

Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

➔ **Kosovo Govt sought to advance NATO membership bid in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while dispute over Serb participation in Serbia's April polls continued.** Amid war in Ukraine following Russia's Feb invasion, President Osmani 17 March reportedly asked U.S. President Biden to "advance" NATO membership bid, underscoring "we are exposed to persistent efforts by Russia to undermine Kosovo and destabilise the entire Western Balkans". Govt 2 March opened "security fund" for donations by citizens and diaspora to security forces. PM Kurti 23 March warned of "danger" from Serbia, arguing Serbia might "imitate Russia". Govt 23 March approved all "sanctions imposed by the European Union on Russia and Belarus". Polish authorities 9 March reportedly stopped two Kosovars heading to Ukraine to join resistance forces; Kosovo's Head of Special Prosecution Blerim Isufaj same day told media "the law prohibits participation" in foreign conflicts. Meanwhile, govt during month reportedly rejected proposal to permit Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe to organise polling stations for Serbian elections on its territory, reversing its policy; PM Kurti 21 March insisted on need for formal "agreement" on issue with Serbia. In response, Serbian President Vučić 22 March announced sanctions and France, Germany, Italy, UK and U.S. 23 March criticised govt, saying policy "is not in line with our values and principles and will undermine their European aspirations". Judicial review body 24 March suspended presiding judge of Mitrovica court after she appeared at meeting with Vučić; Chairman of Serb opposition party Srpska List Goran Rakic next day called on Kosovo Serbs to boycott Kosovo institutions until judge is reappointed, as several hundreds of protesters reportedly rallied in northern Mitrovica city.

Caucasus

➔ **Armenia Govt and Turkey expressed commitment to ongoing normalisation talks, while govt reiterated demands for resumption of talks with Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh (NK).** On margins of Antalya Diplomatic Forum in Turkey, FM Ararat Mirzoyan 12 March met Turkish FM Mevlut Cavusoglu in first visit by senior official to Turkey in over decade; pair exchanged messages of support for ongoing talks between special envoys and reaffirmed commitment to process without preconditions. New Armenian President Vahagn Khachaturyan 13 March took office, underscoring need for unity to build new country in times of transforming "global security systems". Govt 14 March publicised its vision for resumption of negotiations with Azerbaijan on NK: Yerevan demanded mediation of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group co-chairs and respect to right for self-determination. In significant escalation, Azerbaijani troops 24-25 March took over small Armenian settlement located inside NK (see Nagorno-Karabakh).

➡ **Azerbaijan Govt reiterated demands for resumption of talks with Armenia on peace deal and signed transport accord with Iran.** Govt 14 March publicised five-point plan for resumption of negotiations with Armenia over peace deal: Baku outlined conditions, including mutual recognition of each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-use of force and legally binding obligation not to make territorial claims to each other, and delimitation and demarcation of border with establishment of diplomatic relations and unblocking of transportation routes. In significant escalation, Azerbaijani troops 24-25 March took over small Armenian settlement located inside Nagorno-Karabakh (see Nagorno-Karabakh). Govt and Russia 6 March mutually suspended all flights, as Azal Airlines cited insurance risks "connected to the sanctions"; Russian airline Aeroflot 15 March announced resumption of flights for 21 March, and Azal 17 March resumed flights to Russia. Azerbaijan and Iran 11 March signed memorandum of understanding that established plans for new links between southern regions of Azerbaijan (regained by Baku in 2020 war) and its Nakhchivan exclave, including railroad, highway, bridges and energy supply lines.

