NATIONS IN
TRANSIT 2021

The Antidemocratic Turn

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

This booklet is a summary of findings for the 2021 edition of *Nations in Transit*. The complete analysis, including detailed reports on all countries, can be found on our website at **www.freedomhouse.org**.

ON THE COVER

People in Budapest protest for the independence of Hungary's University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE) following changes that threaten the university's autonomy. Image credit: Marton Monus/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

The Antidemocratic Turn

By Zselyke Csaky

Attacks on democratic institutions are spreading faster than ever in Europe and Eurasia, and coalescing into a challenge to democracy itself.

Incumbent leaders and ruling parties are corrupting governance and spreading antidemocratic practices across the region that stretches from Central Europe to Central Asia. These actions are opportunistic, but are often cloaked in an ideological agenda. And as they become increasingly common, they are fueling a deterioration in conditions that will have global implications for the cause of human freedom.

Democracy has never been the only game in town, but for more than two decades after the transitions that ended the Cold War, leaders and politicians continued to pay lip service to the democratic model. Over the past decade, however, amid the erosion of the liberal democratic order and the rise of authoritarian powers, the idea of democracy as an aspirational end point has started to lose currency in many capitals. Existing institutions' failure to address pressing societal concerns, increasing polarization, and growing inequality have fueled uncertainty and anger, and major democracies' mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided additional fodder to those interested in exploiting disillusionment with the traditional champions of democratic governance.

In this period of change and discontent, antidemocratic leaders in the region have started to redefine norms and renegotiate the boundaries of acceptable behavior. A contestation that began with Vladimir Putin's "sovereign democracy" in the mid-2000s,

and continued with Viktor Orbán's "illiberal democracy" a decade later, has expanded, and forms of governance that are decidedly not democratic are taking root. Antidemocratic politicians are also sharing practices and learning from one another, accelerating the turn toward alternatives.

Countries all over the region are turning away from democracy or find themselves trapped in cycle of setbacks and partial recoveries. In the 2021 edition of *Nations in Transit*, covering the events of 2020, a total of 18 countries suffered declines in their democracy scores; only 6 countries' scores improved, while 5 countries experienced no net change. This marked the 17th consecutive year of overall decline in *Nations in Transit*, leaving the number of countries that are designated as democracies at its lowest point in the history of the report.

Nations in Transit Methodology

Nations in Transit evaluates elected state institutions (local and national governments), unelected state institutions (the judiciary and anticorruption authorities), and unelected nonstate institutions (civil society and the media), all of which are necessary for a healthy, well-functioning democracy.

Antidemocratic norm-setting in Central Europe

Two countries, Poland and Hungary, stand out for their unparalleled democratic deterioration over the past decade. Hungary has undergone the biggest decline ever measured in *Nations in Transit*, plummeting through two categorical boundaries to become a Transitional/Hybrid Regime last year. Poland is still categorized as a Semiconsolidated Democracy, but its decline over the past five years has been steeper than that of Hungary.

The ruling parties in Budapest and Warsaw have long been emulating each other in cracking down on judicial autonomy, independent media, the civic sector, and vulnerable minority populations. Recently, however, they have moved from attacking the liberal principles that underpin democracy to setting new norms themselves and openly spreading antidemocratic practices.
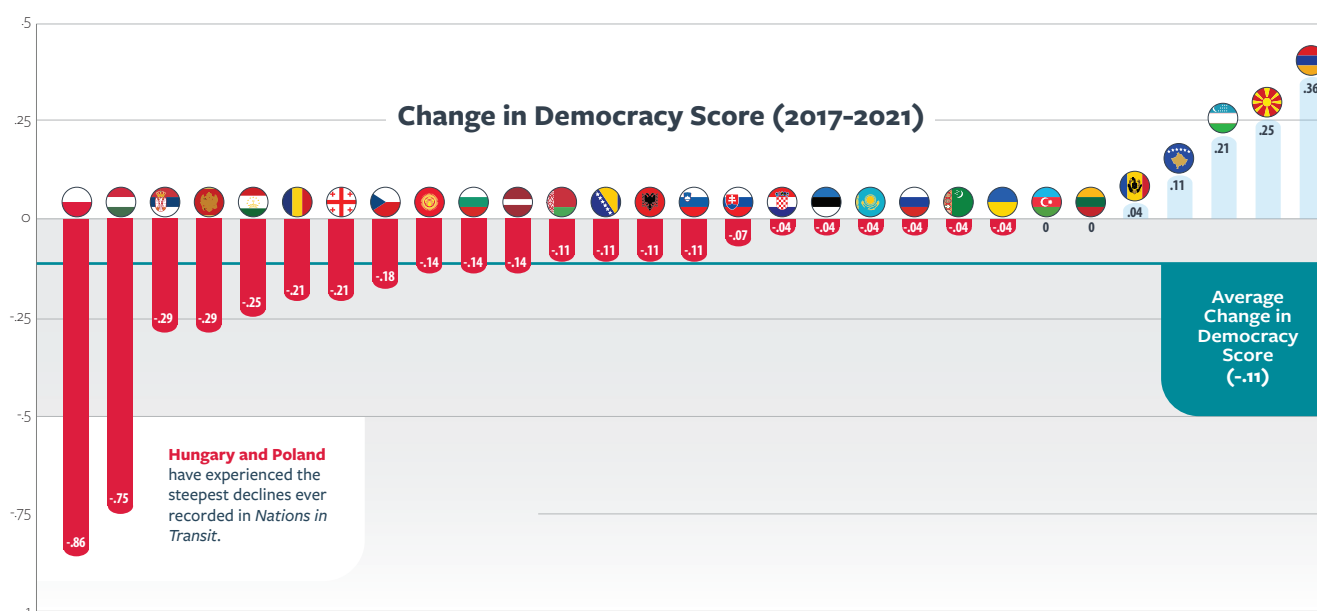
Hungary's model of media capture, for example, has been openly embraced by likeminded governments in the region. In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) have overseen the mainstreaming of smear campaigns and progovernment propaganda, which contributed to the SNS's sweeping election victory and the formation of a nonrepresentative parliament in 2020. In Slovenia, Prime Minister Janez Janša—who had benefitted from Hungarian investment in the Slovenian media industry— has elevated verbal attacks on journalists to a new level. But this antidemocratic learning process is most visible in Poland, where last year the government used a state-owned energy giant to acquire four-fifths of the country's regional media outlets and announced plans to impose an advertising tax, which would strip an already ailing private media sector of vital resources. Both of these steps were essentially torn from the playbook of Fidesz, Hungary's ruling party.

Transfers of antidemocratic norms have also taken place on issues such as the rights of LGBT+ people and abortion. In these cases, Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has led the way, deploying hateful rhetoric and mobilizing its base around the fight against what it calls "LGBT and gender ideology." In the wake of PiS's successes, including the 2020 reelection of President Andrzej Duda after a homophobic campaign, Hungary's government similarly elevated attacks on the LGBT+ community to the top of its political agenda, ending the legal recognition of transgender people and amending the constitution to ban adoption by same-sex couples.

THE DOWNTURN DEEPENS

The majority of countries in the *Nations in Transit* region—including all but one democracy—are worse off than they were four years ago, as measured by the net change in their Democracy Scores.

Change in Democracy Score (2017-2021)

Hungary and Poland have experienced the steepest declines ever recorded in *Nations in Transit*.

-.86 -.75 -.29 -.29 -.25 -.21 -.21 -.18 -.14 -.14 -.14 -.11 -.11 -.11 -.11 -.07 -.04 -.04 -.04 -.04 -.04 -.04 0 0 .04 .11 .21 .25 .36

Average Change in Democracy Score (-.11)

The goal of the ruling parties in Hungary and Poland is to legitimize their antidemocratic practices. This is why, after politically subjugating their respective court systems, Fidesz and PiS have started to promote their judicial "innovations" in newly founded law journals. And while their planned "rule of law institute" has yet to get off the ground, they have clearly staked out a position beyond the pale of Europe's legal norms, challenging the European Union's rule-of-law enforcement mechanism as "political" and arguing that there is no commonly agreed definition of the rule of law.

Deepening autocracy in Eurasia

The entrenchment and expansion of antidemocratic norms and ideas is not a new phenomenon for the broader region. Such practices and innovations have long been shared between Russia and its neighborhood. Over the past decade, there has been a proliferation of "foreign agents" laws to crack down on civil society, the use of legislation on extremism and counterterrorism to silence political opponents, and the creation of puppet organizations that legitimize authoritarian governments and affirm their sovereignty.

But in Russia and the rest of the *Nations in Transit* region's eastern half, this pattern has taken a noticeable turn toward deepening autocratization.

For the first time in the report's history, Russia's score on the National Democratic Governance indicator bottomed out, reflecting President Putin's absolute control after the fraudulent 2020 constitutional referendum and his vicious efforts to silence dissenting voices. The attempted murder of Aleksey Navalny in 2020 and his imprisonment in a notorious penal colony this year was just the most prominent demonstration of the regime's cruelty. The suppression of protests with unprecedented severity, the extension of the foreign agents law to practically any citizen involved in political activities, and plans to tighten state control over the internet all suggest that the Kremlin is fearful of its critics and determined to secure a choreographed victory in the fall 2021 elections by any means necessary.

Similarly, in Belarus, the brutal crackdown on protests that followed the fraudulent 2020 presidential election represented a significant escalation for Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime. After years of repression punctuated by periods of diplomatic thaw, Lukashenka faced a groundswell of opposition as protesters from all walks of life united behind the prodemocracy candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Yet

after months of mass arrests, beatings, torture, and the incarceration of scores of political prisoners, the vision of a more democratic Belarus now seems increasingly distant.

