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NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2020

Dropping the Democratic Facade



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RESEARCH AND EDITORIAL TEAM

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This booklet is a summary of findings for the 2020 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

Serbian police officers escort protesters out of the headquarters of Belgrade’s state-run TV station. Riot police arrived at the scene in downtown Belgrade and were trying to evict dozens who had entered the downtown building protesting against the administration of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. Credit: Darko Vojinović/ AP/ Shutterstock.

Dropping the Democratic Facade

by Zselyke Csaky

A growing number of leaders around the world have dropped even the pretense of playing by the rules of democracy.

As the democratic consensus of the post-Cold War order has given way to great-power competition and the pursuit of self-interest, these politicians have stopped hiding behind a facade of nominal compliance. They are openly attacking democratic institutions and attempting to do away with any remaining checks on their power.

In the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia, this shift has accelerated assaults on judicial independence, threats against civil society and the media, the manipulation of electoral frameworks, and the hollowing out of parliaments, which no longer fulfill their role as centers of political debate and oversight of the executive. Antidemocratic leaders in the region continue to pay lip service to the skeletal, majoritarian element of democracy—claiming that they act according to the will of the people—but they do so only to justify their concentration of power and escalating violations of political rights and civil liberties.

These developments have contributed to a stunning democratic breakdown in the 29 countries covered by *Nations in Transit*. There are fewer democracies in the region today than at any point since the annual report was launched in 1995. The erosion has left citizens especially vulnerable to further rights abuses and power grabs associated with the coronavirus pandemic.

Democratic disintegration

The breakdown of the democratic consensus has been most visible in Central Europe and the Balkans, which experienced the greatest gains after the end of the Cold War.

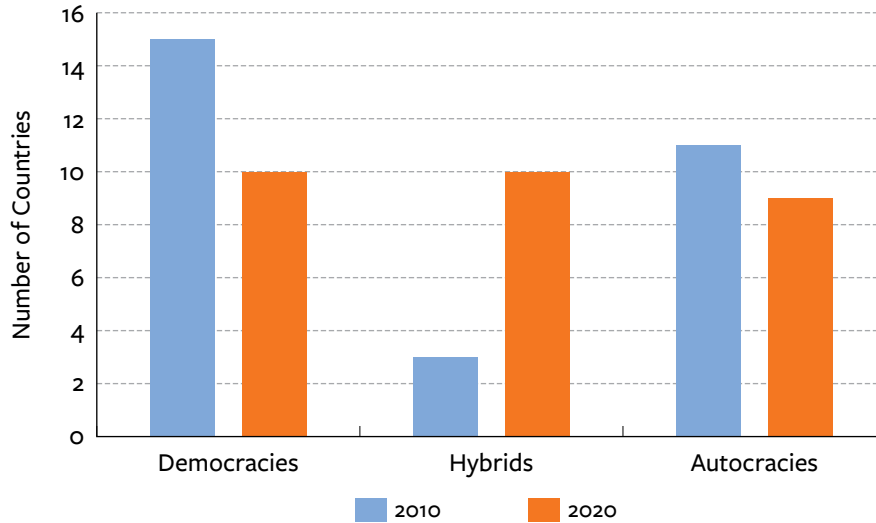
In Poland, the governing Law and Justice (PiS) party has been waging a war against the judiciary in an attempt to convert it into a pliant political tool. After devoting its initial years in office to an illegal takeover of the country's constitutional court and the council responsible for judicial appointments, the PiS government started persecuting individual judges in 2019. By early 2020, judges who criticized the government's overhaul or simply applied European Union (EU) law correctly were subjected to disciplinary action. Such an attack on a core tenet of democracy—that there are legal limits on a government's power, enforced by independent courts—would have been unimaginable in Europe before PiS made it a reality.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary has similarly dropped any pretense of respecting democratic institutions. After centralizing power, tilting the electoral playing field, taking over much of the media, and harassing critical civil society organizations since 2010, Orbán moved during 2019 to consolidate control over new areas of public



DEMOCRATIC DISINTEGRATION

There are 10 democracies in the region today, down from 15 in 2010, while the number of hybrid regimes has more than tripled in the past decade, rising from 3 to 10. There has been little movement on the authoritarian end of the spectrum, with 11 such regimes in 2010 and 9 in 2020.



life, including education and the arts. The 2020 adoption of an emergency law that allows the government to rule by decree indefinitely has further exposed the undemocratic character of Orbán’s regime. Hungary’s decline has been the most precipitous ever tracked in *Nations in Transit*; it was one of the three democratic frontrunners as of 2005, but in 2020 it became the first country to descend by two regime categories and leave the group of democracies entirely.

Meanwhile in the Balkans, years of increasing state capture, abuse of power, and strongman tactics employed by Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia and Milo Djukanović in Montenegro have tipped those countries over the edge—for the first time since 2003, they are no longer categorized as democracies in *Nations in Transit*. This change comes at a time when the EU’s accession process is mired in disagreements and no longer serves as a lodestar for democratic reform, and when great-power politics and transactional diplomacy are turning the Balkans into a geostrategic chessboard. The increased presence of authoritarian powers like Russia, China, and Turkey in the region has spurred some reengagement by the United States, but it too has increasingly focused on backroom deals, deemphasizing any shared commitment to democracy.

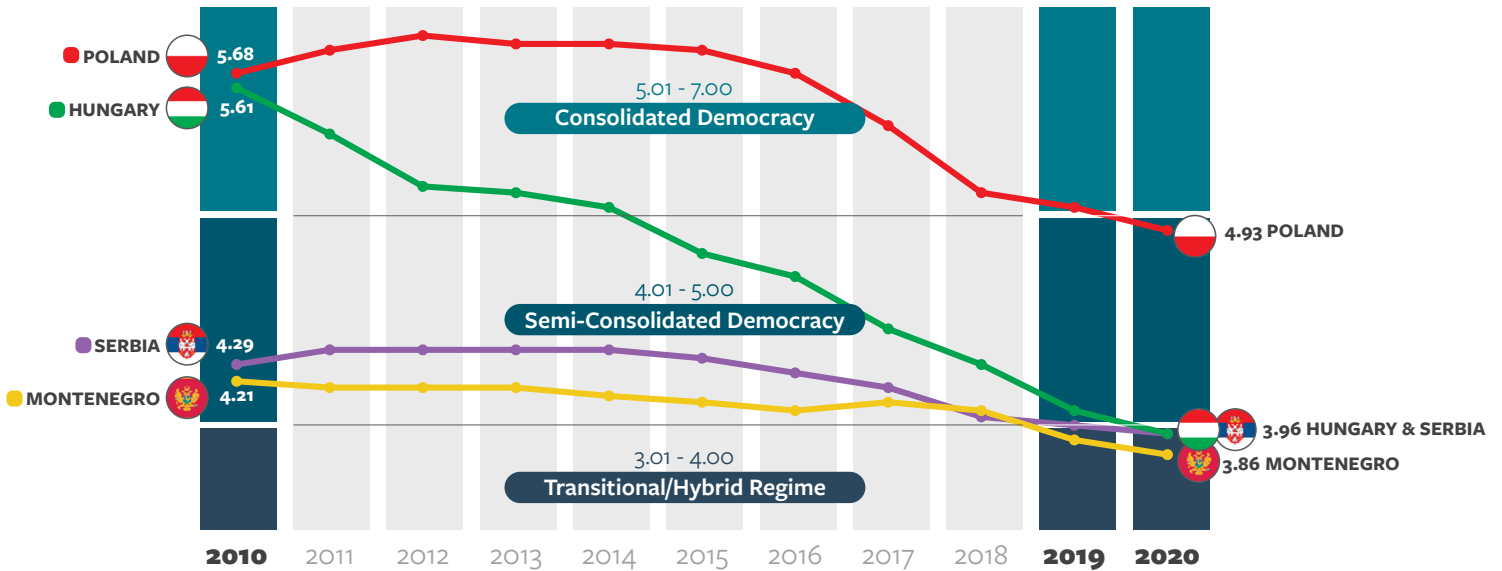
Institutions under attack

Democracy’s resilience is inherently connected to the health of its institutions—the vital components that safeguard the rights of those in the minority and contribute to the resolution of political disagreements in a peaceful, orderly manner. These institutions were never strong to begin with in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia; in the authoritarian east they lacked even the chance to develop, while in the more democratic west they were based on a fragile elite consensus and often lacked societal support. By 2019, each of the institutions evaluated in *Nations in Transit* were under outright attack.

Incumbents of all stripes have been attempting to manipulate the electoral framework, fulfilling the more superficial procedural requirements of a free election while engineering the process below the surface to ensure a certain outcome. Such violations, while less egregious than some other methods, can quickly corrode the integrity of the vote and set the stage for domination by the incumbent. Hungary provided the most obvious example of these tactics. Despite important opposition victories during 2019, a massive government propaganda network and the politicized application of administrative resources continued to overwhelm the ideologically divided opposition parties at the end of the year. In Bulgaria and Slovakia, governments undermined

LEADING THE DEMOCRATIC DECLINE

Poland dropped out of the Consolidated Democracies category and became a Semi-Consolidated Democracy, while Hungary, Serbia, and Montenegro all left the group of democracies and became Transitional/Hybrid Regimes.



the transparency of the vote and tinkered with electoral rules to disadvantage their opponents. Albania's ruling party pressed ahead with local elections despite an opposition boycott, leaving voters with no meaningful choice.

Full or partial parliamentary boycotts by opposition parties in Albania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Montenegro, and Serbia disrupted the work of parliaments and signaled a lack of fairness and legitimacy. In some cases, a pattern of rushed lawmaking and restrictions on the opposition's participation has long made a mockery of the legislative process. Important amendments were adopted without consultation, in the dark of night, or through emergency ordinances in Poland, Romania, and Hungary during the year. The dizzying speed of lawmaking by the new government in Ukraine also raised concerns, with an average of 38 new bills submitted daily between August and October 2019. Parliaments are supposed to work out political

disagreements through debate, discussion, and compromise, carefully vetting proposed changes and checking both honest errors and abuses of power by the executive. They cannot perform this crucial role if they are reduced to rubber stamps or arenas for impotent protests.

