

# NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2022

From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression



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This booklet is a summary of findings for the 2022 edition of *Nations in Transit*. The complete analysis, including detailed reports on all countries, can be found on our website at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

## ON THE COVER

Irpin, Ukraine – March 4, 2022 – Civilians rush to board a train as the sounds of battle draw closer to the city of Irpin. Image credit: Marcus Yam / Contributor, Getty Images

# From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression

By Mike Smeltzer and Noah Buyon

With autocrats assailing the liberal international order and unscrupulous elected leaders turning to corrupt and illiberal forms of governance, the primacy of democracy in the *Nations in Transit* region is giving way to violence and misrule.

On February 24, Russian president Vladimir Putin launched a brutal invasion of Ukraine. This war, which has already displaced millions of people and menaced the lives of millions more, presents an existential challenge not just to Ukraine's sovereignty, but also to the liberal international order. It comes at the time when liberal democracy's star has faded across the 29 countries covered in *Nations in Transit*. This edition of the report, assessing the events of 2021 from Central Europe to Central Asia, marks the 18th consecutive year of democratic decline for the region as a whole.

Putin's war is the latest and gravest expression of his thuggish and malignant influence on neighboring states. When free societies have resisted his efforts to warp their media and corrupt their politicians, he has threatened or actually used military force, as in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. When authoritarian incumbents have teetered in the face of popular demands for change, he has backstopped their regimes and deepened their dependence on Moscow, as in Belarus or more recently in Kazakhstan. But the stakes of the current conflict are even higher. If the Kremlin succeeds in subjugating a sovereign, democratic Ukraine, it will mark the first time that an authoritarian power has overthrown a freely elected national

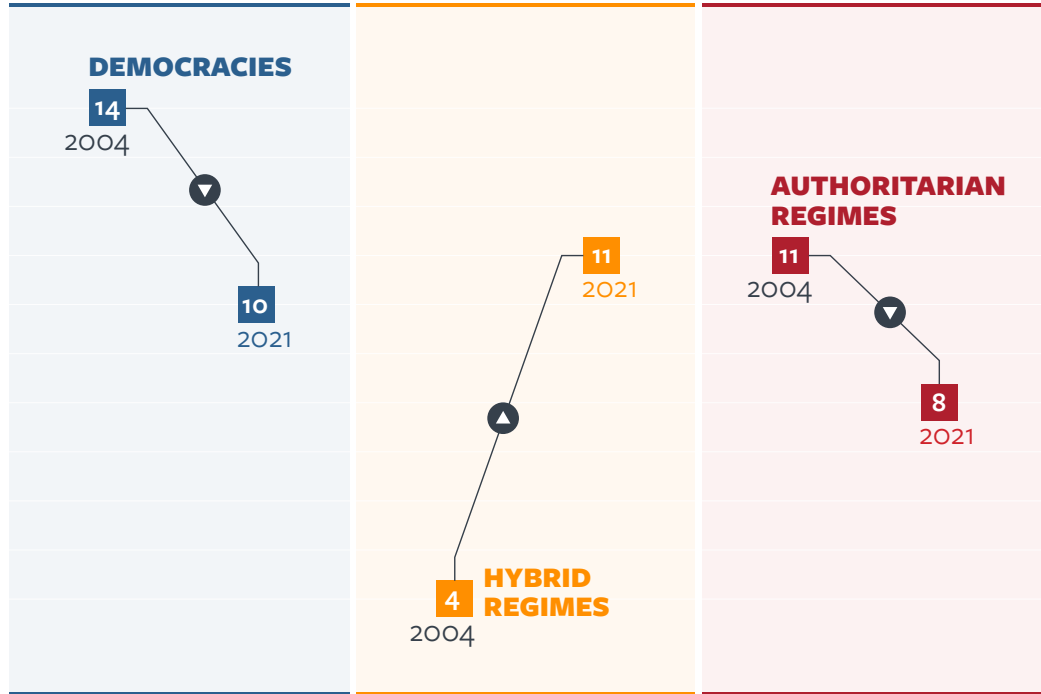
government in the region since the end of the Cold War. Even if the effort fails, it has already destabilized the *Nations in Transit* region, potentially accelerating the steady antidemocratic transformation that has taken place across Europe and Eurasia.

For years now, authoritarians have been on the offensive, while liberal democratic practices have increasingly been discarded. In relations between states, conflict, coercion, and

The term **liberal democracy** entails more than just competitive elections and a basic respect for civil liberties. It refers to democracy in its most robust form—a system of self-government in which executive power is regulated by elected state institutions (parliaments), unelected state institutions (courts), and unelected nonstate institutions (civil society and the press); and in which the full array of individual and collective rights are observed and protected. The **liberal international order** refers to the norms, alliances, and institutions (like the United Nations or the European Union) that were developed after World War II to promote peace, prosperity, and the principles of liberal democracy.

## REGIME TYPES IN NATIONS IN TRANSIT

This chart shows the number of countries classified as democracies, hybrid regimes, or authoritarian regimes in 2004 (the start of the ongoing democratic decline) and in 2021.



attacks on the legitimacy of key principles and institutions have proliferated at the expense of good-faith dialogue and the search for common interests. Domestically, demagogues and dictators run roughshod over the rule of law and the separation of powers. Elections are seldom fair, even when they are nominally free. Governments regard the freedoms of assembly, association, and expression as inconveniences, if not outright threats. Judicial independence, long warped by endemic corruption, is faltering in the face of abusive lawmaking. These disturbing trends, present to varying degrees everywhere in the region, are shaping the contours of a new, more violent, less democratic phase of history.

In this emerging era, liberal democracy no longer prevails as the assumed goal of national political development. Increasingly, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia are headed toward two different destinations: the abyss of full-blown autocracy and the gray zone of hybrid governance, where ostensibly democratic structures belie undemocratic practices. Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia, and the five Central Asian countries continue to sink to the bottom of *Nations in Transit's*

scale as longtime despots stamp out dissent and fortify themselves against perceived foreign and domestic enemies. In some cases, real-world conditions have continued to grow worse even when further score declines are not possible. Meanwhile, there are now 11 hybrid regimes in the region, up from four in 2004. Just six countries are still designated as consolidated democracies, down from eight when the 18-year period of decline began: Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Buffeted by the corrosive effects of illiberalism and corruption, all six suffered score declines this year.

Whether these patterns persist is up to liberal democracy's defenders. The danger posed by the invasion of Ukraine is already galvanizing the world's democrats as no other crisis in recent memory has, but it will take a significant and sustained counterforce to set the broader region back on a positive trajectory. Regional and global leaders must summon the same determination as the Ukrainians themselves if they are to resist authoritarian aggression and reverse the 18-year democratic decline.

## Into the abyss

Perhaps more than at any other point in the post-Cold War period, the people of Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia can now see the threat posed to freedom and democracy by unconstrained dictatorship. The movement of Eurasia in particular toward the abyss of autocracy has accelerated as entrenched leaders across the region have rejected liberal democracy and embraced personalist forms of authoritarian rule, in which the state’s power is concentrated in the hands of an individual. And just as these figures suppress liberal democratic norms and principles at home, viewing them as threats to their hold on power, so too do they seek to neutralize democratic pressure from abroad, whether by terrorizing exiled dissidents, corrupting foreign elites, or in Putin’s case, attempting to crush democratizing neighbors whose example might stoke domestic demands for reform.

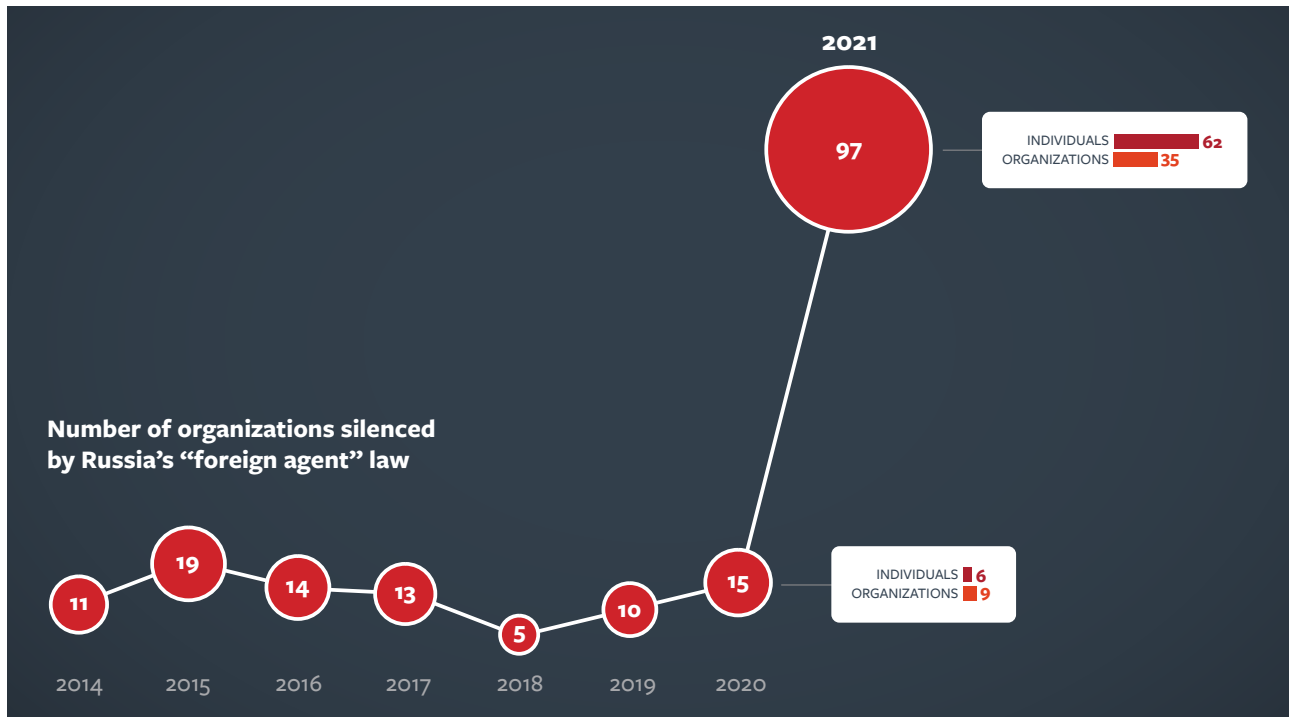
Indeed, no country in the region provides so stark an example of the deadly consequences of strongman rule as Russia. Over the span of his 22-year tenure at the top of

Russia’s vertical of power, Putin has systematically hollowed out the institutions meant to provide crucial checks on the arbitrary and abusive use of executive power, transforming what was a hybrid regime in 2000 into a consolidated authoritarian regime today.