Kyrgyzstan, the only country in Central Asia that was reasonably close to emerging from the category of Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes, experienced a violent and extralegal power grab in 2020 by a political outcast and former prison inmate with links to organized crime. The confirmation of Sadyr Japarov's rise to the presidency in January 2021, even if he is supported by a significant portion of the population, signals a return to strongman rule, and upcoming changes to the constitution are likely to further fortify his dominant position.

Perhaps the only bright spot in Eurasia was civil society's incredible resilience in the face of democratic deterioration and the coronavirus pandemic. Organized civic groups, ad hoc grassroots initiatives, and conscientious citizens joined forces to fill the void left by the state in 2020. This exposed the massive governance failures of autocratic regimes while providing the population with much-needed help and hope in a time of crisis.
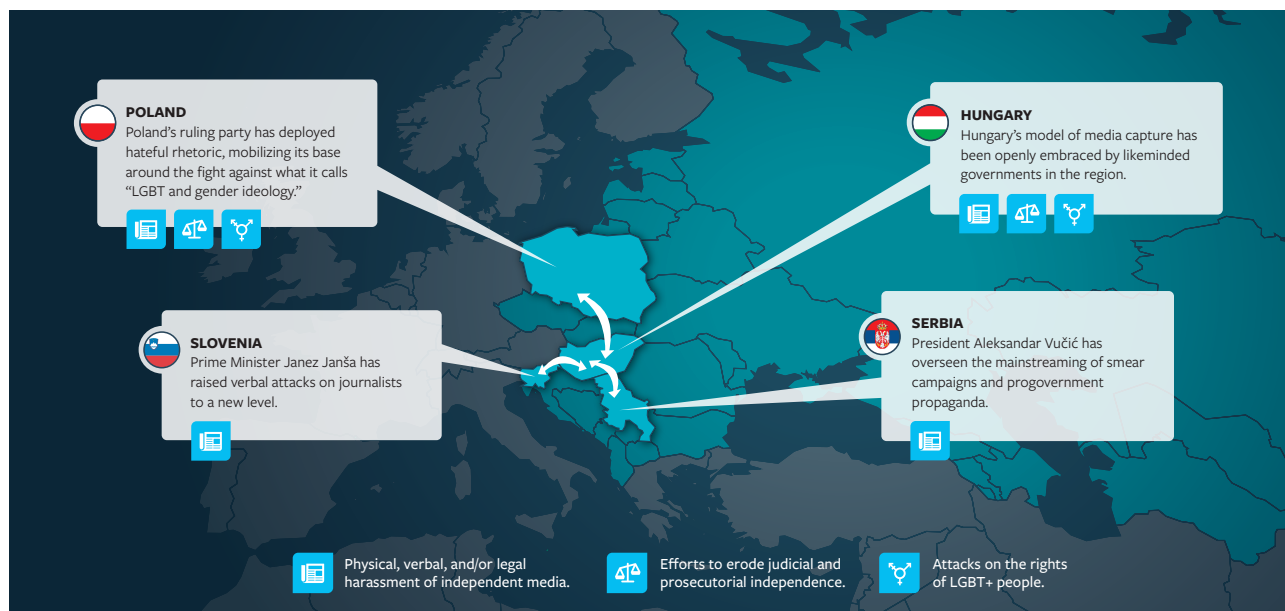
Reform movements losing steam

Nations in Transit is a catalogue of reform efforts; its methodology is rooted in the assumption that transition away from a nondemocratic system and toward something more democratic is both possible and desirable. Yet 2020 was not a good year for reform, and in many countries where there had been hope for change, much of the momentum seems to have drained away.

In Armenia, the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has triggered a domestic crisis that risks undoing the success of the 2018 Velvet Revolution. The country's democracy score declined for the first time since the revolution, and developments to date this year, including tensions between the military and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, demonstrate that the situation could grow worse. In Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's reform efforts met with strong resistance from the judiciary as entrenched interests fought to preserve the status quo. The opportunity to uproot Ukraine's corrupt, oligarchic system is closing, and steps in early 2021, such as the controversial shutdown of oligarch-owned television networks, underscore the difficulty of upholding democratic principles while confronting a stubbornly undemocratic establishment.

THE EXPANSION OF THE ANTIDEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE

Incumbents and ruling parties in Central and Southeastern Europe are corrupting governance and spreading antidemocratic practices.

POLAND
Poland's ruling party has deployed hateful rhetoric, mobilizing its base around the fight against what it calls "LGBT and gender ideology."

HUNGARY
Hungary's model of media capture has been openly embraced by likeminded governments in the region.

SLOVENIA
Prime Minister Janez Janša has raised verbal attacks on journalists to a new level.

SERBIA
President Aleksandar Vučić has overseen the mainstreaming of smear campaigns and progovernment propaganda.

Physical, verbal, and/or legal harassment of independent media.

Efforts to erode judicial and prosecutorial independence.

Attacks on the rights of LGBT+ people.

In Moldova, the election of Maia Sandu as president in late 2020 raised hopes for change, but her attempts to overcome hostility in the parliament in 2021 have led to protracted political and interinstitutional struggle, which could further weaken democratic safeguards. In Georgia, the opposition's boycott of 2020 parliamentary elections and the February 2021 arrest of opposition leader Nika Melia clearly demonstrated the end of the country's recent reform attempts. Georgia's democracy score is now close to where it was a decade ago, before the current ruling party rode to power on a wave of public frustration with the increasingly autocratic incumbents.

By contrast, in North Macedonia and Uzbekistan, piecemeal efforts have yielded some positive change on the ground, resulting in improvements in the countries' scores. The reforms in Uzbekistan—including in the agricultural and judicial sectors— are improving citizens' lives, though they are clearly not aimed at cultivating democracy or allowing genuine political pluralism. In North Macedonia, meanwhile, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev's center-left government has repaired some of the institutional damage wrought by his right-wing populist predecessor, and still has a chance to deliver the benefits of democracy.

A success story is especially needed in the Balkans, where democratic gains have been rolled back in most countries. While important transfers of power took place in Montenegro in 2020 and Kosovo in 2021, it is still unclear whether they will lead to an improvement in democratic institutions. And without such institutional transformation, any political opening is extremely difficult to sustain.

Democracies must take the field

The turn away from democracy and toward antidemocratic alternatives in the region will have global implications. The leaders and parties in question are openly demonstrating their rejection of democratic norms, which often comes hand in hand with the adoption and promotion of "authoritarian counter-norms."

That such steps are taken by elected leaders claiming to act in the national interest—or according to an ideological agenda— can sometimes obscure the underlying reality: the ultimate goal of these practices, from institutional capture to the scapegoating of vulnerable groups, is to keep ruling parties and elites in power indefinitely. If antidemocratic norms are allowed to spread, they will legitimize a broad range of abuses and make life more difficult for millions of people, not just in autocracies but also in the gray zone between democracy and dictatorship.

The challenge faced by democracy's defenders is significant, but not insurmountable. As antidemocratic leaders grow more ambitious and strategic, it is time for democrats to go beyond simply recognizing the threat. Rather than watching with concern on the sidelines, they need to take the field.

Best practices and lessons learned should be shared among democracies, just as autocrats have been exchanging their ideas. Democratic states also need to coordinate their foreign policies with a focus on core principles, not just security concerns or geopolitical competition. In ailing democracies and hybrid regimes, attention should be concentrated on keeping the door open to progress and buttressing the institutions that facilitate change, primarily the electoral framework and the media. And in authoritarian regimes that are ramping up oppression, democracy advocates will need to enhance monitoring and assist victims of persecution, while preparing to respond to any future opportunity for change.

Ultimately, however, democracies must deliver the benefits of free self-government to their people. Citizens will have to be presented with tangible results to restore trust in the system and build support for the shared mission of defending democratic ideals in an increasingly hostile world.

INSTABILITY AND REPRESSION IN RUSSIA

By Mike Smeltzer

For the first time in the history of *Nations of Transit*, Russia's National Democratic Governance score has dropped to its lowest possible position. The events of 2020, including a fraudulent constitutional referendum enabling President Vladimir Putin's continued rule past 2024 and the attempted assassination of opposition leader Aleksey Navalny, depict a political environment that lacks any trace of democratic character. A recent deluge of repressive acts by the Kremlin, such as Navalny's unjust imprisonment, the brutal crackdown on subsequent nationwide protests, and the March 2021 arrests of opposition figures in Moscow, demonstrate how deeply threatened Putin feels by domestic developments. Recognizing that its relationship with the public has weakened, the Kremlin has chosen to drop its facade of "managed democracy" and is rapidly moving to a strategy of wholesale repression.

Society's changing calculus

Russia's deepening autocratization has been incremental but steady. Putin came to power in a period characterized by the preceding Yeltsin administration's dramatic failures: war, instability, and oligarchy had marred its reputation. While the repressive nature of the Putin regime was evident in its early years—the Yukos trial, the elimination of direct gubernatorial elections, the closure of independent media outlets, and the harassment of journalists, along with the notable murder of Anna Politkovskaya—social, political, and economic matters stabilized under his leadership. Even as Putin established a kleptocratic system of patronage that captured and perverted Russia's democratic institutions, society's willingness to protest declined.