The media and civil society continued to bear the brunt of government attacks in more autocratic settings during the year, but they faced mounting difficulties in democracies as well. In a new development, smears and attacks on the judicial branch and particular judges have become a widespread phenomenon, no longer limited to high-profile cases like Poland. In 2019 and in early 2020, politicians have been undermining judicial independence and the rule of law in all of the subregions covered by *Nations in Transit*, resulting in score declines in the Czech Republic, Georgia, Latvia, Montenegro, Poland, and Slovakia.

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.

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Making plans for indefinite rule in authoritarian states

In the authoritarian half of the *Nations in Transit* region, incumbent rulers used their well-established control over state institutions to further fortify their own positions. Perhaps nothing demonstrated this instrumentalization better than the constitutional “reforms” announced by Russian president Vladimir Putin in early 2020, which will ultimately allow him to retain his post beyond the two-term maximum. The timing of the overhaul, very much by design, took everyone by surprise, signaling that Putin is firmly in command and remains one step ahead of friend and foe alike when it comes to succession and the survival of his regime. More importantly, the changes demonstrated a contempt for the rule of law and the basic principles of constitutional government.

In the rest of Eurasia and Central Asia, authoritarians have been similarly preoccupied with the future. Perhaps hoping to avoid scenarios like the Velvet Revolution in Armenia and the arrest of former president Almazbek Atambayev in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan’s Nursultan Nazarbayev oversaw a half-hearted political transition, resigning in March 2019 only to take back much of his power from the designated successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, later in the year. He has also been grooming his daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva as a potential successor, putting her next in line for the presidency.

The presidents of Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have been elevating their own relatives to positions of power and responsibility, preparing the ground for a dynastic transition. While any handover of power carries some risk in a system dominated by a single personality, the likelihood of a substantial change in governance or the observance of fundamental freedoms remains slim in the entrenched dictatorships of the region—as underlined by the lack of genuine democratic reforms in Uzbekistan three years after Shavkat Mirziyoyev succeeded the late president Islam Karimov.

A fraying global order

A country’s democratic potential is influenced not just by its own recent history and internal conditions, but also by its immediate neighborhood and the broader international environment. Over the past few years, important contextual shifts have affected the prospects for democracy in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia.

In addition to Russia’s continued malign influence, China has been advancing an ambitious foreign policy in practically all of the region’s 29 countries. Beijing’s involvement has ranged from suppressing unfavorable media coverage to throwing a financial lifeline to venal elites and supplying repressive governments with surveillance technology. Xi Jinping’s regime is not so much spreading its own one-party model as it is spreading its influence, tailoring solutions to local needs, taking advantage of institutional weaknesses, and wedging itself into corrupt political and economic structures. This approach undermines the rule of law and transparency, further enabling bad governance and repression in the region.

A motley crew of far-right, violent extremist groups have also been making their voices heard in countries as diverse as the Baltic states, Poland, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia. While the groups and their xenophobic messages are not necessarily new, they have demonstrated a new level of cross-border cooperation and enjoyed increasing support from American and Western European counterparts.

These developments are taking place amid a return to great-power rivalry and a distinct lack of leadership on democratic governance from traditional champions like the United States and the nations of Western Europe. In fact, some politicians and parties on both sides of the Atlantic have taken cues from the illiberal populists of the *Nations in Transit* region, enabling and aggravating the broader democratic deterioration.

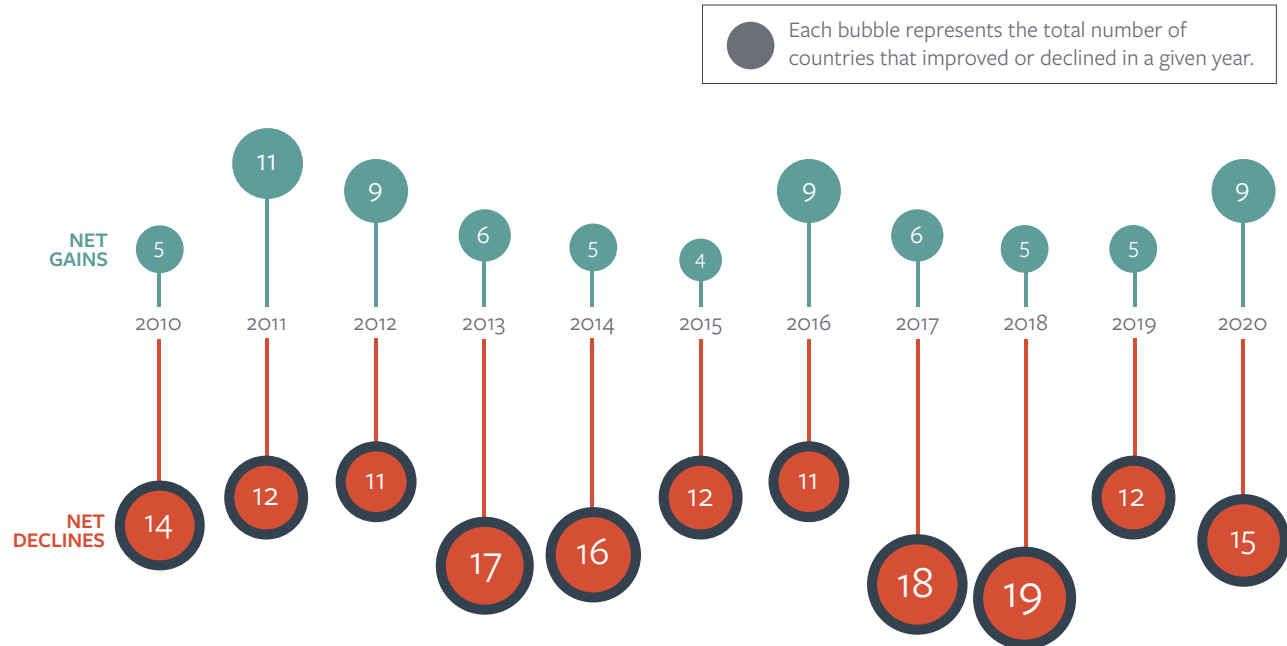
In the EU, member states’ failure to tackle rule-of-law violations inside the bloc has been coupled with a slow erosion of the rights of migrants and asylum seekers. Neither Poland nor Hungary has faced repercussions for damaging the rule of law at home, and Hungary’s ruling Fidesz party has even remained a member of the mainstream European People’s Party, the largest grouping in the European Parliament. Meanwhile, US president Donald Trump has failed to stand up for democracy in the region. He has embraced the governments of Hungary and Poland—proceeding with visits and exchanging praise with both—and put pressure on Ukraine’s new leadership to extract personal political favors, threatening adherence to transparency in that country and casting doubt on its national security.

Restoring democracy from the inside

Despite their leaders’ choices, citizens’ yearning for democracy remains strong. Major transformations driven by public demands for better governance have been under way in

A DECADE OF DEMOCRATIC DEFICITS

Net declines in Democracy Scores in Europe and Eurasia have consistently outweighed net gains in recent editions of *Nations in Transit*.



Armenia and Ukraine, with the former earning the largest two-year improvement ever recorded in *Nations in Transit*. Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy will now face the difficult challenge of managing expectations, maintaining trust, and restructuring corrupt systems without contravening democratic norms.

The past year also featured a break in Moldova's pattern of oligarchic rule and incremental progress in North Macedonia and in Kosovo. Separately, new protest movements, often focused on environmental issues, have been springing up and filling a political void in countries from Central Asia to the Balkans. Together with civil society activists devoted to anticorruption and transparency, environmental campaigners have scored a number of successes, demonstrating the unceasing appeal and proven efficacy of democratic methods. Given this context, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic will likely create new impetus for activism and spur tactical innovations to overcome restrictions on assembly.

It is probably no coincidence that Central Europe and the Balkans, the subregions that made the swiftest progress on democracy indicators in past decades, have seen the most precipitous declines in recent years. The institutions underpinning democracy need more than elite consensus and the fulfillment of simple development criteria—or as Ivan Krastev would say, piecemeal “imitation.” Their effectiveness and resilience depend on the participation of an active citizenry. Public engagement in political affairs has been in short supply in the *Nations in Transit* region for much of the report's history. But there are signs that this may finally be changing.

If it is to survive in a hostile world, democracy must be constantly defended and reinvigorated by its beneficiaries. This will be the main task for the people of the region—and indeed for supporters of democracy everywhere—in the years to come.

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JUSTICE IN THE SERVICE OF POLITICS

The law is a double-edged sword. In autocracies, it is the primary political weapon of those in power, used to silence dissent, to hamstring competitors, and if all else fails, to send critics to prison. In democratic countries, however, the law—guided by independent judges—serves precisely the opposite purpose. It is the final safeguard against executive overreach and the main guarantee that those in the political minority can continue to exercise their rights, speak out about governance problems, and ultimately gain power through elections.

Yet even in the more democratic half of the *Nations in Transit* region, this important defense against tyranny is now being weakened. In 2019 and early 2020, scandals in several countries have revealed a growing rot, a mixture of politicization and corruption, inside the judiciary, while attacks on the judicial branch and even on individual judges have become increasingly acute.

Courts bogged down by political corruption

Perhaps no case demonstrates the dangers posed by judicial corruption more clearly than the Kuciak trial in Slovakia. The investigation into the 2018 murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée exposed a “network” of high-level politicians, members of the judiciary, and organized crime figures who were all connected to Marián Kočner, the underworld businessman accused of ordering the killings. This network not only protected Kočner for a time, but also very likely allowed other powerful individuals to stay above the law. While a number of judges were arrested in early 2020, the revelations further diminished confidence in the judiciary among ordinary Slovaks. In late 2019, a survey showed such trust at its lowest ebb since the country joined the European Union: 72 percent of respondents said they did not have faith in the justice system.

In Montenegro, scandals involving judicial authorities last year similarly revealed abuse and lack of professionalism in the courts. The 2019 conclusion of the “coup trial,” in which 14 people were convicted of terrorism for attempting to violently overthrow the government in 2016 and derail the country’s NATO accession, was a welcome development, but the conduct of the trial was marred by irregularities. In two separate cases over the summer, civil society organizations revealed that several judges had received state-sponsored apartments or loans on very favorable terms, and a local

tycoon claimed that—in addition to funding the ruling party’s election campaign—he had bribed the chief prosecutor.

