



Europe and Central Asia

Balkans

📌🌐 **Bosnia and Herzegovina Tensions escalated between High Representative and Bosnian Serb leader over proposed changes to election law, with latter threatening to paralyse state-level decision-making.**

Crisis erupted days after European Council 21 March approved opening of formal negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) to join bloc. High Representative Christian Schmidt, responsible for overseeing implementation of Dayton peace accords, 26 March imposed changes to state-level Election Law, designed to clamp down on fraud and abuse. In response, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik 28 March threatened to paralyse decision-making in BiH and withdraw from armed forces and other state organs unless number of demands are met, including withdrawal of legislation within seven days and expulsion of Schmidt from country, alongside UK, German and U.S. ambassadors. Republika Srpska lawmakers 29 March subsequently adopted their own version of election law, which Dodik said would come into force on 16 April if demands not met. U.S. Embassy in capital Sarajevo same day condemned move, warning law would “usurp state-level competencies and create a parallel electoral system” and accused Dodik of launching “direct attack on the state structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina”.

➡ **Kosovo Pristina faced pressure to resolve currency issue, PM Kurti alleged Serbian troop movements near border, and electoral authorities set date for referendum on removal of ethnic Albanian mayors in north.**

Govt maintained firm stance on currency issue. During 13-15 March trip to Kosovo, U.S. Special Envoy Gabriel Escobar urged govt to suspend new regulation banning use of Serbian dinar, primary currency for cash and commercial transactions among Kosovo Serbs. PM Kurti 19 March insisted he would not reverse decision, saying Central Bank’s move was designed to tackle “financing of terrorism and other illegal activities”. Kosovo and Serbia chief negotiators 25 March met in Belgian capital Brussels to discuss issue but failed to reach agreement.

Prime Minister accused Belgrade of troop movements along border. PM Kurti 21 March shared footage of Serbian Army units near Kosovo border, claiming Belgrade was “waiting for the best possible opportunity to invade Kosovo”; Belgrade 22 March dismissed accusations as “disinformation campaign”. NATO-led force same day said situation is “calm but fragile”.

Authorities backed referendum on removal of ethnic Albanian mayors in north. Central Election Commission 9 March approved referendum on whether to dismiss ethnic Albanian mayors in four Serb-majority northern municipalities, whose

election in April 2023 (boycotted by Serbs) triggered violent protests. Vote slated for 21 April, after which govt is expected to announce new elections.

Caucasus

➔ Armenia Efforts to advance peace deal with Azerbaijan continued amid tense debates about border villages; Yerevan sought closer ties with West as relations with Russia cooled.

Tensions over settlements erupted after border commission meeting. Amid stepped-up peace efforts in recent weeks, Azerbaijan and Armenia 7 March conducted seventh meeting of sides' border delimitation commissions; parties agreed to finalise draft regulation for commissions' activities and delimitation procedures "as soon as possible". After meeting, Azerbaijani Deputy PM Shahin Mustafayev 9 March said Yerevan should return four non-enclave Azerbaijani villages it has held since early 1990s before sides start delimiting and demarcating border; villages are strategically positioned along highway leading to Georgia and near pipeline supplying Russian gas to Armenia. PM Pashinyan 18 March acknowledged govt had "decided to adjust the border", warning of another war if sides refuse to compromise; issue set to fuel domestic discontent. Meanwhile, U.S. Senior Adviser for Caucasus Louis Bono and NATO Sec Gen Jens Stoltenberg visited Armenia and Azerbaijan separately during month to discuss peace agreement.

Armenia pivoted further away from Russia and towards West. Armenia-Russia relations continued to cool as former sought to reduce dependence on Russian security assistance. Notably, Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan 6 March said Armenian border guards should replace Russian guards at Yerevan's Zvartnots International Airport; and Pashinyan 12 March floated leaving Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. Meanwhile, Grigoryan 21 March announced Pashinyan will meet with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken in Brussels on 5 April. Meeting to focus on trilateral cooperation aimed at strengthening Armenia's "economic resilience" and steps that lay groundwork for future EU integration; Azerbaijan 27 March criticised upcoming talks as "one-sided" and "biased".

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➔ Azerbaijan Efforts to advance peace deal with Armenia continued amid tense debates about border villages; authorities cracked down on media.

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Baku criticised upcoming EU-U.S.-Armenia talks. Armenia’s Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan 21 March announced Pashinyan will meet with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken in Brussels on 5 April. Meeting to focus on trilateral cooperation aimed at strengthening Armenia’s “economic resilience” and steps that lay groundwork for future EU integration. Azerbaijan 27 March criticised upcoming talks as “one-sided” and “biased”.

