

I. Key general developments in the region

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There were three countries with active armed conflicts on their territory in Europe in 2020: the high-intensity interstate border conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan for control of Nagorno-Karabakh (see section II) and the ongoing low-intensity internationalized, subnational armed conflict in Ukraine (see section III).¹ The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict flared up again during the year and involved the most serious fighting since the ceasefire in 1994 that ended the 1988–94 Nagorno-Karabakh War. A Russian-brokered ceasefire, which entered into force on 10 November 2020, ended the 44-day armed conflict in 2020.

Although most of Europe has been relatively peaceful for at least the last two decades, three main areas of tension remain. First, there are persistent tensions between Russia and most of the rest of Europe—over issues as diverse as cyberattacks, Ukraine, the response to Covid-19 and the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.² These tensions have led to several highly militarized and contested security contexts, within Europe and also further afield (including confrontations in Africa, the Arctic and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region). There are competing explanations for this political–military climate of mistrust.³

Second, there are several long-standing simmering conflicts (that are mostly frozen but never resolved), especially in the post-Soviet space where five *de facto* statelets that claimed independence from successor states to the Soviet Union—Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Trans-Dniester and the portions of Ukraine’s Donbas now controlled by Russian-backed separatists—remain unrecognized by most states around the world. Similar conditions apply in Cyprus and the Western Balkans.⁴

¹ For conflict definitions and typologies see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

² See e.g. Sanger, D. E. and Santora, M., ‘US and allies blame Russia for cyberattack on Republic of Georgia’, *New York Times*, 20 Feb. 2020; Sanger, D. E. and Perlforth, N., ‘Russian criminal group finds new target: Americans working from home’, *New York Times*, 25 June 2020; Barnes, J. E. and Sanger, D. E., ‘Russian intelligence agencies push disinformation on pandemic’, *New York Times*, 28 July 2020; and ‘Alexei Navalny blames Vladimir Putin for poisoning him’, BBC News, 1 Oct. 2020. On the chemical nerve agent Novichok and its alleged use to poison Navalny see chapter 12, section IV, in this volume.

³ On the deteriorating relationship between Russia and the USA/Europe see Smith, D., ‘International tensions and shifting dynamics of power’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 11–12; Smith, D., ‘International tensions and the dynamics of power’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 18–19; and Davis, I., ‘Key general developments in the region’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 114–15. Also see Stent, A., *Putin’s World: Russia against the West and with the Rest* (Twelve: New York, 2019); and Sakwa, R., ‘Greater Russia: Is Moscow out to subvert the West?’, *International Politics* (2020).

⁴ On the role of identity politics and the dynamics of the Russian–Western geopolitical confrontation on the conflicts in the post-Soviet space see Kazantsev, A. A. et al., ‘Russia’s policy in the “frozen conflicts” of the post-Soviet space: From ethno-politics to geopolitics’, *Caucasus Survey*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2020), pp. 142–62.

Third, there are serious and complex security challenges in Europe's southern neighbourhood and beyond.⁵ Two issues at the forefront of European security thinking in recent years—irregular migration and terrorism—both have a strong southern dimension.⁶ While Islamist attacks in Europe have been declining since 2017, a spate of attacks in Austria, France and Germany towards the end of the year led to fresh calls for stronger counterterrorism and counter-radicalization efforts.⁷

During the year, two further levels of complexity added to these existing tensions: (a) political protests in Belarus following a disputed presidential election in August 2020 and (b) increased tensions in the eastern Mediterranean that were centred on Greece and Turkey but also pulled in other states on both sides. On a more promising note, a modest Kosovo–Serbia détente was mediated by the United States in September. These developments are discussed briefly below.

Most of the conflicts in Europe are mediated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, but its efforts in 2020 were hampered by reduced mobility due to the Covid-19 pandemic and internal disputes about leadership appointments.⁸ More generally, the impact of Covid-19 on armed conflicts in Europe appeared minimal, although the direct and indirect impacts on conflict dynamics and European security more broadly may take years to develop.⁹ In addition to large numbers of deaths, the Covid-19 pandemic led to unprecedented peacetime restrictions across most of Europe, including restrictions on freedom of movement, with travel often permitted only for essential work, health reasons or other emergencies.

There were 18 multilateral peace operations in Europe in 2020, all of which had been active in the previous year. The number of personnel deployed in these operations remained stable during 2020, at around 8000 (8063 on 31 December 2020).

Political crisis in Belarus

Against the background of poor political relations between Russia and many other European states, the political crisis in Belarus had a regional and a

⁵ On armed conflicts in Afghanistan, MENA and sub-Saharan Africa see respectively, chapter 4, section II, chapter 6 and chapter 7 in this volume.

