. State Duma 17 Nov approved 2024 federal budget, which devotes record 10.8tn rubles (approximately \$119bn) to defence compared with 6.4tn rubles (approximately \$71bn) in 2023. Police conducted raids to draft new army recruits, particularly targeting migrants; notably, police in Voronezh city 14 Nov raided restaurant hosting group of Azerbaijani immigrants and handed around 50 summonses to military enlistment offices.

Crackdown continued, notably targeting war opponents and LGBTQ+ community. Wives of mobilised soldiers 7 Nov staged protest calling on authorities to demobilise their husbands who, according to Putin’s mobilisation decree, could remain in military service until end of so-called special operation in Ukraine. Court in Saint Petersburg city 16 Nov sentenced artist Aleksandra Skochilenko to seven years’ imprisonment for spreading disinformation or “fakes” about Russian army; court in Moscow same day sentenced opposition politician Vladimir Milov in absentia to eight years in prison, also for “fakes”. Meanwhile, Supreme Court 30 Nov labelled “international LGBT movement” as “extremist”, banned activities; UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk same day “deplored” decision, called on authorities to repeal laws that place “improper restrictions on the work of human rights defenders or that discriminate against LGBT people”.

Finland closed checkpoints along border with Russia, Ukrainian strikes continued. Finland 22 Nov announced closure of all but one of its border crossings with Russia beginning 24 Nov, accusing its neighbour of purposely pushing asylum seekers toward border; 28 Nov closed last border crossing point, saying closure would last until 13 Dec and banned filing of requests for “international protection” at border. Meanwhile, authorities 26 Nov announced its air defences had intercepted Ukrainian drones over several regions, including Moscow, day after Kyiv reported one of biggest drone attacks since full-scale invasion (see Ukraine).

Eastern Europe

➔ Belarus Govt continued opposition clampdown, Minsk hosted Russia-led military alliance summit, and tensions with Poland persisted.

Authorities continued stifling dissent. Human rights group Viasna 1 Nov reported media personality Larisa Gribaleva had been detained, though authorities same day released her. Maladechna court 3 Nov sentenced journalist Alyaksandr Mantsevich to four years' imprisonment for "discrediting Belarus". EU High Representative Josep Borrell 12 Nov warned of ever-deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus since disputed 2020 presidential election sparked crackdown, spotlighting over 40,000 arrests, 12,000 criminal cases and nearly 1,500 political prisoners. Meanwhile, President Lukashenko 20 Nov signed decree announcing parliamentary and local polls in Feb 2024, first nationwide elections since 2020. Authorities 28 Nov searched homes of opposition figures, as "preliminary stage" of election preparations.

Minsk hosted military alliance summit. Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization summit 23 Nov took place in capital Minsk, bringing together leaders from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; Armenia's leader did not attend amid deteriorating relations with Russia (see Armenia). During summit, Lukashenko defended hosting Russian tactical nuclear weapons as necessary response to NATO threat.

Minsk accused Warsaw of airspace violation. Foreign ministry 3 Nov summoned Polish Chargé d'affaires over alleged violation of its airspace day before.

➔ Moldova Parliament adopted bill to join EU sanctions regime against Russia.

European Commission 8 Nov released report on enlargement that recommended commencement of membership talks with Moldova. Parliament 24 Nov passed bill to join EU sanctions regime against Russia; Moscow same day denounced move as "another hostile step" and vowed retaliation. Govt 28 Nov stripped pro-Russia politician Alexandr Kalinin of citizenship for "recruitment into the armed forces of a foreign state".

➔ Ukraine Russia intensified attacks in Donetsk region as Ukraine targeted occupied left-bank of Dnipro river, key allies promised more military aid, and European Commission recommended accession talks.

Russian forces made small gains in east and escalated airstrikes. In Donetsk region, Russia stepped up attacks around Bakhmut city and Avdiivka town, making modest gains at high cost. In Odesa region, Russian missile 9 Nov hit freight ship in Odesa port, killing one in first strike on civilian vessel since withdrawal from Black Sea grain deal. Authorities 26 Nov said Russia had conducted one of largest drone attacks since war began, notably targeting capital Kyiv, with over 75 Iranian-made drones injuring five and damaging infrastructure.