Corruption and the inability of the justice system to uproot it have been at the center of scandals in a number of other countries as well, including in Latvia and the Czech Republic. The fallout from an infamous money-laundering scandal in Latvia demonstrated the authorities’ unwillingness to deal with foreign bribery cases, while the US government’s imposition of Global Magnitsky Act sanctions on the oligarch Aivars Lembergs underscored the Latvian courts’ inefficiency: a case against Lembergs has been dragging on for more than a decade. Meanwhile, in the Czech Republic, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš’s attempts to escape prosecution for alleged fraud enjoyed some success, despite extraordinary public disapproval and protests. There has been no actual progress in his case, as the prosecutor general first dropped and then reopened charges against him in 2019.

A frontal assault on the judiciary in Poland

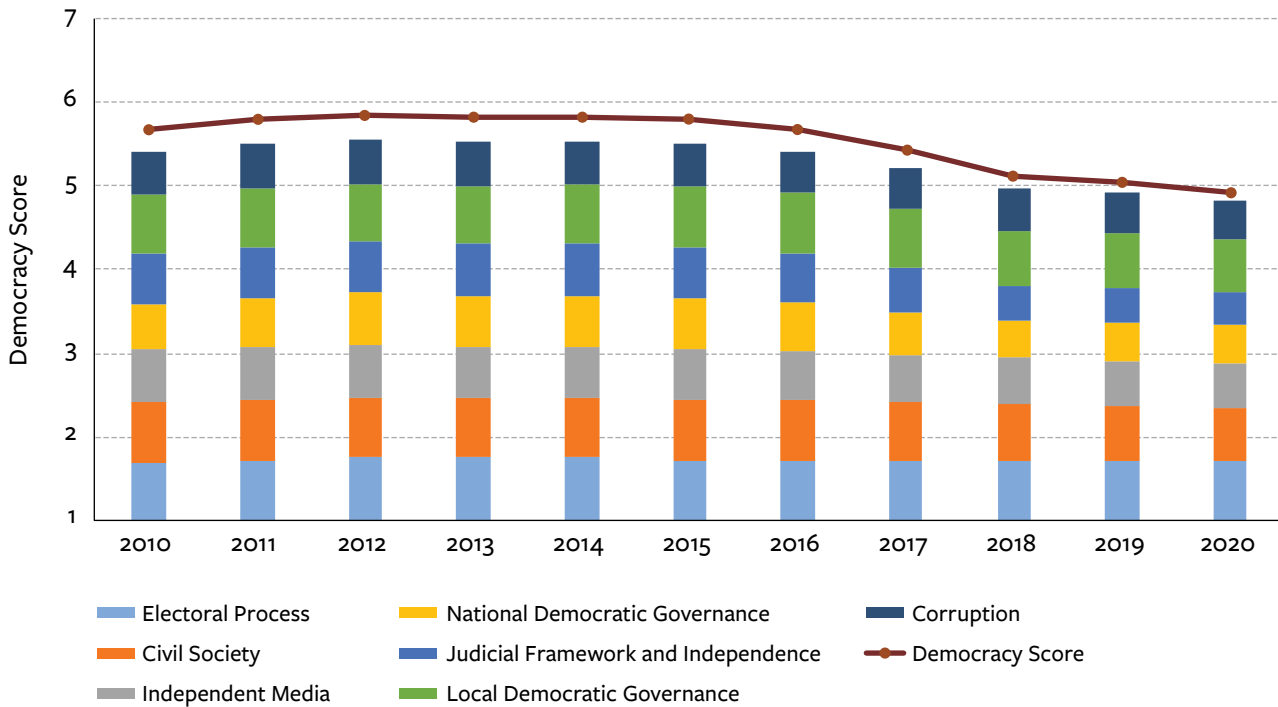
Among the region’s waning democracies, Poland continues to stand out for the systematic, targeted, and aggressive nature of the government’s attacks on judicial independence. Since it took power in 2015, the Law and Justice (PiS) party has overseen an unprecedented offensive against the very idea that laws and courts can, or should, limit executive action.

PiS has not just accused judges of ideological bias and appointed loyal allies to available positions—steps that might be problematic but are not unheard of in democracies during periods of political polarization. The party has gone much further than that. It has violated Poland’s constitution, passed laws that permanently hamper the impartial functioning of the courts, rigged the appointment process for judges, created a mechanism to reopen final court rulings, set up a partisan disciplinary regime for the judiciary, and finally, in 2019, it started punishing individual judges who were critical of these steps.

The EU’s commissioner on values has denounced this ongoing disciplinary campaign as a wholesale “carpet bombing” of judicial independence. Dozens of judges are facing possible penalties on often frivolous grounds, or for simply attempting to uphold EU law. The punishments could range from warnings and salary reductions to dismissal from the bench and even prison terms. Leaks from August 2019 exposed the

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POLAND’S TEN-YEAR DECLINE



involvement of the Ministry of Justice in a coordinated online harassment campaign, leaving no doubt about the ruling party’s willingness to persecute any and all critical judges.

Two possible futures

If Poland continues on this course, it will join hybrid regimes and autocracies that routinely mete out politicized justice. Recent developments in Georgia provide a harrowing example of what that could look like. While the judiciary has long been a flashpoint in Georgia’s polarized politics, arbitrary arrests and a number of controversial court cases in 2019 and early 2020 further aggravated an already tense situation. A new entrant into the political field, businessman Mamuka Khazaradze, was slapped with money-laundering charges as soon as he announced the founding of a political movement, and a more established opposition leader was sentenced to 38 months in prison in a reheated case involving the alleged

misuse of public funds. In an ominous sign that such incidents would not be limited to the lower courts, the ruling majority in Parliament granted lifelong tenure to 14 new justices on the country’s Supreme Court following a “highly dysfunctional and unprofessional” appointment process.

There is, of course, another way forward for Poland and other fragile democracies where the rule of law and judicial independence are in danger. But repairing the profound destruction caused by corruption, politicization, and authoritarian intent will be no easy task. It will take years of dedicated work, and it will require sustained public pressure on political leaders to respect the proper role of the courts in a free society.

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Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama reacts as an opposition member of parliament splashes ink on him during a session of the parliament in Tirana. Credit: MALTON DIBRA/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock.

LEGISLATURES ON THE SIDELINES

When people dislike the direction an institution is moving in, they have two choices, according to economist Albert Hirschman: they can voice their concerns, or they can leave. When people make the first choice over the second, Hirschman argues, it is because they feel a sense of loyalty to the institution. This paradigm helps explain why the institution of parliament functions, and when it does not. In a functioning parliament, the opposition may not like what the ruling majority is doing, but because it accepts that parliament is the right place to register its dislike, it continues to participate in debating and voting. However, this loyalty is not without limits. If the ruling majority refuses to engage with it, the opposition is no longer motivated to voice its concerns inside the parliament. So, it leaves.

Increasingly, the second scenario is coming to pass in countries surveyed by *Nations in Transit*. In 2019, the opposition in 4 of the 29 countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Serbia) surveyed boycotted parliament altogether, while a brief parliamentary boycott took place in a fifth country, Georgia, in early 2020. The underlying conditions for these walkouts can be observed more widely across the region, as ruling parties took steps to marginalize the opposition in

2019. The decline of parliament extends farther than the low incidence of boycotting might let on: in a number of countries, increasingly frustrated lawmakers still sit in opposition as rulemaking and -breaking by illiberal supermajorities degrades the parliamentary ideal.

Serbia: a case study in the limits of loyalty

Outright boycotts lie toward the end of the process of degradation. Recent events in Serbia are instructive in this regard. Since coming to power in 2012, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has systematically curtailed the ability of the opposition to play a role in the business of governing. From 2016 to 2018, it only put bills proposed by friendly lawmakers on the legislative agenda; in 2019, it entertained just two proposals from outside its ranks before voting them down. To limit oversight of its own proposals, the SNS shuts the opposition out of committees, and floods the docket with frivolous amendments that eat into the time allotted for debate. It also forces the adoption of laws via urgent procedure, a process that is only supposed to be invoked in extraordinary situations. More than half of laws adopted in Serbia last year were approved under urgent procedure.

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The questionable legitimacy of the ruling party's majority further discourages opposition lawmakers. The latest parliamentary elections, in 2016, saw the SNS "taking undue advantage of incumbency," "blurring the distinction between state and party activities," "exerting pressure on voters, particularly those employed in the public sector," and "enticing voters through welfare initiatives," according to monitors from the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

In Serbia, then, the opposition does not feel that it can effectively advocate for policy changes because the ruling party has worked to deny it the opportunity to do so, and it doubts that it can ever win power through elections. Hence, it has chosen to boycott parliament, in addition to the upcoming 2020 parliamentary vote. In February 2019, the Alliance for Serbia, an umbrella group of opposition parties, walked out what it dubbed the "usurper parliament," forming a so-called free parliament in a bid to undercut the former's legitimacy. The "free parliament" has been in session ever since, to little effect. Unfortunately, this exercise in symbolic protest has had the effect of damaging the perception of democracy among ordinary citizens.

Other parliaments in peril

Similar dynamics are in evidence elsewhere in the region. In neighboring Montenegro, elements of the opposition have refused to participate in parliament since unfair elections in 2016 returned the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) to government for the tenth time running. The DPS-dominated parliament has slow-walked electoral reforms, although these have also been hampered by the difficulty of mustering quorum during a boycott. (However, party whips had little trouble corraling votes for a contentious law on church property passed at year's end.)

To the south, in Albania, opposition lawmakers followed up on parliamentary walk-outs in 2017 and 2018 by resigning en masse in February 2019. They demanded fresh elections after an investigation revealed that the governing Socialist Party had enlisted the help of organized crime networks in the 2017 vote that brought it to power. Undeterred, the Socialists have put off electoral reforms while working to stifle the country's media and proceeding with plans to oust the president. For their part, the ex-lawmakers have taken up violent street politics since quitting the parliament.

February 2019 also saw Bulgaria's largest opposition bloc temporarily boycott the parliament in protest of the ruling party's attempts to manipulate the electoral framework to its advantage. These include legalizing unlimited campaign contributions from private sources, slashing party subsidies, and doing away with preferential ballots—although the latter two changes were reversed.

And in February 2020, lawmakers from all of Georgia's opposition blocs walked out of the legislature after the government backtracked on its promise to transition the country to a fully proportional electoral system. Had it been introduced, this system would have decreased the ruling Georgian Dream party's chances of winning parliamentary elections again this year. The crisis was only defused when, with the help of international mediation, the parties met halfway in March.