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Media crackdown continued. Police 6 March raided offices of online opposition platform Toplum TV, its partner organisation Institute for Democratic Initiatives and newly-founded Third Republic Platform, reportedly arresting at least ten people; court 9 March sentenced seven individuals to four months’ pre-trial detention. Toplum TV’s Editor-in-Chief Khadija Ismayil 8 March accused authorities of attempting “to silence the media”; U.S. same day urged authorities to halt “crackdown on free expression”.

➔ **Georgia Breakaway regions voted in Russia’s presidential election, political camps stepped up preparations for October parliamentary polls, and new legislation sought to clamp down on LGBTQ+ rights.**

Tbilisi condemned Russia for holding presidential elections in breakaway regions. Voters in breakaway regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia 15-17 March cast their ballots in Russian presidential election, voting overwhelmingly in support of incumbent Vladimir Putin. Foreign Ministry and EU 18 March condemned “illegal” polls in “occupied regions”. NATO Sec Gen Jens Stoltenberg 18 March visited capital Tbilisi, where he criticised Russia’s conduct of elections in breakaways and discussed ways to enhance partnership with “one of NATO’s closest partners”; PM Kobakhidze same day reiterated Georgia’s dedication to NATO integration. Meanwhile, speaker of South Ossetia’s de facto parliament 17 March said de facto authorities and Russia were “discussing” possibility of South Ossetia’s integration into Russian Federation.

New parties emerged ahead of October parliamentary elections. Ruling and opposition forces stepped up election preparations. Notably, former members and close allies of ruling Georgian Dream party 18 March held founding congress of new political party, People’s Power, whose main goal is to “finally prosecute” opposition United National Movement (UNM) party for alleged crimes committed during UNM rule 2004-2012; many view movement’s transformation into a political party as attempt to bolster Georgian Dream in election. Meanwhile, divided opposition also ramped up electoral preparations, with former chairman of UNM and founder of opposition Mtavari TV 11 March announcing new Akhali party.

Ruling party sought to crackdown on LGBTQ+ rights. Georgian Dream's parliamentary leader Mamuka Mdinardze 25 March unveiled draft legislation that would prohibit people from changing gender, outlaw same-sex couples from adopting children, and ban education and public gatherings it says "popularise" same-sex relationships. Mdinardze said legislation designed to protect "family values and minors". Human rights institution Council of Europe 28 March condemned "homophobic" bill amid fears move could endanger Georgia's path toward EU membership.

↓ **Russia (Internal) Islamic State (ISIS) claimed responsibility for deadliest terrorist attack on Russian soil in over two decades, days after President Putin won re-election; Ukrainian attacks intensified.**

Terrorist attack in Moscow killed and wounded hundreds. Militants 22 March entered concert hall in capital Moscow, opening fire and setting premises ablaze. ISIS immediately claimed responsibility for attack, which killed at least 143 people and wounded hundreds more. Authorities swiftly announced number of arrests, including four Tajik citizens suspected of perpetrating attack, who 24 March appeared in court bearing signs of abuse. Putin 25 March suggested "radical Islamists" carried out attack but insinuated Ukrainian and Western involvement, a claim echoed by top officials; such suggestions could lay groundwork for Kremlin to justify future aggression in Ukraine. Kyiv repeatedly denied any role.

Putin secured fifth presidential term. Russia 15-17 March held presidential election. According to official data, poll saw record turnout and landslide victory for Putin. Opposition 17 March organised "Noon Against Putin" rally; according to campaign website, thousands were to head to polling stations across Russia at midday to "show others and see for ourselves that there are many of us", while remaining concealed from authorities.

Ukraine launched cross-border incursions and more drone attacks. Three Ukrainian army units that include Russian nationals 10 March began conducting cross-border incursions into Belgorod and Kursk regions, which continued sporadically throughout March; Russian forces repelled attacks. Ukraine intensified shelling of Belgorod's capital and other populated areas in region, killing over sixteen and wounding scores; governor of Belgorod 19 March announced evacuation of 9,000 children. Ukrainian attacks on oil refineries and other infrastructure persisted.

EU imposed more punitive measures. EU High Representative Josep Borrel 18 March said EU should use 90% of revenues from frozen Russian assets in Europe to buy weapons for Ukraine, announced sanctions on 30 Russian officials over death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. European Commission 22 March proposed increasing tariffs on grain imports from Russia and Belarus to reassure farmers and some member states concerned about influx of cheap Ukrainian products.

Eastern Europe

➔ **Belarus** Minsk maintained pressure on opposition as tensions with its western neighbours persisted.

Crackdown on dissent continued despite opposition. Minsk court 14 March sentenced Roman Catholic religious instructor Uladzislau Beladzed, 22 March sentenced journalist Ihar Karney, both to three years in prison on extremism charges. 27 Nobel Peace Prize laureates 20 March called for “immediate release of political prisoners in Belarus”; letter also urged EU govts to take stronger action to end “brutal repression”.

