



## Europe and Central Asia

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### Balkans

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➔ **Kosovo** Kosovo and Serbia edged closer to deal on normalising relations following European Union (EU)-mediated talks in Brussels.

*PM Kurti and Serb President Vučić tacitly approved EU proposal on normalising relations.* Following meeting in Pristina with EU Special Representative Lajčák, PM Kurti 6 Feb accepted Franco-German proposal on normalising relations with Serbia as “good basis”. EU High Representative Josep Borrell 9 Feb confirmed inviting leaders to EU-mediated dialogue 27 Feb, 10 Feb said proposal is “the only way to solve the problems and normalise relations”. Vučić 17 Feb confirmed readiness for dialogue on condition that Kosovo Association of Serb Municipalities – which would enable Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo to form self-governing association – is discussed. Borrell 27 Feb announced sides agreed that “no more discussions are needed on the European Union proposal” and expressed readiness to “proceed with implementation”. Talks will now focus on leaked annex, which spells out timeline for reaching final deal.

*International actors showed support for normalisation process ahead of talks.* Turkish President Erdoğan 3 Feb expressed “support” for dialogue. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Quint ambassadors (France, Germany, Italy, UK and U.S.) 7 Feb reiterated importance of making “concrete progress” in EU-facilitated talks. European Council 9 Feb “underlined the urgent need for progress in the normalisation”. U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 15 Feb said normalisation “will bring security and prosperity” to region.

### Caucasus

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➔ **Armenia** International efforts to advance peace negotiations continued but with little progress, European Union (EU) launched monitoring mission, and earthquake in Türkiye opened up opportunities for cooperation.

*Armenia and Azerbaijan exchanged draft peace treaty, but talks between FMs did not resume.* Blockade of Lachin corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) with Armenia (see Nagorno-Karabakh) continued to hinder diplomatic efforts, with no meetings in Feb between Armenian and Azerbaijani FMs, who are responsible for formal negotiations on peace treaty. Still, PM Pashinyan 16 Feb announced Yerevan had sent draft proposal of peace treaty to Baku, which Azerbaijani President Aliyev 18 Feb confirmed receiving. U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 18 Feb chaired meeting

with Pashinyan and Aliyev at Munich Security Conference to discuss progress on draft, among other issues. Meanwhile, Russia intensified its own mediation efforts amid growing competition with West over peace agenda. Notably, Russian Special Representative Igor Khovayev 9, 14 Feb visited Yerevan and Baku, respectively; Russian President Putin 14 Feb spoke with Aliyev; and Russian FM Sergei Lavrov 27 Feb met with Aliyev in Baku.

*Armenia and Azerbaijan debated control of corridors, EU launched monitoring mission.* Aliyev 18 Feb proposed establishing Azerbaijani checkpoints along Lachin corridor and creating similar Armenian checkpoints at Azerbaijan-Armenia state border along any future railway and motorway connecting mainland Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhichevan via Armenia; FM Ararat Mirzoyan 22 Feb rejected proposal, saying Russian peacekeepers should retain control of Lachin corridor (see Nagorno-Karabakh). Meanwhile, EU 20 Feb launched civilian monitoring mission along Armenian side of international border with Azerbaijan, aimed at contributing to border stability, building confidence and supporting efforts toward normalisation.

*Ankara and Yerevan made progress on opening border following earthquake.* In aftermath of devastating earthquake that hit Türkiye, Armenia 7 Feb sent rescue team, while border 11 Feb symbolically opened for first time since 1988 to allow humanitarian aid to pass through. Mirzoyan 15 Feb visited Türkiye and sides agreed to repair border bridge and work toward opening land border for diplomats and third-country nationals. Pashinyan 18 Feb expressed optimism that increased communication and collaboration could lead to more progress on political front.

**➡ Azerbaijan International efforts to advance peace negotiations continued but with little progress, European Union (EU) launched monitoring mission, and relations with Iran continued to worsen.**

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*Relations with Iran continued to deteriorate.* Following armed attack late Jan on Azerbaijani embassy in Iran's capital Tehran, Azerbaijan 31 Jan-1 Feb conducted "special police operations", resulting in detention of 39 members of "Iranian spy network" and 66 members of criminal gang that trafficked drugs from Iran to Azerbaijan. Aliyev 17 Feb accused Iran explicitly for first time of orchestrating attack on embassy and called for transparent investigation and consequences for those responsible before any normalisation can occur.