However, the tolerance ordinary Russians have shown towards their government's antidemocratic drift has lately eroded. Recent standard-of-living improvements have not kept pace with the dramatic rise of the early 2000s. GDP-per-capita growth has stalled, real disposable incomes have fallen, and everyday necessities like food have become more expensive. The reasons for this vary from the impact of COVID-19 to the West's sanctions, instituted after the illegal annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Donbas in Ukraine. As Russians face deteriorating economic conditions, elite corruption—highlighted by crusaders like Navalny—has increasingly become a point of social irritation.
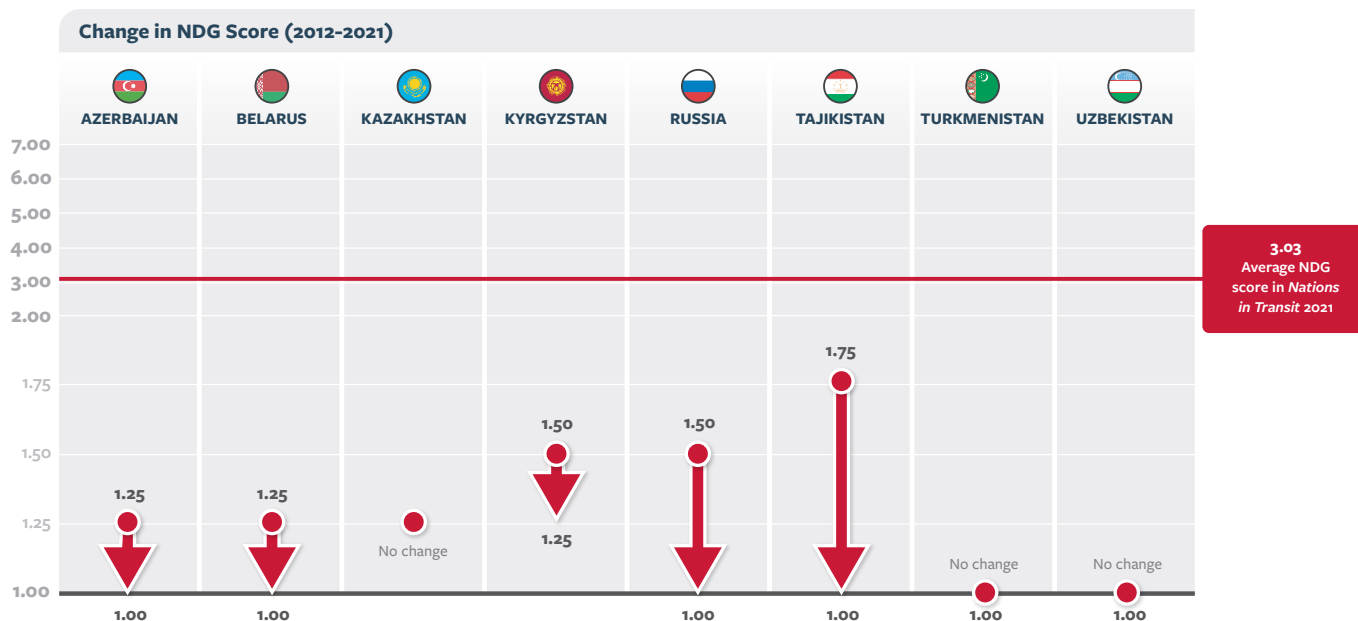
Through his investigations into high-level corruption and his campaign's crafty use of social media, Navalny has turned away from the traditional opposition narrative about the Kremlin's antidemocratic stance and human rights abuses. Rather, Navalny, ever the opportunistic politician, has sought to lay bare the vast extent of Putin-era corruption, and make explicit the connection between individuals' deteriorating quality of life and the state's support of the wealthy elite.

The Kremlin's shifting response

As more and more Russians connect the dots between their daily grievances and the Kremlin's corruption, Putin will likely consider *any* dissent to be an existential threat to his continued rule. And so, the Kremlin has shown a marked change in its response to expressions of dissatisfaction as it grapples with the shift in the public mood.

HITTING ROCK BOTTOM

Six of the eight Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes in the *Nations in Transit* region now have the lowest possible National Democratic Governance (NDG) ratings.

Change in NDG Score (2012–2021)

	AZERBAIJAN	BELARUS	KAZAKHSTAN	KYRGYZSTAN	RUSSIA	TAJIKISTAN	TURKMENISTAN	UZBEKISTAN
	1.25	1.25	No change	1.50 → 1.25	1.50	1.75	No change	No change
	1.00	1.00			1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

3.03
Average NDG score in *Nations in Transit* 2021

There has, until recently, remained a sliver of space for alternative voices in Russia, where protests are more common than is widely recognized. The Kremlin previously eschewed a pervasive campaign of repression, instead choosing when and where to apply the full force of the state in response to protests. For example, mass protests against pension reform in 2018 were not met with brutal repression by the police or security services, but with a partial policy rollback. In 2020, protesters in the northwestern region of Arkhangelsk who opposed an unwanted landfill project— and initially faced a forceful police response—won a rare victory against the elite, and even saw their prolandfill governor resign. Of course, ample evidence abounds of violent repression against concurrently held protests.

Using this tactic of selective repression, the Kremlin has used the law as a cudgel to wield against those who criticize Putin and his continued rule. Rather than simply outlawing dissent or opposition, the Kremlin perverted freedom of the press, electoral processes, and the rule of law to serve its own authoritarian ends. Through this incremental strategy, the Kremlin rhetorically remains a "managed democracy" as far as domestic audiences are concerned.

However, in an environment marked by increasing popular discontent—often directed at Putin himself—the regime has more recently favored a strategy of wholesale repression to maintain its grip. Civil society, independent media, and the political opposition have all felt the shift in the repressive nature of the state in 2021.

The authorities' response to the early 2021 protests was uniquely repressive in the contemporary Russian context. More than 12,000 Russians were detained, in what independent media outlet Proekt described as a staggering intensification in judicial punishment against protesters. That figure represents a six-fold increase in the number of administrative arrests over protests held in 2017 and 2019.

At the same time, the state continues to shrink the space for dissenting voices, constraining the ability of dissatisfied Russians to learn or speak about events via independent media outlets, the online environment, or civil society. Russia's foreign agent law, which was adopted in 2014 and has impacted the ability of civil society groups to operate, has been expanded to apply to independent media outlets and even individuals.

The Kremlin and its allies have also worked to keep the political opposition at bay. Aleksey Navalny's poisoning and subsequent arrest are, of course, the most extreme examples of the complete silencing of Putin's most serious political opponents. But the Kremlin has also attempted to exert more explicit control on the electoral environment by circumventing judicial oversight of campaigning complaints, mobilizing supporters against Navalny's "smart voting strategy," and, as mentioned above, arresting opposition figures.

Stability through repression

Unlike in 2016, President Putin finds himself in a precarious position ahead of this September's parliamentary elections.

While his dominant United Russia party is guaranteed to win a majority in the lower house, what with the regime's top-down control of elections, the Kremlin may nevertheless see some cracks in Putin's support among the population. Rather than a conciliatory state response to their legitimate grievances, Russians have witnessed a transition to fully consolidated authoritarian rule, defined by the attempted murder of political opponents and the silencing of any dissent. So long as Putin prioritizes the stability of his corrupt system of patronage over the public's concerns, he will face an increasingly disaffected population that bristles at the quotidian inequalities of life in a kleptocratic state. And yet, as Russia's civil society score has demonstrated in recent years, those who oppose this state of affairs will continue to mobilize and fight back, no matter the repression they face.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS ABOUT BREAKTHROUGH ELECTIONS

By Noah Buyon

During the present "recession" in democracy around the world, most democratic systems have not transformed neatly into authoritarian regimes. Rather, as recent editions of *Nations in Transit* demonstrate, declining democracies are entering what Thomas Carothers called the "gray zone" of hybridity. In the *Nations in Transit* region, some

countries—such as Kosovo, Moldova, or Ukraine—have been mired in the gray zone for years, but others—notably Hungary, Montenegro, and Serbia—have only recently been reclassified as hybrid regimes, and still more are hurtling toward reclassification.

How can these countries exit the gray zone, or avoid it entirely? A defining feature of hybrid regimes is that their leaders continue to allow somewhat competitive elections. The contests are not necessarily free or fair, but neither are they complete shams, as is the case in authoritarian regimes. Consequently, hybrid regimes can be drawn back toward democracy through the ballot box if enough voters are willing to support new leadership. However, "while an opposition victory is not impossible" in the gray zone, as Larry Diamond has cautioned, "it requires a level of opposition mobilization, unity, skill, and heroism far beyond what would normally be required for victory in a democracy."

To varying degrees, these traits could be seen in recent elections in Kosovo (2019 and 2021), Montenegro (2020), and Moldova (2020), along with the municipalities of Banja Luka and Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2020). In all of these hybrid regimes, the political opposition overcame the odds to unseat entrenched incumbents. Similarly, the 2020 national elections in Slovakia—a consolidated democracy that has been in decline—resulted in the ouster of the long-ruling Smer party.

The outcomes were not preordained. The governing parties enjoyed undue advantages at the polls, whether though clientelism, control over the media landscape, or other means. Prior to the opposition victories, none of the countries mentioned above had taken any steps to make their elections more open, as evidenced by their stagnant performance on *Nations in Transit's* Electoral Process indicator.

Although each electoral breakthrough is unique, two interrelated factors may best explain how voters in hybrid or backsliding regimes have been able to "break the collective action problem and deliver change through elections," as Tena Prelec and Jovana Marović put it.

First, these voters are angry. The recent electoral upsets occurred against a backdrop of corruption scandals and other abuses of power that revealed the ugly venality of the existing leadership. Kosovo, Montenegro, Moldova, and Slovakia perform far worse on *Nations in Transit's* Corruption ratings than they do on any other indicator. Bosnia and Herzegovina is the sole exception, although that is partly because some of its other ratings are also quite low. A 2020 incident in which authorities awarded a contract for the importation of medical ventilators to a fruit-farming company underscores that corruption is by no means checked in the country. Stories of official wrongdoing have

outraged voters and driven them to support anticorruption crusaders, including Slovakia's victorious OL'aNO party, which ran on the slogan "Together against the mafia," or Moldova's newly elected president, Maia Sandu, whose slogan declared, "It's time for good people."

