



Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

➔ **Kosovo** **New currency regulation restricted use of Serbian dinar, sparking outrage among Kosovo Serbs and criticism from international actors.**

New currency rules came into force, fuelling tensions. Regulation establishing euro as only currency permitted for cash transactions came into effect 1 Feb; move bans financial institutions from using Serbian dinar, primary currency for cash and commercial transactions in Kosovo's Serb-majority communities. European Commission 1 Feb warned that "short transition period for the regulation's implementation, combined with a lack of information and practical solutions for all affected communities, risk seriously complicating their lives". Authorities 6 Feb announced one-month transition period; Kosovo police, however, 3 Feb confiscated 4mn Serbian dinar and vehicle transporting it to distribute social benefit payments from Serbia, 7 Feb prevented entry of cash-transfer truck into Kosovo. Hundreds of Kosovo Serbs 12 Feb protested new regulation in North Mitrovica town.

UN Security Council held briefing on currency issue. Speaking at extraordinary session of UN Security Council, Serb President Aleksandar Vučić 8 Feb argued new regulation "disables all medical, educational, social, cultural and other institutions that enable Serbs to live with a minimum of human dignity"; PM Kurti insisted regulation doesn't prevent Belgrade from providing financial support to Kosovo Serbs, but "seeks to ensure the transparency and legality of cash imported into Kosovo". Head of UN Mission in Kosovo Caroline Ziadeh said actions "exacerbate an environment of insecurity and mistrust".

Caucasus

➔ **Armenia** **Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers met for German-facilitated talks following deadly escalation along border; PM Pashinyan's calls for new constitution triggered criticism.**

Deadly border clashes shattered months of relative calm. Azerbaijan's State Border Service 12 Feb reported that Armenian troops fired at Azerbaijani positions in its Zangelan district, wounding one soldier. Situation escalated as Azerbaijan's State Border Service 13 Feb announced "retaliatory operation" that left four Armenian soldiers dead, one wounded and an army post near Nerkin Hand village in southern Syunik region destroyed. EU High Representative Josep Borrell 13 Feb condemned Baku's "disproportionate" response to shooting and reiterated that EU Mission in

Armenia (EUMA), tasked with monitoring situation along Armenian side of border, had been reinforced; announcement came amid growing dissatisfaction from Baku with EUMA, whom it 12 Feb accused of facilitating visits by European officials and unofficial delegations to border. Risk of further small-scale clashes persists.

Armenian, Azerbaijani leaders met in Munich, paving way for talks between FMs. Pashinyan, Aliyev and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz 17 Feb held tripartite meeting on sidelines of Munich Security Conference. Less than two weeks later, German FM 28-29 Feb hosted her Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts for talks focused on peace treaty; pair vowed to continue negotiations.

Pashinyan's calls for new constitution ignited controversy. Pashinyan 1 Feb reiterated mid-Jan call for fresh constitution, citing "new geopolitical and regional realities". Among other reforms, Pashinyan said it should remove provision calling for unification of Armenia with (now former) Nagorno-Karabakh. Aliyev same day weighed in, stating peace could be achieved if Yerevan amends constitution and other laws, which he said make claims on Azerbaijani territory. Comments prompted critics to accuse Pashinyan of bowing to Azerbaijani demands, and may lead to renewed calls for his resignation or fresh protests.

In other important developments. Pashinyan 22 Feb announced Yerevan had frozen membership in Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization amid souring ties with Moscow, though latter same day said Yerevan had not launched formal process to suspend membership. Armenia and France 23 Feb struck defence deal.

➡ **Azerbaijan** **Azerbaijani and Armenian foreign ministers met for German-facilitated talks following deadly escalation along border; President Aliyev won landslide victory in snap poll.**

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Aliyev secured fifth presidential term. President Aliyev won 7 Feb snap presidential election with 92% of vote. In lead up to poll, Aliyev mid Jan stated that Azerbaijan had regained full sovereignty and expressed readiness for peaceful future with Armenia, though subsequent border clashes laid bare challenges ahead.

➔ **Georgia** Irakli Kobakhidze became new prime minister following ruling party reshuffle, and breakaway Abkhazia stepped up restrictions on international organisations and civil society.

Parliament named new PM as Oct elections inched closer. Following resignation of former PM Gharibashvili late Jan and return to politics of ruling Georgian Dream party's billionaire founder Bidzina Ivanishvili, parliament 8 Feb appointed Irakli Kobakhidze as new PM; move came as Georgia gears up for Oct parliamentary elections. Opposition same day dismissed reshuffle as little more than a swap between "Ivanishvili's political puppets".