⚠️ **Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Hostilities escalated in Nagorno Karabakh (NK) conflict zone, raising prospect of further clashes in April.** Incidents mid-March rose in Armenian-populated areas of NK. Specifically, sides reported near-daily incidents close to mountainous eastern Agdam region (retaken by Azerbaijan following 2020 war) and road in south that connects Azerbaijan to Shusha town and runs near Armenian settlements. Notably, in first use of heavy weapons since 2020 war, mine shell 10 March injured resident in Armenian village Khramort and 120mm mine shell next day landed in Armenian village Khnapat, damaging local school; Azerbaijan 11 March denied attacks and blamed local Armenian forces for provoking tensions. In significant escalation, Azerbaijani troops 24-25 March took over small Armenian settlement Farukh located inside NK close to Khramort and Khnapat and next to strategic mountainous height called Karaglukh, which overlooks Agdam region and big parts of Armenian-populated NK; at least three Armenian soldiers reported dead and 14 injured, including in Azerbaijani attacks by Bayraktars TB2 drones. U.S., France and Russian peacekeepers 26 March called on Baku to withdraw troops. Russian peacekeepers 27 March said Azerbaijan removed its troops from Farukh settlement; Azerbaijani Defence Ministry same day denied "changes in positions". Previously, in sign viewed by Yerevan as increasing assertiveness along front lines, Azerbaijan during month continued use of loudspeakers to warn ethnic Armenians against conducting agricultural work and broadcast call to prayer in areas around Agdam region and in southern parts of Armenian-populated areas of NK. Gas pipeline from Armenia to NK 8 March stopped supply due to damage, leaving NK without heating for over one week; Azerbaijan 19, 27 March made repairs, announced that gas supply would be restored. In sign that prospects for talks remain dim, Armenia and Azerbaijan 14 March publicised their visions for resumption of negotiations, reiterating previous mutually exclusive positions: Baku demanded Armenian support to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and Yerevan insisted on respect of right for self-determination. With support from Russian peacekeepers, de facto NK authorities 7 March dispatched humanitarian cargo to separatist entities in Ukraine recognised by Russia.

➔ **Georgia** **Georgians mobilised in support of Ukraine, as gov't's cautious stance on war provoked public anger and strained relations with President Zourabichvili.** Since outbreak of war in Ukraine in late Feb, almost all segments of society vocalised support for and solidarity with Ukraine, including by collecting humanitarian aid, donating blood, raising funds for Ukrainian troops and providing essential services to refugees. Dozens of former military figures, including former defence minister, reportedly joined Ukrainian troops in defending country. Authorities 7 March reported arrival in country of over 30,000 Russians amid exodus following unprecedented Western sanctions; however, less than half stayed in country possibly due to discrimination and pressure from citizens and businesses. All banks introduced restrictions on transactions with Russia despite gov't's late Feb refusal to join Western sanctions. Gov't's refusal to criticise Russia for Ukraine's invasion continued to fuel public anger. Statements from ruling Georgian Dream party, including that gov't would not join Western sanctions, revived speculation about party's pro-Russian stance; anti-gov't protests, some numbering tens of thousands in front of parliament in capital Tbilisi, which started in late Feb continued throughout March. Gov't's stance also fuelled tensions between ruling party and President Zourabichvili. During 4 March address to parliament, Zourabichvili confirmed recent trips to Europe to meet French and EU presidents, noted it was first time ever she was so bluntly rebuffed by senior leadership in request for support; in response, leaders of Georgian Dream threatened to launch investigation on grounds that president is obliged to act in coordination with gov't. FM David Zalkaliani 28 March announced start of European Commission's consideration of Georgia's EU membership bid. Meanwhile, International Criminal Court 10 March released arrest warrants for three high-level former de facto South Ossetian officials for crimes during 2008 war. De facto Abkhazia entity 12, 26 March held election for de facto parliament.