The Kremlin’s contempt for democracy and human rights was on full display in 2021, as it pursued a dramatic escalation in its domestic repression. While the politically motivated arrest of Aleksey Navalny, Russia’s most influential opposition leader, in January resulted in the country’s largest protests in nearly a decade, the state’s subsequent crackdown was swift and bloody. Security forces injured hundreds of peaceful demonstrators and detained thousands more. The Kremlin spent the following months systematically dismantling any remaining or potential avenues of dissent ahead of the rigged parliamentary elections that September. The authorities declared Navalny’s political movement an unlawful “extremist” group and expanded the reach of “foreign agent” laws to further restrict, if not completely close, the space for independent reporting and civic activism.

## A NEW ERA IN THE KREMLIN’S REPRESSION OF DISSENT

Adopted in 2012, and amended in 2019 to include individuals, Russia’s “foreign agent” law was used to silence critics at an astonishing rate in 2021.



Source: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kremlin-foreign-media-crackdown/31438446.html>

This violent, antidemocratic repression at home has significantly intensified since Putin unleashed his war of aggression against Ukraine. In the first three weeks after the invasion began, nearly 15,000 Russians were detained for peacefully protesting the war. What remained of Russia's independent media sector was swiftly eliminated, with domestic outlets blocked or shuttered, international outlets intimidated into suspending in-country reporting, and new legislation banning the spread of "false information," including any reference to the "special military operation" in Ukraine as a "war" or "invasion."

## No country in the region provides so stark an example of the deadly consequences of strongman rule as Russia.

Russia was not the only country to sink further into the depths of autocracy. In Belarus, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka similarly tightened the screws on the remaining vestiges of free expression and political opposition. After crushing mass protests against the rigged 2020 presidential election with crucial Russian support, Lukashenka's regime set about purging the civic and media sectors, forcing real and perceived critics to choose between incarceration or exile abroad—though the May 2021 hijacking of an international flight to arrest Raman Pratasevich demonstrated that even exiles court danger if they continue their activism. Now, in 2022, Lukashenka is repaying his enormous political debt to Putin by enabling and supporting the invasion of Ukraine.

Developments in Kyrgyzstan illustrate how quickly authoritarian regimes can become consolidated, particularly when democratic checks on power have already been weakened. Following his extralegal rise to the presidency in 2020, Sadyr Japarov transformed Kyrgyzstan's government into his personal fief, manipulating voters and rigging a referendum process to overhaul the constitution and reinstitute a presidential model that grants him vast influence over the state. Having thus neutralized the independence and power of the judicial and legislative branches, Japarov moved to weaken the country's nonstate institutions, overseeing harsher attacks on civil society and

the independent media in 2021. He is now poised to stay in office for many years to come.

While Japarov's ascendancy in Kyrgyzstan has coincided with an uptick in border clashes with Tajikistan, it is the invasion of Ukraine—led by Moscow and enabled by Minsk—that offers the most potent reminder of the link between national governance and international order. Both domestic repression and military aggression are the foreseeable products of a form of government in which one leader wields unchecked authority and imposes their will through force. The extinction of Russian democracy and the war against Ukrainian democracy are, in effect, two sides of the same autocratic coin.

### Stuck in the gray zone

This year, for the first time in the 21st century, the prevailing form of governance in the *Nations in Transit* region is the hybrid regime. Four democracies have fallen into this gray zone since the unbroken period of democratic decline began in 2004: Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. During the same period, three authoritarian regimes made democratic strides and joined the ranks of hybrid regimes: Moldova, Kosovo, and now Armenia.

While these regimes combine elements of democracy and authoritarian rule, they are analytically distinct from both. They may be democratic in the minimal sense that they feature regular, competitive elections, but their dysfunctional institutions are unable to deliver the definitive components of a liberal democracy: checks and balances, the rule of law, and robust protections for the rights and liberties of all.

The ranks of hybrid regimes have been swollen by elected leaders in erstwhile democracies who abandoned any commitment to liberal democratic principles in their pursuit of a *de facto* monopoly on power. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary exemplifies this trend, and he has worked actively to propagate likeminded governments across Central and Eastern Europe. Still playing the good democrat, he allowed competitive elections on April 3 of this year, but he and his Fidesz party pressed the entire state apparatus—along with the politically captured bulk of the civic and media sectors—into service against the opposition. The vote was consequently not free, let alone fair. Now that Orbán has survived it, he is likely to give full vent to his illiberal and kleptocratic tendencies. Much the same could

be said of President Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia, who, along with his Serbian Progressive Party, swept that country’s April 3 elections.

Both men are following the ignoble path blazed in the 2000s by the governments of President Milo Đukanović of Montenegro and former prime minister Nikola Gruevski of North Macedonia, which dispensed with liberal norms by bribing voters, wiretapping opponents, and resisting any mechanisms of transparency or accountability that might have interfered with the corrupt and opaque exercise of power.

The countries that have moved from authoritarian to hybrid forms of governance present a somewhat more promising picture, though they still fall short of democratic standards. In Armenia, for example, citizens used a protest movement in 2018 and a series of competitive elections, most recently in 2021, to decisively end the Republican Party’s multidecade reign. The incumbents were replaced with a new generation of politicians who, despite notable flaws, possess a basic commitment to democracy and the public interest.

Democratic forces in Moldova and Kosovo have also mobilized in the public square and at the ballot box to dislodge corrupt or authoritarian parties from positions of power. In the early 2000s, similar efforts in Georgia and Ukraine prevented those countries from slipping out of the hybrid regime category and into full-fledged

authoritarianism. Despite democratic progress since then, however, liberal norms and institutions have yet to take hold.

The former democracies that have tumbled into the gray zone continue to earn better scores in this report than former authoritarian regimes that have risen into the hybrid band. Even within these two subgroups, there is a great deal of difference between countries. Something all hybrid regimes have in common, though, is that they seem to be stuck in their category. Since the start of the region’s democratic decline in 2004, no country with a hybrid regime designation has managed to shake it off—for better or worse.

The failure of any hybrid regime to fully democratize should be a sobering fact for liberal democracy’s supporters. Formally, *Nations in Transit* designates countries in this category as “hybrid/transitional,” suggesting that hybridity is a waystation on the road to democracy, in keeping with the post-Cold War assumptions that shaped this report’s methodology. But in practice the gray zone is a destination in its own right.

At the same time, the fact that no hybrid regime has reverted to authoritarianism is a testament to the abiding power of the liberal international order and the values it represents. In the case of Hungary and the hybrid regimes of the Western Balkans, the European Union (EU) remains



Zahony, Hungary – March 17, 2022 – A young refugee from Ukraine reaches for snacks offered by a volunteer. Image credit: Christopher Furlong / Staff, Getty Images

an imperfect but important bulwark against precipitous democratic backsliding. The EU may even be able to reverse some damage: its hard-won conditionality mechanism for the rule of law, which ties the bloc’s budgetary disbursements to member states’ respect for foundational EU values, could play a crucial role in shoring up Hungary’s democracy, though the European Commission must test this hypothesis by fully implementing it. In the formerly authoritarian states of the EU’s Eastern Partnership, the promise of liberal democracy—of genuine popular sovereignty, good governance, respect for human rights, and economic growth—remains attractive enough that citizens are willing to fight for it. In Ukraine, they are even willing to risk their lives for it.