On the fast track to breakdown

In other countries, the loyalty of the opposition is under severe strain. Hungary began 2019 with a one-off opposition walkout after the ruling Fidesz party forced the so-called Slave Law through the legislature in late December 2018. The party accomplished this by exempting itself from parliamentary procedure in order to defeat hundreds of amendments submitted by the opposition in a single motion. Then, at year's end, Fidesz enacted a "Muzzle Law" that introduced sanctions for lawmakers whose actions are deemed disruptive, and which moreover prohibits independent lawmakers from caucusing with party groups.

In Romania, the erstwhile Socialist Democracy Party (PSD) government continued its abuse of emergency ordinances, akin to laws passed under Serbia's urgent procedure rule. When threatened by a confidence motion toward the end of 2019, it pressured the national airline to delay flights so opposition members would not be able to attend the vote. The former ruling coalition in Slovakia also channeled the SNS when it attempted, unsuccessfully, to shore up its prospects before February 2020 elections, hiding a major change to the electoral code in a rider and passing a hike in pension payments via accelerated procedure.

Lastly, and perhaps most disconcertingly, in Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's supermajority appears to be ignoring both parliamentary procedure and proposals from opposition lawmakers. Observers identified procedural violations in two-thirds of the bills passed by his Servant of the People party between August and November 2019.

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An acute symptom demands a systemic solution

The response offered by the European Union and other external actors to opposition boycotts is unchanging: return to the legislature. This admonition blithely ignores realities on the ground. From Tirana to Tbilisi, those in power are not interested in making parliament the place for discussion. In fact, they are increasingly disinterested in discussion altogether. Faced with this situation, a boycott is an understandable response. However, it is seldom a useful one. Boycotting parliament emboldens those in power by removing a bulwark against their worst impulses. It hurts constituents, whose voices are no longer represented. It also hurts citizens at large, who suffer from ensuing crises of governance.

Boycotts are an expression of an underlying malaise in the institution of a country's parliament. Domestic and outside actors alike should address themselves to this sickness above all else. Absent a long-term cure, boycotts can only be expected to recur.

The crisis in Georgia was resolved in March 2020 when European and US diplomats stepped in to help broker an agreement to transition the county to a mixed electoral system—addressing the structural problem behind the immediate parliamentary crisis. There are a number of other recent instances in which leaders have crafted structural solutions to seemingly intractable problems, notably the US-led mediation effort that resolved the decades-old “name” dispute between Greece and North Macedonia, and allowed the latter to pursue membership in the European Union and NATO. Structural fixes offer a way forward.

FRAGILE INSTITUTIONS OPEN THE DOOR FOR CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY INFLUENCE

Nations in Transit has long documented Russia's aggressive foreign policy, aimed at destabilizing the transatlantic alliance and reestablishing what it considers its “sphere of influence.” But in recent years, China's Xi Jinping has been no less active in promoting his foreign-policy objectives. While China's international engagement is often less directly confrontational than Russia's, it nevertheless has an insidious effect on the development and functioning of democratic institutions in the region spanning from Central Europe to Central Asia.

The Chinese Communist Party's influence campaign is focused around two major goals—expanding the country's influence abroad, and promoting a positive image of China globally. Enacted by China's sprawling diplomatic corps, the campaign is best characterized by its flexibility. It tailors its approach to each individual country, taking advantage of institutional weaknesses, and surreptitiously embedding itself into corrupt political and economic structures. The aggregate impact of these measures is the further degradation of good governance, transparency, and the rule of law, and the creation of additional avenues for predatory, local political elites to remain in power and further bend the system to their advantage.

The most glaring example of China's expanding antidemocratic influence in the region is in the area of technology and surveillance. China's tech giant Huawei has signed a “Safe City

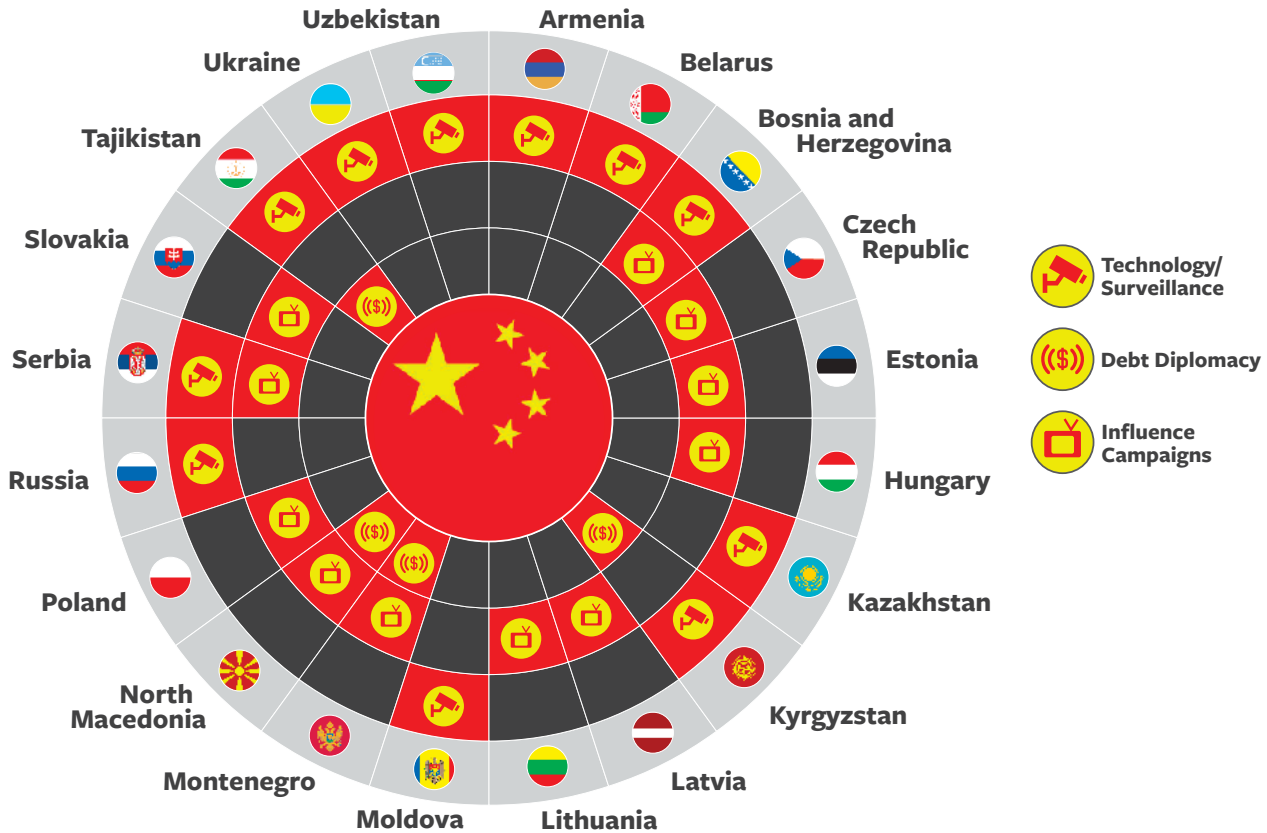
Agreement” with governments in 10 of NIT's 29 countries, each of which has a record of poor governance and serious problems with corruption. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, for example, nearly a thousand cameras have been installed to monitor events in public spaces. In Serbia, another country that has instituted Huawei's surveillance system of facial and license-plate recognition, police officers have taken part in joint exercises with their Chinese counterparts, learning how the Chinese “disable terrorists.” These partnerships raise concerns that China's increasing reach could strengthen authoritarian-minded leaders, contributing to repression and diminishing democratic governance and active civil society. Even in democracies, experts point to vulnerabilities that can be exploited by the Chinese authorities, as Chinese technologies are integrated into the surveillance sector.

Another area of expanding Chinese influence in the region is the media, in which Chinese authorities intervene in in order to shape content to their advantage. The three main strategies focus on promotion of the Chinese Communist Party's preferred narratives, the suppression of critical viewpoints, and the management of content delivery systems. The Czech Republic provided a perfect example of the implementation of this comprehensive strategy in late 2019, when reports that Petr Kellner—the country's wealthiest citizen, who has deep business interests in China—was accused of financing a media

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A SNAPSHOT OF CHINESE GOVERNMENT INFLUENCE

The countries below are among those where Beijing has exploited weak or nonexistent democratic institutions.



influence campaign aimed at promoting a positive image of the country and at attacking its local critics. In Central and Eastern European countries, Chinese diplomats have been given free rein to publish misleading op-eds that push a pro-China narrative.