➡ **Nagorno-Karabakh Efforts to unblock Lachin corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) with Armenia failed to produce results, and Baku and de facto leadership met to discuss energy supply issues.**

*Lachin blockade continued throughout month.* Azerbaijani govt-backed activists' blockade of Lachin corridor, only road linking Armenian-populated NK to Armenia, continued, worsening humanitarian crisis. Diplomatic efforts failed to produce breakthrough. Armenian PM Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Aliyev 18 Feb met with U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken at Munich Security Conference (MSC) (see Armenia and Azerbaijan), where Blinken highlighted importance of "free and open commercial and private transit through the Lachin corridor". However, leaders same day engaged in panel discussion on security in South Caucasus, where Aliyev denied blockades' existence. International Court of Justice 22 Feb ordered Azerbaijan to "ensure unimpeded movement" along Lachin corridor. Pashinyan 23 Feb said decision was "extremely important" and "satisfies Armenia's claim", while Azerbaijan claimed Armenian authorities had misrepresented ruling; UN and EU same day released statements noting court decision and repeating calls to open road.

*Armenia and Azerbaijan debated control of corridors.* During MSC, President Aliyev proposed establishing Azerbaijani checkpoints along Lachin corridor and creating similar Armenian checkpoints at Azerbaijan-Armenia state border along any future railway and motorway connecting mainland Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhichevan via Armenia; Aliyev claimed Europe and U.S. had found proposal "logical". Armenian FM Ararat Mirzoyan 22 Feb rejected proposal, saying Russian peacekeepers should retain control of Lachin corridor, as stipulated in 2020 ceasefire deal to end second NK war.

*Baku and Stepanakert resumed meetings after dismissal of controversial de facto official.* NK's de facto leader, Araik Harutyunyan, 22 Feb dismissed Russian businessman Ruben Vardanyan as state minister, citing strategic differences in their approaches to internal and external issues; Vardanyan's appointment in Nov 2022 had angered Baku, which claimed Moscow had sent him to NK "with a very clear agenda" and thus ruled out negotiations with him. One day after Vardanyan's removal, Russian peacekeepers reported first talks between de facto leadership and Azerbaijani representatives on gas and electricity supply issues, which began after start of Lachin blockade.

➡ **Georgia Russia and breakaway regions responded harshly after co-chairs of Geneva International Discussions postponed talks; foreign agents law proposal sparked controversy.**

*Russia and de facto authorities continued to deny entry to co-chairs of Geneva talks.* After co-chairs of Geneva International Discussions late Jan postponed planned 57th round of talks until April, Abkhazia and South Ossetia de facto authorities, as well as Russia, voiced anger at “unilateral” move and denied co-chairs entry to either breakaway regions or Moscow, despite visits scheduled for 8-9 Feb. Despite this move, co-chairs decided to proceed with their planned trip to capital Tbilisi 6-7 Feb to meet with Georgian govt.

*Proposed law on foreign influence provoked harsh criticism.* People’s Power movement, closely affiliated with Georgian Dream party and critical of Western policies in Georgia, during month submitted two draft laws that would oblige NGOs and media outlets that receive over 20% of their funding from abroad to register as “agents of foreign influence”; failure to fulfil this requirement, which would apply to individuals as well, would result in variety of penalties from fines to prison term of up to five years. Georgian Dream party 21 Feb announced support for draft, but U.S. 16 Feb criticised law and rejected claim it resembles U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act; Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe same day raised “several concerns”; over 60 media outlets 27 Feb released joint statement “categorically opposing” draft law; and President Salome Zourabichvili 28 Feb pledged to veto it.

*In other important developments.* Tbilisi City Court 6 Feb ruled against transfer of imprisoned former President Mikheil Saakashvili abroad for health reasons.

➔ **Russia (Internal) Putin suspended participation in key nuclear arms treaty, Ukrainian shelling of Russia continued, and Western states imposed more sanctions.**

*Putin suspended participation in key arms treaty with U.S.* In state-of-the-union address delivered days before one-year anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, President Putin 21 Feb announced suspension of Russia’s participation in 2010 New START Treaty (last arms control treaty in force between Russia and U.S.), which could portend end of arms control system established during Cold War and built upon since. Putin also said “the more long-range Western systems are delivered into Ukraine, the further we’ll have to push the threat from our borders”.

*Ukrainian attacks on Russian territory continued.* Putin 1 Feb said preventing Ukrainian strikes on Russia was “priority task”, though cross-border attacks continued. Notably, governor of Bryansk region 3 Feb said Russian air defences shot down four Ukrainian rockets in Starodubsk municipality; governor of Belgorod region 19 Feb reported child killed in Novaya Tavolzhanka village. Series of drone attacks 27-28 Feb occurred in six regions, striking oil refinery in Krasnodar Krai region. Meanwhile, founder of paramilitary Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, 20 Feb accused officials of denying his fighters sufficient ammunition for Ukraine war and admitted having uneasy relations with people “at the top”.