Tensions between Belarus and its western neighbours remained high. Defence Ministry 11 March launched large-scale “combat readiness” check of its armed forces, involving live-fire exercises and movement of military hardware on public roads; Lithuania 14 March said check was “routine” and “no reason to worry”, despite one mechanised brigade partially relocating to border near Lithuania and Latvia. Belarus 14 March responded to Lithuania’s Feb closure of additional border crossings with temporary import bans, mainly on food products. President Lukashenko 26 March dismissed claims Minsk is planning attack on Suwalki Gap, corridor linking Poland to Lithuania, after video surfaced allegedly showing him discussing area with military commander.

➔ **Moldova** Breakaway Transnistria region accused Moldova and Ukraine of drone attack on military base, and voters from breakaway cast their ballots in Russian presidential election.

De facto authorities in breakaway Transnistria 17 March claimed that a kamikaze drone launched from Ukraine’s Odesa region struck helicopter at military base in de facto capital Tiraspol; Chişinău same day dismissed incident as “an attempt to provoke fear and panic”, while Kyiv accused Moscow (which supports Transnistria) of “trying to carry out provocations and manipulate the information space”. Meanwhile, 46,182 people from Transnistria cast their ballots in Russian presidential election (see Russia), compared with over 73,000 voters six years ago; Russia’s incumbent president Vladimir Putin received 97% of vote.

➔ **Ukraine** Ukrainian forces hastily built defensive lines in preparation for more Russian advances, Moscow pounded country with missile attacks, and Czech initiative sought to boost waning ammunition stocks.

Ukraine rushed to build defensive lines following Russian advances. After Russia captured Avdiivka town and nearby settlements in eastern Donetsk region in Feb, its offensive slowed significantly. President Zelenskyy 11 March announced Ukraine was building 2000km of defensive lines in preparation for stepped-up advances, though military analysts warned about slow progress, which may force Ukrainian troops to fortify defensive lines while under fire from Russians. Russian forces late March gradually advanced west of Avdiivka, with some reports suggesting they seized control of two more villages, albeit at high cost. Meanwhile, Ukraine 5 March sunk Russian patrol vessel using domestically produced naval drones, 23 March claimed to have inflicted damage on three landing ships and one intelligence ship from

Russian Black Sea fleet in Crimean port of Sevastopol. Ukraine has disabled one third of fleet's combat ships since full-scale invasion.

Russia hailed missiles on Ukraine, notably targeting energy infrastructure. Moscow escalated attacks in north using ballistic missiles and guided aviation bombs, forcing authorities mid-March to begin evacuating civilians. Beginning 21 March, Russian forces launched massive missile and drone attacks on energy infrastructure, leaving over one million Ukrainians without power; strikes hit several major power facilities, including country's largest dam. Russian Ministry of Defence 22 March said attacks were in response to Ukrainian shelling and cross-border incursions (see Russia). Meanwhile, during secret visit to Odesa region by Zelenskyy and Greek PM Mitsotakis, ballistic missile 6 March struck near their convoy; attack raised concerns about Russian intelligence awareness of foreign dignitaries' movements.

In other important developments. Parliament made headway clarifying thousands of queries to pending mobilisation law, which is likely to come up for vote in early April. Czech President Pavel 7 March pledged to deliver 800,000 shells in 2024 via internationally-funded, Czech-led initiative; announcement came amid halting U.S. military assistance and delays in expansion of European ammunition production. China's Ambassador to Switzerland 18 March said Beijing was considering participation in Ukraine peace summit organised by Bern; Moscow 13 March ruled out Russian participation.

Western Europe/Mediterranean

➔ Cyprus UN personal envoy continued careful diplomacy to explore potential common ground between parties for return to formal talks.

Prospects of new round of negotiations between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots for settlement remained uncertain. UN Sec-Gen's Personal Envoy to Cyprus Maria Angela Holguin 11 March returned to island for second round of meetings with Republic of Cyprus President Christodoulides and "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" ("TRNC") leader Ersin Tatar, as well as political parties, civil society, and religious representatives from both communities. Holguin 16 March called for "transforming the hardships of the past into the foundation for a sustainable future", while indicating that she was carrying on with her mission to explore whether common ground for negotiations existed. Meanwhile, in reference to 1974 Turkish invasion of island, Turkish President Erdoğan 19 March said "perhaps if we had pushed south [...] there would be no more south and north, and Cyprus would be completely ours", triggering strong rebuke from Republic of Cyprus and Greece. Christodoulides 21 March said that positive steps regarding enhancement of Türkiye's relations with EU was dependent on "concrete progress" on Cyprus issue.

➔ Türkiye Govt struck agreements with Iraq, including to ban Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and continued operations against PKK in northern Iraq and northern Syria, and Islamic State (ISIS) at home.