Concerns grew about deepening restrictions in breakaway Abkhazia. EU Special Representative Toivo Klaar 14 Feb met with key Georgian officials in capital Tbilisi to discuss situation in breakaway regions and EU's conflict resolution efforts. Meetings came after Abkhazia late Jan declined Klaar's request for visit to region, prompting concern about region's reduced engagement with EU and, according to Klaar, "increasing restrictions being placed on our work and the work of UN agencies, international NGOs and local civil society organisations". De facto presidential administration 7 Feb submitted draft "foreign agents" law to de facto govt, which mimics Russia's increasingly repressive legislation on "foreign representatives"; if approved, bill would designate individuals and organisations that receive money from abroad (excluding countries that recognise Abkhazia as an independent state) "foreign agents".

➔ **Russia (Internal)** Opposition leader Alexei Navalny died in penal colony weeks before presidential election, Moscow reiterated openness for Ukraine talks but on its terms, and West imposed more sanctions.

Opposition leader died in prison. Weeks before 15-17 March presidential election, Alexei Navalny 16 Feb died in penal colony in northern Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District, dealing blow to already weak opposition. Cause of death unknown, though opposition abroad and Navalny's wife Yulia Navalnaya blamed President Putin. Commemorative rallies held 16-19 Feb in 39 cities; authorities detained 397 people. Navalnaya 19 Feb vowed to continue her husband's work. Meanwhile, Election Commission 8 Feb refused to register opposition presidential hopeful Boris Nadezhdin's candidacy for election.

Russia alleged openness for Ukraine talks. As Russia gained battlefield momentum in Ukraine (see Ukraine), Putin 8 Feb expressed willingness for talks and claimed Kyiv refused negotiations with Moscow "under instructions from Washington". FM Lavrov 14 Feb said Moscow was ready to settle conflict if Ukraine takes into account ground realities. During 29 Feb annual state-of-the-nation address, Putin praised battlefield advances in Ukraine and stated readiness for dialogue with U.S.; he also warned of "tragic" consequences should NATO military contingents be sent to Ukraine, after French President Macron 26 Feb refused to rule out sending troops there. Meanwhile, media company Bloomberg 20 Feb reported that U.S. told allies Russia is developing nuclear anti-satellite weapon, which could be launched into space in 2024.

Ukraine war continued to be felt at home. Drone strikes targeting oil infrastructure continued, shelling into Belgorod region 15 Feb killed seven. Deputy Chairman of Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev 19 Feb claimed military had recruited

53,000 personnel since 1 Jan 2024. According to 15 Feb report by media outlet *The New York Times*, U.S. estimated roughly 300,000 Russian soldiers killed or injured since full-scale invasion. Mothers and wives of mobilised soldiers 3 Feb protested in capital Moscow, calling for return of soldiers from frontline.

Western countries imposed more sanctions. EU 21 Feb agreed 13th sanctions package, U.S. 23 Feb announced over 500 new sanctions. Moscow 13 Feb added Estonia's PM and others on wanted list.

Eastern Europe

➡ **Belarus** President Lukashenko revealed plans to run in 2025 presidential election as voters cast their ballot in parliamentary and local polls; crackdown continued.

U.S. condemned "sham" elections. Voters 25 Feb cast their ballots in parliamentary and local elections, choosing candidates from four parties that all back President Lukashenko. U.S. same day condemned "sham" polls in which "all independent political parties were denied registration". Election Commission 26 Feb announced that 73% of eligible voters turned out for ballot and that all 110 seats in parliament had been filled, further cementing Lukashenko's rule. Day of election, president announced intention to run in 2025 presidential election.

Crackdown continued, notably targeting LGBTQ+ community. European Council 19 Feb expressed "continued and deep concern" about human rights situation, stated readiness to take further targeted measures. Crackdown continued, however. Notably, state news agency Belta 19 Feb reported Minsk has prepared draft law proposing penalties for "promotion of non-traditional relationships", referring to LGBTQ+ relationships.

Lithuania sealed another border crossing with Belarus. Lithuania 21 Feb decided to seal off two checkpoints with Belarus, bringing total of closed border crossings to four; Vilnius' Interior Minister announced decision was due to "risks associated with the increased activities of the Belarusian intelligence and security services against Lithuania and our citizens".