*Persecution of war opponents persisted.* Court in Barnaul city 15 Feb sentenced journalist Maria Ponomarenko to six years in prison for spreading disinformation, or “fakes”, about army. Russian Investigative Committee chairman 20 Feb said authorities had opened 152 criminal cases against individuals for “fakes” since invasion of Ukraine. Police 24 Feb reportedly detained at least 54 people in 14 cities at protests on anniversary of Ukraine war.

*West and Russia imposed more tit-for-tat sanctions.* Western states continued to impose sanctions throughout month; European Union 25 Feb introduced tenth sanctions package. Deputy PM Alexander Novak 10 Feb announced Russia would cut oil production by 500,000 barrels per day starting in March. Meanwhile, media outlet *The Financial Times* 6 Feb reported that at least 16 Iranian “ghost” ships, previously used to breach U.S. sanctions, have begun shipping Russian oil since Group of Seven imposed price cap.

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## **Eastern Europe**

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➡ **Belarus Govt stepped up aggressive rhetoric toward Ukraine, Belarusian partisans attacked Russian military aircraft near capital Minsk, and relations with Poland grew increasingly strained.**

*Anti-war partisans claimed responsibility for attack on Russian aircraft.* President Lukashenko 16 Feb said Belarus is “ready to fight” with Russian troops in Ukraine “if even one soldier enters Belarus territory from Ukraine to kill [his] people”. Lukashenko 20 Feb announced creation of civilian paramilitary defence force “in case of aggression”. Defence ministry 21 Feb warned that “a significant grouping” of Ukrainian troops had massed near border. Senior Ukrainian official same day said Minsk had stepped up “aggressive” rhetoric but that Kyiv saw no imminent threat from its neighbour. Meanwhile, partisans 26 Feb claimed responsibility for drone attack on Russian military aircraft at Machulishchy airfield near capital Minsk; senior official 28 Feb dismissed claim as “fake... given the absence of an official reaction”.

*Ties with Poland deteriorated, leaked Russian documents revealed alleged plans to take over Belarus.* Court in capital Minsk 8 Feb sentenced Polish-Belarusian journalist Andrzej Poczobut to eight years in prison for “inciting hatred”, among other charges. Poland same day condemned “politically motivated” trial, 10 Feb closed key Bobrowniki border crossing with Belarus; Minsk 20 Feb announced expulsion of three Polish diplomats in response. Meanwhile, various media outlets 21 Feb published document allegedly leaked from Russia’s presidential administration that dates back to 2021, detailing Kremlin plans to assert full control over Belarus’ politics, economy and military potential by 2030.

*Repression of dissent continued.* Court 10 Feb sentenced two activists to 22 years in prison for sabotaging railway lines used by Russia for transporting military equipment and troops for war in Ukraine. Court in Homel 17 Feb sentenced ten members of Workers’ Movement to between 11 and 15 years in prison for “high treason” and extremism.

⬇ **Moldova Govt resigned, and tensions with Russia escalated over alleged coup attempt, violation of Moldova’s airspace and Russian accusations of provocation in Transnistria.**

*Govt resigned over economic pressures and war in Ukraine.* Pro-European govt 10 Feb resigned after turbulent 18 months in power marked by economic turmoil and spillover of Russia’s war in Ukraine. President Maia Sandu same day nominated pro-European National Security Adviser Dorin Recean to lead new govt, who vowed to advance on European Union integration and said govt should continue efforts for

withdrawal of Russian troops from separatist Transnistria region; parliament 16 Feb approved nomination.

*Allegations of Russian destabilisation efforts in Moldova mounted.* Govt's resignation announcement came amid escalation of tensions with Russia, on the rise for months over latter's suspected role in anti-govt protests and threats to gas supplies in former Soviet republic. Ukrainian President Zelenskyy 9 Feb warned of Russian plan to "destroy" Moldova; Sandu 13 Feb provided further details of alleged plan to topple govt using Russian and Belarusian operatives. Zelenskyy 20 Feb accused Moscow of plans to seize airport in capital Chişinău for transport of soldiers and equipment to Ukraine. Further aggravating tensions, defence ministry 10 Feb announced Russian missile headed for Ukraine had violated Moldova's airspace, prompting FM Popescu to summon Russian ambassador, Oleg Vasnetsov. Meanwhile, several thousand protesters in Chişinău 19 Feb took part in anti-govt rally organised by opposition Shor party, which has strong ties with Russia and is under investigation for illegal financing; more anti-govt protests took place 28 Feb.