Security forces targeted PKK in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, security forces 4 and 19 March announced killing of two of PKK's "youth leaders" in Sulaymaniyah province. Clashes with PKK 19 March killed Turkish soldier and injured four others in northern

Iraq; Türkiye same day responded with round of airstrikes in Metina, Zap, Gara, and Qandil regions (see Iraq). In Syria, security units 22 March carried out operation against People's Protection Units (YPG) in Qamishli (see Syria). Meanwhile, signalling possible escalation in coming months, President Erdoğan 18 March claimed that Iraqi border would be entirely secured by summer and that "job half-done" in Syria would "certainly" be completed; FM Hakan Fidan same day announced intention in summer to cut off "PKK/YPG" transit route between Iraq and Syria.

Govt and Iraq laid groundwork for upgraded security and economic cooperation. Senior Turkish delegation led by FM Fidan 14-15 March visited Iraqi capital Baghdad and jointly met senior Iraqi ministers as well as leader of Iran-backed Popular Mobilisation Forces and Kurdistan Regional Govt's Interior Minister. Meeting established joint Iraqi-Turkish permanent commissions on counterterrorism, water governance, trade, oil trade and transportation, and Baghdad also designated PKK as "banned organisation", which Turkish officials hailed as pivotal diplomatic win. In addition to bolstering fight against PKK, Ankara hopes improved ties can advance Development Road Initiative, a major trade infrastructure project aiming to connect Iraq's Basra city to Türkiye; Ankara and Baghdad are reportedly in talks for joint summer offensive against PKK along part of the project's planned route.

Authorities targeted alleged Islamic State (ISIS) members. Security forces detained over 400 individuals during March; following ISIS-claimed attack in Moscow 23 March, security forces detained nearly 150 individuals across 30 provinces (see Russia).

Relations with Greece remain on course for enhancement. Erdoğan 4 March conveyed birthday wishes to Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Greek vice-FM Alexandra Papadopoulou 11 March met Turkish vice-FM Burak Akçapar in Ankara as part of Turkish-Greek Political Dialogues format.

Central Asia

➔ **Kyrgyzstan** Lawmakers adopted contentious foreign agent's law amid widespread concern about threat to civil society; Tajik-Kyrgyz border talks continued to progress.

Parliament adopted controversial "foreign representatives" legislation. Lawmakers 14 March voted in favour of controversial "foreign agents" draft law in its third and final reading. Move sparked condemnation; in joint letter to President Japarov, over 30 domestic and foreign civil society organisations 20 March warned proposed amendments risk dealing "devastating blow" to Kyrgyzstan's "vibrant civil society" and could endanger "international development and economic assistance programmes". Meanwhile, court in capital Bishkek 12 March placed eight of eleven reporters from Temirov Line media outlet, detained in Jan for allegedly calling for "mass riots", in pre-trial detention until 13 May; court ordered transfer of three others to house arrest.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan agreed on over 10km of border. Kyrgyz-Tajik talks on border delimitation and demarcation 12-17 March took place in Tajikistan's Sughd

region. Kyrgyz officials 17 March announced sides had agreed on just under 11km of border and signed protocols; parties agreed to hold next meeting in Kyrgyzstan.

➔ **Tajikistan Tajik and Russian leaders pledged to intensify joint counterterrorism efforts following terrorist attack in Russian capital; Tajik-Kyrgyz border talks continued to progress.**

Russian authorities charged four Tajik citizens in connection with terrorist attack. Following 22 March deadly terrorist attack in Russian capital Moscow, for which Islamic State (ISIS) claimed responsibility, Russian authorities arrested four Tajik citizens, who appeared in court 24 March to hear charges, bearing visible signs of abuse (see Russia). President Rahmon 24 March condemned attack during call with Russian President Putin; Kremlin afterwards said pair had agreed to intensify joint counterterrorism efforts. Tajik authorities next day began questioning suspects' relatives; according to 29 March media reports, Tajik authorities reportedly detained at least nine people in connection with attack. Meanwhile, Russia witnessed uptick in anti-Tajik sentiment, with migrants reportedly subjected to verbal abuse and harassment from law enforcement.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan agreed on over 10km of border. Tajik-Kyrgyz talks on border delimitation and demarcation 12-17 March took place in Sughd region. Kyrgyz officials 17 March announced sides had agreed on just under 11km of border and signed protocols; parties agreed to hold next meeting in Kyrgyzstan.

➔ **Uzbekistan Delegation headed to Afghanistan for trade talks.**

Delegation led by FM Bakhtiyor Saidov 12 March visited Afghan capital Kabul for meetings with senior Taliban officials amid growing efforts by regional actors to deepen engagement; talks reportedly focused on boosting economic ties, regional connectivity and water management. Taliban media suggested Uzbekistan may soon accept Taliban ambassador.