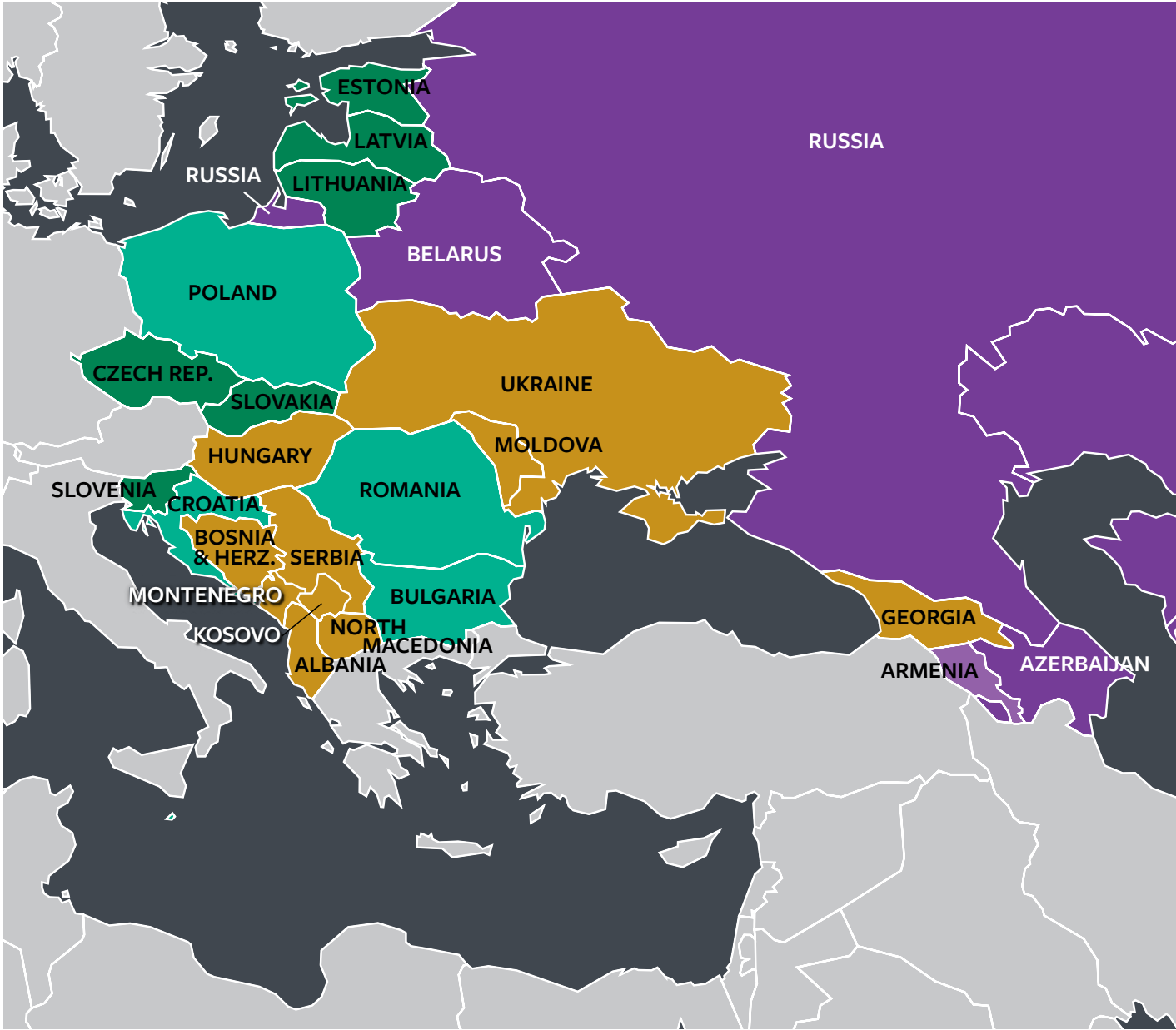
Lastly, China has aimed to gain influence in the region through a strategy of debt diplomacy—that is, providing cash-strapped, infrastructurally weak countries with funds in a way that creates political dependency. China’s advantage in the region is its ability to grant loans with few strings attached—as compared to the EU, which has more stringent guidelines for loaning and paying back financial support. As a result, foreign-held debt in the region is increasingly found in the hands of the Chinese government: Tajikistan, Montenegro, and North Macedonia owe 41, 39, and 20 percent of their

debt, respectively, to China. In April 2020, hit by the coronavirus, Kyrgyzstan resorted to asking for debt relief; the country owes as much as two-fifths of its foreign debt to China’s Eximbank.

All of these strategies weaken avenues for democratic oversight, and provide authoritarians and authoritarians-to-be with tools and incentives to overstay their time in power. Like Russia, China is an opportunistic actor in the region in the sense that it takes advantage of domestic vulnerabilities. Its corrosive influence can and should be countered, but financial investment and political deals only go so far. Ultimately, its sharp power will only have less potential to penetrate if democratic stakeholders focus on backstopping the region’s democratic institutions.

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NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2020



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

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The map reflects the findings of Freedom House's *Nations in Transit 2020* survey, which assesses the status of democratic development in 29 countries from Central Europe to Central Asia during 2019. 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)**.

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President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and his spouse Mehriban Aliyeva, posted on February 5, 2013 to the official Ilyam Aliyev Facebook page.

EURASIA'S AUTOCRATS GRAPPLE WITH SUCCESSION PLANS

Months of speculation about Vladimir Putin's options for maintaining control after leaving the presidency in 2024 were thrown out the window on March 10, 2020, when Russia's parliament adopted a constitutional amendment that will simply restart the term-limits clock and allow Putin to stay in power until 2036. Given the earlier signs that he was planning to shift to another post, as with his stint as prime minister in 2008–12, the move was perhaps unexpected. But it was certainly in keeping with a recent trend of uncertainty surrounding presidential succession in Eurasia.

Autocrats from Central Asia to the Caucasus have been trying to solve the fundamental problem of retirement in a system built around a single personality. They want to retain the trappings of power without the burden of wielding it, or at least ensure their own security if age or infirmity force them to step back.

By extending his possible tenure by another two terms, Putin bought some time for himself. Nevertheless, he still needs an exit strategy, and the history of the region is not encouraging. Every post-Soviet authoritarian ruler in Eurasia to date has died in office, succumbed to a popular uprising, or been betrayed by a hand-picked successor.

As a result, today's Eurasian leaders have increasingly resorted to the rather anachronistic model of dynastic succession. That is, they are placing family members close to the fire—in positions of authority—so that when the time comes, they can transfer power to trusted relatives under a veneer of constitutionality.

A growing pattern of dynasty building

The president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, succeeded his father through a tightly controlled election in 2003, just months after the elder Aliyev collapsed on live television, and weeks before he was pronounced dead. Now there are signs that the regime is laying the groundwork for another, perhaps more predictable power transfer within the ruling family. In recent years, Aliyev has reshaped the upper echelons of his power vertical, primarily to the benefit of his wife—for whom the post of “first vice president” was created in 2016—and her own family network, the so-called Pashayev clan. As his public support has waned amid a slowing economy and increasingly divisive clan politics, Aliyev has also made an intralite revolt less likely by removing “old guard” officials who oppose or at least have no allegiance to his spouse. Consequently, any future resignation by Aliyev would leave First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva, an ally of presumably unwavering loyalty, in charge of a power structure staffed by her supporters.

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In Turkmenistan, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's 38-year-old son Serdar has been steadily climbing the ladder of authority over the last five years, moving through posts with ever increasing responsibility. In 2019, he was appointed governor of the important Ahal Province, which surrounds the capital, Ashgabat, and in February he took over the new Ministry of Industry and Construction, which will manage the construction of a new provincial capital in Ahal. All of this points toward an incipient transfer of power to the younger Berdimuhamedov, a prospect that gained salience last year after the president was forced to dispel rumors of his own ill-health or death.

Discussions surrounding dynastic succession in Tajikistan have been going on for years, but they recently ramped up in anticipation of the presidential election due in 2020. Incumbent Emomali Rahmon's 32-year-old son, Rustam, held a number of government positions before receiving his current post as mayor of Dushanbe, which some consider to be a stepping stone to the presidency. The possibility that Rustam could succeed his father received a boost in 2018, when Tajikistan's parliament lowered the eligibility age from 35 to 30.

Kazakhstan, the only consolidated authoritarian regime in *Nations in Transit 2020* that featured a transfer of power last year, seemed to be going in a different direction. To the surprise of some, the first transition of post-Soviet Kazakhstan proceeded in an orderly fashion and did not directly involve family. After ruling the country for 29 years, 78-year-old Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned in March 2019, passing the presidency to his chosen successor and ally, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Yet recent reports suggest a strained relationship between the new president and the old, and it appears that Nazarbayev—who remains the leader of the ruling party and lifetime chairman of the country's Security Council—might be reconsidering his decision, clawing back much of the control ceded to Tokayev. Fortunately for Nazarbayev, his daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva, as the Senate speaker, is next in the line of presidential succession. While Tokayev retains the presidency for the moment, a pivot to dynastic succession could be in the offing.

The failure of alternatives

Nazarbayev's apparent case of cold feet could be linked to the experiences of some of his fellow rulers in the region. Many authoritarian leaders, both inside and outside Eurasia, have manipulated their constitutions to preserve and extend

their own authority, but only a few have sought to create new perches for themselves outside the presidency, and the experiments have not gone well.

For example, the outgoing presidents of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan both sought to circumvent term limits by shifting the nucleus of power from the presidency to the parliament. Three years later, both of these leaders are facing criminal prosecutions after failing in their attempts maintain political control.

In Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev was unable to retain the unified loyalty of his party amid rivalry with his chosen successor, current president Sooronbay Jeenbekov. Atambayev was even stripped of his legal immunity and later arrested, following a violent confrontation between the authorities and his supporters.

In Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan's attempt to hop from the presidency to a newly empowered premiership touched off mass protests, with citizens expressing deep frustration over the stagnant economy and transparently undemocratic political system. Sargsyan was ultimately compelled to resign in 2018, ushering in a new government that has pursued significant, democratic reforms since crushing the old ruling party in that parliamentary elections.

Putin is no doubt aware of these cases, which show that trust in allies can be misplaced, and public discontent can overwhelm even the best-laid transition plans. Unlike Nazarbayev and the other dynasty builders, however, the Russian leader has kept his family members out of public office, and almost entirely out of the public eye. If he plans to raise the profile of a daughter or some other relative, he will need to get started well before 2036.

In the end though, even dynastic succession is far from safe. These authoritarian leaders must contend with the glaring fact that their concentration of power is fundamentally undemocratic and violates the spirit if not the letter of their constitutions, all of which make some promise of basic political rights and envision a republican form of government. Lacking better options, Eurasian rulers may attempt to pass the baton to family members, but there is no guarantee that their citizens or even their henchmen will accept the insult of a de facto monarchy.

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WITHIN ECO-PROTESTS, SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY

Governments from Central Asia to Central Europe were rocked by political protests in 2019. Public displays of dissent roiled Kazakhstan ahead of and after a sham vote installed former president Nursultan Nazarbayev's chosen successor in office. In Moscow, protestors braved police brutality to reject the rigging of local elections, while in the Serbian capital of Belgrade, a movement against creeping authoritarianism organized weekly antigovernment demonstrations. Across Poland, concerned citizens rallied to denounce the ruling Law and Justice party's purge of the judiciary, and in Prague, at least a quarter-million people protested Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš's corrupt dealings, recalling the crowds of the 1989 Velvet Revolution.

While causes and contexts of these protests differed, they shared a common fate: failure to secure stated aims. The region's governments, no matter their democratic character, have calculated that they can keep a lid on simmering discontent and survive without ceding ground to the street.

There is, however, an exception to this general rule. Even in some of the most closed countries, the appeals of environmental activists have found a surprisingly receptive audience in the authorities. For instance, in authoritarian Belarus, a series of protest marches compelled officials to suspend construction of a planned battery factory in Brest, though organizers endured repeated detentions before their determination paid off. In semi-authoritarian Kyrgyzstan, the same government that shrugged off a popular anticorruption campaign in 2019 leapt into action after a spate of demonstrations against uranium mining, issuing a blanket ban on the practice. Meanwhile, Montenegro experienced the largest protests in its history last year—involving perhaps 10 percent of the population—yet government officials there only granted concessions to a diffuse campaign against dams whose rallies never drew more than a few dozen people.

