



## Europe and Central Asia

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### Balkans

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↓ **Kosovo** Protests following elections in Serb-majority northern municipalities turned violent, while tensions simmered with Belgrade over these municipalities' political status.

*Clashes broke out in north following April's municipal elections. After tense municipal elections in April boycotted by most Kosovo Serbs, newly elected mayors in northern municipalities 26 May attempted to enter municipal buildings amid increased police presence. Small groups of Kosovo Serbs sought to block new mayors from buildings in three communes; in Zvecan town, police intervened, leading to clashes with protesters. Serbian President Vučić same day placed army on high alert and ordered "urgent movement [of troops] to Kosovo border". U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 26 May criticised police's use of force, which "unnecessarily escalated tensions", while European Union (EU) urged "everyone" to de-escalate. Unrest continued, however, and NATO-led force KFOR 29 May moved to disperse Serb protesters, leading to clashes that left dozens injured, including NATO troops; NATO next day announced deployment of additional forces. Tensions began to ease end May.*

*Frictions with Belgrade over political status of northern Serbs persisted. PM Kurti 2 May met with Vučić in Brussels as dialogue on agreement to normalise relations, mediated by EU High Representative Josep Borrell and EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajčák, continued. Sides discussed draft statute proposed by Kosovo Serbs to establish "Association/Community" of Serb municipalities in north, which would enable them to form self-governing association. Kurti said he could not accept draft, fearing arrangement would result either in northern municipalities' secession or internal fracturing reminiscent of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska; Borrell same day emphasised draft statute was "a starting point".*

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### Caucasus

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➡ **Armenia** After long pause, high-level talks with Azerbaijan resumed as fatal clashes erupted along border.

*U.S., EU and Russia facilitated parallel negotiations between Yerevan and Baku. Amid fears of major violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan after latter in late April installed checkpoint along Lachin road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) with Armenia, FMs 1 May met in U.S. capital Washington for talks. Key issues discussed included future of Armenians in NK, state border and resumption of*

transport links. U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 4 May said parties “made tangible progress” and were “within reach of an agreement”; FMs 19 May held second meeting in Russian capital Moscow. PM Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Aliyev, meanwhile, 14 May met in Brussels, agreed to resume work on border delimitation agreement and made progress on transport routes. Leaders 25 May met Russian President Putin in Moscow, who said on “principal issues, there is an agreement”, though Aliyev and Pashinyan exchanged harsh words regarding Lachin. Meanwhile, Pashinyan 22 May told news conference that “Azerbaijan’s territory includes Nagorno-Karabakh”, but called for special arrangements to protect rights and security of ethnic Armenians living in enclave (see Nagorno-Karabakh).

*Sides traded blame for cross-border shelling.* Armenia 11, 12 May blamed Azerbaijan for attack on its forces at tensest part of state border between Azerbaijan’s Kelbajar district and Armenia’s Gegharkunik region, reporting one casualty and several injured; Azerbaijan blamed Armenia for escalation, reporting two casualties. Armenia 17 May said Azerbaijani gunfire killed a serviceman at same section of border. Baku 26 May reported detention of two Armenian soldiers who had crossed into Azerbaijan’s Zangelan district, allegedly to mount “sabotage” operations; Armenia denied accusation and said Azerbaijan abducted soldiers. Detentions came after leaders recommitted to releasing soldiers found on their territory during mid-May European Union meeting.

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*Israeli president visited Baku.* Amid Azerbaijan-Iran tensions, which escalated after Baku late March opened embassy in Israel's capital Tel Aviv, Israeli President Herzog 30 May met with Aliyev in Baku; sides hailed deepening ties and promised further cooperation.