Second, citizens are casting ballots in large enough numbers to thwart incumbents' efforts at intimidation and manipulation. In Kosovo, turnout was up 3.4 percentage points in 2019 and 7.7 in 2021, relative to the parliamentary elections in 2017. Turnout soared past 60 percent in Slovakia for the first time since 2002. Records were shattered in Montenegro, where nearly 77 percent of registered voters participated in last year's elections, and among the diaspora in Moldova, which accounted for 15 percent of the votes cast in the first round of the 2020 presidential poll. These figures are especially striking in light of COVID-19, which contributed to historically low voter participation in nearby Croatia, North Macedonia, and Romania. The pandemic also trimmed turnout in Bosnia's municipal elections, but only by a modest 1 to 2 percent.

Of course, these factors do not always translate into electoral breakthroughs. Public outrage at Montenegro's self-serving elites goes a long way toward explaining how the political opposition was able to end the 30-year rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists, despite the latter's misuse of state resources and domination of the media sector. However, in Poland, a similar set of advantages—the ruling Law and Justice party's exploitation of state resources and political control over the public broadcaster—was sufficient to stymie the opposition's energetic bid for the presidency.

There is no magic formula, then, for voting out the parties responsible for a country's hybrid status. Moreover, there is no guarantee that an opposition win will bring an end to backsliding or an exit from the gray zone. As Licia Cianetti and Sean Hanley observe, it is fashionable to describe movements that ride to power on a wave of anticorruption sentiment as "prodemocracy," but anticorruption politics can easily contain illiberal or other antidemocratic features.

Such negative qualities make it hard to celebrate the opposition's triumph in Banja Luka or Montenegro unreservedly, as the new mayor of the former and the new government of the latter have espoused ethnonationalist, exclusionary views. Similarly, in its erratic and occasionally unconstitutional response to the pandemic, Slovakia's

Supporters of opposition groups celebrate after polls close in Montenegro's August 2020 parliamentary elections.
Image credit: Risto Bozovic/AP/Shutterstock

OL'aNO-led government did not distinguish itself vis-à-vis its predecessor. In Moldova, President Sandu's push to engineer a friendlier parliament through early elections has entailed numerous procedural violations, mirroring the risky "move fast and break things" approach adopted by the reformist governments of Armenia and Ukraine. While the victorious Vetëvendosje party in Kosovo represents a genuine break from the status quo, its qualified support for unification with Albania could unsettle the wider region.

Nevertheless, it is always the case that when corrupt or repressive incumbents lose power through elections, there is at least an opportunity for change in a more democratic direction.

It is unrealistic to expect that the leaders of hybrid or backsliding regimes will do anything to make it easier for voters to deliver electoral breakthroughs. Hungary's ruling

Fidesz party, for example, is constantly tinkering with the electoral framework to fortify its parliamentary supermajority. Yet the united opposition still has a chance to win its uphill battle in next year's elections, because voters still have a real choice at the ballot box. By contrast, voters in Russia, which has long since exited the gray zone and joined the ranks of consolidated authoritarian regimes, have no such luxury in their upcoming parliamentary elections.

This makes it all the more tragic when opposition groups in hybrid regimes feel compelled to boycott elections due to dramatically tilted playing fields, as recently occurred in Georgia and Serbia. While depriving the winners of legitimacy and drawing attention to serious abuses, boycotts also deprive voters of what little opportunity for change may remain. Elections will not always result in an upset or propel a country out of its hybrid status, but the chances drop to zero when no one makes the attempt.

STANDING IN AND STANDING UP

By Noah Buyon & Mike Smeltzer

Denizens living in the countries covered by *Nations in Transit* will remember 2020 as an annus horribilis due in no small part to the COVID-19 pandemic, with regional governments proving unable to meet the moment. At year's end, countries in the Nations in Transit region featured heavily among the 10 that reported the world's worst COVID-19 death tolls per 100,000 people (four), and even more so among the 10 with the worst suspected fatality undercounts (a staggering seven). Meanwhile, the Turkmenistani government has gone so far as to insist their country is virus-free.

A tragic combination of incompetence and negligence has allowed for these results. The year has been marred by dilatory crisis legislation, lackluster electoral management (making voting simultaneously less convenient and more dangerous), unchecked disinformation, budgetary starvation of local authorities, discriminatory policing, and rampant corruption, which triggered many of the score declines in this year's survey. Ultimately, governments flailed while responding to COVID-19 and to the bouts of dislocation and violence that made 2020 so bleak.

While institutional actors have aggravated these challenges or otherwise abdicated responsibility, civic actors, ranging from everyday people to formal organizations, filled the leadership vacuum. It is largely thanks to civic mobilization and resilience in extremis that 2020 was not the worst year for democracy and good governance in the survey's history. Below, we highlight how civil society held firm while other pillars of society buckled.

Civic actors in the region often supplemented, or substituted for, the state. As the Belarusian government adopted a policy of ignorance in response to COVID-19—which strongman Alyaksandr Lukashenka called a "psychosis"—the private and third sectors effectively spearheaded the country's response, coordinating care, procuring personal protective equipment and medical supplies, and setting social-distancing standards. In Tajikistan, where the autocratic government of Emomali Rahmon suppressed independent media outlets while promoting doctored pandemic-related data, activists shared information on how to take necessary health precautions and how to donate to the most vulnerable, all while disseminating accurate fatality figures.

Similar mutual-aid networks developed in many other countries. Armenian civil society actors absorbed tens of thousands of displaced people fleeing the Azerbaijani military's offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, providing housing, clothing, and medicine, and assisting with family reunification while Yerevan struggled to prosecute the war. After

Protesters ride bicycles through the streets of Ljubljana during an antigovernment protest in May 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Image credit: Luka Dakskobler/SOPA Images/Shutterstock

WHERE CIVIL SOCIETY SHINES BRIGHTEST

Across the *Nations in Transit* region, civil society groups are democracy's biggest boosters and the most steadfast advocates of citizens' rights.

RESILIENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

LESS RESILIENT — MORE RESILIENT

Resilience is determined by subtracting a country's National Democratic Governance rating from its Civil Society rating.

SERBIA

Through persistent protests, activists in Serbia have elevated **environmental issues** to the national agenda, leading the state to scrap plans for destructive hydroelectric power plants.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

While state and local-level officials argued over who was responsible for **migrants and refugees** trapped in the country due to COVID-19, everyday citizens organized the provision of basic necessities to this vulnerable population.

UKRAINE

As the government dealt with a myriad of problems, from procurement of PPE to testing policies, concerned citizens and local entrepreneurs in Ukraine mobilized to provide free transport for medical workers during the **COVID-19 pandemic**.

ARMENIA

Formal and informal civil society groups provided shelter and primary care to **tens of thousands of people displaced** by the Azerbaijani military during the war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Kyrgyzstani police absented themselves amid postelection rioting, self-defense groups worked to keep the peace.

Ultimately, however, civil society cannot do all the work that belongs to other institutions, least of all the state. Practically, they lack the capacity to. The impressive sums raised by the #BYCOVID19 crowdfunding campaign in Belarus and the Armenian diaspora's Hayastan All Armenian Fund pale in comparison to state budgets. Moreover, civil society's normative role is not to replace the state, media, or other institutions, but to complement and, when necessary, resist them.

Examples of pushback abounded in 2020, as civic actors pioneered innovative forms of pandemic-appropriate protest to hold leaders to account. As political infighting hobbled the Kosovar state's COVID-19 response, frustrated citizens took to their balconies en masse, banging pots and pans to sound a call for unity. In Slovenia, thousands attended weekly demonstrations on bicycles to circumvent bans on gatherings, after allegations of political interference in the public procurement of medical supplies surfaced. Elsewhere, protesters maintained social distancing on picket lines by organizing convoys of cars and online flash mobs. However, these protests, lacking the full force of conventional street demonstrations, often failed to achieve their stated aims.
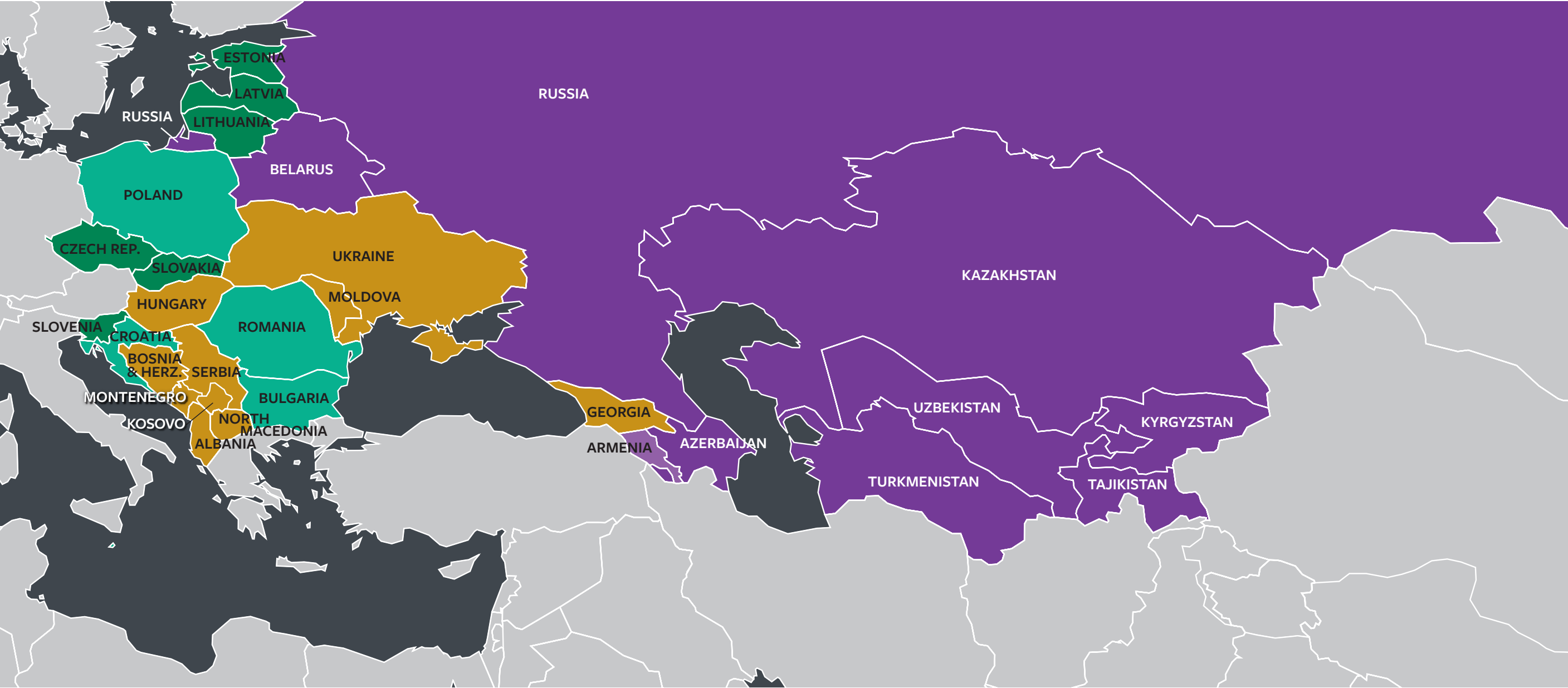
Perhaps for this reason, in-person action continued in many countries, despite concerns about COVID-19.