### Trouble at the top

Even the comparatively strong democracies of Central and Eastern Europe have not been immune to the broader region’s democratic decline. Eight of the 10 countries this report still classifies as democracies earned lower scores

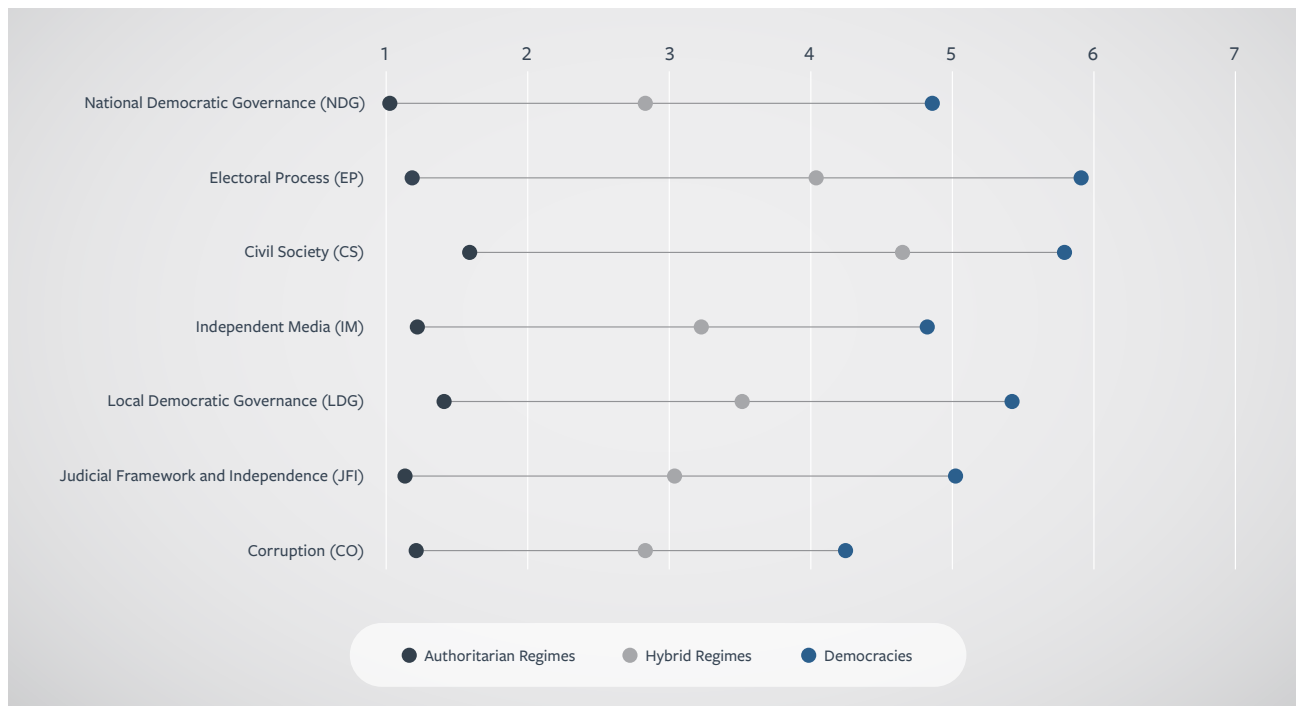
for the events of 2021, and the scores of the remaining two did not improve. For the first time this century, no country in the region is rated within *Nations in Transit’s* highest score band (that is, none received a Democracy Score of 6.01–7.00), which is reserved for countries that embody the best practices of liberal democracy.

Increasingly in these countries, corrupt practices are supplanting best practices. In Estonia, the last country to leave the highest score band, a ruling coalition led by the Centre Party collapsed early in 2021 after it became ensnared in a COVID-19-related public procurement scandal. However, Centre soon found itself back in power in partnership with the Reform Party, whose decision to overlook its ally’s record of graft contributed to the normalization of political corruption.

Corruption continues to be the most glaring weakness of the region’s remaining democracies, whose average score on *Nations in Transit’s* Corruption indicator is a half-point lower than the next lowest indicator (Independent Media).

## AVERAGE NIT22 INDICATOR RATINGS BY REGIME TYPE

For democracies and hybrid regimes, Corruption is the lowest of NIT’s seven indicators on average. For authoritarian regimes, National Democratic Governance is the lowest indicator on average.





However, the true scope of state capture in a given country often comes to light only after a corrupt government is voted out. Recent rotations of power in Bulgaria (2021) and Slovakia (2020) have revealed disturbing patterns of patronage, conflicts of interest, and opaque deal-making, with the former ruling parties Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) and Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD) evidently reviving harmful practices from the period immediately after the transition from communism.

Illiberalism, which often provides cover for corruption, is also driving the decline within democracies. An ideology that replaces the liberal defense of pluralism and individual rights with an exclusionary vision of ethnic, cultural, and national unity, illiberalism has firmly established itself in Poland's government. The ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has hacked away at judicial checks on its power, while eroding the freedom and autonomy of women and LGBT+ people. In 2021, government-appointed Polish judges

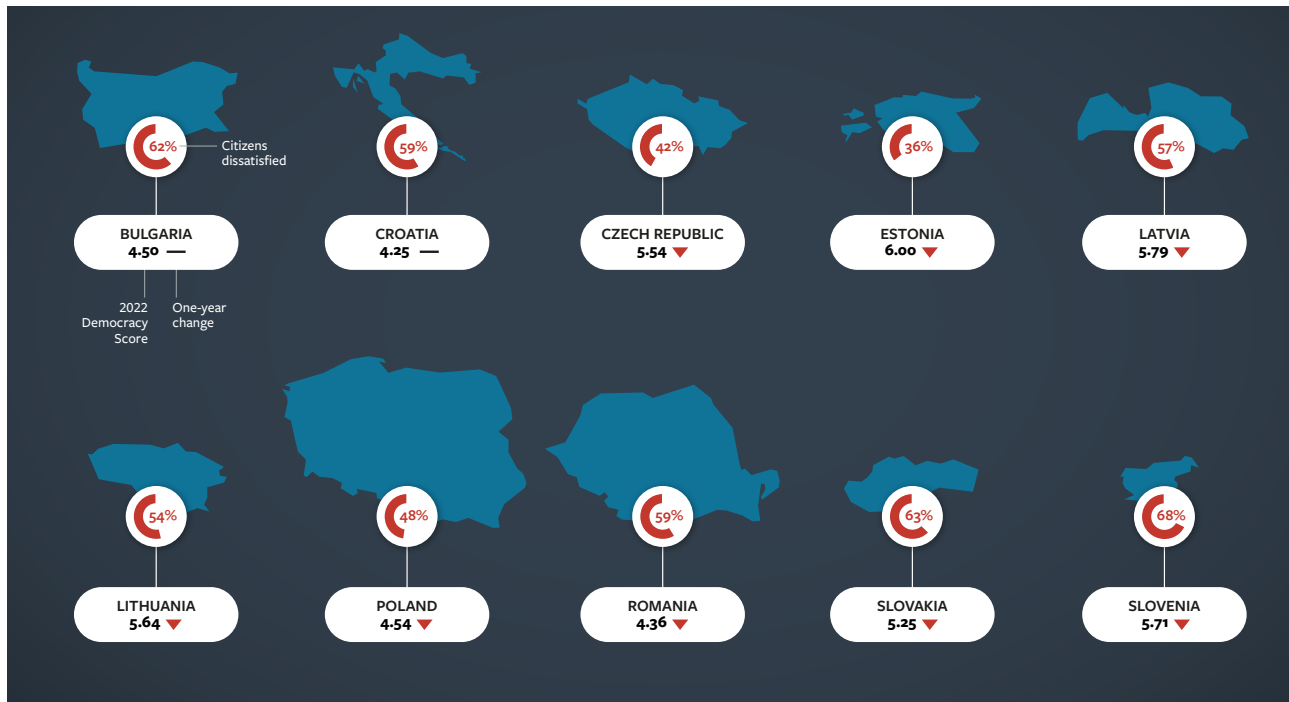
moved to reject elements of the foundational human rights treaties of the EU and the Council of Europe. Consequently, Poland's scores have fallen faster than those of any other country.

Last year, however, no country's scores fell further than those of Slovenia, long one of the strongest performers in this report. The government, led by Prime Minister Janez Janša of the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), has sidelined the parliament and exerted considerable political and financial pressure on civil society organizations, public media services, the judiciary, and the European Public Prosecutor's Office. Janša's combative political style serves in part to distract citizens from suspected graft within SDS circles, but it also betrays an illiberal intolerance of any and all criticism.

Liberal democratic values in the EU came under external strain when Lukashenka's regime in Belarus orchestrated a migration crisis on the borders of Latvia, Lithuania,

## WIDESPREAD DISSATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY

In 2021, eight of the 10 countries still classified as democracies saw their Democracy Scores decline. In all but three of these countries, a majority of citizens are dissatisfied with the way democracy works.



Source: Eurobarometer 96.2 (2021), European Commission

and Poland. Thousands of primarily Middle Eastern migrants seeking opportunity in Europe were encouraged by Belarusian authorities to transit through Minsk and approach these democracies' eastern frontiers, where they faced indifference, hostility, or even violent pushbacks. This mistreatment, which contributed to a number of deaths from exposure, stands in marked contrast to the warm and generous welcome that the same three countries have offered to political exiles from Belarus itself and to war refugees from Ukraine. While Lukashenka certainly bears the blame for weaponizing the suffering of human beings as part of his feud with the EU, the governments of Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland failed to meet the challenge in a way that upheld their stated commitments to basic human rights.

Despite the backsliding, there is cause for optimism at the top of the *Nations in Transit* rankings. In Czechia last year, civil society groups helped bring together a coalition of prodemocracy parties to unseat then prime minister Andrej Babiš's government, which had embraced illiberalism in word and corruption in deed. In Croatia, local elections lifted reformists to power in the capital and in the second city of Split. The new leaders then began a push for accountability and against patronage in municipal government, following in the footsteps of reformist mayors in Bucharest and Budapest.