➡ **Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Tensions ran high in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) amid Azerbaijan's blockade of Lachin corridor, which aggravated humanitarian crisis and heightened fears of ethnic cleansing; clashes occurred along line of contact.**

*Checkpoint on Lachin corridor faced fierce opposition amid humanitarian crisis.* After Azerbaijan late April installed checkpoint on Lachin road connecting Armenia to NK, Azerbaijani-backed protesters ended months-long rally, which had hampered NK residents' access to basic necessities. Azerbaijani military consolidated blockade, however, leading to even fewer crossings and reduced transportation of goods. De facto NK authorities early May said reinforced checkpoint caused "acute humanitarian crisis". Armenia 22 May urged UN Security Council to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access to NK by "sending an international mission". Meanwhile, thousands 9 May protested in de facto capital Stepanakert, chanting "No to ethnic cleansing", amid fears checkpoint could be precursor to such acts.

*Azerbaijani leader urged de facto officials to dissolve parliament in NK.* Amid resumption of talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan (see Armenia and Azerbaijan), Armenian PM Pashinyan 22 May said "Azerbaijan's territory includes Nagorno-Karabakh", while still calling for special arrangements to protect rights and security of ethnic Armenians living in enclave. De facto President Arayik Harutyunyan 23 May called possible Armenian recognition of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over NK "unacceptable and inadmissible". Azerbaijani President Aliyev 28 May said NK population should "obey the laws of Azerbaijan" and called for dissolution of parliament, warning Baku was capable of launching "operation" in region immediately; de facto authorities 29 May decried statement, while Armenian foreign ministry said Aliyev was threatening "the people of Nagorno-Karabakh with ethnic cleansing".

*De facto armed forces and Azerbaijan traded blame for unrest in northern NK.* Azerbaijan 12 May reported de facto NK armed forces fired on Azerbaijani army; de facto defence ministry same day denied allegations. De facto authorities 18, 21 May accused Azerbaijan of violating ceasefire "in the northern & eastern directions" of NK contact line, attacking civilians.

➡ **Georgia Russia cancelled visa requirements for Georgians and resumed flights to capital Tbilisi amid internal and external opposition.**

*Russia cancelled visa regime and resumed direct flights to Georgia.* Russian President Putin 10 May abolished visa requirement for Georgian citizens, imposed early 2000s when Georgia accepted refugees and fighters fleeing war in Chechnya, and lifted ban on direct flights. One Russian airline 19 May resumed flights to capital Tbilisi, more expected early June; starting 20 May, Georgian Airways launched direct daily flights to Russia.

*West and opposition criticised resumption of flights, govt remained defiant.* President Zourabichvili 16 May labelled decision to cancel visa requirements and

resume flights “a Russian provocation” while opposition 19 May gathered around 200 protesters at airport to oppose flight; U.S. State Dept 22 May warned “companies in Georgian airports could be at risk [of] sanctions”; and EU 29 May said decision contradicts position of member states. Breakaways Abkhazia and South Ossetia mid-May also raised concerns. PM Garibashvili 24 May defended decision.

*Govt claimed progress on EU candidate status reforms.* As Brussels finalised report concerning Georgia’s progress on reforms needed to earn candidate status, FM 9 May claimed authorities had adopted most recommendations, with “around 20% still to deliver”.

↓ 🇷🇺\* **Russia (Internal) Ukraine-aligned Russian combatants staged cross-border incursion, while large-scale drone attack targeted capital; more subversive activities and attacks on Russian territory expected as Ukraine war continues.**

*Cross-border raid from Ukraine sparked violence, multiple drones struck capital.* Governor of Belgorod region (which borders Ukraine) 22 May said Ukrainian “sabotage group” had infiltrated region, announced “counter-terrorist operation”. Authorities evacuated villages coming under fire as attackers reportedly took control of several locations. Defence ministry 23 May said Russian troops used “airstrikes, artillery fire and active action” to repel invaders. Two groups that claimed responsibility reportedly are comprised mostly of far-right Russian nationals tied to Ukrainian military intelligence, which may have coordinated attack; Kyiv denied involvement. More subversive activities expected in coming weeks and months as Ukraine war continues. Meanwhile, presumably Ukrainian shelling of Russia rose sharply, mostly affecting Belgorod but increasingly targeting capital, Moscow. Series of drone strikes 30 May marked most significant attack on Moscow since full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