⁶ For details on Europe's response to irregular migration and counterterrorism policy in 2019 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2020* (note 3), pp. 119–21.

⁷ Murphy, F., 'Austrian police arrest 14 in manhunt after gunman rampage', Reuters, 2 Nov. 2020; and 'Terrorism in Europe: Despite the horrors in Vienna and Paris, jihadism has declined', *The Economist*, 3 Nov. 2020.

⁸ Liechtenstein, S., 'How internal squabbling paralyzed Europe's most vital security organization', *World Politics Review*, 5 Aug. 2020.

⁹ See e.g. Nye, J. S., 'Post pandemic geopolitics', Project Syndicate, 6 Oct. 2020. On the impact of Covid-19 on Russian foreign policy see e.g. Trenin, D., Rumer, E. and Weiss, A. S., 'Steady state: Russian foreign policy after coronavirus', Carnegie Moscow, 8 July 2020.

national significance. Widespread protests erupted in the Belarusian capital Minsk after Aleksander Lukashenko, president since 1994, claimed 80 per cent of the vote in what opposition leaders and many Western governments said was a rigged election on 9 August 2020.¹⁰ The peaceful protests expanded and continued on a weekly basis from September through to December, despite being met with a fierce police crackdown and arrest of opposition leaders.¹¹

The internal governance crisis in Belarus has a strong geopolitical dimension.¹² While Belarus is normally a relatively stable junior partner to Russia, President Lukashenko has been pursuing greater autonomy since 2014, leading to growing attention from the West, including visa liberalization with the European Union (EU), military training with the United Kingdom and the resumption of a US ambassadorial appointment.¹³ In turn, Russia began to apply pressure to encourage Belarus to return to more Russian-aligned foreign and security policy, and to integrate the two countries more deeply.¹⁴

After the escalation in protests, Russia, which views Belarus as a close partner and a buffer zone against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), offered security assistance to Belarus—including a newly established police force that could be deployed if needed—and also pledged a \$1.5 billion loan.¹⁵ In September, as President Lukashenko continued to claim the protests were being driven by the West, Belarus closed its western borders with Poland and Lithuania and placed its army on high alert.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the EU declined to recognize the ‘inauguration’ of President Lukashenko on 23 September 2020, and imposed sanctions on 40 Belarus officials a week

¹⁰ Makhovsky, A., ‘Bloody clashes in Belarus as West condemns crackdown after election’, Reuters, 10 Aug. 2020; ‘Belarus presidential election results finalized’, Belarusian Telegraph Agency, 14 Aug. 2020; ‘Joint statement of Nordic-Baltic foreign ministers on recent developments in Belarus’, Government Offices of Sweden, 11 Aug. 2020; and Makhovsky, A., ‘Thousands stage flower protest as EU weighs sanctions’, Reuters, 12 Aug. 2020.

¹¹ ‘Aleksandr Lukashenko is trying to beat protesters into submission’, *The Economist*, 22 Aug. 2020; Walker, S., ‘Belarus protests: Nationwide strike looms after “people’s ultimatum” rally’, *The Guardian*, 26 Oct. 2020; and ‘More than 150 anti-Lukashenko demonstrators detained in Belarus’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 20 Dec. 2020.

¹² Anthony, I., ‘The Belarus election: A challenge to stability and security in Northern Europe’, SIPRI Commentary, 19 Aug. 2020.

¹³ ‘Belarus: EU concludes agreements on visa facilitation and readmission’, Council of the European Union, Press release, 27 May 2020; ‘42 Commando head to Belarus for Exercise Winter Partisan’, UK Defence Journal, 1 Mar. 2020; and ‘US nominates first Ambassador to Belarus in over a decade’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 21 Apr. 2020.

¹⁴ Sivitsky, A., ‘Belarus–Russia: From a strategic deal to an integration ultimatum’, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2019.

¹⁵ Shotter, J. and Peel, M., ‘Russia says it is ready to provide Belarus with military support’, *Financial Times*, 16 Aug. 2020; Tétrault-Farber, G. and Makhovsky, A., ‘Putin says Russia has set up force to aid Belarus leader if needed’, Reuters, 27 Aug. 2020; and ‘Belarus protests: Putin pledges \$1.5bn loan at Lukashenko meeting’, BBC News, 14 Sep. 2020.