➡ **Moldova** Congress of Deputies from breakaway Transnistria called for Russian protection from mounting Moldovan pressure.

Congress of Deputies from Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria 28 Feb held extraordinary session – seventh in its history – amid intensifying dispute with Chişinău over customs duties. De facto lawmakers and officials adopted seven declarations, including appeal to Russia to "protect" region from growing pressure from Moldova; they stopped short, however, of calling on Moscow to annex region despite fears.

↓ **Ukraine** As war entered third year, Avdiivka town fell to Russia, marking significant setback for Ukraine as its forces felt sting of waning Western support and momentum swung toward Moscow.

Russian forces captured Avdiivka and nearby settlements. Following months of intense bombardment, Ukraine 17 Feb announced withdrawal from eastern Donetsk region's Avdiivka town; retreat marks country's most significant setback since loss of Bakhmut town in May 2023 and, according to military analysts, is consequence of ammunition shortages and Western hesitancy to sustain military aid. During final days of fighting, Russia appears to have established localised air superiority for first time since invasion, hastening Ukraine's loss of control. Ukraine late Feb withdrew from several settlements west of Avdiivka. In south, Russian forces 17 Feb launched forward operations on Zaporizhzhia region's Robotyne village. With pressure mounting along frontline, Ukraine could lose more territory in coming weeks.

Ukraine sunk two ships in Black Sea, Russian strikes continued. Ukrainian forces 1 and 14 Feb sunk two ships from Russian Black Sea fleet using domestically produced naval drones; 29 Feb reportedly shot down three Russian Su-34 jets. Russian airstrikes continued across country, increasingly featuring North Korean ballistic missiles. Media outlet *The New York Times* 9 Feb quoted warning from U.S. official that Ukraine could run low on air defence interceptors within weeks, which could lead to intensified Russian bombardments and more casualties.

President Zelenskyy dismissed top general. Zelenskyy 8 Feb replaced commander of armed forces General Zaluzhnyy with Oleksandr Sirskyy following souring Zelenskyy-Zaluzhnyy relations over competing narratives of counteroffensive and former's hesitancy to mobilise more soldiers. Govt continued work on mobilisation reform bill.

Europeans pledged more military aid amid concerns about future of U.S. support. EU 1 Feb passed €50bn support package for Ukraine after long delays. Deadlock in U.S. Congress over support package persisted, however, amid opposition from staunchest supporters of Republican Party's presumptive nominee for 2024 presidential election Donald Trump. Kyiv during month signed long-term security agreements with number of European countries amid fears U.S. support is drying up. Meanwhile, protests by Polish farmers and lorry drivers over cheap Ukrainian grain continued.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➡ **Cyprus** Newly-appointed UN personal envoy kickstarted first round of deliberations in search of common ground between parties.

UN envoy held first round of meetings seeking to break years-long diplomatic stalemate. UN Sec-Gen's new Personal Envoy for Cyprus, Maria Holguin Cuellar, 30 Jan commenced visit to Cyprus, stating that her first mission would be to investigate whether there is "common ground" and "listen attentively" to parties' positions; Cuellar early Feb met Republic of Cyprus President Christodoulides and "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" ("TRNC") leader Ersin Tatar before visiting Athens, Ankara and London. Notably, Turkish Cypriot leadership remained sceptical of

prospects of new negotiations, as de facto FM Tahsin Ertuğruloğlu suggested he did not expect Holguin to finish her mandate and that there was no common ground to be found. “TRNC” seeks recognition of existence of “two states and two democracies” on island, while Republic of Cyprus seeks return to dialogue on basis of 2017 framework.

➔ **Türkiye** **Hostilities with Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) remained concentrated in northern Iraq and northern Syria, while govt retained pressure on Islamic State (ISIS) at home and improved ties with regional states.**

Amid clashes with PKK and its affiliates, Ankara engaged with Iraqi authorities and local actors. Military carried out airstrikes targeting PKK in northern Iraq and People’s Protection Units (YPG)/Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) members in northern Syria as well as critical infrastructure belonging to groups. Notably, Turkish defence ministry 4 Feb announced killing or capturing of five PKK fighters in northern Iraq, while Turkish drones 11 Feb struck targets in northern Syria’s Qamishli, killing two high-ranking SDF members (see Iraq and Syria). Meanwhile, Defence Minister Yaşar Güler and Army Chief of Staff Metin Gürak 6 Feb visited Iraq’s capital Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan regional capital Erbil, reportedly to propose new defence treaty that includes measures to safeguard security and strengthen cooperation against PKK. In capital Ankara, FM Fidan 19 Feb met with Falih Alfayyadh, chairperson of Iran-backed Iraqi paramilitary coalition Hashd al-Shaabi.