Green shoots

Eco-activists' demands, such as closing dumps, cleaning up waterways, and otherwise reversing environmental degradation, tend to be local and indirectly political, which may explain why normally unresponsive governments have proven willing to tolerate and occasionally accommodate them. Yet, many of the ecological issues driving this activism are downstream of governance failures including clientelism, graft, and gross incompetence. Consequently, in free and unfree societies alike, environmental protests have become ciphers



Demonstrators march across the River Danube staging a protest in Budapest in September 2019. Credit: ZOLTAN BALOGH/ EPA-EFE/ Shutterstock.

through which citizens can advocate against corruption and for good governance—and expect results.

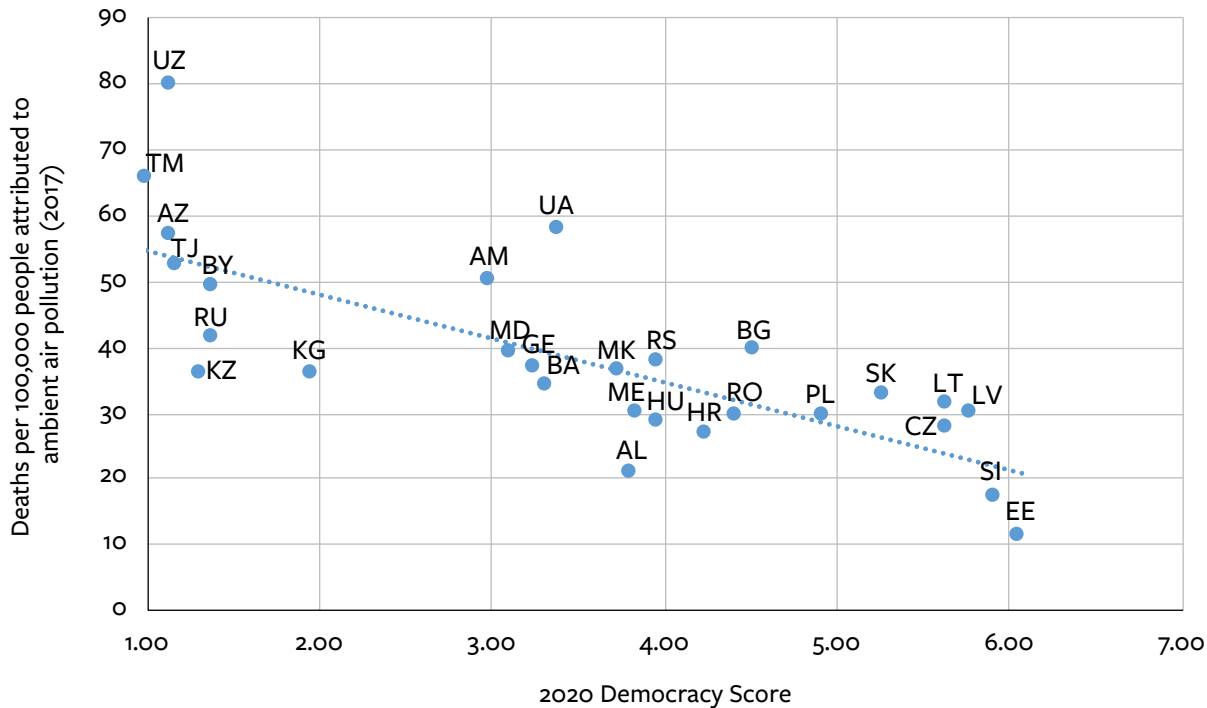
In more democratic countries, activists often explicitly link their desire for a better environment to a desire for a better government. For example, in Bulgaria, outrage over a water shortage brought about by corruption-tinged mismanagement in the city of Pernik saw residents descend on the capital to call for the prime minister's resignation. The largest opposition party took up their cause, initiating a no-confidence motion in parliament that drew a direct connection between the situation in Pernik and the deterioration of democracy in the country. While the motion failed, the environment minister was sacked, and a pipeline to bring relief to the city was rapidly constructed.

In Armenia, local concern over runoff from the planned Amulsar gold mine became a headache for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who inherited the project from the corrupt administration ousted by popular protests in 2018. Activists have blocked the mine's approach road for months; they say Pashinyan will prove that he's no different than the leaders he replaced if he greenlights the project.

Antigovernment sentiment is also in evidence among activists in the region's autocracies. In Uzbekistan, where memories of the Andijan Massacre still confine activism to the digital sphere, online uproar over plans to bulldoze Samarkand's tree-lined University Boulevard led authorities to scrap the initiative. Moreover, it revealed some willingness to confront the authorities: beneath a Change.org petition addressed to the city's appointed mayor, one signatory wrote, "You probably forgot about the people, but the people will not forget about you."

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND MORTALITY FROM AIR POLLUTION



Source: "Global Burden of Disease Study 2017," Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, Seattle, WA, USA

Trouble in the water

While environmental protests offer citizens some means for holding their governments accountable, ruling classes are also waking up to their potential to touch off wider political unrest. In Russia, the authorities cracked down hard on a grassroots campaign against a proposed landfill in the remote railway depot of Shiyes, especially after activists began to attract international attention with their calls for the resignation of regional leaders and eventually of President Vladimir Putin. Protesters' persistence in the face of state repression earned them fractured bones and fines totaling millions of rubles, but ultimately, the authorities blinked: in January 2020, a court ordered construction to halt. Simultaneously, though, the Kremlin has reportedly mulled a "reboot" of the Russian Ecological Party—a sock puppet loyal to Putin's ruling United Russia party—in a bid to co-opt growing environmental activism throughout the country. Similarly, the only new party permitted to compete in Uzbekistan's 2019 parliamentary elections was the progovernment Ecological Movement.

As the struggle in Shiyes came to a close, small-scale demonstrations erupted across the Balkans in response to

plummeting air quality: according to readings on January 3, 2020, capital cities in the Balkans accounted for five of the 20 most polluted major municipalities in the world. In Belgrade, the Alliance for Serbia, an umbrella opposition group, began to champion the cause of combatting smog, inserting the air quality crisis into its long-running feud with President Aleksandar Vucic. Time will tell whether this move will bolster the opposition's halting campaign to challenge Vučić and his long-ruling Serbian Progressive Party, but to date, it has not.

Spring awakening

Contemporary observers, contrasting small eco-movements in Eastern Europe and Eurasia against more consolidated, politically influential green movements in Western Europe, sometimes speak of a new "Iron Curtain" behind which green politics cannot penetrate. However, recent events suggest otherwise. While the kinds of isolated protests taking place in Brest, Belgrade, and beyond are a far cry from forceful movements centered around ecological issues, if ordinarily irreproachable governments are taking them seriously, democracy's boosters should take notice, too.

Recommendations

To counter the democratic breakdown recorded by *Nations in Transit*, democracies, especially the United States and European Union member states, should do the following:

STRENGTHEN AND PROTECT CORE VALUES

- 1. Ensure that political leaders promote democratic values and the protection of human rights through their own words and actions.** COVID-19 has thrown into sharp relief the importance of public trust in democratic institutions and elected leaders, exposing weaknesses in many established democracies. When senior officials in such countries attack the press, the judiciary, or other institutions, they further undermine faith in democracy around the world. Political leaders should demonstrate respect for fundamental norms at home by adhering to the relevant domestic legislation and parallel international human rights standards, and by refraining from rhetoric that contradicts those standards. Doing so will give them greater credibility and present a positive model for individuals still struggling to bring democracy to their countries.
- 2. Make the promotion of democracy and human rights a priority in bilateral relations, focusing attention and funding on countries at critical junctures.** While economic deals and financial assistance can jumpstart cooperation and help people on the ground, it is crucial to incorporate democracy and human rights considerations into such agreements. Special attention should be paid to countries undergoing significant governance transitions, including Armenia and Ukraine, as well as those in the Balkans and Central Europe that are backsliding.
 - In Central Europe, make funding conditional on respecting democratic values and push on key areas related to the rule of law and media freedom.** Given the EU's lack of success to date in addressing autocratization in Hungary and Poland, member states should adopt a simple and uniformly applicable method for making EU funding conditional on respect for democratic values. The upcoming German presidency should also restart monitoring of the rule

of law, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, in Hungary and Poland. The United States could generate broader benefits for democracy through targeted funding programs that support media freedom, including the return of Radio Free Liberty/Radio Liberty to the region.

- In the Balkans, prioritize long-term democratic progress over short-term political and economic considerations.** Despite a number of successful political deals and technical progress toward accession to the EU, *Nations in Transit* has recorded democratic deterioration in the region, especially in Serbia and Montenegro. The revamping of the accession process can serve as opportunity: membership might not be an immediate offer, but the EU should make sure that it remains a credible partner in the meantime, including for Kosovo, and that good governance and democracy criteria remain frontloaded in the process. The recent renewal of engagement by the United States was a much-needed step, but to secure lasting results Washington needs to work in close cooperation with European allies and reintegrate its traditional foreign policy emphasis on democracy.
- In Ukraine, support participatory, transparent, and accountable governance.** Assistance and support from the United States and European governments have played a crucial role and should continue to bolster Ukraine's progress. Policymakers should prioritize programs meant to fight corruption; they should also closely monitor limitations on freedom of expression, making sure that any restrictions adopted are necessary and proportionate. In addition, to keep Ukraine's democracy safe and healthy, democratic partners should back initiatives that strengthen independent oversight of security services and that work toward preventing and responding to hate-motivated violence against vulnerable communities.
- In Armenia, invest heavily in programs that support the rule of law and strengthen independent institutions, including comprehensive judicial and police reforms.** A national consensus in favor of political change, the rule of law, and the elimination of systemic corruption formed the basis of Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution. This public demand provides a

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historic opportunity for democracy's advocates inside and outside the country. Both the United States and the EU have stepped up support, but their programs should also focus on maintaining social cohesion and addressing political polarization. Overcoming these challenges could be the key to success for any other reforms.