Ukraine stepped up attacks across Dnipro river and continued targeting Crimea. Russian military bloggers 6 Nov reported Ukraine had transferred armoured vehicles across Dnipro River into bridgeheads on Russian-held left bank in southern Kherson

region. In following days, troops managed to expand bridgeheads and Kyiv 15 Nov claimed foothold; Russia-installed Kherson governor same day admitted Ukrainian gains but promised reversal. In Russian-annexed Crimea, Ukrainian missile 4 Nov damaged under-construction missile carrier in port city of Kerch; Russian officials 26 Nov claimed its air defence averted several Ukrainian drone attacks on occupied Crimea and Moscow.

U.S. and Germany pledged more military assistance. U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin 20 Nov visited Kyiv, announcing new military aid package and promising continued support, even as worries grew over approval of further spending in U.S. Congress and supply capacity amid Israel-Hamas war (see Israel/Palestine). German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius 21 Nov announced €1.3bn military aid package during Kyiv visit; France 29 Nov announced intention to sign bilateral defence accord with Kyiv in early 2024.

European Commission recommended accession talks, tensions with EU neighbours rose. European Commission 8 Nov recommended accession negotiations with Ukraine; Hungarian PM Orbán 18 Nov said Ukraine was “light-years away” from membership, signalling intent to block proceedings. Meanwhile, Polish lorry drivers 6 Nov began blockade of border crossings, alleging EU suspension of entry permits for Ukrainian truckers had created unfair competition; after traffic diverted to Slovakia, Slovak border guards 15 Nov increased checks.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➡ Cyprus UN-brokered understanding on buffer zone faced strains, while agreement on new UN envoy remained elusive.

Tensions resurfaced around buffer zone, undermining UN deal struck in Oct. After UN in early Oct brokered deal on road construction by Turkish Cypriots to connect Pile/Pyla village (located in UN buffer zone) to “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”), leader of “TRNC” Ersin Tatar 1 Nov met UN Deputy Sec Gen for Peace Operations, claiming Greek Cypriots had “started construction activities” in areas around village and requesting UN intervention. “TRNC” FM Tahsin Ertugruloglu same day argued such works breached UN-brokered mutual understanding and demanded cessation. Republic of Cyprus President Christodoulides 6 Nov reported that UN had “requested a short pause” in construction to deal with “TRNC” complaints and 11 Nov denied the works violated UN understanding, asserting that “TRNC” had effectively “backed away” from it. Republic of Cyprus 21 Nov ruled out renegotiating deal and called on UN to facilitate “swift resumption of work”. Republic of Cyprus 27 Nov claimed “serious ongoing violation of the buffer zone” in reference to installation by Turkish Cypriots of rotating camera and antenna on uninhabited house; TRNC said it was aimed at preventing illegal immigration. Christodoulides 28 Nov warned of consequences if status quo not restored after around 40 armed Turkish Cypriot soldiers were sighted in buffer zone previous day.

Search for agreement on UN envoy continued. After Greek Cypriot media late Oct reported that “TRNC” had rejected Julie Bishop, potential candidate to fill UN envoy role vacant since 2017, due to her Australian nationality, Christodoulides 11 Nov

accused Türkiye of “making excuses” by not accepting her for coming from “Commonwealth country”. Tatar 15 Nov said “TRNC” was waiting for new envoy proposal; Christodoulides 20 Nov said he expected new choice imminently.

In another important development. International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and nearly 70 media organisations 14 Nov published report alleging dozens of Russian oligarchs used financial services in Republic of Cyprus to evade Western sanctions, including those imposed in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in Feb 2022; Republic of Cyprus police subsequently opened criminal investigation.

➡ **Türkiye Authorities continued targeting Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) at home and in Iraq and Syria, while govt continued positive engagement with Greece and rebuked Israel for Gaza onslaught.**

Military maintained operations against PKK and affiliates. In Türkiye, police 2 Nov reportedly detained eleven PKK suspects in Istanbul city. IED explosion 4 Nov killed soldier during operation in rural area of eastern Van province. Security forces 5 Nov announced capture of PKK militant on Syrian border. In northern Iraq, defence ministry 13 and 17 Nov claimed operations killed total nineteen PKK members and intelligence services 17 and 20 Nov reportedly eliminated senior PKK members in targeted operations; PKK attack 26 Nov killed three soldiers. In northern Syria, intelligence services same day killed alleged senior People’s Protection Units (YPG) official (see Iraq and Syria).