It is notable that many street demonstrations were met with intense repression. Indeed, the year's events have again demonstrated that civil society's effectiveness is impeded when political elites view it as a threat. Recent events in Poland and Russia provide illustrative examples of this tendency. Having draped itself in a cloak of anti-"LGBT and gender ideology," Warsaw cracked down on a mass movement contesting a Constitutional Tribunal ruling which effectively outlawed abortion. In Russia, demonstrators who rallied against the unjust arrest of opposition leader Aleksey Navalny took direct aim at Putin's kleptocratic system of patronage and were subjected to unprecedented state violence.

Despite these reprisals and impediments, civic mobilization is the single most important factor keeping many regimes in the *Nations in Transit* region from backsliding or bottoming out entirely. Even if civil society is not a leading indicator of democratization, as *Nations in Transit* data suggest, it is certainly a bulwark against the spread of authoritarianism and antidemocratic alternatives in the region and the world at large.

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2021

SURVEY FINDINGS

Regime Type	Number of Countries	
Consolidated Democracy (CD)		6
Semi-Consolidated Democracy (SCD)		4
Transitional Government or Hybrid Regime (T/H)		10
Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (SCA)		1
Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (CA)		8
Total		**29**

The map reflects the findings of Freedom House's *Nations in Transit 2021* survey, which assessed the status of democratic development in 29 countries from Central Europe to Central Asia during 2020. Freedom House introduced a Democracy Score—an average of each country's ratings on all of the indicators covered by *Nations in Transit*—beginning with the 2004 edition. The Democracy Score is designed to simplify analysis of the countries' overall progress or deterioration from year to year. Based on the Democracy Score and its scale of 1 to 7, Freedom House has defined the following regime types: **Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (1.00–2.00), Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (2.01–3.00), Transitional/Hybrid Regime (3.01–4.00), Semi-Consolidated Democracy (4.01–5.00), Consolidated Democracy (5.01–7.00).**

MEDIA MATTERS

By Zselyke Csaky

In functioning democracies, the media provides information to the public, mediates between citizens and politicians, and serves as a watchdog, uncovering abuses of power and forcing institutions to correct their course.

In practice, the delineation between politics and the press is unclear even in responsive democratic states, never mind the countries covered by *Nations in Transit,* which we often classify as Hybrid/Transitional or Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes. In much of the region, journalists and outlets are increasingly coopted, harassed, and silenced by those in power.

Independent and critical outlets faced increasing pressure from the media-capture model pioneered in Hungary—and to a lesser extent, Serbia—in 2020. Under this model, legal and economic tools are used to squelch critical outlets and bolster friendly reporting. While connected Hungarian businesspeople have not been entirely successful in

establishing direct footholds in the Balkans, the model itself has been exported to much of the coverage region.

This model is adhered to in Slovenia, for example, with its government interrupting the public news agency's funding stream. The Polish government, meanwhile, has used state-owned companies to take control of regional outlets while harassing critical media through administrative and legal measures. In 2020, *Gazeta Wyborcza,* the country's second-largest daily newspaper, was fighting over 50 lawsuits, many of them filed by the ruling Law and Justice party and its allies.

The Albanian media environment, which has long been plagued by oligarchic control like much of the coverage region, has also been affected by the increased use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs). In addition, controversial antidefamation legislation threatened to restrict online speech there. The Georgian media environment was also affected by political interference and

A protester near the Embassy of Belarus in Moscow holds a sign reading, "Journalism is not terrorism" in support of independent journalists working in Belarus. Image credit: NickolayV/Shutterstock.com

polarization in 2020, with the dismissal of staff members from publicly funded Adjara TV and Radio serving as a potent example of the pressure placed on journalists there.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic also narrowed the space for independent reporting, with media outlets finding themselves cash-strapped and consequently more vulnerable to political control. The Romanian government used the pandemic as cover to distribute €40 million ($44.9 million) to media outlets in a manner that strengthened clientelistic networks instead of outlets in need.

In repressive environments, the pandemic augmented persecution. The authoritarian regimes of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan denied the existence of COVID-19 months after the pandemic began and punished any reporting on the dire heath and economic consequences. Tajikistani authorities also introduced heavy fines for "false or inaccurate information," threatened those "sowing panic," and blocked websites keeping an independent tally of pandemic-related deaths.

The media crackdown was not limited to COVID-19 reporting. Belarusian authorities engaged in brutal repression after last summer's elections, with hundreds of journalists facing arbitrary arrest, physical assault, and detention. Foreign correspondents saw their accreditation revoked or denied, while internet users encountered extensive shutdowns and website blocks. Russian authorities

also tightened their grip by expanding the "foreign agents law" to include journalists (such as those working for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), testing the implementation of a sovereign internet law, and escalating pressure on social media companies.

Notwithstanding the onslaught of negative news throughout the region, there were also remarkable examples of resilience. Exiled journalists, bloggers, and individuals active in diaspora communities—including those from Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan—continued to report on developments in their home countries. Journalists also employed innovative means to continue their work in difficult conditions. Independent Belarusian outlets, for example, moved en masse to Telegram to circumvent government blocking.

Outlets facing precarious financial situations also turned to crowdfunding and membership-based solutions. A group of journalists who resigned from Index.hu—the most popular news site in Hungary—over a loss of editorial control launched Telex, an outlet that raised €1 million ($1.1 million) in its first month.

These examples of resilience, while sporadic, nevertheless hold the key to improving not just the media environment, but the region's overall democratic health. Those looking to arrest the expansion of antidemocratic practices would do well to turn their attention to the media and work to buttress the independence of this institution.

HOPE AND PUSHBACK: HOW CITIZENS AND POLITICAL LEADERS CAN BAND TOGETHER TO COUNTER REPRESSION

By Zselyke Csaky & Mike Smeltzer

Politicians are norm entrepreneurs. When they berate journalists, or whip up fear by alleging that upholding rights for LGBT+ people and ethnic or religious minorities harms the majority, they reap political benefits in the short term, but help entrench antidemocratic values in the long term.

Nations in Transit 2021 found frequent instances of politicians instrumentalizing dangerous rhetoric for political gain—such as Bulgaria's nationalist reasoning for blocking North Macedonia's European Union (EU) accession negotiations, and Sadyr Japarov's embrace of exclusionary

populist narratives to galvanize support in Kyrgyzstan. It also found instances where illiberal, top-down messaging took hold in public opinion and societal norms, such as growing hostility toward media in Slovenia, and frequent rhetorical attacks on LGBT+ people in Poland and Hungary.

However, by confronting autocratic behavior and standing up for democratic values, civil society, political leaders, and governments can shape the conversation as well. Over the past year, there were also a number of positive developments in the *Nations in Transit* region where

Protesters gather in Riga, Latvia to show solidarity with the people of Belarus in August 2020. Image credit: Girts Ragelis/Shutterstock.com

ordinary citizens and politicians alike took action against attacks on democracy, and upended seemingly fixed narratives in the process.

Belarusian protesters propel political shifts

Events in Belarus offered a wake-up call to citizens and autocrats alike. For Russia's Vladimir Putin, the political and civil unrest was a signal to orchestrate shows of support for fellow autocrats, in the hopes of preventing similar unrest at home. But for hundreds of thousands of Belarusians, another round of bogus elections was intolerable. And for supporters of democracy at all levels of society in Central and Eastern Europe, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's violent crackdown on the ensuing peaceful demonstrations was a step too far: after years of political tolerance of authoritarianism in Belarus, repression of the country's massive prodemocracy movement galvanized international support for the demonstrators, and prompted real consequences for the longtime autocratic regime.

As citizens in the Baltics formed human chains in solidarity with their Belarusian neighbors, harkening back

to the proindependence Baltic Way demonstrations 30 years earlier, political leaders grew vociferous in their denunciation of rights abuses under Lukashenka. Lithuania's foreign minister vehemently rejected Belarus's extradition request of opposition leader and likely presidential election winner Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, for instance.

More directly impactful were the actions taken by political leaders, often in concert, to counter the repressive turn in Belarus. The EU issued three separate rounds of sanctions against the Belarusian regime, including penalties that targeted Lukashenka himself. Lithuania blocked EU payments to Belarus for a cross-border assistance program over concern about misuse. Additionally, both Estonia and Poland committed financial resources to "raise awareness of democracy and rule of law" in Belarus, and to provide funding for the country's beleaguered independent media.

