



## Europe and Central Asia

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### Balkans

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➔ **Kosovo** **Pristina and Belgrade resolved license plate dispute in positive step toward normalisation, but sparred over currency; Kosovo Serbs in north launched petition to remove Albanian mayors from office.**

*Normalisation process between Serbia and Kosovo saw progress and setback.* Serbia 1 Jan enforced Dec decision allowing cars with Kosovo license plates to enter its territory, though insisted this did not equal recognition; in return, Kosovo 4 Jan ended requirement to cover Serb license plates with stickers. EU 7 Jan welcomed “positive step” toward normalisation. Simultaneously, EU 1 Jan opened visa-free travel to Schengen area for Kosovar citizens. Despite progress, Central Bank 17 Jan announced decision to suspend Serbian dinar beginning 1 Feb, after which Euro will be “only currency allowed” in Kosovo; Serbia 19 Jan condemned measure. EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajčák 30 Jan urged sides to step up normalisation efforts ahead of June 2024 EU parliamentary elections.

*Kosovo Serbs launched petition to remove Albanian mayors from office in north.* Hundreds of Kosovo Serbs from northern municipalities 17 Jan started petition to remove four Albanian mayors from office, who were elected in April 2023 municipal polls boycotted by local Serbs. Process began after Pristina issued administrative order in Sept 2023 allowing removal of mayors through petition process as first step toward holding new election.

*Germany bolstered NATO-led force.* Germany 16 Jan increased troop contribution to NATO-led force KFOR from 80 to 300 soldiers, citing “worsening security”.

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### Caucasus

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➔ **Armenia** **Baku and Yerevan continued bilateral work on peace treaty, but internationally mediated talks remained on hold.**

*Baku and Yerevan exchanged draft peace treaty amid simmering tensions.* Bilateral efforts on Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty continued, with Yerevan 4 Jan returning draft proposal to Baku. In interview that nearly derailed efforts, however, Azerbaijani President Aliyev 10 Jan said Baku could cease participation in talks should Yerevan refuse to compromise, notably regarding security measures along border; he also reiterated calls for Russian-supervised corridor connecting mainland with exclave Nakhchivan, threatened military action if Armenia continued to procure weapons or ever sought to reclaim Nagorno-Karabakh (see Armenian-Azerbaijani

Conflict) and claimed “all of Zangezur” – alluding to southern Armenia – and other areas were historically Azerbaijani territory. PM Pashinyan 13 Jan decried “unacceptable territorial claims” but later softened stance, while EU 22 Jan threatened “severe consequences” if Armenia’s territorial integrity is violated. Sides 31 Jan held fresh talks on border delimitation but provided no details on what was discussed.

*Baku continued to reject foreign mediation as Russia sought greater role.* Senior EU and U.S. officials mid Jan travelled to capital Yerevan for talks, but not to Azerbaijan amid speculation in Azerbaijani media about cooling relations with West over Baku’s takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh (see Azerbaijan). Russia, meanwhile, sought to reassert its dominant role in region. Notably, ruling party 16 Jan confirmed partial delivery of Russian weaponry to Armenia after two-year delay; Russian FM Lavrov 18 Jan touted Russian mediation in 2023, blamed West for acting as spoiler.

*In another important development.* PM Pashinyan and his Georgian counterpart 26 Jan signed memorandum on “strategic partnership” in Georgia’s capital Tbilisi.

➡ **Azerbaijan** **Baku and Yerevan continued bilateral work on peace treaty, but internationally mediated talks remained on hold; tensions with EU rose ahead of 7 February presidential election.**

*Baku and Yerevan exchanged draft peace treaty amid simmering tensions.* Bilateral efforts on Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty continued, with Yerevan 4 Jan returning draft proposal to Baku. In interview that nearly derailed efforts, however, President Aliyev 10 Jan said Baku could cease participation in talks should Yerevan refuse to compromise, notably regarding security measures along border; he also reiterated calls for Russian-supervised corridor connecting mainland with exclave Nakhchivan, threatened military action if Armenia continued to procure weapons or ever sought to reclaim Nagorno-Karabakh (see Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict) and claimed “all of Zangezur” – alluding to southern Armenia – and other areas were historically Azerbaijani territory. Armenian PM Pashinyan 13 Jan decried “unacceptable territorial claims” but later softened stance, while EU 22 Jan threatened “severe consequences” if Armenia’s territorial integrity is violated. Sides 31 Jan held fresh talks on border delimitation but provided no details on what was discussed.