## The liberal international order will only be as strong as the democracies that defend it.

The rot revealed by new national or local leaders in countries like Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Slovakia, and elsewhere underscores the frustrating asymmetry between building and dismantling liberal democratic institutions. As the experiences of Hungary, Poland, and now Slovenia show, it is relatively easy for bad actors to damage the structures that underpin a democratic system. Undoing such damage requires far more time and effort. But one of the inherent strengths of democracy is its resilience: so long as some components of free self-government are functioning, they can contribute to the restoration and improvement of those that break down.

## Meeting the moment

Faced with both internal and external threats, liberal democracy is in danger. In fact, it has been for some time. Over the past 18 years, the achievements of the 1990s—the expansion of democratic governance across the region—were allowed to erode, and leading democratic forces like the United States and the EU failed to take the problem seriously enough. They failed to counter the antidemocratic threat posed by Putin, to his own people and to the world. However, the Kremlin's invasion this year and the Ukrainians' own fierce resistance may provide the jolt that finally spurs liberal democracy's proponents to unified and decisive action.

Turning back the menace of authoritarian aggression will require resolve and short-term sacrifices. Champions of democracy must be willing to use diverse forms of power and new legal tools to aid allies and punish perpetrators, even when it means disrupting trade or cutting off investment from authoritarian actors. However, they must remember that their fight is with despotic regimes, not with ordinary citizens struggling to survive under authoritarian rule. Democratic governments should never abandon such people or forget that they too deserve to live in freedom.

The liberal international order will only be as strong as the democracies that defend it. Unfortunately, too many democracies or would-be democracies in the *Nations in Transit* region have been weakened by the corrupt and illiberal practices that characterize governance in hybrid regimes. Committed democrats can no longer allow these practices to go unchallenged.

Moreover, citizens across the region should not assume that their leaders will do the right thing. They need to recognize that political complacency has been the hallmark of the ongoing democratic decline, and that it is no longer acceptable given the scale and urgency of the current moment. Democratic societies must push their representatives to adopt courageous policies that meet the moment and lay the foundations for a safer, freer, and more just world. ■

## EXITING THE GRAY ZONE

By Noah Buyon

The democratic decline in the *Nations in Transit* region, coming in the wake of the “third wave” of democratization, has not led to a corresponding “third wave” of autocratization. Instead, more and more countries are coming to rest in the gray zone of hybrid governance, where the “game” of democracy is still played, if unfairly.

Back in 2002, scholar Thomas Carothers argued that most of the “postcommunist world” had already found itself in the “middle ground between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship.” Going by *Nations in Transit* data, however, this middle ground only became the region’s predominant political condition last year, with Armenia’s reclassification as a hybrid regime.

According to the transition paradigm that informed this survey’s creation (and against which Carothers was writing), the growth of hybrid regimes should be welcomed. The transition paradigm holds that hybrid governance is a necessary step on a country’s journey to full-fledged democracy; Carothers countered that hybridity itself was

the destination. Indeed, no hybrid regime in the region has managed to defy the gravity of the gray zone since 2002. During this period, Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia flirted with liberal democracy, while Armenia and Moldova weathered authoritarian episodes, but all returned to hybridity by 2021. A total of 11 countries are currently categorized as hybrid regimes in *Nations in Transit*.

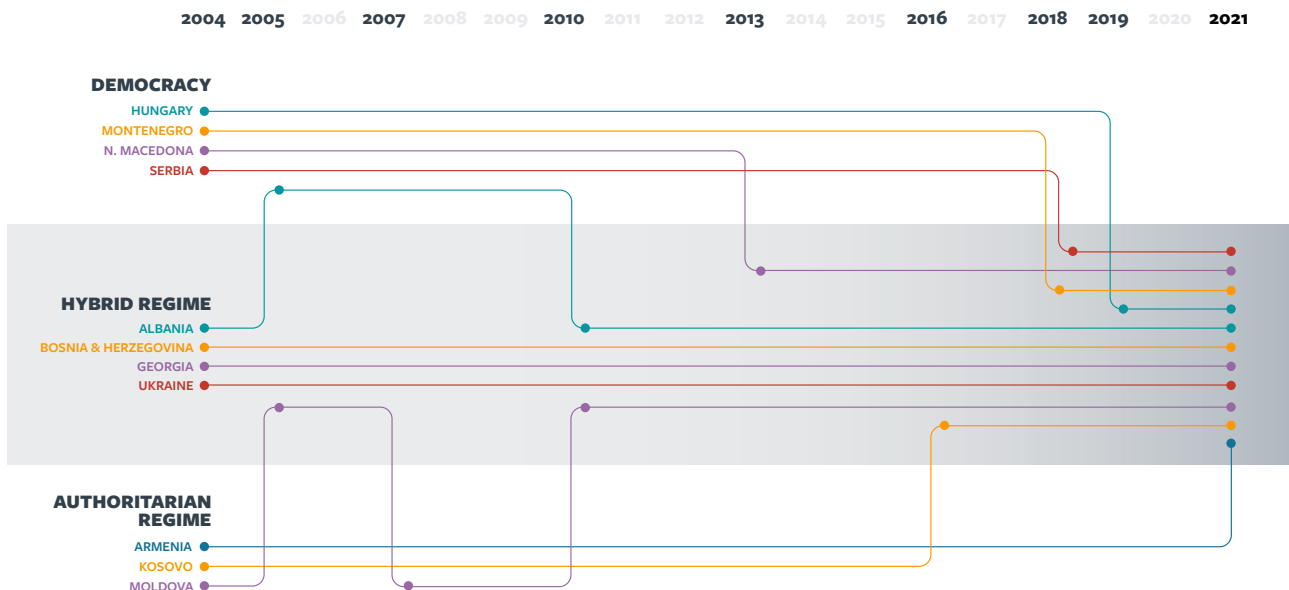
Recent history has proven Carothers correct. Instead of a waypoint, hybrid governance might be better seen as a trap: one that a growing number of countries in the region are falling into and are unable to break out of. With Poland among the latest countries at risk of entering the gray zone, the challenge for liberal democracy’s defenders is to plot an escape route.

**“[As] if we were living in a state governed by the rule of law”**

For hybrid regimes, the road to democratization runs through the ballot box. Street protests in the mold of the

## INTO THE GRAY ZONE

Since 2004, eight countries have entered or reentered the hybrid regime category; none have exited it.



“Color Revolutions” of the 2000s offer neither a reliable nor sustainable path to democracy, even though that is where they sometimes lead. Pacted transitions, where departing incumbents negotiate a change from a system with some authoritarian features to one that is more democratic, do not apply to hybrid regimes, which are already *de jure* democracies. Limited legal tweaks may help prevent future democratic backsliding, but democratizing hybrid regimes in the first place turns on whether committed democrats can consolidate and effectively wield political power.

Crucially, hybrid regimes regularly hold competitive, if not free and fair, elections. These elections present built-in opportunities to remove antidemocratic or merely venal incumbents. Their opponents must seize them, because the first obstacles to democratization are forces of the status quo. If successful—as in Croatia’s 2000 election, when a center-left coalition dislodged Franjo Tuđman’s authoritarian-minded Croatian Democratic Union from its 10-year reign—they can turn run-of-the-mill competitions for votes into watershed events that scholars Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik term “democratizing elections.”

**Today’s challengers... must play the game of democracy to win, knowing full well that it is rigged. If they do not, they will certainly lose.**

Of course, incumbents will not go quietly. They will vigorously contest elections, marshalling administrative resources and patronage networks to stay in power. Worse, they will cheat. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, for instance, spared no expense during this April’s parliamentary elections, drawing liberally from the state’s coffers to shower voters with subsidies, underwriting a vituperative smear campaign against the opposition in public and progovernment media (a distinction without a difference), cajoling pensioners and public-sector employees to vote for the ruling Fidesz party, and using his legislative supermajority to legalize other forms of electoral manipulation. For his efforts, he secured a fourth consecutive term.

The advantages that leaders like Orbán enjoy easily foster pessimism, since they do so much to keep incumbents in power. Yet change is possible. In 1988, a group of activists in communist Hungary called the Alliance of Young Democrats charged into the political arena, determined to contest the hegemony of the ruling Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party despite long odds. This group—better known today as Fidesz—organized around the notion that “no one should believe that Hungary is a state governed by the rule of law, but we must behave as if we were living in a state governed by the rule of law.” Today’s challengers should pay heed. They must play the game of democracy to win, knowing full well that it is rigged. If they do not, they will certainly lose.

### **Toward democratizing elections**

Who are these challengers? Political parties, usually in opposition, and civil society groups who share a substantive commitment to liberal democracy. While they operate in unfair environments, they can beat incumbents at the polls under the right circumstances. Fortunately, these circumstances are largely within their power to control.

To be credible agents of change, the opposition must represent a break with the status quo, embodied by either a single dominant party or by several equally corrupt parties who rotate in government. Albania’s Democratic Party and Montenegro’s Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) do not meet this criterion; the Albanian Democrats are perceived to be as corrupt as the ruling Socialist Party, while the DPS dominated Montenegrin political life for 30 years before its 2020 defeat.

Instead, advocates for genuine democratic rule must draw strength from a new generation of politicians. It is no coincidence that recent electoral breakthroughs in the *Nations in Transit* region were powered by new parties like Armenia’s Civil Contract, Moldova’s Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), and Ukraine’s Servant of the People; none of these parties are even a decade old.