Standing up to threats at home

In addition to standing up for democracy in authoritarian states, some politicians and governments have spoken out on threats to democracy within the EU. While the Matovič government in Slovakia had a mixed record on issues of

democracy and human rights, the country's president, Zuzana Čaputová, made an unambiguous commitment to them on several occasions in 2020, calling for rebuilding trust in institutions domestically, and issuing strong criticism of neighboring Poland and Hungary for vetoing the EU's rule-of-law mechanism. Čaputová's rhetorical turn-in was a strong break with the past embrace of illiberal ideas in the Visegrad Four.

There were also instances of pushback against the authoritarian reach and influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the EU. In the Czech Republic, President Miloš Zeman has long advocated for closer ties, but a weariness of the CCP was growing more evident in public discourse in 2020. Meanwhile, governments in Romania, Lithuania, Croatia, and Slovenia have banned Chinese companies or suspended public tenders due to concerns about transparency and national security. And in 2021, amid a culmination of concerns over "dividing Europe," the three Baltic countries, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovenia conspicuously scaled back their presence at the latest summit of the 17+1 platform on cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European governments, rejecting the CCP's ongoing attempts to expand its global presence through multilateral institutions.

Amid a deluge of grim news from the region, these instances of pushback and cooperation might seem like isolated examples. But focusing only on the negative can warp our senses and prevent us from seeing that politicians can also change norms in a positive direction, one step at a time. Words matter, and not just when they are used to set a negative example.

Recommendations

To counter the spread of antidemocratic practices in Europe and Eurasia, democracies, especially the United States and European Union (EU) member states, should do the following:

NURTURING OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE AND EURASIA

Reinvigorate alliances with other democracies, and support multilateral institutions. The expansion of antidemocratic governance in Europe and Eurasia can be countered by cooperation and information sharing among democracies, and their full engagement in multilateral institutions. The United States, EU, and democratic alliances should work to address the threat posed by antidemocratic norm setting and prevent authoritarian-minded governments from ignoring international commitments and taking advantage of international systems, including the EU and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Democracies should adopt policies that efficiently and effectively counter the spread of antidemocratic practices, and should hold each other accountable for living up to democratic ideals.

Invest in independent elections. Free and fair elections are a cornerstone of any democracy, and independent and transparent electoral processes are necessary to foster a competitive electoral environment and citizens' trust in election integrity. Yet, politicians across the region have bent the rules to further entrench their control over elections, making peaceful transfers of power increasingly difficult. Work by the United States, EU, and other democracies to support free and fair elections across Europe and Eurasia should emphasize the importance of impartial election observation and efforts to combat disinformation.

- Impartial election observers are key to ensuring trust in electoral processes. Governments across the region should support and welcome robust observation, including by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The ODIHR's well-established methodology, which includes both long-term assessments of the campaign environment and election-day observations, can inform the operations of smaller and domestic observer missions. National authorities should regularly reexamine past observations' findings and act upon recommendations to improve or reform their electoral processes.

- In addition, given the extent and impact of digital disinformation and election interference across the region, the OSCE should further incorporate digital election interference into its election-monitoring methodology, especially the sections on long-term observation practices.

Support civil society and grassroots movements calling for democracy. Peaceful protest movements appealing for reform can drive long-term democratic change, but face greater odds without international support—as the brutal crackdowns on protesters in Belarus and Russia have demonstrated. The United States, EU, and other democratic governments should provide vocal, public support for grassroots prodemocracy movements, and respond to any violent crackdown by authorities with targeted sanctions, reduced or conditioned foreign assistance, and public condemnation. Democracies should also be ready to welcome human rights defenders who face attacks, grave threats, unlawful detention, or other dangers due to their work. Civil society groups, citizen-led social movements, and other nonstate actors with democratic agendas should be provided with technical assistance and training on issues such as coalition and constituency building, advocacy, and physical and digital security.

- The EU should ensure that its annual rule-of-law reports for member states—which are intended to "facilitate cooperation and dialogue in order to prevent problems from reaching the point where a formal response is required"—describe how well civil society is protected in practice, and whether groups are able to operate openly and freely.

- The United States and other democratic governments should ensure that financial assistance is focused on fostering systemic resilience. This should include providing assistance on sustainable business models; incentivizing the philanthropic community to support civil society organizations, including with core funding; increasing transparency around the activities of government-supported NGOs (GONGOs); and engaging with grassroots actors.

- The United States, EU, and other democratic governments should maintain a principled stance on bilateral engagement with governments that implement so-called foreign agent laws, laws on "undesirable organizations," and other cynical measures that purport to promote transparency but in practice target legitimate civil society groups. National authorities should directly challenge these policies and raise human rights concerns in every bilateral engagement. More broadly, democracies should condemn the current global trend of criminalizing civil society engagement with out-of-country partners, donors, and other stakeholders.

Support free and independent media. Providing the public with access to fact-based information about current events is one of the best ways to combat authoritarian power. It is especially important during times of emergency, and will remain essential as the world begins to recover from the coronavirus pandemic. Governments should provide support for independent media, including exile media, such as financial assistance, technical support, skills training, and mentoring. Laws should protect the free flow of information, allow journalists access to elected officials, allow the public to place freedom of information requests, and guard against state monopolization of media outlets.

- In the United States, the Biden administration should restore the regulatory "firewall" protecting editorial independence at the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM). The firewall's elimination in 2020 harms the credibility of US public broadcasters operating in foreign countries and limits their effectiveness in countering propaganda. Full, bipartisan support is necessary to ensure the integrity and robust operations of USAGM-sponsored media outlets. Notably, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) has come under assault in Europe and Eurasia, with a spurious case pending against it in Russia and harassment and threats, including death threats, levied against its investigative journalists in Kyrgyzstan. The United States, EU, and other democracies should insist that the government of Russia immediately drop its politically motivated investigation of RFE/RL, and call on officials in Kyrgyzstan to fully investigate threats against RFE/RL journalists and hold perpetrators accountable.

- In the EU, governments should work to ensure that the system of media capture pioneered and exported by Hungary does not take root in Poland and other countries. This strategy can be countered through a vocal defense of media pluralism by senior officials and the adoption of EU-wide rules on transparency of media ownership. The European Commission's rule-of-law reports should include an assessment of independence at state-owned media in each member state to enable early detection of signs of media capture; these outlets are often the first to be co-opted if a hostile government comes to power.

- In the EU, governments should address the use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) to stifle investigative journalism. The EU should promote an anti-SLAPP directive that would give journalists and media groups the ability to request rapid dismissal of these types of lawsuits in member states, and provide financial support to media groups facing them.

- Democracies should also scale up efforts to support independent media. In the United States, the executive branch should work with Congress to create a large-scale Enterprise Fund for Independent Media. This fund would invest in promoting free expression and quality journalism internationally, and would seek financing partnerships with democratic allies; its efforts should focus on supporting the emergence and sustainability of independent media, promoting effective investigative journalism, and protecting journalists at risk. To elevate diplomatic work centered on media freedom, the United States should appoint a Special Envoy for Press Freedom. As part of a comprehensive strategy to protect journalists, this envoy, working with the State Department's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, should track and recommend action against governments and officials who persecute and intimidate journalists.

Promote international peer-to-peer exchanges. In light of growing authoritarianism and escalating tensions between democracies and authoritarian regimes, peer-to-peer exchanges are critical in fostering relationships among future leaders. Cultural, educational, and professional exchanges help build understanding and strengthen partnerships between nations and offer future leaders a platform to develop collaborative, innovative strategies to fight back against attacks on democracy and reverse democratic erosion. The United States, EU, and other democracies should increase investments in such programs to empower young leaders to strengthen democratic governance around the world. In the United States, programs such as the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program for high school students from Europe and Eurasia, and the Young Transatlantic Innovation Leaders Initiative (YTILI) Fellowship Program for emerging entrepreneurs from Europe, have provided young people important opportunities for professional development, and fostered lasting, positive relationships among potential future leaders. Democratic governments should also help fund events that connect activists and civil society groups across borders, so they can share strategies, tools, and approaches.

COUNTERING THREATS TO DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE AND EURASIA