Dialogue with Greece yielded progress. In first such meeting in three years, Greek diplomatic and military officials 13 Nov visited capital Ankara, agreeing to implement and reactivate numerous confidence-building measures over coming year and establish new dialogue mechanism, marking positive sign ahead of 7 Dec meeting between President Erdoğan and Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Greece. Meanwhile, FM Hakan Fidan 2 Nov attended EU enlargement meeting in Berlin. EU 8 Nov released progress report on Türkiye’s candidate status, which noted “democratic backsliding” among list of other concerns; Ankara same day branded report unfair. European Commission and EU High Rep 29 Nov proposed enhanced cooperation in areas such as trade, transport, energy and migration.

Tensions increased with Israel. In protest of Israel’s military campaign in Gaza (see Israel-Palestine), Türkiye 4 Nov recalled ambassador to Israel. Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar 8 Nov announced freeze on energy cooperation until Gaza ceasefire declared. Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu 15 Nov labelled President Erdoğan’s criticism over human rights hypocritical, which foreign ministry called “slander”. Erdoğan 20 Nov accused Israel of “genocide” and 29 Nov called Netanyahu “the butcher of Gaza”.

Clampdown on Islamic State (ISIS) continued. Security forces in Nov detained at least 44 individuals with alleged links to ISIS. Notably, authorities 12 Nov detained high-ranking ISIS member in Istanbul.

Central Asia

➔ **Kazakhstan France's president sought to boost ties with Kazakhstan, and FMs from Central Asian countries attended G7 online meeting.**

Macron sought to bolster cooperation. French President Macron 1 Nov met with President Tokayev in capital Astana during regional tour (see Uzbekistan) to “accelerate cooperation” in key sectors. Pair signed raft of agreements, including on transport engineering, agribusiness and pharmaceuticals; Macron also praised Astana for refusing “to be a vassal of any powers”. Days after Macron’s visit, Russian President Putin 9 Nov met with Tokayev in Astana to discuss bilateral cooperation, with Putin calling for stronger military ties. In interview broadcast 12 Nov, Russian FM Lavrov accused west of trying to “push” Moscow out of Central Asia.

G7 hosted Central Asian FMs for virtual meeting. During 7-8 Nov G7 Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Japan, FMs from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan 8 Nov attended virtual session amid efforts by G7 to strengthen engagement with Central Asia. G7 promised to “support the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Central Asian countries” and to strengthen cooperation on “regional challenges”, such as impact of war in Ukraine, water security and climate change. Meanwhile, Belarus 23 Nov hosted Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization summit, bringing together leaders from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (see Belarus).

➔ **Kyrgyzstan FMs from Central Asian countries attended G7 online meeting.**

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➔ **Tajikistan Iranian president visited Dushanbe amid deepening ties, and FMs from Central Asian countries attended G7 online meeting.**

Tajik and Iranian presidents pledged to boost ties. Iranian President Raisi 8 Nov met with President Rahmon in capital Dushanbe to discuss bilateral ties; pair signed raft of documents, including memorandums of understanding on visa-free visits for citizens, transportation, economic and technological cooperation, and efforts to tackle drug-trafficking.

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➡ **Uzbekistan** France’s president sought to boost ties with Uzbekistan, and FMs from Central Asian countries attended G7 online meeting.

Macron sought to bolster cooperation. President Macron 1-2 Nov visited Uzbekistan following trip to Kazakhstan (see Kazakhstan) amid efforts to strengthen ties. Sides reportedly discussed projects in agriculture and uranium, while Macron 2 Nov said countries would develop strategic partnership; Mirziyoyev praised “historic” visit and confirmed leaders had “agreed to advance bilateral relations to the level of a strategic partnership”. In interview broadcast 12 Nov, Russian FM Lavrov accused west of trying to “push” Moscow out of Central Asia. French newspaper *La Tribune* 26 Nov reported Macron pitched replacing Tashkent’s Russian-made fighter planes with French jets during meeting.

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