Effective candidates possess some government experience, often at the local level, and robust ties to civil society. Experience in local government gives candidates a track record while acquainting them with the messy reality of politics. Meanwhile, civil society groups can register and rally voters while performing other tasks crucial to electoral success. For example, Hungarian opposition leaders Péter Márki-Zay and

Gergely Karácsony highlighted their respective stewardship of Hódmezővásárhely and Budapest on the campaign trail, refuting Orbán's argument that he alone could govern. The civil society group aHang (The Voice) energized supporters by organizing Hungary's first-ever primary on the opposition's behalf last year, while an opposition-backed teachers' strike kept that energy up earlier this year.

Politics is the art of the possible. Every mixed regime in the *Nations in Transit* region hosts a proportional or semiproportional multiparty electoral system, in which committed democrats may not command enough support to win elections single-handedly. Thus, they must contemplate unifying, or at least striking deals with, other opposition forces in order to compete.

Incumbents in hybrid regimes rely on divide-and-conquer tactics to dilute popular support for the political opposition. Consider Serbia; after failing to reach an agreement with genuine opposition parties over conditions for the April elections, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) coaxed unscrupulous opposition groups into signing a similar deal, effectively vassalizing them. Meanwhile, the SNS backed a spoiler green party to siphon votes from the country's burgeoning environmental movement. Finally, pro-SNS media chipped away at the unity of the bona fide opposition alliance, United for Serbia's Victory, fomenting discord with every news story. These tactics turned votes for parties other than the SNS into wasted votes.

Prodemocratic opposition groups can maximize their chance to translate votes into power by forming electoral coalitions, even if they are not as all-encompassing as in Hungary. In 2016, 14 North Macedonian parties united under the Social Democratic Union's banner, but despite their relatively strong showing in polls, they still required the backing of other parties to unseat the incumbent Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). In 2020, Montenegro's diverse opposition parties, including proxies of Serbia's SNS, formed three coalitions instead of one, only banding together after the polls to evict the incumbent DPS. Lockstep unity is not required: parties need only be united in opposing the incumbent.

Opposition unity is not always sufficient for victory, as evidenced by Fidesz's reelection in Hungary this year. But even in those cases, opponents can energize apathetic voters who previously accepted the impossibility of meaningful change by sharing a coherent and powerful message. This message should tap into popular resentment of incumbent malfeasance: nothing rouses voters in the *Nations in Transit* region like corruption. Anticorruption slogans should also be accompanied by proposals that are aimed at meeting voters' everyday needs and speak to the concerns not just of the traditionally prodemocratic middle classes, but also voters who have been left behind by the transition to globalized capitalism. For example, in 2021, Kosovo's Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) party successfully ran "for justice and work



Budapest, Hungary – Feb. 26, 2022 – A poster promoting the opposition United Hungary alliance prior to the nation's parliamentary elections. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán's ruling Fidesz party won the elections on April 3. Image credit: BalkansCat / Shutterstock

and against state capture and corruption,” in the words of Albin Kurti, who became prime minister.

Opposition messaging must reach voters through retail politics, relying on networks of party activists, cutting-edge advertising strategies, and other electoral best practices. Pan-European party groups, like the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, and US party-based democracy assistance outfits should spread these practices.

Finally, as Czech-born playwright Tom Stoppard wrote, “It’s not the voting that’s democracy, it’s the counting.” Opposition parties must look to independent election monitors to referee that counting. Local observers should use parallel vote tabulation and other tried-and-tested techniques to detect fraud. Meanwhile, international observers from institutions

spiraling public debt—problems frequently exacerbated by incumbents’ preelectoral giveaways.

In practice, though, new leaders in hybrid regimes often fail to deliver good government. Following Carothers, this tendency can be explained by either a single winning party’s unchecked dominance or fecklessness among a new ruling coalition’s members.

One-party dominance is typified by so-called “legislative turbo mode,” as seen in Ukraine and elsewhere. Here, an insurgent party like Servant of the People rides an antiestablishment wave and earns a parliamentary majority or supermajority only to govern adventurously, without meaningful opposition or civil society input. To some extent, this behavior is also on display in Armenia and Moldova, both of which feature postauthoritarian single party-dominated parliaments. While born of a commendable reformist impulse, turbo mode can enable destructive score-settling. For example, a 2019 law in Ukraine empowering the state prosecutor’s office to indict sitting lawmakers allowed for the former president’s arraignment on controversial treason charges. Worse still, turbo mode can morph into the abusive majoritarianism of Fidesz and Georgia’s Georgian Dream.

Postelection fecklessness, on the other hand, sees a diverse ruling coalition fall into dysfunction or collapse entirely after achieving the short-term objective of entering government. Without a common enemy, the ideological and stylistic contradictions within such a coalition come to the fore and impede the business of governing, sometimes fatally. For example, Montenegro’s fractious parliamentary majority finally collapsed in February after 13 months of uninterrupted infighting, during which virtually no domestic reforms could be enacted.

Voters should not tolerate either of these political syndromes. Through direct and indirect action, including active participation in parties and at the polls, they can provide the best corrective to wayward changemakers.

Regardless of the composition of a new government, victorious prodemocracy candidates will have to contend with the remnants of the old guard in state institutions like the justice system. Understandably, a new government’s instinct is to prosecute members of the old order for crimes real and imagined. Best practices dictate that this prosecution take place in the court of the public opinion first, and only in the courtroom if necessary. Revolutionary justice—just

## Opponents can energize apathetic voters who previously accepted the impossibility of meaningful change by sharing a coherent and powerful message.

including the Council of Europe, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe must put incumbents on notice. Incumbents should realize that if they cheat, they will be found out—and called out. As a last resort, robust documentation of fraud can also propel any protests that may follow from an incumbent’s refusal to concede defeat.

### Out of opposition, but not out of the woods

Upon winning power, committed democrats must not squander the opportunity they have fought hard to create. Unfortunately, they frequently do: there are precious few examples of postelection democratization to draw from in the *Nations in Transit* region.

Changemakers should bear in mind that, for most citizens, bread-and-butter issues take precedence over building or rebuilding liberal democratic systems. Further, new governments must also defuse the fiscal time bombs left by their predecessors in the form of systemic corruption and

or not—can radicalize a society and especially the defeated government’s most ardent supporters and cadres, who may react to the threat of imprisonment by turning to politically illegitimate means, especially violence. The VMRO-DPMNE–orchestrated storming of North Macedonia’s parliament in 2017, arguably a precursor of the January 6, 2021, riot in the United States, painfully illustrates this point.

In power, new leaders should clean house by replacing old-guard loyalists with qualified personnel in strict compliance with the law and giving those loyalists who cannot be easily replaced a chance to come around. If loyalists prove recalcitrant and resist reforms, it may be necessary for new leaders to play hardball. For example, Moldovan president Maia Sandu used a law passed by the newly elected PAS-controlled parliament to suspend Prosecutor General Alexandru Stoianoglo, an appointee of former president Igor Dodon, thereby removing a stubborn obstacle to combating endemic corruption. However, Stoianoglo’s lawful suspension was nevertheless secured through an amendment that specifically targeted his office, mirroring the “rule-by-law” strategies employed in Orbán’s Hungary to evict Central European University and intimidate critical civil society groups. In this way, hardball gives cover to autocratic legalism; committed democrats should be circumspect in their use of the law as a cudgel, even against worthy enemies.

**Upon winning power, committed democrats must not squander the opportunity they have fought hard to create. Unfortunately, they frequently do...**

Similarly, constitutional amendments should be broached with care. New governments have a duty to prevent a new generation of corrupt and illiberal politicians from coming to power—most obviously, by rewriting the rules that benefited the old one. However, for every instance of positive constitutional change—consider Croatia’s 2000 transition from a presidential to parliamentary democracy—myriad examples of “authoritarian constitutionalism” abound, like constitutional tinkering in Belarus this year and in Russia in 2020.

In the end, it may be necessary for committed democrats to pursue far-reaching legal changes. On paper, though, the region’s hybrid regimes already boast liberal constitutions. It may be enough to bring these constitutions to life. ■