*Wagner Group’s feud with top military brass escalated.* Head of paramilitary Wagner Group Yevgeny Prigozhin 5 May threatened to withdraw from Ukrainian city of Bakhmut amid ammunition shortages, 9 May claimed defence ministry had threatened to qualify move as treason. Politician and former commander Viktor Sobolev 15 May branded Wagner “an illegal armed formation”; three Wagner mercenaries next day threatened to rape Sobolev. Prigozhin 31 May called on prosecutors to investigate possible “crimes” committed by senior defence officials before and during Ukraine war.

*Western states imposed sanctions, finance ministry recorded huge deficit.* During Japan summit, G7 leaders 19 May promised more measures against Russia and those who support its war effort; several Western countries and Russia same day imposed tit-for-tat sanctions. Meanwhile, finance ministry 10 May recorded 3.4tn ruble deficit in first four months of 2023; in same period in 2022, authorities recorded 1.2tn deficit.

*Repression of dissent continued.* Court in Moscow 5 May ordered two-month pre-trial detention for two artists accused of “justifying terrorism” in play about Russian women who joined Islamic State. Authorities 19 May designated environmental organisation Greenpeace “undesirable”. Authorities 23 May extended pre-trial detention of U.S. journalist Evan Gershkovich by three months.

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## Eastern Europe

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➔ **Belarus** International actors denounced govt crackdown, president dismissed rumours of poor health, and Minsk signed agreement with Moscow to deploy nuclear warheads in Belarus.

*Foreign actors expressed solidarity with political prisoners held in Belarus.* On eve of International Day of Solidarity with Political Prisoners in Belarus, U.S. 20 May condemned govt for “unjustly holding over 1,500 political prisoners”, called for their “immediate” release. EU High Representative Josep Borrell 21 May said authorities had made 40,000 politically motivated arrests since Aug 2020 amid “regime’s intensified repression”; other govts and civil society organisations also decried crackdown, which continued unabated.

*Rumours of Lukashenko’s ill health circulated.* During President Lukashenko’s 9 May trip to Russia, rumours began circulating about his poor health. Exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya 15 May urged public and international community “to be prepared for every scenario”. Lukashenko 23 May appeared in public, dismissing talk he was seriously ill, but rumours he had been hospitalised 27 May flared once more.

*Minsk and Moscow moved ahead with plan to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus.* Russian and Belarusian defence ministers 25 May met in capital Minsk, signed documents defining procedure for keeping Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons in storage facility on Belarusian territory; Moscow said it retained control of nuclear weapons and decision to use them.

↓ **Ukraine** Moscow pummelled Ukrainian cities with drones and missiles as attacks and subversive activities on Russian soil escalated; Zelenskyy secured further military assistance and stepped up diplomatic efforts toward non-Western leaders.

*Russia intensified airstrikes but faced sharp escalation of attacks on its territory.* Moscow scaled up airstrikes on Ukrainian cities, firing Iranian-made drones as well as cruise and ballistic missiles simultaneously from different directions in increasingly complex attacks. Dense air defence prevented mass casualties, though falling debris caused several fatalities, injuries and damages to infrastructure, including to Kyiv-based Patriot air defence system. Head of military intelligence 29 May promised to respond; multiple drones, presumably Ukrainian, next day struck Russian capital amid rise in subversive activities and attacks on Russian soil, particularly affecting its border regions (see Russia). Meanwhile, Russian President Putin 20 May claimed victory in Bakhmut city after nearly eight-month battle; Ukraine 21 May insisted its forces retained small foothold inside city and were advancing along city’s flanks. Paramilitary Wagner Group head Yevgeny Prigozhin 22 May vowed to withdraw Wagner units from Bakhmut by 1 June, 23 May said 20,000 fighters killed in fighting. Meanwhile, top Ukrainian commander 29 May said counteroffensive due to start soon.

*Zelenskyy secured more military aid, sought support of non-Western states.* President Zelenskyy mid-May toured number of Western capitals, securing military assistance from Germany, France and UK. U.S. 19 May said it would allow other

countries to supply Ukraine with advanced fighter jets, including U.S.-made F-16s, said U.S. air force would help train pilots; Russian FM 27 May warned fighter jets represented “unacceptable escalation”. Zelenskyy stepped up diplomatic activity toward non-Western leaders to win support for goal of expelling all Russian troops from Ukrainian territory, 19 May attending Arab League Summit in Saudi Arabia’s Jeddah city, 20 May meeting with Indian PM Modi. Meanwhile, Turkish President Erdoğan 17 May announced 60-day Black Sea Grain deal extension.

*In other important developments.* Authorities 16 May arrested high court judge on suspicion of accepting bribes from exiled oligarch awaiting extradition. Govt 9 May introduced bill that would lower age by which men must have registered with conscription offices from 27 to 25, widening recruitment pool for army.

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## **Western Europe/Mediterranean**

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### **➡ Cyprus Tensions surfaced over Republic of Cyprus military drills with partner countries and property in contested Varosha/Maraş area, amid Republic of Cyprus initiative for greater EU involvement.**

*Republic of Cyprus held military drills with partner countries.* Republic of Cyprus National Guard and Israel 7-11 May conducted military exercises involving jets and helicopters in divided capital Nicosia’s Flight Information Region – part of which is de facto controlled by “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) – and 23 May held similar drills with UK; “TRNC” described operations as “provocation”. Republic of Cyprus 15-18 May held military drills with Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, U.S. and UK during which U.S. destroyer docked at Limassol port, which “TRNC” said “demonstrated once again that [U.S.] is not observing the delicate balance” on island. Republic of Cyprus and France 28 May held aerial exercises off Limassol’s coast.

*Ghost resort Varosha/Maraş and energy exploration stoked concern.* In response to reports of potentially unlawful property purchases by Turkish Cypriot entrepreneur in fenced-off ghost town Varosha/Maraş in “TRNC”, Republic of Cyprus House of Representatives president 8 May denounced Türkiye’s policy on town to UN Security Council members, European Union (EU) member states and Middle Eastern countries. Meanwhile, Turkish FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu 1 May reiterated support for Turkish Cypriots’ energy rights after Republic of Cyprus late April announced drilling preparations in zone that allegedly overlaps with area licenced by Turkish Petroleum Corporation.

*Republic of Cyprus sought France’s involvement, deepened ties with Israel.* In meeting with French President Macron on 3 May, Republic of Cyprus President Christodoulides said Republic of Cyprus expects France’s support in breaking deadlock; “TRNC” next day dismissed Christodoulides’ initiative for EU involvement and urged Paris to cease arms sales to Republic of Cyprus. UN Special Representative in Cyprus Colin Stewart 15-16 May met separately with Christodoulides and “TRNC” leader Ersin Tatar, said “a very important period” will begin after elections in Türkiye and Greece that could see progress on Cyprus issue. Republic of Cyprus and Israeli defence ministers 5 May discussed “strategic partnership” and Republic of Cyprus

energy minister 15 May announced possible natural gas pipeline between two countries.

➔ **Türkiye President Erdoğan prevailed in runoff election, military targeted Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and affiliates in Türkiye, Iraq and Syria, and Ankara pursued normalisation with Syria and Egypt.**

*President Erdoğan won runoff election.* In 14 May parliamentary and presidential elections, ruling People's Alliance secured parliamentary majority, but neither incumbent president nor main opposition candidate Kemal Kilicdaroglu surpassed 50% threshold for presidency. In runoff 28 May, Erdoğan secured presidency with 52%. International election observers called initial poll "mostly peaceful"; unidentified group 7 May attacked Istanbul Mayor and vice-presidential candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu in Erzurum province, injuring 17.