- 3. Safeguard the rule of law and the judiciary in at-risk countries.** An independent judiciary is an indispensable bulwark against authoritarian power grabs. But even in the more democratic countries evaluated in *Nations in Transit*, the justice system has been plagued by politicization and corruption. Judicial organizations should continue to receive technical legal assistance, including resources for improving ethics and accountability, while democratic partner governments should closely monitor and speak out against attacks on the courts in the region. All countries should abide by the Venice Commission's 2016 rule of law checklist, which sets out the core elements of a democratic legal system.
- 4. Support civil society and grassroots movements calling for democracy.** Democratic governments should provide vocal, public support for grassroots prodemocracy movements, and respond to any effort to suppress them by imposing targeted sanctions, reducing or conditioning foreign assistance, and condemning the crackdown in public statements. Civil society groups, citizen-led social movements, and other nonstate actors with democratic agendas should receive technical assistance and training on issues such as coalition and constituency building, advocacy, and how to maintain both physical and digital security.

GUARD AGAINST MANIPULATION BY AUTHORITARIAN ACTORS

- 1. Impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities involved in human rights abuses and acts of corruption.** In the United States, a variety of laws allow authorities to block visas for and freeze the assets of any people or entities, including private companies, that engage in or support corruption or human rights abuses. These accountability tools, such as the Global Magnitsky Act, enable governments to punish perpetrators without harming the general population. Countries with similar laws should robustly enforce them, and the EU should prioritize the creation of its own such mechanism.
- 2. Take steps to invigorate the fight against kleptocracy and transnational corruption.**
- 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 make sure that the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), a union-level body recently set up to investigate and prosecute fraud involving EU money, is adequately resourced and able to investigate such crimes in all member states.
 - In the United States, the proposed CROOK Act (H.R. 3843) 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. 1309), 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.
- 3. Monitor and work to limit China's corrosive influence in the region.** Civil society groups and independent news outlets should vigilantly monitor any technology transfers, emerging investments, infrastructure developments, elite co-optation, and media manipulation related to China. With the help of democratic governments, they should expose any evidence of bilateral collaboration with Beijing that could result in human rights violations, and urge their governments to resist the temptation of adopting the sorts of censorship and surveillance methods pioneered by the Chinese Communist Party.
- 4. Restrict the export of sophisticated surveillance tools to authoritarian and hybrid regimes.** Technologies such as facial-recognition surveillance, automated social media monitoring, and targeted interception or collection of communications data can empower authoritarian governments to violate fundamental rights. The sale of such technologies—including those that use machine learning, natural-language processing, and deep learning—should be restricted for countries that are classified as authoritarian or hybrid regimes in *Nations in Transit*.

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NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2020 SCORES

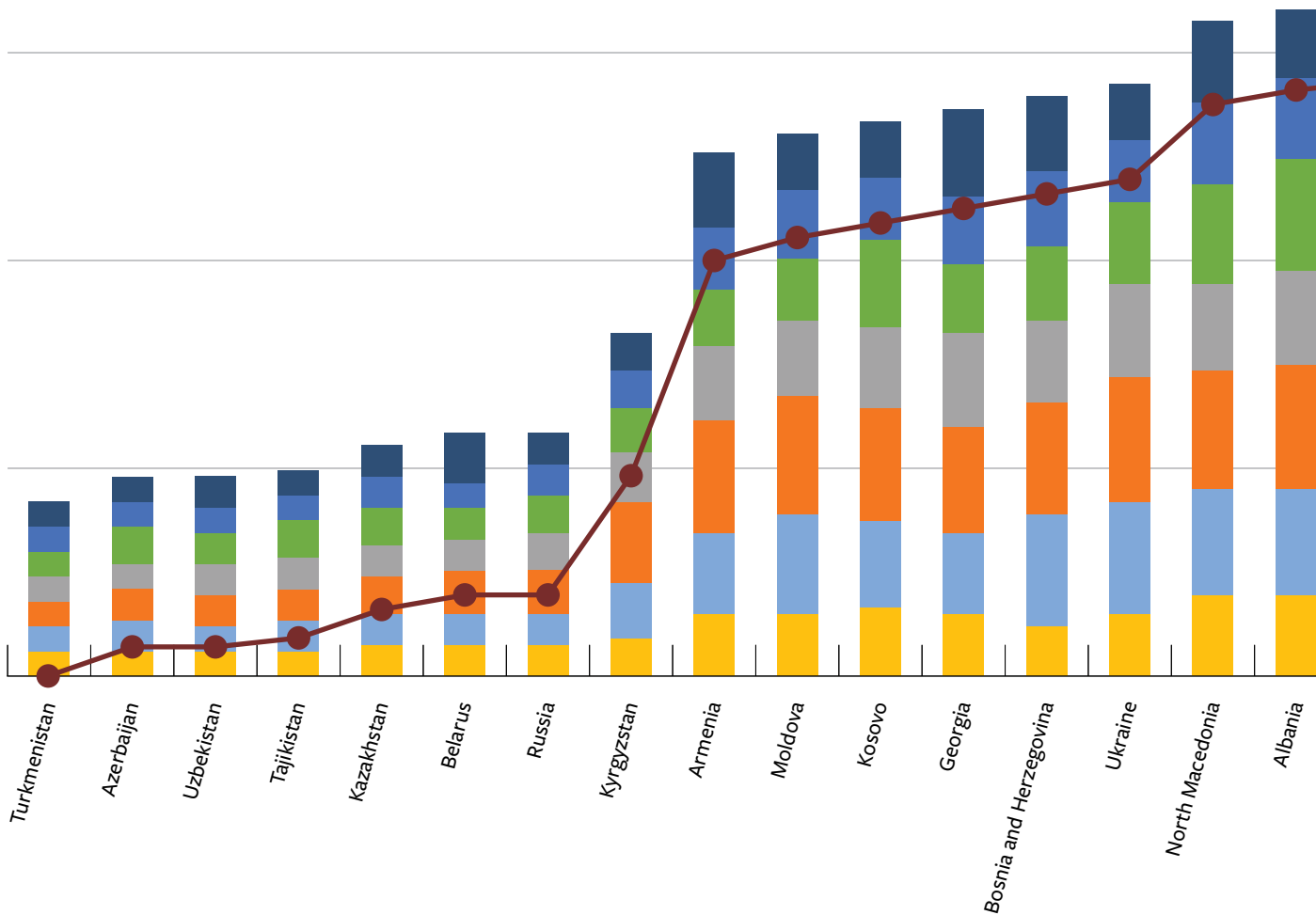
Nations in Transit scores its 29 countries on a scale of 1 to 7 in seven categories: National Democratic Governance, Electoral Process, Civil Society, Independent Media, Local Democratic Governance, Judicial Framework and Independence, and Corruption. Category scores are based on a detailed list of questions available on page 23. These category scores are straight-averaged to create a country's "Democracy Score" on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being the most democratic, and 1 the least.

Democracy Scores are used to assign the following regime classifications:

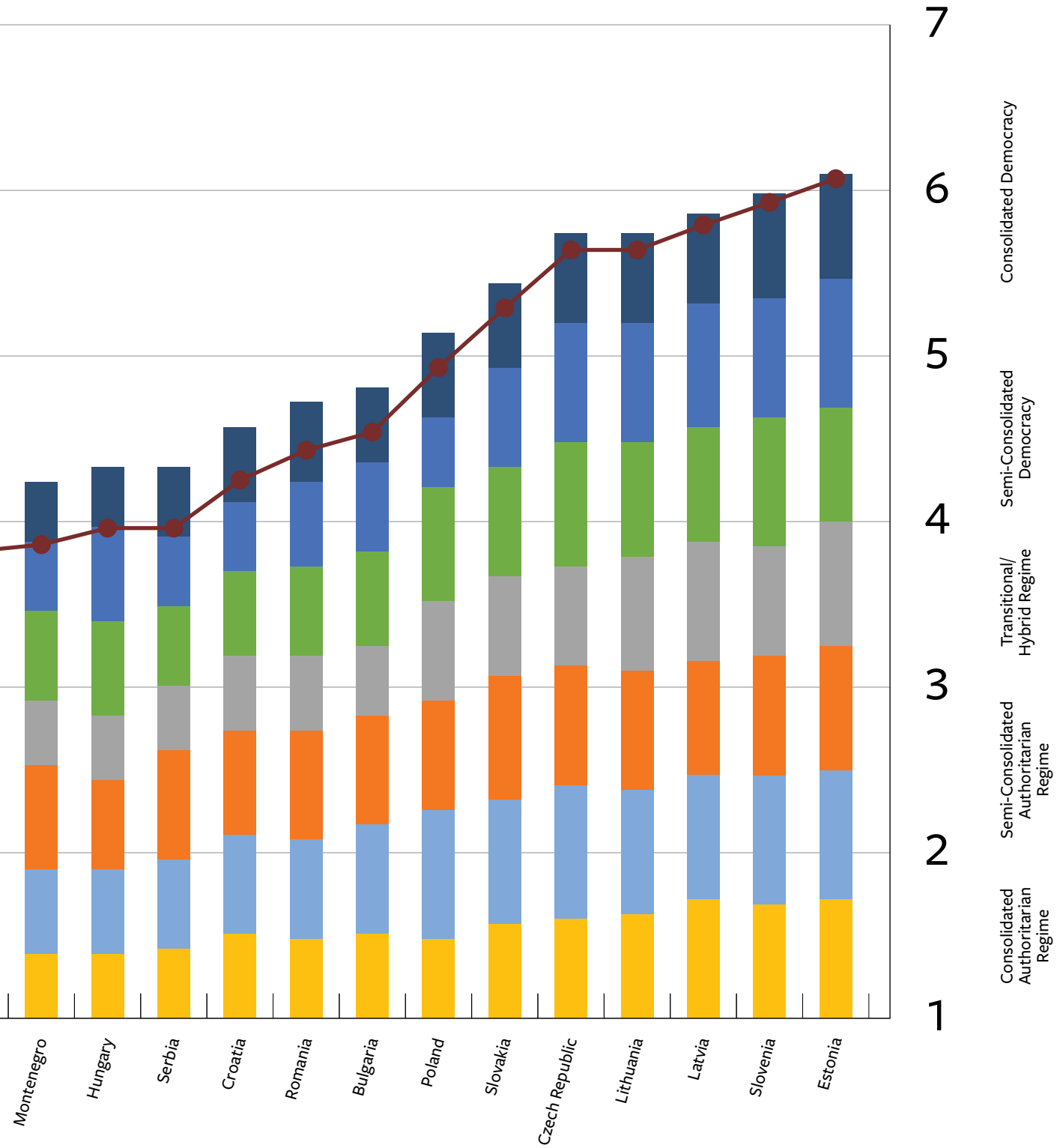
- 1.00–2.00** Consolidated Authoritarian Regime
- 2.01–3.00** Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime
- 3.01–4.00** Transitional/Hybrid Regime
- 4.01–5.00** Semi-Consolidated Democracy
- 5.01–7.00** Consolidated Democracy