## CIVIL SOCIETY’S MANY FACES

By Mike Smeltzer

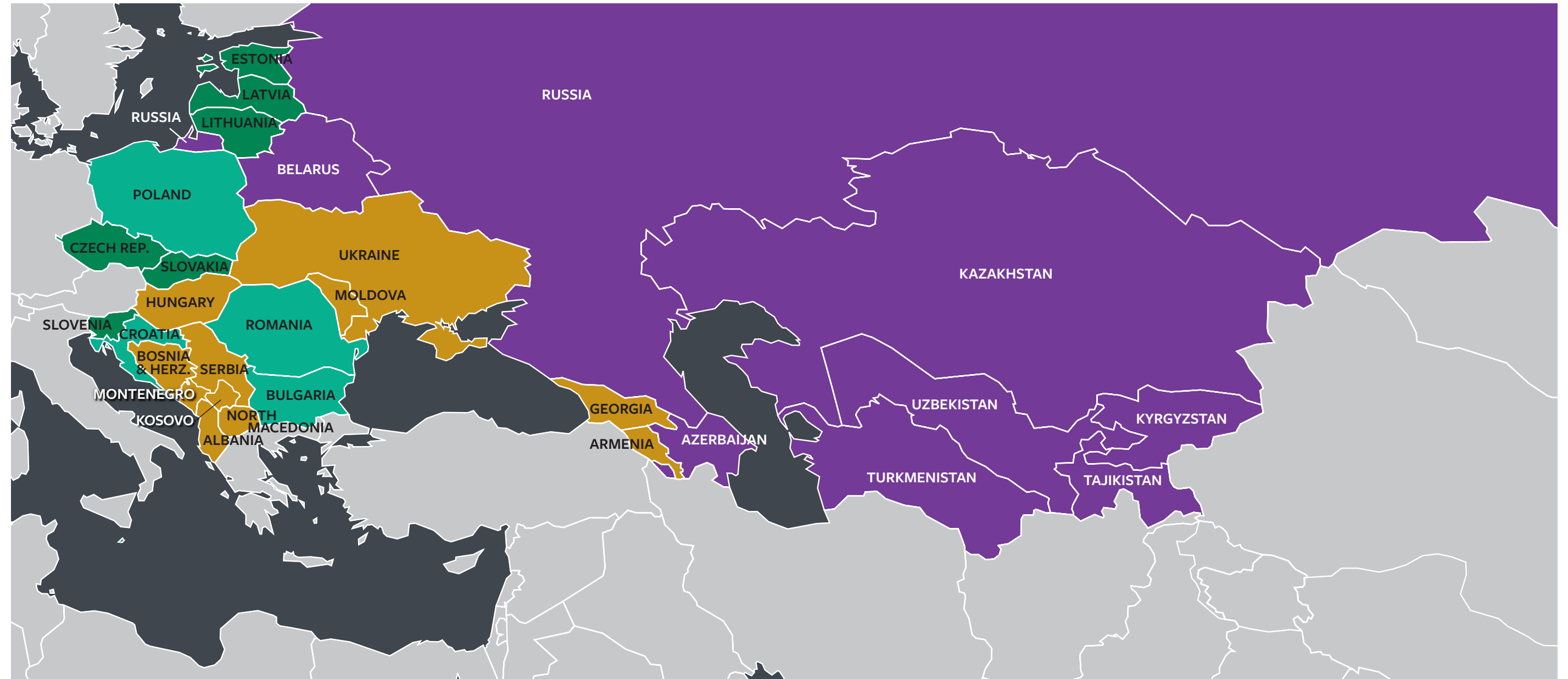
As leaders across the *Nations in Transit* region turn to antidemocratic and illiberal practices, civil society is confronting new and disquieting threats. However, the individuals and groups that compose each country’s civil society have remained steadfast in their efforts to hold bad actors accountable and promote the public good. Throughout the 18-year democratic decline documented by *Nations in Transit*, Civil Society has remained the highest-performing indicator: in the 2022 edition it averaged 4.21, vastly overperforming the year’s average overall Democracy Score of 3.43.

The way civil society acts as a check on state power is in large part dependent on the environment in which groups and individuals operate—in other words, whether states approach actors in a spirit of cooperation, with begrudging

tolerance, or with overt hostility. Given dramatic variations among the 29 countries *Nations in Transit* reviews, discussions of civil society’s democratic health are diverse, ranging from financial viability, to authorities’ willingness to solicit guidance or resist it, to organizations’ ability to operate in the face of repression.

Examples of civil society’s resilience to these pressures reflect the versatility that reliably emerges when groups are forced to adapt to new challenges at hand. As Michael Bernhard observes, these various roles, or “modalities,” of civil society can be categorized in much of the *Nations in Transit* region as “institutionalized,” “firewall,” and “insurgent.” While not exhaustive, these descriptions are helpful in understanding the contributions of civil society in democratic, hybrid, and autocratic regimes.

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2022



SURVEY FINDINGS

Regime Type	Number of Countries
Consolidated Democracy (CD)	6
Semi-Consolidated Democracy (SCD)	4
Transitional Government or Hybrid Regime (T/H)	11
Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (SCA)	0
Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (CA)	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

The map reflects the findings of Freedom House's *Nations in Transit 2022* survey, which assessed the status of democratic development in 29 countries from Central Europe to Central Asia during 2021. 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)**.



## Resistance in autocracies

*Nations in Transit's* findings for 2022 reflect an existential threat to the most basic elements of democracy in the region's autocratic regimes. Yet civil society actors continue resisting authoritarian efforts to smother their work through “insurgent” strategies that challenge regime legitimacy through bold, often dangerous actions that elevate public grievances.

Events in Uzbekistan in 2021 demonstrated the “insurgent” role that civil society often plays in authoritarian contexts. In January, individuals took the streets and published protest videos online to express outrage over power outages that left swaths of the country without heat during a frigid winter. While President Shavkat Mirziyoyev shielded himself from ballot-box consequences by rigging the subsequent elections, the protests served as a highly visible accountability tool, and expressed a grievance sympathetic enough that Mirziyoyev chose not to clamp down on the movement.

In Russia, where President Vladimir Putin and his allies have all but eliminated the political opposition, independent media, and civic sector, average Russians continued speaking out against rampant corruption and the Kremlin's brutal

## An open environment

At the other end of the spectrum, civil society actors can act as partners of democratic governments. According to Bernhard, “institutionalized civil society... works to strengthen and institutionalize democracy and enhance its performance as a representative form of rule.” In these environments, civil society is an integral part of the system of governance, acting in concert with state institutions and at times improving them.

In recent weeks, Polish groups and individuals have powerfully embodied the role institutionalized civil society can play in enhancing a state's democracy. Hosting nearly 60 percent of the 4.5 million refugees fleeing Russia's war in Ukraine, Poland's civil society has come to the aid of these families and individuals during a truly unprecedented migration crisis, advocating to the government on their behalf and rallying to provide shelter, education, and basic necessities.

Notwithstanding civil society's vibrancy in the region's democracies, challenges to further institutionalization remain. In Latvia, for instance, only 4 percent of NGOs reported participating in national-level decision making. Additionally, the politicization or co-optation of civil society by illiberal and antidemocratic elements poses obstacles to the sector's democratic contributions. Ahead of Hungary's April 3 elections, the ultraconservative, anti-LGBT+ Polish organization *Ordo Iuris* announced that it would provide additional election monitoring, potentially supplying its illiberal allies in the Orbán government with an alternative assessment to that provided by the OSCE mission. And, civil society's contributions can be complicated by xenophobia, as seen in disparities between states' welcoming of Ukrainian refugees and the treatment of those from further abroad.

## Pushing back against antidemocratic behavior

Lastly, as hybrid regimes proliferate in this region, so have “firewall” elements of civil society that serve as a last “layer of accountability” where antidemocratic actors have warped—but not dismantled—the crucial elements of democracy.

Such “firewalls” often coalesce in countries where a single ruling party governs in the absence of meaningful legislative scrutiny. For example, in Armenia, local civil society groups

**Civil society actors continue resisting authoritarian efforts to smother their work through “insurgent” strategies that challenge regime legitimacy through bold, often dangerous actions that elevate public grievances.**

war against Ukraine despite the risks of police brutality and arrest. Civilians have persevered in the face of increasingly draconian repression: when authorities made it a crime to call the “special military operation” a war, some continued to take to public spaces, their posters denouncing the invasion replaced with blank sheets of paper. They too were arrested, but brave acts of public resistance continue even still.



Belgrade, Serbia – Dec. 4, 2021 – Thousands of Serbians take to the streets to protest the government’s support of a planned lithium mine. Image credit: Stefan Milivojevic / Shutterstock

were able to prevent the ruling party from pushing through a bill that would have placed its Human Rights Defender’s Office under greater government control. Civil society in Moldova similarly sounded the alarm about the potential for improper government influence over the country’s Ombudsman, ultimately forcing the resignation of an appointee widely seen as politically compromised.

However, civil society’s “firewall” role has not gone unnoticed by the powers it seeks to check. Increasingly, antidemocratic and illiberal political leaders are seeking to co-opt illiberal groups to help counter civil society’s efforts. In Serbia, for example, environmental protests, which emerged last year in response to a host of ecological concerns ranging from air pollution to the construction of a lithium mine, were met with intimidation not only by the police, but by armed thugs with reported connections to local authorities and derision as “fake environmentalists” by progovernment tabloids.

### Democracy’s jack-of-all-trades defender

While civil society may assume particular roles depending on a country’s democratic environment, the individuals and groups that comprise it are dynamic, and capable of changing strategies as needed. And, strategies for activism are not linked to an associated regime type. For example, Slovenians’ enormous protest against right-wing prime minister Janez Janša as he prepared to take over the rotating European Union presidency last May was an “insurgent” protest in a democracy. And in Kazakhstan, even while facing administrative fines and suspensions intended to silence them, NGOs conducting independent election observation or advocating for press freedom fought in the heavily tilted judicial system in order to continue their democracy-bolstering, “institutional” work.

It is these courageous, innovative acts of civil society that give us cause for hope in a world imperiled by antidemocratic forces. ■



Moscow, Russia  
– March 10, 2022 –  
Russian president  
Vladimir Putin chairs  
a teleconference with  
Russian government  
officials. Image credit:  
Mikhail Klimentyev  
/ Contributor,  
Getty Images

## IN EURASIA’S OVERRIPE DICTATORSHIPS, LONGEVITY MEANS INSTABILITY

By Mike Smeltzer

The authoritarian regimes of Eurasia have steadily descended into new depths of tyranny over the past 18 years, and it is no accident that the concentration of power in the hands of individual dictators has been accompanied by growing international conflict and domestic disorder across the region. Paradoxically, the longer these strongmen endure in office, the greater the risk of an explosive denouement.