¹⁶ AP News, ‘Belarus president closes western borders, puts army on high alert’, Al Jazeera, 17 Sep. 2020.

later.¹⁷ Belarus closed its borders with all neighbouring countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine) except Russia on 29 October 2020.¹⁸ With protests continuing at the end of the year, there appeared to be no clear way out of the crisis.

US-mediated détente between Kosovo and Serbia

Areas of instability remained in the Western Balkans, including the unresolved dispute between Kosovo and Serbia over Kosovo's independence. Both countries have been at peace with each other since 1999. They have reached some agreements over trade, border management and other common challenges through EU-led mediation. However, despite recent efforts to find a solution, Kosovo remains a contested state, with the governance of Serb-majority communities a particularly problematic issue.¹⁹

The USA embarked on its own mediation initiative during 2020, apparently with only limited coordination with the EU, which is tasked with facilitating dialogue under Resolution 1739 (2010) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.²⁰ In June 2020 US-mediated talks between Kosovan and Serbian leaders aimed at normalizing economic relations were cancelled after a special prosecutor indicted Kosovo's President Hashim Thaçi on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity relating to Kosovo's 1998–99 conflict.²¹ However, the indictment set back efforts to reach a settlement with Serbia by only a few months. On 4 September 2020 the Kosovo and Serbia economic normalization agreements were signed: two documents in which Kosovo and Serbia agreed to normalize economic ties. They also included commitments linked to US peace efforts in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: Serbia agreed to move its Israeli embassy to Jerusalem (following

¹⁷ 'Belarus: Declaration by the high representative on behalf of the European Union on the so-called "inauguration" of Aleksandr Lukashenko', Council of the European Union, Press release, 24 Sep. 2020; and 'Belarus: EU imposes sanctions for repression and election falsification', Council of the European Union, Press release, 2 Oct. 2020.

¹⁸ Balmforth, T., 'Lukashenko shuts borders, shakes up security team to stamp out Belarus protests', Reuters, 29 Oct. 2020. On bilateral tensions between Belarus and Ukraine see Nahaylo, B., 'Alarm bells in Ukraine as Lukashenka calls on Putin to rescue his crumbling regime', Atlantic Council, 17 Aug. 2020.

¹⁹ Kosovo is recognized by about 100 UN member states, but the number fluctuates as some states withdraw their recognition. Key states that do not recognize Kosovo include China, Russia and Serbia, as well as five EU member states (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain). Kartsonaki, A., 'Playing with fire: An assessment of the EU's approach of constructive ambiguity on Kosovo's blended conflict', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2020), pp. 103–20; and Turp-Balazs, C., 'Serbia's campaign to reduce the number of countries which recognise Kosovo is working', *Emerging Europe*, 16 Jan. 2020.

²⁰ Ushkovska, M., 'The EU's rivalry with the US is complicating Serbia-Kosovo talks', *World Politics Review*, 9 Nov. 2020; and Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Resolution 1739 (2010), 'The situation in Kosovo and the role of the Council of Europe', 2010.

²¹ Kelly, L., 'Trump's Kosovo peace summit postponed amid war crimes allegations', *The Hill*, 25 June 2020.

the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017), and Israel and Kosovo mutually recognized each other for the first time.²² However, the agreements have been criticized for being 'light on substance and heavy on publicity', with little advancement on previous EU initiatives.²³

Increased tensions in the eastern Mediterranean

A dangerous stand-off developed in the eastern Mediterranean during 2020—pitting Turkey against Cyprus and Greece, but also involving the EU, Egypt, France, and other states with geopolitical and economic interests in the region.²⁴ Turkish–Western relations have deteriorated over multiple issues, including oil and gas exploration, maritime delimitation, the wars in Libya and Syria, migration and the long-standing Cyprus conflict between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots.²⁵ Bilateral Greek–Turkish talks to address some of these underlying issues started in 2002 but broke down in 2016. In 2020 Germany (in the context of its presidency of the Council of the EU) and NATO (in relation to military de-escalation) led diplomatic efforts to prevent a destabilizing conflict.

Competition over hydrocarbon resources and maritime boundaries

Since the signature of commercial exploration contracts in 2018 and the formation of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum in 2019 (by Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and Palestine), the proprietorship and financial feasibility of the regional gas discoveries have been clouded by uncertainties.²⁶ In June 2020 the rhetoric between Greece and Turkey over maritime borders and hydrocarbon development became even more heated following Turkey's late-May decision to begin hydrocarbon drilling in areas Greece claimed as its exclusive economic zone.²⁷ Agreements reached by Greece with Italy (on 9 June 2020) and Egypt (on 6 August 2020) to demarcate their maritime borders further heightened tensions with Turkey (which signed a competing deal with the Government of National Accord in Libya

²² Wood, V., 'Serbia and Kosovo agree to normalise economic ties in US-brokered deal', *The Independent*, 4 Sep. 2020. On the Israeli–Palestine conflict see chapter 6, section III, in this volume.