Authorities conducted operations against alleged ISIS members in Türkiye. Security forces during Feb apprehended over 400 individuals with suspected links to ISIS. Notably, police 13 Feb detained alleged ISIS operative working at Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant construction site, Mersin province, under fake identity.

Ties with Greece, U.S. and Egypt remained on track for improvement. FM Hakan Fidan 7 Feb said that inherited disputes with Greece can be “set aside” as negotiations on other bilateral issues continue; Fidan and Greek counterpart Giorgos Gerapetritis 18 Feb met on sidelines of Munich Security Conference to discuss progress on bilateral issues and Greek PM Mitsotakis’ upcoming visit to Ankara currently scheduled for later this year. U.S. Congress 10 Feb approved sale of 40 F-16 fighter jets and 80 modernisation kits to Ankara; U.S. ambassador Jeff Flake 13 Feb emphasised Türkiye’s strategic importance. U.S. Senators Jeanne Shaheen and Chris Murphy 20-21 Feb visited Ankara and met President Erdoğan and Fidan. Erdoğan 15 Feb visited Egypt for first time since 2013 coup, signalling Ankara’s efforts to normalise ties with former adversaries.

Central Asia

➔ **Kyrgyzstan** **Chorus of voices protested draft law on “foreign representatives”, Bishkek and Dushanbe advanced toward border deal, and UN, EU and Central Asian officials held talks on Afghanistan.**

Criticism of “foreign representatives” bill continued. Parliament 22 Feb approved second reading of controversial ‘foreign representatives’ bill amid chorus of voices

underscoring risks to civil society and free speech. Notably, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 7 Feb warned it “would have an overwhelmingly negative impact on civil society, human rights defenders, and the media”, while rights group Amnesty International 8 Feb said proposed legislation and amendments bill “mimic the infamous Russian ‘foreign agents’ law”. President Japarov 9 Feb responded to Jan letter from U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken expressing concern about bill, accused U.S. of “interference” in country’s internal affairs.

Bishkek and Dushanbe advanced toward final border agreement. Tajik state news agency Khovar 5 Feb reported that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan had agreed on another 3.71km of state border, as sides inched closer toward final agreement. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon same day met with FM Kulubayev in Tajik capital Dushanbe; pair reportedly discussed recent progress on border delimitation, as well as water resource management.

Kyrgyzstan hosted talks on Afghanistan with UN, EU and regional officials. Bishkek 14 Feb hosted UN Special Representative for Afghanistan Roza Otunbaeva, along with officials from all five Central Asian nations and EU, for talks ahead of UN-sponsored conference on Afghanistan 18-19 Feb in Qatar. Meeting came amid efforts among regional powers for closer engagement with Kabul, and reportedly focused on current challenges obstructing assistance to Afghanistan and how to ensure country’s long-term peace and stability.

➡ **Tajikistan Tajikistan made progress on border deal with Kyrgyzstan and sought to improve water resource management with Uzbekistan; UN, EU and Central Asian officials held talks on Afghanistan.**

Dushanbe pursued border talks with Bishkek and opened water-monitoring station with Tashkent. State news agency Khovar 5 Feb reported that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan had agreed on another 3.71km of state border as sides inched closer toward final agreement. President Rahmon same day met with Kyrgyz FM Kulubayev in capital Dushanbe; pair reportedly discussed recent progress on border delimitation, as well as water resource management. Meanwhile, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan 23 Feb installed two new measuring stations along border to monitor transboundary water flows in effort to improve cooperation on water resource management.

Officials attended talks on Afghanistan. Tajik representatives 14 Feb attended meeting in Kyrgyzstan along with UN Special Representative for Afghanistan and other Central Asian, EU officials ahead of UN-sponsored conference on Afghanistan 18-19 Feb in Qatar. Meeting came amid efforts among regional powers for closer engagement with Kabul, and reportedly focused on current challenges obstructing assistance to Afghanistan and how to ensure country’s long-term peace and stability.

➡ **Uzbekistan Uzbekistan sought to improve water resource management with Tajikistan; UN, EU and Central Asian officials held talks on Afghanistan.**

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