*Baku continued to reject foreign mediation as Russia sought greater role.* Senior EU and U.S. officials mid Jan travelled to capital Yerevan for talks, but not to Azerbaijan; EU Special Representative for South Caucasus Toivo Klaar 19 Jan cited Baku’s need to focus on Feb election, though Azerbaijani media suggested cooling relations with West over Baku’s takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh could be reason for not involving foreign mediators. Russia, meanwhile, sought to reassert its dominant role in region. Notably, Armenia’s ruling party 16 Jan confirmed partial delivery of Russian weaponry after two-year delay; Russian FM Lavrov 18 Jan touted Russian mediation in 2023, blamed West for acting as spoiler.

*In other important developments.* Ahead of 7 Feb presidential poll, authorities 13 Jan arrested Elnara Gasimova in Baku for alleged people smuggling, tenth journalist detained in three months. Meanwhile, Parliament Assembly of the Council of Europe 24 Jan did not ratify credentials of Azerbaijani delegation, citing among other things

concern about “free and fair elections”, “respect for human rights” and Baku’s military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh.

➡ **Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict    Nagorno-Karabakh formally ceased to exist.**

*Nagorno-Karabakh formally dissolved.* Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) 1 Jan officially ceased to exist following Azerbaijan’s lightning military operation in Sept 2023 that ended three decades of de facto self-rule. In lengthy interview about conflict with Armenia (see Armenia, Azerbaijan), Azerbaijani President Aliyev 10 Jan threatened military action if Yerevan ever sought to reclaim enclave; he also announced govt’s goal is to return 140,000 Azerbaijani internally displaced people “to their ancestral lands by the end of 2026” and reiterated that “the Armenians of Karabakh... would live as Azerbaijani citizens” should they choose to return to region. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan 25 Jan extended pre-trial detention of fifteen members of former de facto authorities.

*France-Azerbaijan tensions persisted over latter’s Sept military operation.* French Senate 17 Jan adopted non-binding resolution calling on govt to condemn Azerbaijan’s military takeover of NK and impose sanctions, and to demand guarantees for right of ethnic Armenian population to return to NK; Azerbaijan’s legislature next day responded with similar calls to impose sanctions on France. Parliament Assembly of the Council of Europe 24 Jan did not ratify credentials of Azerbaijani delegation, citing among other things concern about Baku’s Sept 2023 military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh, “which led to allegations of ‘ethnic cleansing’”.

➡ **Georgia    PM Garibashvili resigned from office, official in breakaway Abkhazia announced construction of Russian naval base in region could begin in 2024, and ruling party sought closer ties with China.**

*PM Garibashvili tendered his resignation.* PM Garibashvili 29 Jan resigned from his post, citing ruling Georgian Dream party’s “internal democratic principle of rotation” amid reports he will switch positions with party chairman, Irakli Kobakhidze; news came month after return to politics of party’s founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili.

*De facto Abkhaz official said work on Russian naval base could commence in 2024.* During interview with Russian news agency *RIA Novosti*, breakaway Abkhazia region’s de facto Security Council secretary 12 Jan confirmed Moscow is preparing to build naval base in region, and that construction would likely begin in 2024; de facto president Aslan Bzhania in Oct 2023 had announced agreement with Moscow to construct base in Ochamchira town along Black Sea coast amid stepped-up Ukrainian attacks on its Black Sea Fleet in Russian-annexed Crimea.

*Tbilisi strengthened ties with China and Armenia.* Kobakhidze 14-20 Jan led delegation to China, held meetings with senior officials to ensure “proper implementation” of 2023 Strategic Partnership Agreement; Chairman of the Parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee Nikoloz Samkharadze 15 Jan said delegation “received a promise of unwavering support from China” to support Georgia’s territorial integrity. Meanwhile, then-PM Garibashvili and his Armenian counterpart 26 Jan signed memorandum on “strategic partnership” in capital Tbilisi.