²³ Ruge, M., 'Trump's Kosovo show: No big deal', *Politico*, 8 Sep. 2020.

²⁴ See e.g. Anthony, I. and Sahlin, M., 'Maritime disputes in the eastern Mediterranean: Why and why now?', SIPRI Commentary, 23 Oct. 2020; 'How to defuse tensions in the eastern Mediterranean', International Crisis Group, 22 Sep. 2020; and 'Angst in the Aegean: A row between Turkey and Greece over gas is raising tensions in the eastern Mediterranean', *The Economist*, 22 Aug. 2020.

²⁵ On Turkish–Western relations see Daly, G. et al., 'Turkey and the West: Keep the flame burning', German Marshall Fund Policy Paper no. 6, June 2020.

²⁶ Vesterby, S. D., 'Keep your friends close and Turkey closer: EU-Turkey relations', Royal United Services Institute Commentary, 22 Sep. 2020.

²⁷ Antonopoulos, P., 'Greek defence minister: Turkey's behaviour is aggressive but our armed forces are a deterrent', *Greek City Times*, 5 June 2020.

in November 2019).²⁸ Although Turkey agreed to temporarily pause energy exploration activities in July following talks brokered by German chancellor Angela Merkel, it later resumed them.²⁹ On 12 August 2020 a Turkish frigate escorting a survey ship suffered a minor collision with a Greek frigate.³⁰ Meanwhile, the EU threatened Turkey with fresh sanctions.³¹

In September 2020 the US administration partially lifted an arms embargo imposed on Cyprus in the late 1980s and appeared to provide growing diplomatic support to Greece in its dispute with Turkey.³² In December the EU agreed to impose sanctions on an unspecified number of Turkish officials and entities, but deferred more significant options (such as trade tariffs or an arms embargo) pending consultations with the new Biden administration.³³

North Atlantic Treaty Organization 'deconfliction' talks

The regional divisions have also led to intra-NATO tensions, with increased naval deployments and military exercises in the eastern Mediterranean highlighting the risk of a military confrontation among member states, either by accident or by design. A naval incident between French and Turkish ships in June 2020 led to an investigation by NATO, which also initiated 'technical talks' between Greece and Turkey in September.³⁴ These latter talks led to a military deconfliction mechanism being established at the beginning of October. Deconfliction involves setting up communication links among rival militaries in the same theatre to reduce the risk of military incidents and accidents, as the USA has done with Russia in Syria. In this case, it included the creation of a hotline between Greece and Turkey to facilitate deconfliction at sea or in the air.³⁵ However, prospects for diplomacy continued to look uncertain at the end of the year.

²⁸ 'Greece, Italy sign deal delimiting maritime zones', Al Jazeera, 9 June 2020; Mourad, M., 'Egypt and Greece sign agreement on exclusive economic zone', Reuters, 6 Aug. 2020; and 'Turkey denounces maritime deal between Greece, Egypt', Al Jazeera, 7 Aug. 2020.

²⁹ Smith, H. and Henley, J., 'Greek military put on high alert as tensions with Turkey rise', *The Guardian*, 13 Aug. 2020.

³⁰ Sharman, J., 'Turkish and Greek warships collide in eastern Mediterranean', *The Independent*, 14 Aug. 2020.

³¹ 'EU warns Turkey of sanctions as east Mediterranean crisis worsens', Al Jazeera, 28 Aug. 2020.

³² 'Turkey slams US over lifting Cyprus arms embargo, Nicosia welcomes decision', *Deutsche Welle*, 2 Sep. 2020; and Morello, C., 'Pompeo highlights warmer ties with Greece amid regional tensions with Turkey', *Washington Post*, 29 Sep. 2020.

³³ Emmott, R., 'After heated debate, EU to prepare new sanctions over Turkish gas drilling', Reuters, 10 Dec. 2020.

³⁴ Emmott, R., Irish, J. and Gumrukcu, T., 'NATO keeps France-Turkey probe under wraps as tempers flare', Reuters, 17 Sep. 2020; and 'NATO Secretary General statement on technical talks for de-confliction in the eastern Mediterranean', NATO news release, 3 Sep. 2020.

³⁵ 'Military de-confliction mechanism between Greece and Turkey established at NATO', NATO news release, 1 Oct. 2020. On the conflict in Syria see chapter 6, section II, in this volume.