*Tensions over Transnistria escalated.* Kremlin 20 Feb said "anti-Russian hysteria" had worsened bilateral relations and urged Moldovan authorities to be "very, very careful" regarding calls to demilitarise Transnistria. Russian President Putin next day revoked 2012 decree which, among many other things, underpins Moldova's sovereignty in resolving future of Transnistria. Russia 23 Feb warned Kyiv could carry out "armed provocation" in Transnistria, next day said it would view any actions that threatened Russian peacekeepers in Transnistria as "an attack on the Russian Federation". Kremlin 27 Feb accused Ukraine and other European countries of "provoking" situation in Transnistria.

➡ **Ukraine One year on from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, signs of new Russian offensive in embattled east began to emerge, Biden visited Kyiv, and Zelenskyy called on Western states to send fighter jets.**

*Stepped-up Russian activity along front line signalled new offensive.* 24 Feb marked one-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, amid indications of new Russian offensive to fully occupy eastern Donbas region, including increased Russian activity along front line, arrival of electronic warfare equipment, more reconnaissance activities and spike in losses of Russian soldiers. There were no major breakthroughs, however. In Donetsk region, Russian forces attempted to capture Vuhledar hilltop mining town, control of which would give them strategic advantage for operations to occupy remainder of Donetsk, but reportedly suffered major losses of troops and equipment in assault. Their troops made more progress around Bakhmut town, but suffered unsustainably high rate of attrition, while Ukrainian units retained control of main road out of town. With Russia's land force so far unable to punch through Ukrainian defence lines, Western partners 14 Feb warned Russia could intensify airstrikes, making efforts to bolster Ukraine's air defences a priority. Strikes on critical infrastructure continued, albeit at lower frequency.

*Zelenskyy appealed for fighter jets, U.S. President Biden visited Kyiv.* During 8 Feb visit to UK, President Zelenskyy urged British lawmakers to send fighter jets; UK PM Rishi Sunak responded that "nothing is off the table". Zelenskyy's plea came hours after UK announced it would train Ukrainian pilots to fly NATO-standard fighter jets, suggesting Western countries may be working on plan to send military aircraft.

Zelenskyy 8-9 Feb also visited Paris and Brussels. Israeli FM Eli Cohen 16 Feb visited Ukraine, promising more support but refusing to condemn Russia. In strong show of support ahead of anniversary, President Biden 20 Feb made unannounced visit to Kyiv, promising more military aid and tighter sanctions on Russia before heading to Poland.

*Defence minister announced new deputies.* Following Jan corruption scandal that rattled defence ministry, Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov 14 Feb announced three new deputies as part of anti-graft efforts.

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## **Western Europe/Mediterranean**

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➔ **Cyprus** Republic of Cyprus elected new president who pledged reunification of island and held first informal meeting with Turkish Cypriot leader.

*New Republic of Cyprus president met Turkish Cypriot leader.* Former FM Nikos Christodoulides 12 Feb won Greek Cypriot run-off presidential elections against left-wing contender Andreas Mavroyiannis (51.9% to 48.1%). During inauguration speech, Christodoulides remarked “my biggest concern is the end of the Turkish occupation and the reunification of our homeland”, adding “I will do everything to break the deadlock, to restart the dialogue”. In first informal meeting following his election, Christodoulides 23 Feb met Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar in UN buffer zone in Nicosia; after encounter, Tatar said formal return to talks will require recognition of Turkish Cypriot sovereignty, while Christodoulides remarked he did not hear anything unexpected.

*Tensions continued between sides prior to presidential poll.* Outgoing Republic of Cyprus President Anastasiades 2 Feb visited Greece, thanking Greek PM Mitsotakis for “support in containing Turkish revisionism”. Turkish FM Fuat Oktay 3 Feb referred to “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” as “Turkish Cypriot Republic”, urged UN Security Council to recognise north as having “equal international status” with Republic of Cyprus; Oktay also claimed UN peacekeeping mission has “no humanitarian, diplomatic, or legal value”. Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar 4 Feb reiterated “sovereign equality” of “Turkish Cypriot Republic”.

➔ **Türkiye** Deadly earthquakes wreaked unprecedented destruction, spurring international response; Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) announced conditional ceasefire as hostilities persisted in Syria and Iraq.