➔ **Russia (Internal) Russian leaders alleged readiness for Ukraine peace talks but on their terms, Kyiv intensified drone attacks, and Bashkortostan region witnessed large-scale protests over jailed activist.**

*Moscow accused Kyiv of hindering peace efforts, attacks into Russia persisted.* Speaking in Moscow region about Ukraine war, President Putin 16 Jan dismissed Kyiv's "peace formulas" and said Russia would not give up occupied territories. In further sign Kremlin is only prepared to negotiate on its terms, FM Lavrov 22 Jan said Russia was ready for talks but that Kyiv seeks to "perpetuate the war"; he added that Western aid to Ukraine complicates search for peace. Meanwhile, Ukraine stepped up drone attacks into Russia, notably targeting oil infrastructure. Ukrainian forces 14 Jan shot down early warning and control aircraft A-50 over Sea of Azov and damaged Il-22M aircraft, killing unknown number. Moscow and Kyiv traded blame for downed plane in Russia's Belgorod region 24 Jan that left 74 dead, including 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war.

*Anti-war presidential candidate saw surge of support.* As March election drew closer, anti-war presidential hopeful Boris Nadezhdin 25 Jan said he had collected around 200,000 signatures endorsing his candidacy, double amount required for him to run in poll, 31 Jan submitted application to Central Election Commission to run. Two other candidates 30 Jan withdrew from race and endorsed Putin.

*Thousands protested in Bashkortostan in support of jailed activist.* Protest 15 Jan took place in Baymak city of Bashkortostan region against trial of Fail Alsynov, environmental activist and campaigner for preservation of Bashkir language and culture. Authorities 17 Jan sentenced Alsynov to four years in prison for "inciting hatred", prompting more protests that led to clashes with police. Despite warnings from authorities, protesters 19 Jan rallied again in Ufa city.

*Russia allegedly acquired Iranian and North Korean weapons.* U.S. 4 Jan said Russia used North Korean ballistic missiles to strike Ukraine (see Ukraine), while UK 22 Jan presented fresh evidence to UN indicating transfer of North Korean weapons to Russia. Sky News 10 Jan claimed Iran has developed new attack drone and appears close to providing Moscow with surface-to-surface missiles.

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## **Eastern Europe**

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➔ **Belarus Authorities deepened crackdown, arresting over 200 people in lead-up to February elections; govt proposed new military doctrine.**

*Authorities conducted mass raids as crackdown escalated.* In lead-up to Feb parliamentary elections, Viasna human rights centre 23 Jan said authorities detained or interrogated scores for alleged "involvement in extremist groups", including former political prisoners; as of 30 Jan, over 200 people "persecuted" amid ever-worsening crackdown. EU and U.S. 25 Jan decried "wave of repression".

*Minsk announced monitors for Feb elections.* Govt 5 Jan invited Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation and Commonwealth of Independent States – regional intergovernmental organisation comprising former Soviet republics – to observe 25 Feb polls, 8 Jan announced it would not invite Organization for Security

and Cooperation in Europe due to organisation's "double standards". Opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya 12 Jan reiterated call to boycott elections.

*Minsk put forward updated national security doctrine.* Lukashenko 16 Jan convened Security Council to discuss updated military doctrine draft, which for first time provides for use of nuclear weapons (Russia stationed tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus in 2023). Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin 19 Jan said weapons were "an important component" of doctrine's overall focus on "preventive deterrence of potential adversaries". Meanwhile, Lukashenko 29 Jan met with Russian President Putin 29 Jan in Russian city St. Petersburg to discuss ways to deepen alliance.

➡ **Ukraine Russia conducted deadly airstrikes as its ground forces retook battlefield initiative, which could shift war's centre of gravity north; Ukraine stepped up diplomatic efforts.**

*Russia escalated strikes on Ukrainian cities as Kyiv scaled up air defence.* Russia 29 Dec-8 Jan launched massive airstrikes targeting civilian and military infrastructure; U.S. and allies 10 Jan alleged attacks featured first use of North Korean ballistic missiles (see Russia). UN humanitarian agency 16 Jan claimed hundreds of civilians were killed or wounded; energy infrastructure remained operational. President Zelenskyy 30 Jan said Russia had launched nearly 1,000 missiles and drones at Ukraine since beginning of 2024. In effort to counter attacks, Ukraine 17 Jan claimed first successful use of hybrid 'FrankenSAM' air defence system against Russian drone, 20 Jan claimed scaled-up electronic warfare capabilities enabled interception of twenty missiles on 13 Jan. Sides, meanwhile, traded blame for downed plane in Russia's Belgorod region 24 Jan that left 74 dead, including 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war.