➔ **Russia (internal)** **Authorities deepened crackdown on dissent amid widespread but largely small-scale protests against invasion of Ukraine.** Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 Feb (see Ukraine), authorities detained at least 15,107 people at anti-war protests held in more than 150 cities nationwide, while opening 60 criminal cases. Small-scale protests took place every weekend during month: notably, authorities 6 March detained 4,640 people in 65 cities and 13 March detained 866 people in 37 cities. Gov't 4 March passed laws criminalising opposition to war, for instance punishing spreading false information about Russian military with up to 15 years' imprisonment. Gov't 4 March blocked Facebook and 14 March Instagram; NGO Roskomvoboda 22 March estimated gov't had blocked 769 websites and links since 24 Feb. Authorities also piled pressure on last remnants of legal opposition, including 5 March seizing office equipment of opposition party Yabloko and independent newspaper Pskovskaya Guberniya. In Bashkiria region, Federal Security Service (FSB) 25 March detained communist member of regional parliament and four left-wing activists accused of plotting violent change of constitutional order. In sign of gov't efforts to mobilise support for war, President Putin 16 March warned that Western countries "will try to bet on [...] national traitors" and urged "natural and necessary self-purification of society". On anniversary of 2014 Crimea annexation, authorities 18 March organised rallies and concerts, with largest rally in capital Moscow attended by 200,000 people. Western states continued sanctions. EU 9 March extended third package of sanctions and 15 March introduced fourth package of sanctions; notably, EU imposed ban on imports

of iron and steel products from Russia. U.S. 8 March announced ban on supplies of oil, gas and coal from Russia, and UK same day announced that it would abandon purchase of oil and gas from Russia until end of 2022. Separately, court 22 March sentenced opposition leader Alexey Navalny, imprisoned since Jan 2021, to nine additional years in prison and to pay fine of 1.2mn rubles; U.S. and EU same day condemned “politically motivated” ruling.

Eastern Europe

➔ **Belarus** **Govt faced international pressure for its role in supporting Russia’s war in Ukraine, while authorities continued crackdown on dissent at home.** U.S. Special Envoy for Belarus Julie Fisher 1 March alleged govt’s 27 Feb referendum – which introduced constitutional changes to permit President Lukashenko to remain in power until 2035 and abolish country’s “nuclear-free zone” status – “unmistakably” linked to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, pointing at possibility of Moscow stationing nuclear weapons in country. EU 2 March imposed sanctions on high-level military officials and trade for Minsk’s “role in the Russian military aggression of Ukraine”. Meanwhile, UN Human Rights Office 9 March published report alleging “widespread and systemic” breach of fundamental human rights of “tens of thousands” in continued crackdown since Aug 2020; in following debate at UN Rights Council, U.S. 17 March accused Belarus of “enabling” Ukraine war. Authorities continued crackdown on independent media. Notably, court 4 March sentenced Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s (RFE/RL) Belarus correspondent Aleh Hruzdilovich to 18 months in prison; RFE/RL same day condemned sentencing of “innocent journalist”. Authorities 24 March detained Zmitser Dashkevich, former leader of Belarusian opposition movement Malady Front (Youth Front), over “activities that violate social order”.

↓ 🇺🇦 **Ukraine** **In Europe’s biggest conflict in decades, Russian forces faced stiff resistance despite destructive tactics; risk of further escalation loomed.** Russian forces 2 March claimed control of Kherson, major port city on Dnipro estuary, but suffered Ukrainian counter-attacks on city’s airport since 15 March. After Russian forces 28 Feb encircled Donbas port city of Mariupol, it became focal point of fighting, sparking devastating destruction and major humanitarian crisis; some 170,000 people remained besieged in city as of late March. Russia’s southern advance started to stall from late Feb north of Dnipro River around Mykolaiv city, gateway to Odessa, Ukraine’s largest coastal city; fall of Odessa would cut off Ukraine from Black Sea. In north, Russian army during month maintained control of thinly populated stretch of land between capital Kyiv’s north-western suburbs and Belarusian border. Russian attempts to enter Sumy, Kharkiv, Chernihiv and Kyiv cities met forceful resistance; Russia resorted to heavy artillery in densely populated areas, causing hundreds of casualties. Danger of encirclement of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Chernihiv and Sumy as well as Mykolaiv and Odessa in south remains; encirclement could cut off millions from basic needs. UN estimated fighting had left over 1,104 killed or injured, with over 10mn displaced by late March, including 6.4mn internally; as displaced reached country’s west, strains on infrastructure and tension with local population rose as newcomers compete for work and housing. President Zelenskyy during month addressed legislative branches of several Western states, including UK, Germany and France, with calls for more

military aid and no-fly zone; U.S. 15 March ruled out latter, citing risk of direct engagement between Russia and NATO. In move underscoring such risk, Moscow 12 March declared shipments of western military aid to Ukraine as legitimate military targets. Meanwhile, Moscow and Kyiv engaged in talks. Notably, sides 29 March met in Turkish city Istanbul where Kyiv re-emphasised neutrality requires security guarantees from UN Security Council member states and offered to delay decision about Crimea's status by 15 years following complete ceasefire; Moscow after talks announced reduced operations around Kyiv and Chernihiv in north, which Kyiv called either act of deception or sign of Russia's inability to maintain operations.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➔ **Cyprus Turkish Cypriot leadership cast Greek Cypriot proposals on confidence-building measures as insincere.** After new Greek Cypriot FM Ioannis Kasoulides late Feb announced govt would actively pursue progress on confidence-building measures with Turkish Cypriot side (such as opening Ercan airport to international flights and handing over Varosha/Maraş area to UN administration), Turkish Cypriot leadership 7 March said offer was “nothing but old proposals that have been repeatedly negotiated and exhausted” that were “aimed at perpetuating the status quo and reinforcing the claim of the Greek Cypriot side that it is the sole sovereign of the island”. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in response to which Republic of Cyprus 28 Feb closed its airspace to Russia, Russia's ambassador to Cyprus 1 March noted that Russian tourists could now go to Turkey “to spend their money”. Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar 11 March said “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) airspace was open to Russia, and its doors were open to tourists from there. War in Ukraine also appeared to accelerate discussions around how Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon resources can reduce western Europe's energy dependence on Russia, but, for now, prospects look dim (see Turkey).

➔ **Northern Ireland Hoax bomb threat against Irish FM raised prospect of Loyalist groups escalating campaign against Northern Ireland Protocol.** Paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) 25 March reportedly coerced driver to transport hoax bomb to car park of Houben Centre in capital Belfast, where Irish FM Simon Conveney was attending peacebuilding event; security alert halted Conveney's speech and evacuated him from location. Loyalists indicated in media reports that incident marked start of renewed campaign against Northern Ireland Protocol – post-Brexit arrangements for UK-EU trade that created regulatory border in Irish Sea. Protesters 25 March rallied in Ballymoney town demanding UK govt overturn protocol. Ulster Unionist Party leader Doug Beattie 27 March criticised anti-protocol rallies for “raising tensions” and acknowledged “media reports quoting UVF sources that they intend to escalate their terrorist activities in the coming weeks”.

➔ **Turkey Military operations continued against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in south east and northern Iraq, albeit at reduced intensity, while Ankara engaged with Greece, Israel and Armenia.** Military operations against PKK remained concentrated primarily in northern Iraq, with occasional

clashes in Turkey's south east and at Turkey-Syria border. Numerous airstrikes in northern Iraq and some ground operations in Turkey targeting PKK positions persisted, but at lesser intensity than in previous months likely due to harsh winter conditions in area's mountainous terrain where conflict remains concentrated. Ground operations in Turkey's south east during month took place in rural areas of Diyarbakır, Mardin, Hakkari and Hatay provinces. Turkish forces continued targeting senior PKK figures, including via use of armed drones. Turkish military 8 and 10 March targeted "PKK/Kurdish group People's Defence Units (YPG)" positions at Turkey-Syria border. Security forces continued operations against Islamic State (ISIS) cells/operatives; police detained more than 100 individuals (including Turkish citizens and other nationals) with alleged links to ISIS across country. Relations between authorities and Greek govt improved, in large part catalysed by war in Ukraine. Greek PM Mitsotakis 13 March met with President Erdoğan in Istanbul city, where two leaders agreed on keeping communication channels open and improving bilateral relations; following meeting, Turkish presidency noted "Turkey and Greece have a special responsibility in the European security architecture, which is changing with Russia's attack on Ukraine". Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and Greek counterpart 16 March emphasised importance of maintaining dialogue; sides are expected to meet for fourth round of talks on military confidence-building measures in Ankara next month. Ankara remained invested in efforts to normalise ties with Israel and Armenia. In first visit by Israel's head of state to country since 2007, President Isaac Herzog 9 March met Erdoğan, who described visit as "opportunity to revive the energy cooperation that began before", signalling potential alternative pipeline or other collaboration that may carry Eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe. Armenian FM Mirzoyan 10 March attended Antalya Diplomacy Forum where he expressed willingness "to establish diplomatic relations and open borders with Turkey".