The European Union should take urgent action to end ongoing attacks on democracy inside the union. The EU's rule-of-law mechanisms should be used in a strategic, comprehensive, and systematic manner, deploying all tools available including infringement and monitoring measures, as well as financial penalties. The European Commission last year added a mechanism to the EU's budget that allows the EU to withhold funding for member states that fail to uphold the rule of law. Poland and Hungary have filed a complaint with the European Court of Justice (ECJ) over this new mechanism. The ECJ should address this complaint in an expedited manner, and the European Commission should trigger this mechanism against noncompliant member states as soon as possible. The commission should also enforce Article 260 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which allows for financial penalties in cases where a member state fails to implement ECJ rulings. For Article 7 proceedings, which aim to punish member states that violate the common values of the EU by suspending certain rights guaranteed by the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), the European Council should keep Poland and Hungary on the agenda and organize at least one hearing per EU presidency.
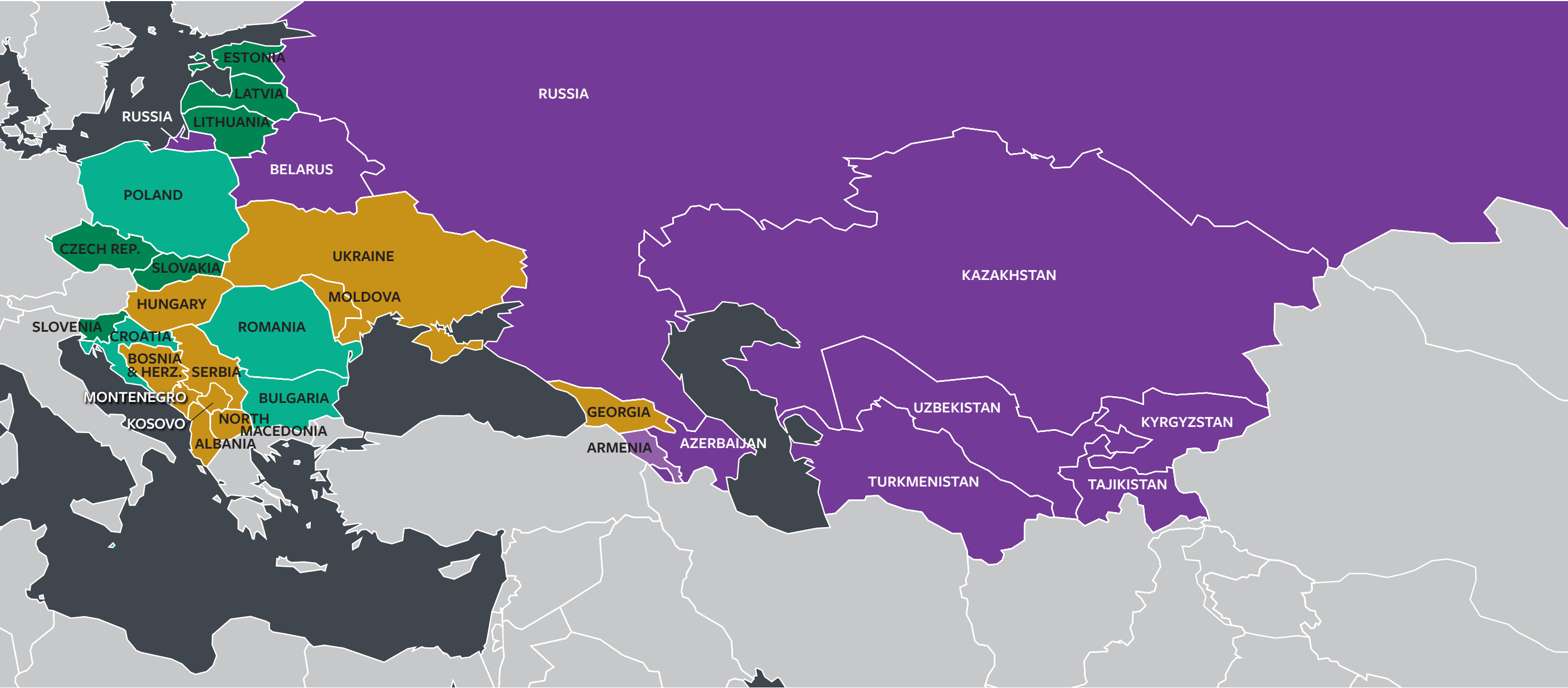
Utilize targeted sanctions as part of a comprehensive strategy of accountability for human rights abusers and corrupt officials. Targeted sanctions against individuals who engage in egregious human rights abuses or large-scale corruption are not a standalone solution, but are a powerful tool for deterring harmful behavior. Democracies should devise comprehensive strategies for deploying targeted sanctions in concert with their full suite of foreign policy tools to bring accountability for international human rights abuses and acts of corruption. When possible, democracies should coordinate their efforts to jointly impose sanctions on perpetrators for maximum impact. Recent targeted sanctions imposed jointly by the United States, EU, United Kingdom, and Canada on four Chinese officials and a security organization over the mass detention of Uyghurs and other members of religious and ethnic minority groups should serve as a model for multilateral coordination on sanctions to maximize impact. Democratic nations that do not yet have laws allowing for targeted sanctions for human rights abuses and acts of corruption should enact them, and those with laws on the books should ensure that they are fully resourced and enforced.

- The US Congress should reauthorize the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (22 USC 2656 note), which allows for visa bans and asset freezes on individuals and entities engaged in human rights abuses and corruption. Reauthorization should eliminate the December 23, 2022, sunset and codify Executive Order 13818, which enables the United States to impose sanctions for serious human rights abuses. The executive branch and Congress should work together to ensure adequate funding for sanctions implementation and enforcement.

- In the EU, officials should continue to utilize the global human rights sanctions regime adopted in December 2020, including by imposing sanctions against those involved in gross human rights violations in Russia and Belarus. The EU should expand the regime, or adopt new regulations, to make acts of corruption a sanctionable offense.

Take steps to more effectively address kleptocracy and transnational corruption. Governments broadly agree that addressing the corrosive effects of global corruption is critical. However, the nearly universal political statements of intent to combat corruption have not been translated into effective action to root it out. Any serious effort to promote democracy and counter authoritarianism must include measures to combat corruption and kleptocracy, which have become business models for modern-day authoritarians.

- Given the transnational nature of corruption, the United States, the EU and its member states, and democratic governments worldwide should develop and implement comprehensive strategies that prioritize anticorruption efforts at home and abroad. This should include pursuing an anticorruption agenda across international bodies including the United Nations, OSCE, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and others, and promoting coordination among them. There is also a need to focus on implementation and enforcement, ensuring that states actually adhere to the anticorruption commitments they voluntarily made. Democracies should include civil society in discussions of anticorruption programs, as they often play key implementation and monitoring roles.

- In the European Union, the centralized disbursement of EU funding by national governments can be a significant source of corruption. Most EU countries covered in *Nations in Transit* lack domestic mechanisms that guarantee the transparent use of these funds. The EU should ensure that there is effective follow-up on European Anti-Fraud Office reports, which document fraud against the EU budget and corruption within the EU's institutions, and outline consequences for misuse. The European Public Prosecutor's Office should consider the merits and feasibility of proposals to establish a list of the worst corruption offenders.

- In the United States, the proposed CROOK Act (S.158/H.R.402) would establish an action fund offering financial assistance to foreign countries during historic windows of opportunity for anticorruption reforms. Another draft law, the Combating Global Corruption Act (S.14), would require the US government to assess corruption around the world and produce a tiered list of countries. US foreign assistance directed at the lowest-tiered countries would require specific risk assessments and anticorruption mechanisms, such as provisions to recover funds that are misused. Both measures would contribute significantly to the global fight against corruption, and both should be passed into law.

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2021

SURVEY FINDINGS

Regime Type	Number of Countries	
Consolidated Democracy (CD)		6
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The map reflects the findings of Freedom House's *Nations in Transit 2021* survey, which assessed the status of democratic development in 29 countries from Central Europe to Central Asia during 2020. Freedom House introduced a Democracy Score—an average of each country's ratings on all of the indicators covered by *Nations in Transit*—beginning with the 2004 edition. The Democracy Score is designed to simplify analysis of the countries' overall progress or deterioration from year to year. Based on the Democracy Score and its scale of 1 to 7, Freedom House has defined the following regime types: **Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (1.00–2.00), Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (2.01–3.00), Transitional/Hybrid Regime (3.01–4.00), Semi-Consolidated Democracy (4.01–5.00), Consolidated Democracy (5.01–7.00).**

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2021: OVERVIEW OF SCORE CHANGES

▼ Decline ▲ Improvement ☐ Unchanged

	Country	Democracy Score	Democracy %	NDG	EP	CS	IM	LDG	JFI	CO
BALKANS	Albania	3.82 TO 3.75	46%			▼	▼			
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.32 TO 3.36	39%					▲		
	Croatia	4.25	54%							
	Kosovo	3.18 TO 3.14	36%	▼						
	Montenegro	3.86 TO 3.82	47%					▼		
	North Macedonia	3.75 TO 3.82	47%	▲	▲					
	Serbia	3.96 TO 3.89	48%	▼	▼					
CENTRAL EUROPE	Bulgaria	4.54 TO 4.50	58%						▼	
	Czech Republic	5.64 TO 5.57	76%	▼				▼		
	Estonia	6.07 TO 6.04	84%	▼						
	Hungary	3.96 TO 3.71	45%	▼		▼		▼	▼	▼
	Latvia	5.79 TO 5.82	80%			▲				
	Lithuania	5.64 TO 5.68	78%	▲						
	Poland	4.93 TO 4.57	60%	▼	▼		▼	▼	▼	▼
	Romania	4.43 TO 4.39	57%	▲	▼		▼			
	Slovakia	5.29 TO 5.32	72%						▲	
	Slovenia	5.93 TO 5.86	81%			▼	▼			
EURASIA	Armenia	3.00 TO 2.96	33%	▼						
	Azerbaijan	1.14 TO 1.07	1%		▼			▼		
	Belarus	1.39 TO 1.29	5%	▼	▼					▼
	Georgia	3.25 TO 3.18	36%		▼		▼			
	Kazakhstan	1.32	5%							
	Kyrgyzstan	1.96 TO 1.86	14%	▼	▼	▼				
	Moldova	3.11	35%							
	Russia	1.39	7%	▼		▲				
	Tajikistan	1.18 TO 1.11	2%		▼		▼			
	Turkmenistan	1.00	0%							
	Ukraine	3.39 TO 3.36	39%						▼	
	Uzbekistan	1.14 TO 1.25	4%		▲	▲			▲	

CATEGORIES:

NDG – National Democratic Governance
EP – Electoral Process
CS – Civil Society
IM – Independent Media

LDG – Local Democratic Governance
JFI – Judicial Framework and Independence
CO – Corruption

The NIT ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The NIT 2021 ratings reflect the period from 1 January through 31 December 2020.

Methodology

Nations in Transit 2021 evaluates the state of democracy in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia. The 23rd edition of this annual study covers events from January 1 through December 31, 2020. In consultation with country report authors, a panel of expert advisers, and a group of regional expert reviewers, Freedom House provides numerical ratings for each country on seven indicators:

- **National Democratic Governance.** Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches.

- **Electoral Process.** Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process.

- **Civil Society.** Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.

- **Independent Media.** Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.

- **Local Democratic Governance.** Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities.

- **Judicial Framework and Independence.** Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.

- **Corruption.** Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives.

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the lowest and 7 the highest level of democracy. The **Democracy Score** is a straight average of the seven indicators and is also expressed as a percentage, where 0 represents the lowest and 100 the highest level of democracy. Based on the Democracy Score, Freedom House assigns each country to one of the following regime types:

Consolidated Democracies (5.01–7.00): Countries receiving this score embody the best policies and practices of liberal democracy, but may face challenges—often associated with corruption—that contribute to a slightly lower score.

Semi-Consolidated Democracies (4.01–5.00): Countries receiving this score are electoral democracies that meet relatively high standards for the selection of national leaders but exhibit weaknesses in their defense of political rights and civil liberties.

Transitional or Hybrid Regimes (3.01–4.00): Countries receiving this score are typically electoral democracies where democratic institutions are fragile, and substantial challenges to the protection of political rights and civil liberties exist.

Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes (2.01–3.00): Countries receiving this score attempt to mask authoritarianism or rely on informal power structures with limited respect for the institutions and practices of democracy. They typically fail to meet even the minimum standards of electoral democracy.

Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes (1.00–2.00): Countries receiving this score are closed societies in which dictators prevent political competition and pluralism and are responsible for widespread violations of basic political, civil, and human rights.

Nations in Transit does not rate governments per se, nor does it rate countries based on governmental intentions or legislation alone. Rather, a country's ratings are determined by considering the practical effect of the state and nongovernmental actors on an individual's rights and freedoms. A more detailed description of the methodology, including complete checklist questions for each democracy indicator, can be found at https://freedomhouse.org/reports/nations-transit/nations-transit-methodology.

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2021: CATEGORY AND DEMOCRACY SCORE SUMMARY

Countries are rated on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the lowest and 7 the highest level of democratic progress. The average of these ratings is each country's Democracy Score **(DS)**. The Democracy Percentage **(D%)** is the translation of the Democracy Score to the 0–100 scale.

CATEGORIES:

NDG – National Democratic Governance
EP – Electoral Process
CS – Civil Society
IM – Independent Media
LDG – Local Democratic Governance

JFI – Judicial Framework and Independence
CO – Corruption
DS – Democracy Score
D% – Democracy Percentage

Country	NDG	EP	CS	IM	LDG	JFI	CO	DS	D%
Estonia	5.75	6.50	6.25	6.25	5.75	6.50	5.25	**6.04**	84%
Slovenia	5.75	6.50	5.75	5.25	6.50	6.00	5.25	**5.86**	81%
Latvia	6.00	6.25	6.00	6.00	5.75	6.25	4.50	**5.82**	80%
Lithuania	5.50	6.25	6.00	5.75	5.75	6.00	4.50	**5.68**	78%
Czech Republic	4.75	6.75	6.00	5.00	6.00	6.00	4.50	**5.57**	76%
Slovakia	4.75	6.25	6.25	5.00	5.50	5.25	4.25	**5.32**	72%
Poland	3.75	5.75	5.50	4.25	5.50	3.25	4.00	**4.57**	60%
Bulgaria	4.25	5.50	5.50	3.50	4.75	4.25	3.75	**4.50**	58%
Romania	4.25	4.75	5.50	3.50	4.50	4.25	4.00	**4.39**	57%
Croatia	4.25	5.00	5.25	3.75	4.25	3.50	3.75	**4.25**	54%
Serbia	3.25	4.25	5.50	3.25	4.00	3.50	3.50	**3.89**	48%
Montenegro	3.25	4.25	5.25	3.25	4.25	3.50	3.00	**3.82**	47%
North Macedonia	3.50	4.50	4.75	3.50	4.00	3.25	3.25	**3.82**	47%
Albania	3.25	4.25	4.75	3.50	4.50	3.25	2.75	**3.75**	46%
Hungary	3.00	4.25	4.25	3.25	4.25	4.25	2.75	**3.71**	45%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2.00	4.50	4.50	3.25	3.25	3.00	3.00	**3.36**	39%
Ukraine	2.50	4.50	5.00	3.75	3.25	2.25	2.25	**3.36**	39%
Georgia	2.50	3.00	4.25	3.50	2.75	2.75	3.50	**3.18**	36%
Kosovo	2.50	3.50	4.50	3.25	3.50	2.50	2.25	**3.14**	36%
Moldova	2.50	4.00	4.75	3.00	2.50	2.75	2.25	**3.11**	35%
Armenia	2.25	3.25	4.50	3.00	2.25	2.50	3.00	**2.96**	33%
Kyrgyzstan	1.25	2.00	3.00	2.00	1.75	1.50	1.50	**1.86**	14%
Russia	1.00	1.25	2.00	1.50	1.50	1.25	1.25	**1.39**	7%
Belarus	1.00	1.00	1.75	1.25	1.25	1.00	1.75	**1.29**	5%
Kazakhstan	1.25	1.25	1.50	1.25	1.50	1.25	1.25	**1.32**	5%
Uzbekistan	1.00	1.25	1.50	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.25	**1.25**	4%
Tajikistan	1.00	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.50	1.00	1.00	**1.11**	2%
Azerbaijan	1.00	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.00	**1.07**	1%
Turkmenistan	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	**1.00**	0%
Average	3.03	3.91	4.25	3.28	3.58	3.24	2.94	**3.46**	41%
Median	3.00	4.25	4.75	3.25	4.00	3.25	3.00	**3.71**	45%

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2021: DEMOCRACY SCORE HISTORY BY REGION

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	
Central Europe												
Bulgaria	4.93	4.86	4.82	4.75	4.71	4.75	4.64	4.61	4.61	4.54	**4.50**	▼
Czech Republic	5.82	5.82	5.86	5.75	5.79	5.79	5.75	5.71	5.71	5.64	**5.57**	▼
Estonia	6.07	6.07	6.04	6.04	6.04	6.07	6.07	6.18	6.11	6.07	**6.04**	▼
Hungary	5.39	5.14	5.11	5.04	4.82	4.71	4.46	4.29	4.07	3.96	**3.71**	▼
Latvia	5.86	5.89	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.96	5.93	5.86	5.79	**5.82**	▲
Lithuania	5.75	5.71	5.68	5.64	5.64	5.68	5.68	5.64	5.61	5.64	**5.68**	▲
Poland	5.79	5.86	5.82	5.82	5.79	5.68	5.43	5.11	5.04	4.93	**4.57**	▼
Romania	4.57	4.57	4.50	4.54	4.54	4.54	4.61	4.54	4.43	4.43	**4.39**	▼
Slovakia	5.46	5.50	5.43	5.39	5.36	5.39	5.39	5.39	5.36	5.29	**5.32**	▲
Slovenia	6.07	6.11	6.11	6.07	6.07	6.00	5.96	5.93	5.93	5.93	**5.86**	▼
Average	5.57	5.55	5.53	5.50	5.47	5.45	5.40	5.33	5.27	5.22	**5.15**	
Median	5.77	5.77	5.75	5.70	5.71	5.68	5.55	5.52	5.48	5.46	**5.45**	
Balkans												
Albania	3.96	3.86	3.75	3.82	3.86	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	**3.75**	▼
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.68	3.64	3.61	3.57	3.54	3.50	3.46	3.36	3.32	3.32	**3.36**	▲
Croatia	4.36	4.39	4.39	4.32	4.32	4.32	4.29	4.25	4.25	4.25	**4.25**	
Kosovo	2.82	2.82	2.75	2.86	2.86	2.93	3.04	3.07	3.11	3.18	**3.14**	▼
Montenegro	4.18	4.18	4.18	4.14	4.11	4.07	4.11	4.07	3.93	3.86	**3.82**	▼
North Macedonia	4.18	4.11	4.07	4.00	3.93	3.71	3.57	3.64	3.68	3.75	**3.82**	▲
Serbia	4.36	4.36	4.36	4.36	4.32	4.25	4.18	4.04	4.00	3.96	**3.89**	▼
Average	3.93	3.91	3.87	3.87	3.85	3.81	3.79	3.76	3.74	3.73	**3.72**	
Median	4.18	4.11	4.07	4.00	3.93	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	**3.82**	
Eurasia												
Armenia	2.57	2.61	2.64	2.64	2.64	2.64	2.61	2.57	2.93	3.00	**2.96**	▼
Azerbaijan	1.54	1.43	1.36	1.32	1.25	1.14	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.14	**1.07**	▼
Belarus	1.43	1.32	1.29	1.29	1.29	1.36	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.39	**1.29**	▼
Georgia	3.14	3.18	3.25	3.32	3.36	3.39	3.39	3.32	3.29	3.25	**3.18**	▼
Kazakhstan	1.57	1.46	1.43	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.36	1.29	1.29	1.32	**1.32**	
Kyrgyzstan	1.89	2.00	2.04	2.11	2.07	2.11	2.00	1.93	2.00	1.96	**1.86**	▼
Moldova	3.04	3.11	3.18	3.14	3.14	3.11	3.07	3.07	3.04	3.11	**3.11**	
Russia	1.82	1.82	1.79	1.71	1.54	1.50	1.43	1.39	1.43	1.39	**1.39**	
Tajikistan	1.86	1.82	1.75	1.68	1.61	1.46	1.36	1.21	1.21	1.18	**1.11**	▼
Turkmenistan	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.00	**1.00**	
Ukraine	3.39	3.18	3.14	3.07	3.25	3.32	3.39	3.36	3.36	3.39	**3.36**	▼
Uzbekistan	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.11	1.11	1.14	**1.25**	▲
Average	2.03	2.01	2.00	1.99	1.97	1.96	1.93	1.90	1.93	1.94	**1.91**	
Median	1.84	1.82	1.77	1.70	1.57	1.48	1.41	1.39	1.41	1.39	**1.36**	

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