*Moscow regained battlefield initiative and could shift war's epicentre north.* Russia's ground forces continued attacking Avdiivka town in eastern Donetsk region, with reports late Jan indicating they had entered town's southern periphery. In northern Kharkiv region, stepped-up Russian attacks near Kupiansk city 16 Jan prompted governor to order nearby villages to evacuate; Russian military 21 Jan claimed capture of Krokhmalne village, south east of Kupiansk; 29 Jan reported capture of Tabaiivka village, which Ukraine denied. With Moscow increasingly able to dictate battlegrounds, fighting's epicentre could shift north in coming weeks.

*Kyiv sustained high-intensity diplomatic activity.* Ukraine 12 Jan signed ten-year security cooperation agreement with UK. Govt delegation 14 Jan attended meeting on Ukraine's peace plan at World Economic Forum in Davos, along with 82 other countries; China remained absent. Polish PM Donald Tusk 22 Jan met President Zelenskyy in capital Kyiv, announced military assistance and commitment to dialogue over trade issues.

*In other important domestic developments.* Govt 30 Jan filed revised version of mobilisation reform bill to parliament following criticism over potential constitutional violations and corruption risks. Meanwhile, Zelenskyy 29 Jan asked top commander Valerii Zaluzhnyi to step down amid rising tensions between the two; Zaluzhnyi refused.

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## Western Europe/Mediterranean

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➔ **Cyprus UN appointed new personal envoy, which could mark possible step toward eventual return to formal talks although sides clung to long-held positions.**

*UN Sec Gen filled "personal envoy" role.* UN Sec Gen António Guterres 5 Jan announced former Colombian FM Maria Angela Holguin Cuellar would fill UN "personal envoy" position, last appointed in 2017 and vacant since Oct 2021, after relevant parties gave their consent to appointment. Republic of Cyprus President Christodoulides same day welcomed appointment and said he was determined to resume formal talks based on UN resolutions. Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar cautioned that new negotiations could only begin if de facto Turkish Cypriot administration in north was given same international status as Republic of Cyprus, while both Ankara and "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" ("TRNC") clarified they approved appointment on condition that mandate does not exceed six months and focuses solely on exploring if there exists "common ground" for talks. Turkish Cypriot "FM" Tahsin Ertuğruloğlu 11 Jan rejected possibility of continuing negotiations from where they left off in failed 2017 summit, calling for new process based on rectifying unequal status of two sides. Cuellar 29-30 Jan visited Cyprus and met with various political and civil society actors, including leaders of two communities. Meanwhile, Christodoulides 27 Jan unveiled fourteen-point plan of measures and benefits for Turkish Cypriots; "TRNC's" "PM" Ünal Üstel denounced plan as attempt to "fool Turkish Cypriots". UN Security Council 30 Jan voted unanimously to renew mandate of UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) for another twelve months.

*Arrest of Turkish Cypriot lawyer stoked controversy.* Tatar 11 Jan said that late Dec arrest of lawyer Akan Kürşat in Italy, prompted by Republic of Cyprus police filing complaint over money laundering and embezzlement, was attempt to disrupt Cuellar's work; Christodoulides 13 Jan denied any link between case and recent attempts at putting negotiations back on track.

↓ **Türkiye Islamic State (ISIS) conducted first attack in seven years, killing one and prompting intensified crackdown, while clashes with Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) killed over dozen soldiers in Iraq, prompting wave of airstrikes.**

*ISIS killed one in first attack since Jan 2017.* In first claimed attack on Turkish soil in over seven years, ISIS 28 Jan carried out armed assault on Italian Catholic Church located on outskirts of Istanbul, killing one individual. Subsequently, security forces conducted series of raids in Istanbul, detaining nearly 50 ISIS-linked suspects, including two assailants identified as nationals from Russia and Tajikistan. Detentions brought total number of individuals apprehended by security forces (including foreign nationals) during Jan to 280. Earlier, security units 1 Jan apprehended alleged ISIS ring leader Abdullah al-Jundi in northern Syria.