*Operations continued against PKK in Türkiye and affiliates abroad.* In Türkiye, govt claimed security operation in rural areas of Şırnak province 16 May killed three PKK members, three soldiers and village guard; security forces 22 May detained 23 alleged PKK members suspected of starting forest fires in Mersin and Antalya provinces. In northern Iraq, Turkish intelligence 4 May claimed to have killed PKK's so-called training officer Ahmet Gümüş and 8 May captured high-ranking PKK member Azime Dursun at Erbil airport; security authorities in Iraq's Kurdistan region claimed Turkish drone 23 May killed three members of Sinjar Resistance Units (see Iraq). In Syria, Syrian Democratic Forces 5 May said Turkish drone killed two members in Hasakah province (see Syria).

*Security forces cracked down on Islamic State (ISIS).* Security forces detained at least 127 individuals countrywide with alleged links to ISIS. In northern Syria, ISIS chief Abul-Hassan al-Qurayshi 1 May reportedly detonated suicide vest, killing himself, during Turkish operation to capture him; security forces 10 May captured group's so-called Türkiye emir, Şahap Varış, in Syria.

*Amid engagement with Syria and Egypt, rapprochement with Greece slowed.* Turkish and Syrian FMs 10 May held first meeting since 2011 in Russian capital Moscow alongside Russian and Iranian counterparts; FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stressed need for cooperation on terrorism and return of Syrian refugees. Egypt 29 May announced agreement with Ankara on "immediate start of upgrading diplomatic relations and exchanging ambassadors". Meanwhile, rapprochement with Greece slowed amid elections in both countries.

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## **Central Asia**

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➔ **Kyrgyzstan NGO said Kyrgyz, Tajik forces committed "apparent war crimes" during 2022 border conflict; China sought closer ties with Central Asian countries during "milestone" summit.**

*Kyrgyz and Tajik forces accused of "apparent war crimes".* NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2 May published report detailing attacks on civilians by Kyrgyz and Tajik forces during border conflict in Sept 2022; HRW said several of these violations "likely amount to war crimes" and urged both sides to investigate potential abuses and hold perpetrators to account.

*Central Asian leaders attended China summit following Russia trip.* Leaders from all five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – 9 May travelled to Russian capital Moscow for Russia’s Victory Day parade, which marks Soviet victory over Nazi Germany. Chinese President Xi Jinping 18-19 May hosted Central Asian leaders in north-western Xian city for “milestone” China-Central Asia Summit. In sign of Beijing’s growing influence in region, Xi unveiled ambitious development plan that includes building infrastructure, boosting trade and strengthening security networks.

➡ **Tajikistan Govt repatriated more women and children from Syria, NGO said Kyrgyz, Tajik forces committed “apparent war crimes” during 2022 border conflict, and China sought closer ties with Central Asian countries during “milestone” summit.**

*Authorities repatriated over 100 women and children from Syria.* Govt 21 May repatriated 109 women and children from detention camps in north-eastern Syria, where suspected Islamic State militants and their relatives are being held.

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➡ **Uzbekistan Snap election announced after Uzbeks voted overwhelmingly in favour of constitutional reforms; China sought closer ties with Central Asian countries during “milestone” summit.**

*President announced snap election following constitutional referendum.* Central Election Commission 1 May announced that 30 April referendum on President Mirziyoev’s proposed constitutional amendments had passed with over 90% of voters approving reforms. In 1 May statement, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe said referendum “was technically well prepared and widely promoted as intending to enhance various rights and freedoms” but took place “in an environment short of genuine political pluralism and competition”. Mirziyoev 8 May announced snap election in July, which he is widely expected to win, saying he requires new mandate to implement reforms.

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