“Personalist” regimes—a subset of authoritarian states in which an individual leader has come to overshadow all institutions, including ruling parties and formal constitutional structures—are not a new phenomenon in the *Nations in Transit* region. Belarus’s Alyaksandr Lukashenka, for example, has been in power for nearly 28 years. But the ranks of such rulers have expanded to the point that the methodological category for “semi-consolidated authoritarian regimes” is now entirely empty, as most of the countries that previously occupied it have since fallen into the band of “consolidated authoritarian regimes.”

This numerical expansion has raised the stakes of the most obvious problem presented by personalist regimes: succession. Even the most entrenched autocracies must confront the leader’s inevitable departure.

Some incumbents have attempted to recede into the background while maintaining influence through a handpicked successor, but these maneuvers are fraught with danger. Longtime Kazakhstani president Nursultan Nazarbayev engineered a partial transfer of power to his nominal successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, in 2019, and the process seemed reasonably smooth at first. Over the next two years, Tokayev oversaw small but important openings for civil society activity and participation in local politics. However, in January of this year, local protests against rising gas prices bloomed into nationwide demonstrations calling for deep reforms. These in turn were eventually co-opted by violent elements, providing Tokayev with an excuse to both crack down on the protests and purge state institutions of cadres who remained loyal to Nazarbayev. Tokayev garnered support

from Moscow in the form of troop deployments from the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), making it clear that he would have a free hand in dismantling his predecessor's competing vertical of power and cementing a new one for himself. In a personalist dictatorship, there can be only one paramount leader.

Others in the region are looking to reduce the risk of successor disloyalty by handing power to their own children. For example, after years of incrementally raising the public profile of his only son, Serdar, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow called a snap presidential election for March of this year, with Serdar standing virtually unopposed. A truncated, tightly managed electoral campaign ended in an overwhelming victory for the designated heir, and he took office a week later. Unfortunately, based on previous experience in the region, such changes in leadership are unlikely to generate an improvement in conditions for ordinary citizens. If anything, dynastic successors in a republic may have to work even harder to suppress dissent and maintain a sense of legitimacy.

Ilham Aliyev succeeded his father as president of Azerbaijan in 2003, and its already low score in *Nations in Transit* has fallen by half since then, as the regime moved to crush opposition parties, independent media, and civic activism. In 2020, Aliyev launched a military offensive against Armenian forces in the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, killing thousands of people and displacing many more. The conflict, which seriously destabilized the region's security arrangements, also yielded territorial gains for Baku, bolstered the president's political position, and provided a pretext for further smothering of free expression. In this repressive environment, persistent social problems have continued to grow worse. During 2021, the state turned a blind eye to brutal attacks against women and members of the LGBT+ community, resulting in the suicide of a long-suffering victim of domestic abuse, Sevil Atakishiyeva, and the murder and immolation of a transgender woman named Nurray, among other cases.

Aliyev's evident success in using military aggression to reinforce his rule may have contributed to Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022. Putin himself

**It is no accident that the concentration of power in the hands of individual dictators has been accompanied by growing international conflict and domestic disorder across the region.**

had reached for this tool on multiple occasions in the past, and there was reason to believe that it could work again. The disastrous outcome, however, has demonstrated another inherent weakness of entrenched, personalist autocracies.

Scholars such as Seva Gunitsky and Adam Casey have observed that these regimes naturally disincentivize dissenting views, even among the ruling elite, leaving the leader with a dearth of accurate information on which to base decisions. They suggest that Putin's many miscalculations—of the Ukrainian people's will to resist the invasion, of the Ukrainian military's actual ability to defend the country, and of the democratic world's unity in supporting Kyiv and punishing Moscow—point to a silencing of unfavorable intelligence among his advisers. While the outcome of the war and the consequences of a potential Russian defeat are still unknown, the risks for Putin's regime are apparent. The needless deaths of Russian soldiers, the decreasing quality of life for Russian civilians, and the blow to the president's image as a shrewd tactician all pose a threat to the system's survival.

Whether they collapse through unforced errors or manage to overcome succession crises and endure for decades, autocratic regimes can inflict enormous damage on their own people, neighboring states, and the wider world. The lack of checks on the judgment of individual leaders, and the related absence of a mechanism for peaceful, regular leadership changes, are major factors behind calamities like war, civil conflict, and state failure around the globe. As long as these flawed governance systems exist, in Eurasia or elsewhere, so too will the instability and insecurity they foment. ■

## Recommendations

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Russian president Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine presents both a dire threat and an urgent opportunity for democracy in the *Nations in Transit* (NIT) region. If the international democratic community is to stem the spread of authoritarianism and defend and strengthen fundamental freedoms, like-minded leaders must seize this pivotal moment to undertake creative, multilateral, and sustained policy solutions in the face of extraordinary challenges.

To be effective, these solutions will need to involve states, civil society, and the private sector. Care should be taken to exert pressure on authoritarian leaders without inadvertently strengthening the alliances between undemocratic rulers, or the alternative financial systems on which they often rely. In situations where authoritarians employ violence or aggression, pressure should be exerted while still preserving opportunities for de-escalation.

The struggle for democracy in the NIT region has global implications. Other authoritarian rulers are watching the response to the invasion of Ukraine and learning lessons about the resolve of the international democratic coalition. If democracy's defenders are to expand recognition of the value and promise of democracy, practical first steps should include efforts to:

### RESTRICT THE ABILITY OF AUTHORITARIANS TO CO-OPT THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER.

- **Address the financial-crime loopholes authoritarians exploit.** To combat the systemic corruption and kleptocracy that enables authoritarians to maintain power, democracies must close structural loopholes they have for too long permitted. Stricter rules for shell companies, tax havens, and anonymous trusts can limit autocrats' ability to launder assets in democracies. Because autocrats are typically able to amass enormous financial resources at home, democracies must also work together to limit their ability to further enrich themselves. One impactful step would be charging the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)—whose evaluations financial institutions and investors study closely—with establishing a new set of anticorruption standards. Detailed recommendations for the FATF and other anticorruption measures are [here](#).
- **Refrain from investments that enrich authoritarians and undermine fundamental freedoms.** Private companies should adhere to the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), carefully considering whether investments or the sale of their products will benefit governments committing rights abuses. Where companies operate, they should conduct periodic assessments of how their products and actions might affect rights, and mitigate harm and prevent further abuse when they are found to do so. Detailed recommendations for the private sector are [here](#).
- **Apply targeted sanctions as part of a comprehensive foreign policy, and minimize impacts on civilians.** Targeted sanctions can be an impactful response when authoritarian rulers commit abuses at home, target critics for [transnational repression](#) abroad, or commit acts of aggression against sovereign states—especially when applied multilaterally. But when sanctions are too broad, prodemocracy actors and ordinary citizens can suffer due to a sudden inability to access funds, goods, or safe means of travel. Such impacts should be mitigated as much as possible, including through a commitment to avoid discrimination resulting from sanctions based on nationality or geographic location alone, and careful analysis of how restrictive measures affect rights activists, civil society, and ordinary people. Exemptions for key items and services, such as the provision of internet services to ensure access to information, can also mitigate harm. Pressure should be applied to states that do not comply with sanctions efforts. Detailed sanctions recommendations are [here](#).

## SUPPORT DEMOCRACY AND ITS DEFENDERS.

- **Support prodemocracy actors, civil society groups, and human rights defenders.** When threats arise, short-term needs typically include relocation and legal and medical assistance. Longer-term needs include security, psychosocial support, and flexible funding to sustain work. Democratic governments should welcome as refugees activists forced to flee, and protect those who may be targets of transnational repression. In the NIT region, eight governments were documented by Freedom House as having engaged in transnational repression. All are consolidated authoritarian regimes. Transnational repression recommendations are [here](#).
- **Support independent media and access to reliable information.** Providing the public with access to fact-based information and on-the-ground reporting is one of the best ways to combat authoritarian power and propaganda. But independent media face physical and legal threats from hostile regimes, as well as online censorship, and often lack sustainable funding. Support for independent media in the NIT region should concentrate on diversifying funding streams, addressing the politicization of news, and protecting editorial independence in democracies; mitigating political interference in hybrid regimes; creatively addressing the lack of independent media in autocracies; and protecting global internet freedom. Read more on supporting [independent media](#), [countering disinformation](#), and [addressing censorship](#), including in [Russia](#).
- **Strengthen free and fair 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. Democracies should provide financial support to the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)—which conducts both long-term assessments of campaign environments and election-day observation—and dedicate support to domestic observer efforts. Read more [here](#) and [here](#).
- **Address democratic deficiencies at home.** Freedom House has tracked a decline in global freedom for 16 consecutive years, and a decline in the NIT region for 18 consecutive years. The EU should do even more to protect democracy internally and promote it in the bloc's neighborhood. Russia's war in Ukraine makes action on unresolved rule-of-law violations by EU member states, especially Hungary and Poland, urgent; the invasion also raises challenges for the bloc including the risk of increasing xenophobia and militant nationalism. The European Commission and other EU institutions should deploy all available tools, including the so-called conditionality mechanism, which the European Court of Justice upheld in February.
- **Prioritize democracy in EU integration, and advance the process in the NIT region.** The current crisis provides an opportunity to reimagine the EU accession process along the lines of defending democracy in the region. The bloc should finally start accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, pressing Bulgaria to drop objections to the latter's candidacy. The EU should also expedite consideration of membership applications lodged by Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, cutting red tape while maintaining high standards for commitments throughout the application process.

## NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2022: OVERVIEW OF SCORE CHANGES

▼ Decline ▲ Improvement □ Unchanged

	Country	Democracy Score	Democracy %	NDG	EP	CS	IM	LDG	JFI	CO
BALKANS	Albania	3.75	46%							
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.36 TO 3.29	38%	▼		▼				
	Croatia	4.25	54%					▲		▼
	Kosovo	3.14 TO 3.25	38%	▲					▲	
	Montenegro	3.82	47%	▲					▼	
	North Macedonia	3.82	47%							
	Serbia	3.89 TO 3.79	46%				▼	▼		▼
CENTRAL EUROPE	Bulgaria	4.50	58%							
	Czech Republic	5.57 TO 5.54	76%			▲			▼	▼
	Estonia	6.04 TO 6.00	83%							▼
	Hungary	3.71 TO 3.68	45%				▼			
	Latvia	5.82 TO 5.79	80%						▼	
	Lithuania	5.68 TO 5.64	77%						▼	
	Poland	4.57 TO 4.54	59%	▼						
	Romania	4.39 TO 4.36	56%					▼		
	Slovakia	5.32 TO 5.25	71%			▼				▼
	Slovenia	5.86 TO 5.71	79%	▼	▼				▼	▼
EURASIA	Armenia	2.96 TO 3.04	34%	▲	▲		▼		▲	
	Azerbaijan	1.07	1%							
	Belarus	1.29 TO 1.18	3%			▼	▼			▼
	Georgia	3.18 TO 3.07	35%	▼		▼			▼	
	Kazakhstan	1.32 TO 1.36	6%					▲		
	Kyrgyzstan	1.86 TO 1.75	13%	▼	▼				▼	
	Moldova	3.11	35%							
	Russia	1.39 TO 1.32	5%			▼	▼			
	Tajikistan	1.11	2%							
	Turkmenistan	1.00	0%							
	Ukraine	3.36	39%				▼	▲		
	Uzbekistan	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 2022 ratings reflect the period from January 1 through December 31, 2021.

# Methodology

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*Nations in Transit 2022* evaluates the state of democracy in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia. The 24th edition of this annual study covers events from January 1 through December 31, 2021. 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 2022: 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%
Albania	3.25	4.25	4.75	3.50	4.50	3.25	2.75	<b>3.75</b>	46
Armenia	2.50	3.50	4.50	2.75	2.25	2.75	3.00	<b>3.04</b>	34
Azerbaijan	1.00	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.00	<b>1.07</b>	1
Belarus	1.00	1.00	1.50	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.50	<b>1.18</b>	3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1.75	4.50	4.25	3.25	3.25	3.00	3.00	<b>3.29</b>	38
Bulgaria	4.25	5.50	5.50	3.50	4.75	4.25	3.75	<b>4.50</b>	58
Croatia	4.25	5.00	5.25	3.75	4.50	3.50	3.50	<b>4.25</b>	54
Czech Republic	4.75	6.75	6.25	5.00	6.00	5.75	4.25	<b>5.54</b>	76
Estonia	5.75	6.50	6.25	6.25	5.75	6.50	5.00	<b>6.00</b>	83
Georgia	2.25	3.00	4.00	3.50	2.75	2.50	3.50	<b>3.07</b>	35
Hungary	3.00	4.25	4.25	3.00	4.25	4.25	2.75	<b>3.68</b>	45
Kazakhstan	1.25	1.25	1.50	1.25	1.75	1.25	1.25	<b>1.36</b>	6
Kosovo	3.00	3.50	4.50	3.25	3.50	2.75	2.25	<b>3.25</b>	38
Kyrgyzstan	1.00	1.75	3.00	2.00	1.75	1.25	1.50	<b>1.75</b>	13
Latvia	6.00	6.25	6.00	6.00	5.75	6.00	4.50	<b>5.79</b>	80
Lithuania	5.50	6.25	6.00	5.75	5.75	5.75	4.50	<b>5.64</b>	77
Moldova	2.50	4.00	4.75	3.00	2.50	2.75	2.25	<b>3.11</b>	35
Montenegro	3.50	4.25	5.25	3.25	4.25	3.25	3.00	<b>3.82</b>	47
North Macedonia	3.50	4.50	4.75	3.50	4.00	3.25	3.25	<b>3.82</b>	47
Poland	3.50	5.75	5.50	4.25	5.50	3.25	4.00	<b>4.54</b>	59
Romania	4.25	4.75	5.50	3.50	4.25	4.25	4.00	<b>4.36</b>	56
Russia	1.00	1.25	1.75	1.25	1.50	1.25	1.25	<b>1.32</b>	5
Serbia	3.25	4.25	5.25	3.00	4.00	3.50	3.25	<b>3.79</b>	46
Slovakia	4.75	6.25	6.00	5.00	5.50	5.25	4.00	<b>5.25</b>	71
Slovenia	5.50	6.25	5.75	5.25	6.50	5.75	5.00	<b>5.71</b>	79
Tajikistan	1.00	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.50	1.00	1.00	<b>1.11</b>	2
Turkmenistan	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	<b>1.00</b>	0
Ukraine	2.50	4.50	5.00	3.50	3.50	2.25	2.25	<b>3.36</b>	39
Uzbekistan	1.00	1.25	1.50	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.25	<b>1.25</b>	4
<b>Average</b>	3.03	3.91	4.21	3.22	3.59	3.20	2.88	<b>3.43</b>	41
<b>Median</b>	3.00	4.25	4.75	3.25	4.00	3.25	3.00	<b>3.68</b>	45

## NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2022: DEMOCRACY SCORE HISTORY BY REGION

Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
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### Central Europe

Bulgaria	4.86	4.82	4.75	4.71	4.75	4.64	4.61	4.61	4.54	4.50	4.50
Czech Republic	5.82	5.86	5.75	5.79	5.79	5.75	5.71	5.71	5.64	5.57	5.54
Estonia	6.07	6.04	6.04	6.04	6.07	6.07	6.18	6.11	6.07	6.04	6.00
Hungary	5.14	5.11	5.04	4.82	4.71	4.46	4.29	4.07	3.96	3.71	3.68
Latvia	5.89	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.96	5.93	5.86	5.79	5.82	5.79
Lithuania	5.71	5.68	5.64	5.64	5.68	5.68	5.64	5.61	5.64	5.68	5.64
Poland	5.86	5.82	5.82	5.79	5.68	5.43	5.11	5.04	4.93	4.57	4.54
Romania	4.57	4.50	4.54	4.54	4.54	4.61	4.54	4.43	4.43	4.39	4.36
Slovakia	5.50	5.43	5.39	5.36	5.39	5.39	5.39	5.36	5.29	5.32	5.25
Slovenia	6.11	6.11	6.07	6.07	6.00	5.96	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.86	5.71
<b>Average</b>	5.55	5.53	5.50	5.47	5.45	5.40	5.33	5.27	5.22	5.15	5.10
<b>Median</b>	5.77	5.75	5.70	5.71	5.68	5.55	5.52	5.48	5.46	5.45	5.39

### Balkans

Albania	3.86	3.75	3.82	3.86	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	3.75	3.75
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.64	3.61	3.57	3.54	3.50	3.46	3.36	3.32	3.32	3.36	3.29
Croatia	4.39	4.39	4.32	4.32	4.32	4.29	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25
Kosovo	2.82	2.75	2.86	2.86	2.93	3.04	3.07	3.11	3.18	3.14	3.25
Montenegro	4.18	4.18	4.14	4.11	4.07	4.11	4.07	3.93	3.86	3.82	3.82
North Macedonia	4.11	4.07	4.00	3.93	3.71	3.57	3.64	3.68	3.75	3.82	3.82
Serbia	4.36	4.36	4.36	4.32	4.25	4.18	4.04	4.00	3.96	3.89	3.79
<b>Average</b>	3.91	3.87	3.87	3.85	3.81	3.79	3.76	3.74	3.73	3.72	3.71
<b>Median</b>	4.11	4.07	4.00	3.93	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	3.82	3.79

### Eurasia

Armenia	2.61	2.64	2.64	2.64	2.64	2.61	2.57	2.93	3.00	2.96	3.04
Azerbaijan	1.43	1.36	1.32	1.25	1.14	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.14	1.07	1.07
Belarus	1.32	1.29	1.29	1.29	1.36	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.29	1.18
Georgia	3.18	3.25	3.32	3.36	3.39	3.39	3.32	3.29	3.25	3.18	3.07
Kazakhstan	1.46	1.43	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.36	1.29	1.29	1.32	1.32	1.36
Kyrgyzstan	2.00	2.04	2.11	2.07	2.11	2.00	1.93	2.00	1.96	1.86	1.75
Moldova	3.11	3.18	3.14	3.14	3.11	3.07	3.07	3.04	3.11	3.11	3.11
Russia	1.82	1.79	1.71	1.54	1.50	1.43	1.39	1.43	1.39	1.39	1.32
Tajikistan	1.82	1.75	1.68	1.61	1.46	1.36	1.21	1.21	1.18	1.11	1.11
Turkmenistan	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.00	1.00	1.00
Ukraine	3.18	3.14	3.07	3.25	3.32	3.39	3.36	3.36	3.39	3.36	3.36
Uzbekistan	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.11	1.11	1.14	1.25	1.25
<b>Average</b>	2.01	2.00	1.99	1.97	1.96	1.93	1.90	1.93	1.94	1.91	1.88
<b>Median</b>	1.82	1.77	1.70	1.57	1.48	1.41	1.39	1.41	1.39	1.36	1.34

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