*Earthquakes killed tens of thousands, unleashed humanitarian crisis.* In deadliest natural disaster in republic’s almost 100-year history, two major earthquakes 6 Feb rocked 11 southern provinces, killing over 40,000 people, injuring over 100,000, collapsing or damaging 100,000 buildings, and displacing up to 1.5mn people. Earthquakes galvanised international support: notably, more than 75 countries dispatched over 10,000 rescue workers and, alongside other high-level officials, NATO Sec Gen Jens Stoltenberg 15-16 Feb and U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 19-20 Feb visited affected areas. Facing public criticism over its earthquake response and allegations of malpractice in construction sector, govt 8 Feb reportedly briefly

restricted access to Twitter and detained some individuals voicing criticism, while ruling party officials reportedly raised prospect of delaying May elections. Social media users and far-right politicians framed Syrian refugees as “looters” amid reports of sporadic law and order breakdown in some areas.

*PKK announced unilateral ceasefire in Türkiye.* Following earthquakes, one of PKK’s leaders Cemil Bayık 9 Feb announced cessation of hostilities within country, conditional on military not attacking group; month witnessed no military operations against PKK in country following announcement. Authorities 25 Feb arrested PKK militant in Konya province who was allegedly waiting for orders to carry out sensational attack. Hostilities persisted elsewhere: Turkish forces continued operations in northern Iraq, while northern Syria witnessed slight reduction in fighting, notwithstanding several drone strikes (see Iraq and Syria).

*Tensions eased with Greece following disaster.* Greek FM Nikos Dendias 12 Feb visited earthquake-affected areas with FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu; Dendias pledged continued support, while Çavuşoğlu said both countries should not “wait for another disaster to hit ... to restore their relations”, adding that their solidarity following earthquakes will be decisive in “opening a new page” in relations.

*Authorities arrested Islamic State (ISIS) suspects.* Authorities detained some 95 individuals with alleged links to ISIS countrywide. Notably, police 4 Feb detained 15 suspects in Istanbul with alleged instructions to carry out attacks in city in retaliation to Quran-burning incidents in Jan.

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## **Central Asia**

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➔ **Kyrgyzstan Court extended pre-trial detention for activists protesting border delimitation agreement until April, govt agreed to host CSTO military drills and U.S. sought to deepen engagement in region.**

*Authorities extended pre-trial detention of imprisoned activists for second time.* Court in capital Bishkek 15-17 Feb extended pre-trial detention of 26 activists and politicians, detained late Oct for protesting border delimitation agreement with Uzbekistan, until April; court first extended their pre-trial detention in Dec.

*Govt repatriated 59 nationals from north-eastern Syria.* Govt 16 Feb repatriated 18 women and 41 children from displaced persons camps in north-eastern Syria. U.S. 20 Feb welcomed Kyrgyz govt’s efforts to “help resolve the ongoing humanitarian and security challenges” in region, where Islamic State remains “a persistent threat”; U.S. added that repatriation remains “the only durable solution” and urged “all governments to follow Kyrgyzstan’s example and repatriate their nationals”.

*In other important developments.* After Armenian PM Pashinyan mid-Jan announced Armenia would not host annual military exercises for Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) military alliance, CSTO’s Chief of Staff Anatoly Sidorov 14 Feb announced Kyrgyzstan had agreed to host them instead. Meanwhile, U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 28 Feb held talks with FMs from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan’s capital, Astana, amid U.S. efforts to deepen engagement in region; Blinken announced \$25mn of new funding to support economic growth.



➡ **Tajikistan Authorities handed down lengthy prison sentence to Islamic State recruiter, and U.S. sought to deepen engagement in region.**

Court in capital Dushanbe 16 Feb announced it had sentenced notorious Islamic State recruiter Parviz Saidrahmonov, who enlisted over 200 people in the group's ranks, to 21 years in prison in Nov 2022 on terrorism charges. Meanwhile, U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 28 Feb held talks with FMs from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, amid U.S. efforts to deepen engagement in region; Blinken announced \$25mn of new funding to support economic growth.

➡ **Uzbekistan Legal proceedings over Karakalpakstan unrest continued, and U.S. sought to deepen engagement in region.**

*More trials following Karakalpakstan unrest took place.* After authorities late Jan charged 22 Karakalpak activists with instigating deadly violence in autonomous Karakalpakstan region in July 2022, authorities 6 Feb announced that one had died while in custody; in following days, exiled activists raised concerns about prison conditions and demanded an investigation. Bukhara city regional court 6 Feb opened trial for 39 more activists for similar charges of inciting unrest in Karakalpakstan. General Prosecutor's Office 9 Feb announced arrest of three police officers amid investigation into police misconduct during protests.

*U.S. pledged deeper engagement in region.* U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 28 Feb held talks with FMs from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, amid U.S. efforts to deepen engagement in region; Blinken announced \$25mn of new funding to support economic growth.