Central Asia

➡ **Kyrgyzstan Clashes on border with Tajikistan killed one.** Local officials 10 March held discussions with counterparts from Tajikistan following gunfire exchange between border guards previous day along disputed part of border between Kyrgyzstan's Batken district and Tajikistan's Sughd region that killed one person and wounded another; Kyrgyz authorities claimed clashes erupted after Tajik border guards entered disputed area. Hundreds of pro-Russia demonstrators 19 March gathered in southern city Osh; Deputy PM Edil Baysalov 20 March said govt should be "neutral" on Ukraine crisis, saying: "We cannot say that one side is right and the other is wrong". FM Ruslan Kazakbayev 23 March vocalised commitment to principles of "territorial integrity of states and peaceful settlement of conflicts", while President Japarov 24 March said "our country is divided into two camps" on issue. Amid Western sanctions on Russia and devaluation of currency, Deputy Minister of Economy and Commerce Eldar Alisherov 23 March vowed to keep prices low, noting rise in food prices and petrol, oil and lubricants. Around 100 protesters 26 March gathered in capital Bishkek to demand suspension of Russia state media outlets. Authorities 4 March detained head of NEXT television channel after it broadcast allegations of deal between govt and Russia to deploy troops to support Russian

military operations in Ukraine; Bishkek court 5 March ruled head of channel will be detained until 3 May at earliest.

➡ **Tajikistan Clashes on border with Kyrgyzstan killed one, while U.S. expressed concern over internet blackout in country's eastern region.**

Local officials 10 March held discussions with counterparts from Kyrgyzstan following gunfire exchange previous day along disputed part of border between Kyrgyzstan's Batken district and Tajikistan's Sughd region that killed one person and wounded another; Kyrgyz authorities claimed clashes erupted after Tajik border guards entered disputed area. U.S. embassy 16 March called on govt "to restore full Internet access" to residents of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region in east, which has reportedly had its internet access cut since protests in Nov 2021; embassy said lack of internet "impacts the ability of residents to access information, run businesses, and exercise freedom of expression". Authorities 7 March announced lifting of COVID-19 restrictions imposed in 2020, citing "normalization of the epidemiological situation". FM Sirojiddin Muhridin and U.S. Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya 22 March discussed bilateral cooperation issues and situation in Afghanistan.

➡ **Uzbekistan Western sanctions on Russia following invasion of Ukraine affected remittances, as govt sought to strike neutral approach.**

Central Bank chief 17 March reported remittances from Russia "shrank significantly" in first half of March, compared with same period of 2021; last year, majority of remittances were sent from Russia. FM Abdulaziz Komilov 17 March said: "We do not recognize the Luhansk and Donetsk republics" and called on Ukraine and Russia to resolve conflict "by diplomatic means". Foreign Ministry 18 March hosted meeting on Ukraine attended by EU and member states, UK, Japan and U.S.; govt reportedly expressed desire for neutral approach and diplomatic resolution to conflict. President Mirziyoyev and Russian President Putin 21 March held telephone conversation to discuss bilateral cooperation as well as Ukraine crisis. NGO Cotton Campaign 10 March announced end to campaign to boycott Uzbek cotton and textiles, citing progress in ending forced labour during crop harvesting last year.