NIT Categories

- National Democratic Governance
- Electoral Process
- Civil Society
- Independent Media
- Local Democratic Governance
- Judicial Framework and Independence
- Corruption
- Each Country's Democracy Score



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NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2020: OVERVIEW OF SCORE CHANGES

▼ Decline ▲ Improvement □ Unchanged

	Country	Democracy Score	Democracy %	NDG	EP	CS	IM	LDG	JFI	CO
BALKANS	Albania	3.89 TO 3.82	47%	▼	▼					
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.32	39%							
	Croatia	4.25	54%							
	Kosovo	3.11 TO 3.18	36%	▲			▲			
	North Macedonia	3.68 TO 3.75	46%		▲		▲			
	Montenegro	3.93 TO 3.86	48%						▼	▼
	Serbia	4.00 TO 3.96	49%							▼
CENTRAL EUROPE	Bulgaria	4.61 TO 4.54	59%		▼		▼			
	Czech Republic	5.71 TO 5.64	77%				▼		▼	
	Estonia	6.11 TO 6.07	85%				▼			
	Hungary	4.07 TO 3.96	49%		▼			▼		▼
	Latvia	5.86 TO 5.79	80%						▼	▼
	Lithuania	5.61 TO 5.64	77%		▲					
	Poland	5.04 TO 4.93	65%			▼		▼	▼	
	Romania	4.43	57%							
	Slovakia	5.36 TO 5.29	71%		▼				▼	
	Slovenia	5.93	82%							
EURASIA	Armenia	2.93 TO 3.00	33%		▲					▲
	Azerbaijan	1.07 TO 1.14	2%		▲	▲				
	Belarus	1.39	7%							
	Georgia	3.29 TO 3.25	38%						▼	
	Kazakhstan	1.29 TO 1.32	5%			▲				
	Kyrgyzstan	2.00 TO 1.96	16%							▼
	Moldova	3.04 TO 3.11	35%	▲						▲
	Russia	1.43 TO 1.39	7%			▼				
	Tajikistan	1.21 TO 1.18	3%					▼		
	Turkmenistan	1.04 TO 1.00	0%					▼		
	Ukraine	3.36 TO 3.39	40%	▲						
	Uzbekistan	1.11 TO 1.14	2%							▲

CATEGORIES:

NDG – National Democratic Governance **LDG** – Local Democratic Governance
EP – Electoral Process **JFI** – Judicial Framework and Independence
CS – Civil Society
IM – Independent Media **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 2020 ratings reflect the period from 1 January through 31 December 2019.

Methodology

Nations in Transit 2020 evaluates the state of democracy in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia. The 22nd edition of this annual study covers events from January 1 through December 31, 2019. 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>.

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NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2020: 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	6.00	6.50	6.25	6.25	5.75	6.50	5.25	6.07	85%
Slovenia	5.75	6.50	6.00	5.50	6.50	6.00	5.25	5.93	82%
Latvia	6.00	6.25	5.75	6.00	5.75	6.25	4.50	5.79	80%
Czech Republic	5.00	6.75	6.00	5.00	6.25	6.00	4.50	5.64	77%
Lithuania	5.25	6.25	6.00	5.75	5.75	6.00	4.50	5.64	77%
Slovakia	4.75	6.25	6.25	5.00	5.50	5.00	4.25	5.29	71%
Poland	4.00	6.50	5.50	5.00	5.75	3.50	4.25	4.93	65%
Bulgaria	4.25	5.50	5.50	3.50	4.75	4.50	3.75	4.54	59%
Romania	4.00	5.00	5.50	3.75	4.50	4.25	4.00	4.43	57%
Croatia	4.25	5.00	5.25	3.75	4.25	3.50	3.75	4.25	54%
Hungary	3.25	4.25	4.50	3.25	4.75	4.75	3.00	3.96	49%
Serbia	3.50	4.50	5.50	3.25	4.00	3.50	3.50	3.96	49%
Montenegro	3.25	4.25	5.25	3.25	4.50	3.50	3.00	3.86	46%
Albania	3.25	4.25	5.00	3.75	4.50	3.25	2.75	3.82	47%
North Macedonia	3.25	4.25	4.75	3.50	4.00	3.25	3.25	3.75	35%
Ukraine	2.50	4.50	5.00	3.75	3.25	2.50	2.25	3.39	40%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2.00	4.50	4.50	3.25	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.32	39%
Georgia	2.50	3.25	4.25	3.75	2.75	2.75	3.50	3.25	38%
Kosovo	2.75	3.50	4.50	3.25	3.50	2.50	2.25	3.18	36%
Moldova	2.50	4.00	4.75	3.00	2.50	2.75	2.25	3.11	48%
Armenia	2.50	3.25	4.50	3.00	2.25	2.50	3.00	3.00	33%
Kyrgyzstan	1.50	2.25	3.25	2.00	1.75	1.50	1.50	1.96	16%
Belarus	1.25	1.25	1.75	1.25	1.25	1.00	2.00	1.39	7%
Russia	1.25	1.25	1.75	1.50	1.50	1.25	1.25	1.39	7%
Kazakhstan	1.25	1.25	1.50	1.25	1.50	1.25	1.25	1.32	5%
Tajikistan	1.00	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.50	1.00	1.00	1.18	3%
Azerbaijan	1.00	1.25	1.25	1.00	1.50	1.00	1.00	1.14	2%
Uzbekistan	1.00	1.00	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.00	1.25	1.14	2%
Turkmenistan	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0%
Average	3.09	3.98	4.26	3.34	3.62	3.27	2.97	3.50	42%
Median	3.25	4.25	4.75	3.25	4.00	3.25	3.00	3.75	46%

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2020: DEMOCRACY SCORE HISTORY BY REGION

Country	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
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Central Europe

Bulgaria	4.96	4.93	4.86	4.82	4.75	4.71	4.75	4.64	4.61	4.61	4.54	▼
Czech Republic	5.79	5.82	5.82	5.86	5.75	5.79	5.79	5.75	5.71	5.71	5.64	▼
Estonia	6.04	6.07	6.07	6.04	6.04	6.04	6.07	6.07	6.18	6.11	6.07	▼
Hungary	5.61	5.39	5.14	5.11	5.04	4.82	4.71	4.46	4.29	4.07	3.96	▼
Latvia	5.82	5.86	5.89	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.96	5.93	5.86	5.79	▼
Lithuania	5.75	5.75	5.71	5.68	5.64	5.64	5.68	5.68	5.64	5.61	5.64	▲
Poland	5.68	5.79	5.86	5.82	5.82	5.79	5.68	5.43	5.11	5.04	4.93	▼
Romania	4.54	4.57	4.57	4.50	4.54	4.54	4.54	4.61	4.54	4.43	4.43	▼
Slovakia	5.32	5.46	5.50	5.43	5.39	5.36	5.39	5.39	5.39	5.36	5.29	▼
Slovenia	6.07	6.07	6.11	6.11	6.07	6.07	6.00	5.96	5.93	5.93	5.93	▼
Average	5.56	5.57	5.55	5.53	5.50	5.47	5.45	5.40	5.33	5.27	5.22	
Median	5.72	5.77	5.77	5.75	5.70	5.72	5.68	5.56	5.52	5.48	5.46	

Balkans

Albania	4.07	3.96	3.86	3.75	3.82	3.86	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	▼
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.75	3.68	3.64	3.61	3.57	3.54	3.50	3.46	3.36	3.32	3.32	▼
Croatia	4.29	4.36	4.39	4.39	4.32	4.32	4.32	4.29	4.25	4.25	4.25	▼
Kosovo	2.93	2.82	2.82	2.75	2.86	2.86	2.93	3.04	3.07	3.11	3.18	▲
Montenegro	4.21	4.18	4.18	4.18	4.14	4.11	4.07	4.11	4.07	3.93	3.86	▼
North Macedonia	4.21	4.18	4.11	4.07	4.00	3.93	3.71	3.57	3.64	3.68	3.75	▲
Serbia	4.29	4.36	4.36	4.36	4.36	4.32	4.25	4.18	4.04	4.00	3.96	▼
Average	3.96	3.93	3.91	3.87	3.87	3.85	3.81	3.79	3.76	3.74	3.73	
Median	4.21	4.18	4.11	4.07	4.00	3.93	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	

Eurasia

Armenia	2.61	2.57	2.61	2.64	2.64	2.64	2.64	2.61	2.57	2.93	3.00	▲
Azerbaijan	1.61	1.54	1.43	1.36	1.32	1.25	1.14	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.14	▲
Belarus	1.50	1.43	1.32	1.29	1.29	1.29	1.36	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.39	▼
Georgia	3.07	3.14	3.18	3.25	3.32	3.36	3.39	3.39	3.32	3.29	3.25	▼
Kazakhstan	1.57	1.57	1.46	1.43	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.36	1.29	1.29	1.32	▲
Kyrgyzstan	1.79	1.89	2.00	2.04	2.11	2.07	2.11	2.00	1.93	2.00	1.96	▼
Moldova	2.86	3.04	3.11	3.18	3.14	3.14	3.11	3.07	3.07	3.04	3.11	▲
Russia	1.86	1.82	1.82	1.79	1.71	1.54	1.50	1.43	1.39	1.43	1.39	▼
Tajikistan	1.86	1.86	1.82	1.75	1.68	1.61	1.46	1.36	1.21	1.21	1.18	▼
Turkmenistan	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.00	▼
Ukraine	3.61	3.39	3.18	3.14	3.07	3.25	3.32	3.39	3.36	3.36	3.39	▲
Uzbekistan	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.11	1.11	1.14	▲
Average	2.04	2.03	2.01	2.00	1.98	1.97	1.96	1.93	1.90	1.93	1.94	
Median	1.83	1.84	1.82	1.77	1.70	1.58	1.48	1.41	1.39	1.41	1.39	

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