*Clashes with PKK killed more than a dozen Turkish soldiers in northern Iraq.* Late Dec spate of attacks on Turkish troops in northern Iraq continued, as PKK 5 Jan killed five soldiers in attack on military base and clash 12 Jan killed nine Turkish

soldiers (see Iraq). In response, military 12-16 Jan launched airstrikes in both northern Iraq and Syria, targeting PKK/People's Protection Units militants as part of strikes on 114 targets in both countries; military's intensified shelling in northern Syria marked unusually high level for winter months (see Syria). In south east Türkiye, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya 16 Jan announced security forces had destroyed eighteen PKK winter shelters in drone strikes in rural areas.

*Parliament ratified Sweden's NATO bid, govt actively engaged abroad.* Parliament 23 Jan ratified Sweden's membership to NATO; Ankara expects U.S. to greenlight sale of F-16s in return. Relations with Greece remained on course for improvement, although Greece's steps to purchase U.S. jets and combat ships stoked concern in Ankara. Attempting to play constructive role in Ukraine-Russia war (see Ukraine), Erdoğan 5 Jan told Ukrainian President Zelenskyy Türkiye was ready to host peace talks. Govt continued to voice strong opposition to Israel's war in Gaza (see Israel-Palestine); police 2 Jan detained 34 people on suspicion of working for Israeli intelligence. Iranian President Raisi 24 Jan visited Ankara, meeting President Erdoğan; pair called for end to Israeli attacks in Gaza.

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## Central Asia

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### ➔ **Kyrgyzstan** Efforts to crack down on independent media and civil society drew condemnation from human rights groups and UN.

*Authorities moved against several media outlets and over a dozen journalists.* Law enforcement agents and security services 15 Jan searched offices of news agency 24.KG and detained outlet's director and two chief editors, Makhinur Niyazova and Anton Lyman, for several hours on charges of "war propaganda"; Niyazova told reporters actions linked to outlet's coverage of Ukraine war. Ministry of Interior next day searched several other independent media organisations and detained eleven journalists and media workers on charge of "calls for disobedience and mass riots".

*Human rights groups warned of growing threat to freedom of expression.* Eight international human rights groups 16 Jan said raids came amid "worsening campaign against free speech in Kyrgyzstan"; UN human rights office 20 Jan echoed warning, saying actions "appear to be part of a larger pattern of pressure against civil society activists, journalists and other critics of the authorities". Days later, parliament's Committee on Constitutional Legislation 23 Jan endorsed draft law on "foreign representatives", prompting number of human rights organisations 25 Jan to issue statement urging parliament to reject "Russia-style 'foreign-agents bill'".

*In another important development.* During visit to Tajik capital, Dushanbe, Türkiye's FM hinted at imminent border deal between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (see Tajikistan).

### ➔ **Tajikistan** Watchdog painted grim picture of media freedom in Tajikistan, and Türkiye's foreign minister hinted at possible border deal between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan during working visit.

*Watchdog warned of intensified media crackdown since 2022.* Committee to Protect Journalists 4 Jan warned in its annual report that Tajikistan's media "are in their worst state since the violent years of the civil war" of 1992-1997. Watchdog said

series of harsh sentences handed down to seven journalists in 2022 and 2023 marked “a deeply chilling escalation in the years-long constriction of independent media”, with several journalists reportedly linking crackdown to suppression of May-June 2022 protests in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region.

*Türkiye’s FM hinted at imminent border deal between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.* President Rahmon and FM Muhridin 10 Jan met with Türkiye’s FM Hakan Fidan in capital Dushanbe to discuss bilateral ties, with sides reportedly stressing need to boost cooperation “in all areas of mutual interest”. Speaking with reporters after meeting, Fidan also hinted that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan could sign border deal in March 2024, but offered few details.

➔ **Uzbekistan Tashkent upgraded diplomatic relations with Beijing.**

President Mirziyoyev 23-25 Jan visited China amid efforts to deepen bilateral ties and secure investment. Mirziyoyev 24 Jan met with China’s leader Xi Jinping in capital Beijing, during which pair announced they have upgraded diplomatic ties from “comprehensive strategic partnership” to “all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership”, meaning deeper cooperation and mutual support in regional and international affairs. Sides also agreed to work closely on range of infrastructure projects, including China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway.