

# NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2018



## CONTENTS

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<b>Nations in Transit 2018: Confronting Illiberalism</b>	<b>1</b>
The Challenge at the Core of Europe	5
Smearing the Messenger	8
The Twilight of Putinism	10
<b>Nations in Transit 2018 Map</b>	<b>12</b>
Informal Power: The Men behind the Curtains	14
Macedonia: Freeing the Captured State	15
Uzbekistan: The First, Meager, Shoots of Spring	17
Overview of Score Changes	19
<b>Nations in Transit 2018 Scores</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Category and Democracy Scores</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Democracy Score History by Region</b>	<b>24</b>

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## ON THE COVER

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Serbians protest against Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić's presidential win in Belgrade in April 2017.  
*MILOS MISKOV/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

# Nations in Transit 2018

## Confronting Illiberalism

by Nate Schenkkan

Contempt for independent institutions and open discussion has become entrenched from Central Europe to Eurasia. Time is running out for the EU and the United States to confront the antidemocratic backlash.

In 2017, illiberalism established itself as the new normal in the region that stretches from Central Europe through Eurasia. In Central Europe, governments that disdain independent institutions and seek to fuse the ruling party with the state are no longer exceptional. The bulldozing of the judiciary in Poland exposed how few safeguards there are, even in the heart of the European Union, against a determined government that disregards political and constitutional norms.

But illiberalism has spread far beyond Poland or Hungary. Members of government and presidents in almost every country in the *Nations in Transit* coverage area now regularly smear nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and independent media outlets as agents that serve foreign interests and harm the nation. Politicians' attempts to delegitimize all critical voices presage legislative efforts to eliminate checks and balances.

"Illiberalism" is not a derogatory code word for "policies we disagree with." It is an ideological stance that rejects the necessity of independent institutions as checks on the government and dismisses the idea of legitimate disagreement in the public sphere.

The version of illiberalism taking root in Central Europe is distinct from the violent authoritarianism that dominates the Eurasian half of the coverage area. In this new illiberal environment, citizens will be able to go to protests, establish NGOs, publish news articles, or make critical remarks on social media without risking physical assaults or long prison terms. But such activities will expose them to intrusive government inspections and vociferous attacks in state-owned and government-aligned media, and even discrimination in employment in countries where ties to the ruling party are becoming an economic

necessity. What Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary famously hailed in 2014 as “illiberal democracy” is essentially a return to the political practices of goulash communism, in which individual persecution may be relatively rare, but independent institutions

with minimal accountability. If illiberalism continues to thrive within the EU, it will bolster illiberal leaders and parties in the countries seeking to attain membership in the next wave of accession, and over time it will remake the EU in its own image.

individual persecution may be relatively rare, but independent institutions are nonexistent and the party and the state are one

are nonexistent and the party and the state are one. The entrenchment of this system matters because it comes from within the EU and thrives on the bloc’s contradictions. Its leading proponent is a European prime minister, Orbán, whose Fidesz party remains in good standing in the largest political grouping in the European Parliament. Its defenders enjoy the privileges of EU and NATO membership, including hundreds of millions of dollars in cohesion funds,

Developments outside the *Nations in Transit* area continued to bolster this European trend in 2017. The U.S. administration’s ongoing denigration of the media has reinforced the sense in Europe that politicians no longer need to treat journalists with respect. “Fake news” has become a common shorthand among leaders who want to dismiss unfavorable reporting. The National Front’s Marine Le Pen failed to win the presidency in France, but she advanced to the second round. A new government in Austria included the far-right Freedom Party, and the far-right Alternative für Deutschland made major gains in the German parliamentary elections. Such parties have helped to normalize apocalyptic “civilizational” rhetoric, and formerly center-right politicians now portray themselves as defending “Christian Europe” against Muslim migrants. Russian proxies and propaganda outlets have exploited the situation,

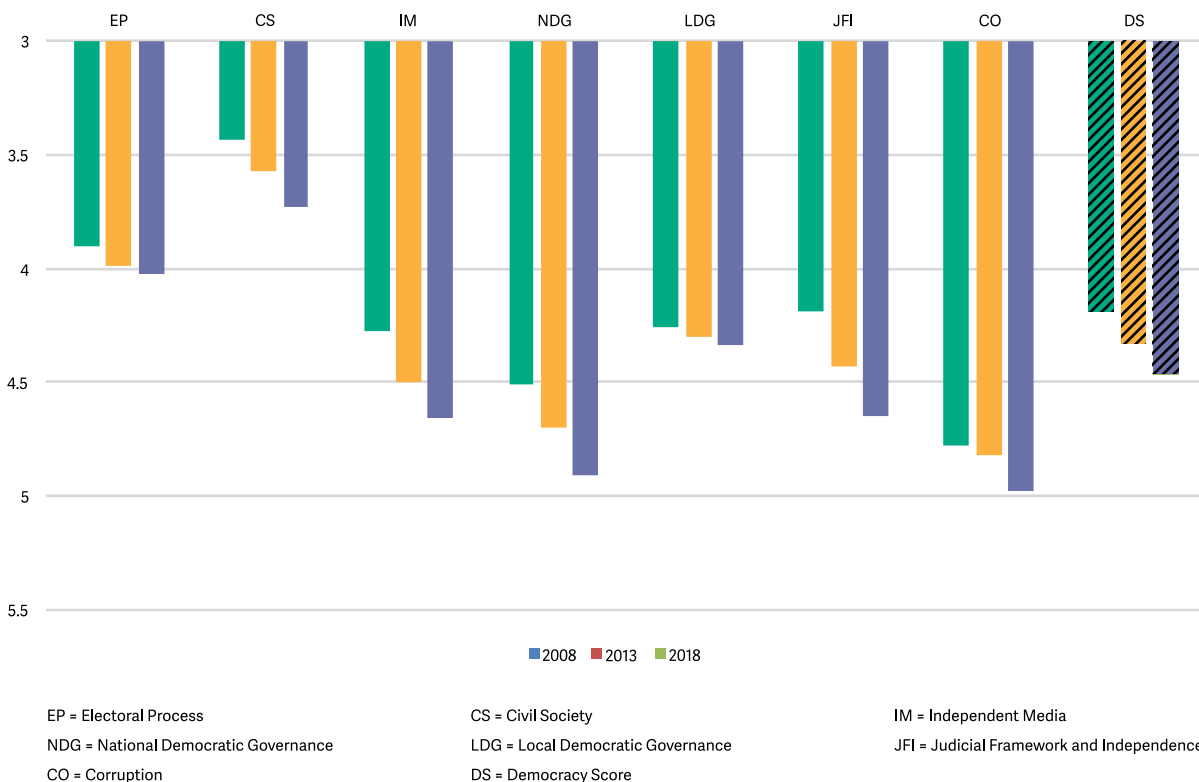
**NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2018: CHANGES IN DEMOCRACY SCORE**

Number of changes in DS per year; average changes weighted and unweighted for population.

Nineteen out of 29 countries recorded declines in their Democracy Scores, the most ever in the history of the survey.



**AVERAGE NIT SCORES 2008-2018**



The 29-country averages of all 7 categories in the survey have declined since 2008.

stoking grievances and encouraging division within and among democratic countries.

Faced with this rising tide, American and European policymakers have a choice: They can resign themselves to the new normal, or they can confront and overcome illiberalism by exposing the corruption, inequality, and hypocrisy that sustains it in power.

**Backsliding across the region**

The consolidation of democratic institutions in the postcommunist countries of Europe that occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s has stalled, and in important cases, been reversed. The Democracy Score of every country in Central Europe has declined since 2008, with the biggest setbacks in the media, the judiciary, and the functioning of national democratic institutions like parliaments and presidencies. Hungary and Bulgaria are no longer considered “Consolidated Democracies,” and Poland

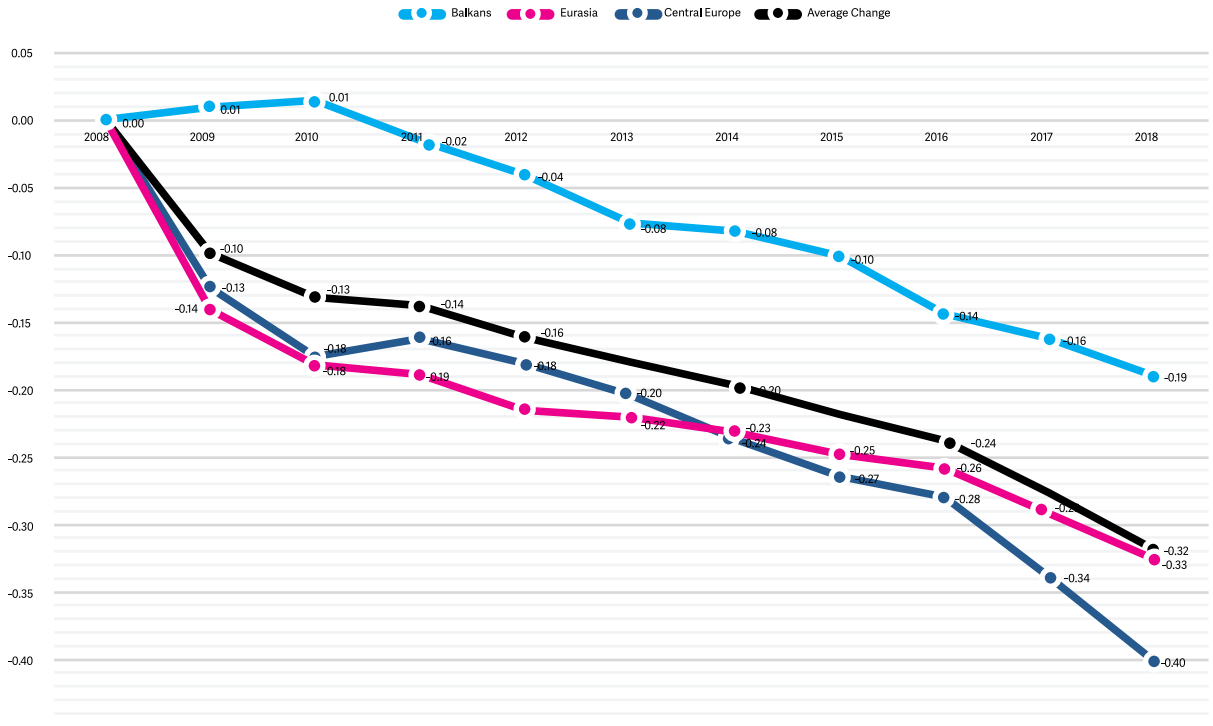
is near the threshold for leaving the category, having suffered the largest category score declines in the history of the survey. This year, 19 of the 29 countries in the report recorded declines in their Democracy Scores—more than in any previous edition of *Nations in Transit*.

The fragile postwar status quo established in the Balkans is also fraying. Dysfunctional institutional arrangements in Bosnia have left it unable to move forward on joining the EU. Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia and Milo Đukanović in Montenegro have captured their respective states, turning them into mechanisms for distributing patronage that in turn strengthen their parties’ grip on power. Meanwhile, the nationalist incitement that drove the Yugoslav conflicts has again become the preferred vocabulary of politicians. Democracy improved across the Balkans from 2005 to 2010, but it is now in decline, with the sole exception of Macedonia after its promising change in government.

**CHANGE IN DEMOCRACY SCORE AVERAGES BY SUBREGION**

Normalized subregional Democracy Scores

Every subregion in the survey is in decline.



With these deepening setbacks in the European half of the *Nations in Transit* region, it is no surprise that the countries in Eurasia most at risk of falling into authoritarianism—Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan—are also moving in a negative direction. The window for fundamental reforms may not have closed in Ukraine, but it has narrowed considerably amid political resistance to anticorruption reforms and a series of attacks on civil society and the media. For the first time since the 2014 revolution, Ukraine’s Democracy Score declined this year. In the other four countries, informal leaders operating outside of or on the edges of accountable institutions increasingly dominate their underdeveloped political systems.

In Eurasia’s entrenched autocracies—Belarus, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—personalized regimes keep a tight grip on power, suppressing political competition and targeting independent activists and journalists who dare to speak out.

The authoritarian regimes of Eurasia are hardly successful. The economic crises of 2008 and 2014, and the collapse of the global commodity boom, left the region with anemic growth and added another decade to the post-Soviet legacy of poor investment in physical infrastructure and human capital. While the death of President Islam Karimov in late 2016 has resulted in a small opening in Uzbekistan, the new leadership appears hesitant to fully dismantle the system it inherited after decades of rule centered on a single person.

**Standing up for what counts**

The paradox of the new normal is that illiberal leaders benefit from their states’ membership in supranational bodies, even as they rail against outside meddling. The security umbrella of NATO gives populist politicians the room to uproot state institutions, stoke bitter societal divisions, and goad neighboring states without fear of armed conflict or direct intervention by a hostile power. The EU’s funds can be used to sustain patronage networks without risking financial collapse. In the long term, the United States and the EU will have to confront these paradoxes

if democracy in Europe is to be truly consolidated. In the short term, they must be willing to counter antidemocratic behavior with deeds as well as words.

Certain successes in the Western Balkans during 2017 showed that this is possible. In Macedonia, the United States supported the EU in applying pressure to the outgoing ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, which had used violence and intimidation in an effort to block a new government from forming. Faced with a united front, VMRO-DPMNE was eventually forced to cede power to a new coalition, which now has a historic opportunity to reverse state capture and reconcile with its neighbors. In Albania, a preelection deal between the government and opposition, brokered with international assistance, allowed voting to go ahead without violence.

These are relatively simple cases, however. To directly combat illiberalism within Europe, the United States and the EU must take on the challenges emanating from Poland, and especially from Hungary, which in many ways is the standard-bearer of this new normal on the continent.

The **European Union**—and the European People's Party group in the European Parliament—must take responsibility for confronting the illiberalism of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz government. Hopes that Orbán and his party will turn away from illiberal tactics on their own have proven to be foolhardy. With Poland now moving down the same path that Hungary has trod,

the EU must urgently take coordinated action on both countries. First, it should build on its Article 7 sanctions process against Poland by also opening one against Hungary. Second, for both countries the EU needs to follow through on anticorruption investigations involving the misuse of EU funds, and should make access to EU funds conditional on meeting strict rule-of-law criteria. By the same token, the EU must take seriously the illiberal behavior of potential member states in the Western Balkans, including the so-called frontrunners, Serbia and Montenegro. The desire for a superficial "stability" in the Balkans must not overwhelm the need to use the EU's considerable leverage to improve the rule of law.

For the **United States**, the decades-old strategic goal of a "Europe whole, free, and at peace" has meant supporting democratization, including the promotion of civil society, independent media, and effective governing institutions. It has also meant backing a strong role for the EU in securing democratic progress and prosperity across the continent. The alternative vision of the new illiberal normal is one of inevitable civilizational conflict, demanding that countries barricade themselves against the world, which in turn becomes an excuse for intolerance, exclusion, and demagoguery. Rather than turning away from its long-standing commitment to democracy, the United States should embrace it and invest in it even more. The answer to the illiberal challenge must not be to walk away, but to step up.

**Poland's declines in Judicial Framework and Independence and National Democratic Governance are the largest single-year drops in the history of Nations in Transit.**

## The Challenge at the Core of Europe: Poland and the Future of the European Union

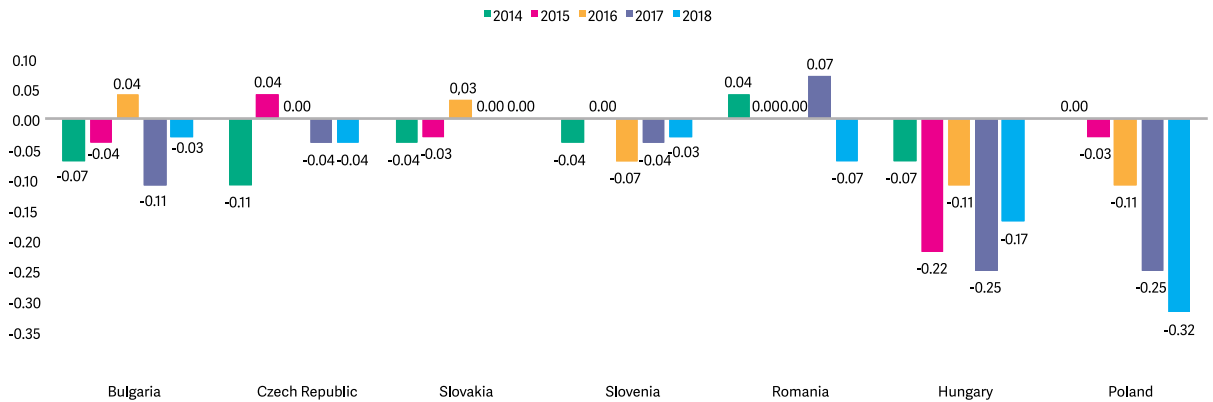
by Zselyke Csaky

The events of 2017 delivered a humbling blow to the EU's identity as a union of democratic states. After decades in which the expansion of the bloc was considered a means of consolidating democracy, the EU for the first time found itself moving toward formal sanctions against an existing member state, Poland, for failing to uphold democracy at home. The initiation of Article 7 sanctions against Poland is a pivotal moment in EU history: The process's outcome will fundamentally define the nature of the European project for years to come.

To understand the challenge that Poland poses, one must first appreciate the audacity of the changes pushed through by the governing Law and Justice (PiS) party. Since winning elections in October 2015, PiS has not only passed far-reaching reforms to politicize the courts and the media, clamped down on civil society, and branded those criticizing it as traitors. It has turned the country's legal framework upside down, putting an end to the separation of powers and endangering the rule of law inside—but also outside—the country.



DEMOCRACY SCORE CHANGES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE 2014-2018



According to laws passed in 2017, the PiS-dominated parliament has full control over the election of members of the National Judicial Council (NJC), which is responsible for appointing judges across the country. The new laws also allow for the replacement of around 40 percent of sitting Supreme Court judges. All of this was made possible in part by PiS's

It is not hard to see how drastically these changes have altered Poland's legal system. The appointment of judges and the course of their careers will depend on nothing but the goodwill of the governing party. It is also not hard to imagine the chaos and abuses that could arise when final decisions are subject to reexamination—in a court case, after all, at least one side is always unhappy with the outcome.

It is not hard to see how drastically these changes have altered Poland's legal system.

aggressive 2016 takeover of the Constitutional Tribunal, which adjudicates constitutional disputes. With the past year's changes, the party's subjugation of the Polish judiciary is complete.

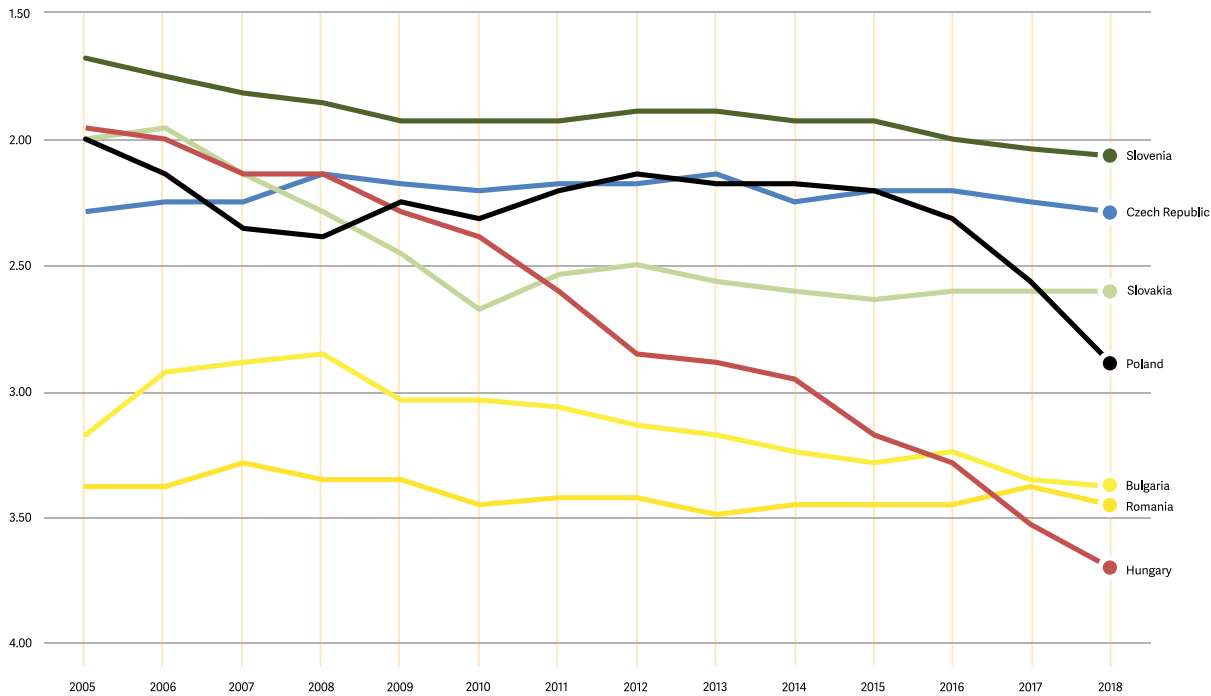
According to the 2017 reforms, anyone who has felt wronged by the courts in the past 20 years could have their cases reopened and reexamined by a newly established, PiS-nominated extraordinary chamber, and all decisions related to disciplining and sanctioning judges will happen under the auspices of a new body whose judges are also effectively chosen by PiS. This new body is responsible for validating elections as well, a task that had been within the purview of an independently appointed Supreme Court.

What PiS is attempting to do is revolutionary. The party is not just seeking to select its own judges and give them extraordinary powers, it is essentially taking over the state, operating with total disregard for constitutional and parliamentary norms. It bases its actions on a vague notion of "social justice," making an arbitrary distinction between just outcomes in a legal sense and just outcomes in a societal sense, and claiming the right as the elected party to decide when its interpretation of the latter should override the former.

This is why small concessions to the European Commission—such as watering down the controversial laws, as Hungary previously did, and then portraying the end result as a victory for both sides—will not be enough in Poland. The EU has drawn a line in the sand with the launch of Article 7 proceedings, and it should not back down until Poland's government has fully remedied the situation.



## DEMOCRACY SCORES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE 2005-2018



The current conditions in Poland also serve to highlight the EU's costly delay in the case of Hungary. While the legal grounds for launching Article 7 sanctions had not been present in such a clear-cut way in the first few years of the Orbán regime, developments in 2017 should have been a late wake-up call. Hungary passed two Russian-style laws—restricting the work of foreign-funded NGOs and hampering the continued operation of the Central European University in Budapest—and created an increasingly hostile atmosphere for critical voices. In early 2018, the State Audit Office handed down fines to several opposition parties, including an exceptionally large

penalty for Fidesz's main competitor, Jobbik. The fine, if collected on time, would have bankrupted the party right before parliamentary elections. With a propaganda campaign that included plastering Budapest's streets with billboards attacking the philanthropist George Soros, the government has created a parallel reality, rich in conspiracy theories, allegations of foreign interference, and threats of an imminent catastrophe. The loose framework of an authoritarian system is ready and visible in Hungary. Fidesz has only to tighten the screws. And if the past is any indication, the party will do nothing but double down after the April elections.

## Building an EU based on shared democratic values

The EU is in a difficult bind, contending simultaneously with growing nationalism and increasing interdependence among its member states. National political parties demand more sovereignty, as demonstrated by the Brexit vote, but at the same time new challenges require deeper and stronger cooperation, as shown by the migration crisis. These conflicting trends have bolstered the appeal of creating a “multispeed Europe,” or breaking the union into a core group and a less tightly connected second tier, with greater political integration at the core, for instance, but a single market still shared among all members.

## What happens in Warsaw or Budapest will also affect Paris and Berlin

Yet western member states would be wrong to assume that ignoring attacks on the rule of law in the eastern half of Europe can provide protection from their effects, even in a multispeed arrangement. In the end, if the revolutionary forces at work in Hungary and Poland prevail, the impact will be felt across the union, which depends in part on the consistent enforceability of judicial decisions. No single market can function with zones of legal uncertainty. What happens in Warsaw or Budapest will also affect Paris and Berlin—and the sooner decision-makers realize it, the better.

## Smearing the Messenger

labeled as “foreign agents” and denounced on national television as mercenaries. Six years later, such

## In the last three years, Nations in Transit has noted smears against NGOs and the media by ruling-party politicians or presidents in every country in the report except the three Baltic states and Slovenia.

smears have become par for the course across the *Nations in Transit* region.

The EU should continue working through Article 7 proceedings with the government of Poland and consider ending the process only if there are substantial changes to the legal framework. It should also launch such proceedings against Hungary as soon as possible. Brussels will have to be aggressive about using its distribution of EU funds to enforce rule-of-law criteria, conditioning access to resources on upholding democratic values. Member states must make clear that if countries refuse to accept the jurisdiction of the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO), they will not be eligible for EU funding.

The current crisis in the region provides a singular opportunity for the EU to shift its priorities and become not just a union of nations, but also a community based on common values. Such an EU would be a stronger and more prominent actor on the international stage, more capable of promoting democracy, peace, and security beyond and within its borders.

It has been said that democracy dies in darkness. But Poland’s recent experience shows that democracy is sometimes attacked in broad daylight, for everyone to see. If its defenders fail to take swift and decisive action in glaring cases like these, it is difficult to see how democracy can survive anywhere. When Russia’s government launched a virulent campaign against NGOs in 2012, it was shocking to see civil society groups and investigative journalists

The demonization of NGOs and journalists for allegedly working against national interests or serving foreign powers spread first in Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, but it has since become normalized in Central Europe and the Balkans as well. In the last three years, Nations in Transit has noted smears against NGOs and the media by ruling-party politicians or presidents in every country in the report except the three Baltic states and Slovenia.

Even when they do not lead to new legal or regulatory restrictions, smear campaigns threaten the functioning of democracy by attempting to delegitimize the participation of nongovernmental voices in public debate. The logic behind the smears is that



“They would tear down the fence together.” Campaign billboard in Budapest with opposition leaders and Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros.

only those who have been elected by a popular majority, meaning the government, are entitled to speak about issues of public interest. The implications of this line of reasoning were made clear in January 2018, when Hungary’s government discussed banning the U.S.-based liberal philanthropist George Soros—who holds Hungarian citizenship—from even entering the country.

Combined attacks on Soros and the NGOs and journalists he supposedly controls aim to tar them all as outsiders, recalling the anti-Semitic trope of Jews in Europe as “permanent foreigners.” In the Hungarian campaign against Soros, he is portrayed as a puppet master manipulating opposition politicians, or said to

be organizing an influx of millions of migrants so as to change the demographic balance of the country. Caricatures of Soros as a malevolent wizard—or even as some kind of reptilian monster—tap into a rich historical vein of European anti-Semitic imagery.

Politicians use smear campaigns because they work. Like the famous fallacy “When did you stop beating your wife?” they taint the targeted party no matter the response. The *Nations in Transit* region is experiencing an erosion of unwritten norms that kept politicians from using such smears whenever they chose. Fighting back requires a willingness to confront politicians who try to shift the blame off of themselves, and to support activists and journalists who are under attack.

## The Twilight of Putinism

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On March 18, Vladimir Putin was reelected to the presidency of the Russian Federation, besting a collection of hand-picked candidates who were put forward to placate different demographics—elderly Communists, nationalists, yuppies—without generating real competition. His only credible rival for the post, the charismatic anticorruption campaigner Aleksey Navalny, was banned from running due to a prior conviction on cooked-up embezzlement charges that have left his brother sitting in prison. Navalny “ran” anyway, conducting a de facto campaign through YouTube and in rallies across the country that continue to peel away the aging regime’s illusion of popularity.

Putin won, and if the international headlines are to be believed, he has never been stronger. He is presented as the bogeyman of American elections, spoiler of Syrian strategies, mastermind of Ukrainian invasions, shirtless rider of horses.

But his accomplishments over the last five years may be fool’s gold. The combination of the oil price crash in 2014 and international sanctions for that year’s invasion of Ukraine drove a teetering Russian economy into recession for two years. Gross domestic product at the end of 2017 was the same as it was in 2013. The country is creeping back to growth as oil prices have stabilized at over \$60 per barrel, but the expansion remains feeble, with just 1 to 2 percentage points forecast through 2019. The country’s Reserve Fund, built up in flush times to cover budget deficits, has been drained dry.

The power players in Russia seem to be jockeying for position in anticipation of their boss’s eventual departure.

After the election, Putin will have to shrink the budget even further while maintaining pensions for an

aging population. His government has avoided financial collapse, but unless it addresses the structural reasons behind low growth, it is only forestalling a reckoning that Putin probably hopes will come after his watch. Meanwhile, Russia will fall even farther behind larger and more innovative economies in East Asia, Europe, and North America.

The political consequences of this economic decay are already apparent. Forced to share a smaller pie, the ruling elites have begun to turn on one another. There have always been squabbles among oligarchs and cronies, but Putin was able to keep them within certain limits. Not anymore. The recent clash between Igor Sechin, chairman of the state oil company Rosneft, and Minister of Economic Development Aleksey Ulyukayev, in which Sechin entrapped his adversary in a bribery scheme and then ratted him out to investigators, was a violation of the thieves’ code that had prevailed inside the regime’s top echelons. Sechin, assured of the case’s outcome, even went so far as to ignore the court’s requests for him to testify, claiming that he was too busy. Renewed conflict in early 2018 between the aluminum magnate Oleg Deripaska and his rival Vladimir Potanin could signal that gloves are coming off across the board. Putin’s reelection will do nothing to quell these conflicts. Instead, the power players in Russia seem to be jockeying for position in anticipation of their boss’s eventual departure.

In another sign of disorder, Ramzan Kadyrov, the avowed Putin henchman who rules the Chechen Republic, has openly defied the federal security services and the constitution in a warped, postmodern parody of a feudal lord, posting pictures of his private menagerie on Instagram while violently enforcing his own version of Islamic law within the borders of his territory.

Even in foreign policy, the area where Putin staked his political reputation in his third term, there is much less to crow about than might appear. Perhaps the Kremlin is delighted at the chaos Russian interference is causing in the United States, but it has alienated Washington’s entire corps of foreign





iStock

### Russian President Vladimir Putin

policy professionals as well as many voters. It is hard to imagine that any future Republican or Democratic administration will have the domestic political room to cut a deal with Russia.

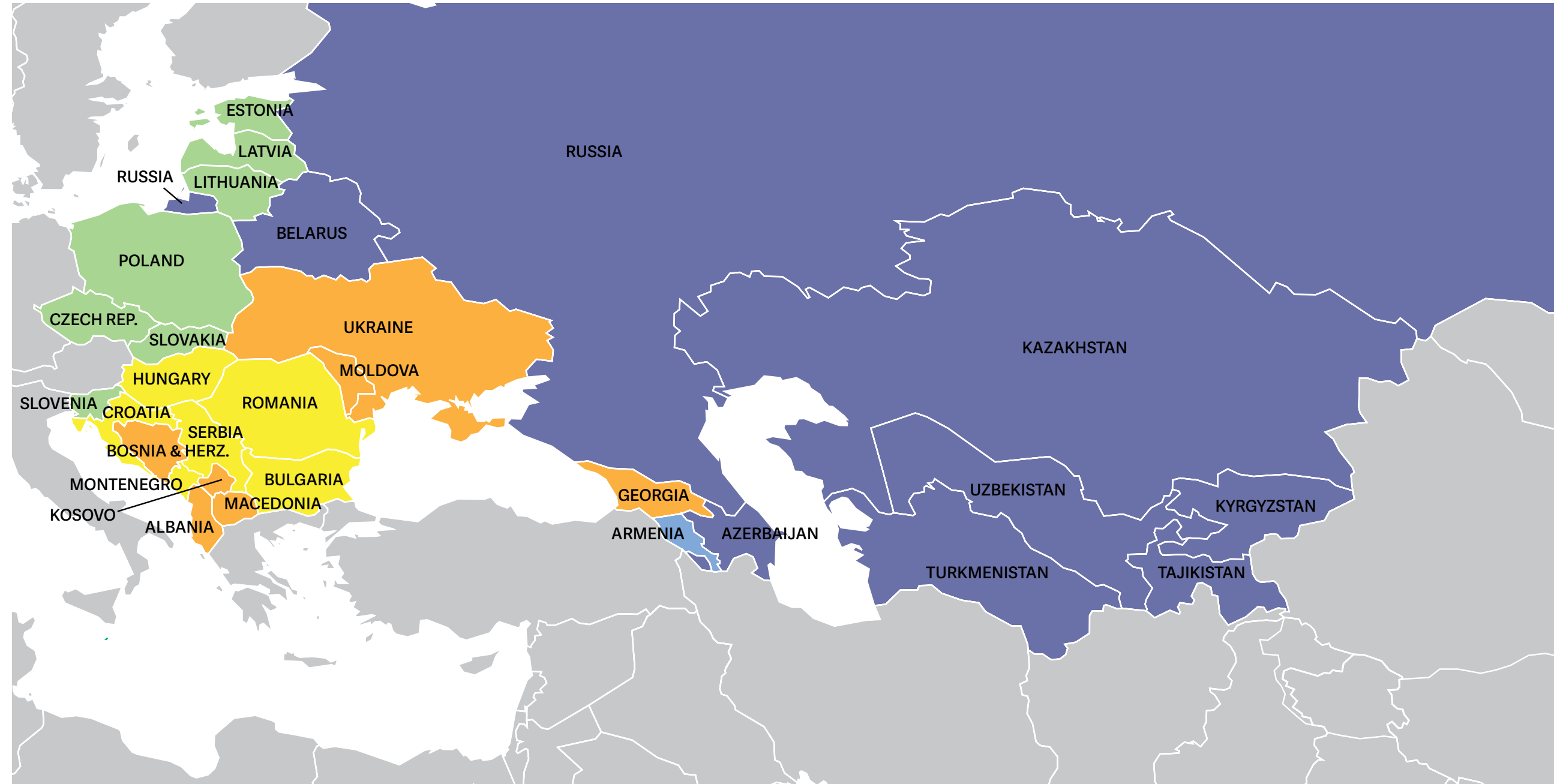
Focused as he is on the West, Putin has failed to develop any credible Eastern strategy. China surpassed Russia as the top investor in Central Asia years ago, and Beijing is now exploring a military presence in northeastern Afghanistan. Russia itself is locked into an unfavorable gas supply deal with China that Putin signed in the aftermath of his invasion of Ukraine, when he was desperate to put up a positive headline and show that the country could find trade partners despite Western sanctions.

Indeed, the seizure of Crimea is supposed to be Putin's great achievement, but it has poisoned relations with Europe and the United States for the foreseeable future, leaving them no realistic option for deesca-

lating sanctions. The fact that Russia helped shoot down a civilian airliner over eastern Ukraine, and that it still refuses to take responsibility for doing so, will not be forgiven. Even more importantly, the invasion has turned a whole generation of Ukrainians against Russia, fostering a climate of nationalist defiance that grows more entrenched with every soldier killed on the front lines in Donbas. Russia's seemingly permanent loss of Ukraine as a potential partner is a foreign policy catastrophe.

Barring a health crisis, Putin will rule Russia until 2024. Even if he refrains from changing the constitution to give himself another six years after that, by the time this term ends he will have been either president or prime minister for 25 years. This will be the legacy of Putin's Russia: a quarter-century wasted on the circular path carved out by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, and Belarus, where a leader is unable to make any real reform because he himself has become the system.

**NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2018**



**SURVEY FINDINGS**

Regime Type	No. of countries
Consolidated Democracy (CD)	7
Semi-Consolidated Democracy (SCD)	6
Transitional Government or Hybrid Regime (T/H)	7
Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (SCA)	1
Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (CA)	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

The map reflects the findings of Freedom House’s *Nations in Transit 2017* survey, which assesses the status of democratic development in 29 countries from Central Europe to Central Asia during 2016. 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 Democracy (1–3)**, **Semi-Consolidated Democracy (3–4)**, **Transitional Government/Hybrid Regime (4–5)**, **Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (5–6)**, and **Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (6–7)**.

## Informal Power: The Men behind the Curtains

In many countries across the *Nations in Transit* region, the most important political figure either holds no elected office or rules from a post vastly inferior to his real status. Informal power undermines institutions that are meant to clarify the authorities and obligations of those who run the state. It places real decision-making beyond the reach of voters, journalists, and the law itself.

Informal power takes different forms in different settings. Many countries have powerful business magnates or security service chiefs who exercise an outsized influence on politics. But the following eight countries all feature especially prominent individuals with informal power that far outstrips their mandates:

- In **Poland**, the chairman of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, Jarosław Kaczyński, officially acts as a mere member of parliament, chairing no committees and wielding no special authority. But his actual dominance is so widely known that there is a popular comedy series, *The Chairman's Ear*, about the political suitors who visit his office.
- In **Serbia** last year, Aleksandar Vučić undermined institutions by performing the maneuver—known by the chess term “castling”—that was made infamous by Vladimir Putin, who has repeatedly switched between the premiership and the presidency in Russia. In Serbia’s parliamentary system, the prime minister is the more

powerful executive authority. But after becoming president, Vučić hand-picked his own successor as prime minister and continues to run the country’s daily affairs from the president’s office in defiance of the constitution.

- In **Montenegro**, Milo Đukanović was either prime minister or president from 1991 to 2016, inter-

rupted only by two short “retirements.” He last left the post of prime minister after his Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) won the 2016 general elections, in a concession to the opposition, but he is widely believed to be the force behind the throne of his close DPS ally and current prime minister Duško Marković.

- In **Moldova**, the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc is so unpopular that protesters stormed the parliament in January 2016 to stop one of his proxies from becoming prime minister. Plahotniuc himself acts as chair of the Moldovan Democratic Party (PDM), which combined with his private wealth and media holdings enables him to direct not only his party, but also a large part of the opposition.
- In **Romania**, Social Democratic Party (PSD) leader Liviu Dragnea has installed his third candidate as prime minister in a year; the new appointee, Viorica Dăncilă, has little experience but comes from the same region, Teleorman, as Dragnea. The PSD leader cannot hold the position himself due to a previous conviction related to corruption, though his party has been working hard on relaxing anticorruption laws and undermining their enforcement since it returned to power at the end of 2016.
- In **Georgia**, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili stepped down as prime minister after one year in 2013, but he retains control over the ruling Georgian Dream party, which features employees of his companies in its highest ranks. Ivanishvili’s political vendettas and development plans for the capital Tbilisi continue to loom over Georgian politics.

- In **Kyrgyzstan**, Almazbek Atambayev stepped down as president due to term limits in 2017, but used the judicial system to arrest and imprison opponents of his chosen successor prior to the election. It is widely expected that he will retain political dominance through the ruling Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK).
- In **Armenia**, President Serzh Sargsyan must decide whether to leave power as the country transitions to a parliamentary model, to switch to the prime minister’s office, or to run the country informally as the leader of the Republican Party of Armenia.



U.S. Department of Defense

Then president Milo Đukanović meeting with US Secretary of Defense William Perry in 1999.





Marco Fieber / Flickr

**Bidzina Ivanishvili speaking with media. Georgia's richest man remains the force behind the dominant Georgian Dream party.**

## Macedonia: Freeing the Captured State

The most promising chance for a democratic breakthrough in Europe today is in Macedonia. Although the country is small, the opportunity is big: Success in Macedonia would mean breaking up a decade of state capture and peacefully resolving bilateral disputes that have held back political and economic progress in the region. In *Nations in Transit 2018*, Macedonia recorded its first score improvements since 2010, ending seven straight years of decline.

The prospects for such a breakthrough looked bleak as recently as April 2017. Macedonia had been deadlocked since 2014, when the opposition began boycotting the parliament over allegations of corruption and violence by the ruling Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). In February 2015, the opposition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) began releasing wiretap recordings that showed government officials engaged in grave crimes:

election rigging, bribery, covering up murder, and corrupting judicial processes, among others.

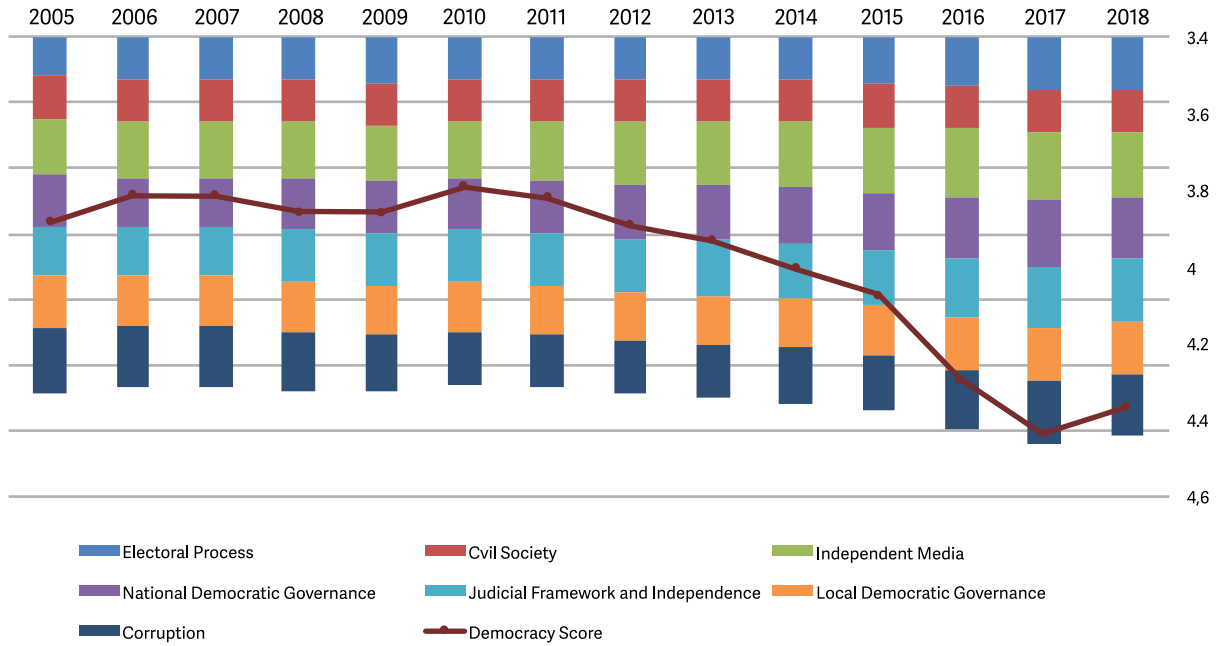
The “bombs,” as the leaked recordings became known, resulted in huge protests that led to EU mediation beginning in summer 2015. The mediation process produced a Special Prosecutor’s Office (SJO) tasked with investigating the crimes revealed in the wiretaps, and a road map to early elections with a series of reforms intended to ensure their fairness.

Elections were delayed repeatedly, however, because the VMRO-DPMNE obstructed reforms affecting the media, the judiciary, and the electoral system, while also hampering the SJO’s investigations through its control of the courts and the Interior Ministry, and with the help of the VMRO-DPMNE-aligned president, Gjorge Ivanov.

When they were finally held in December 2016, the elections produced a near-tie between the VM-

MACEDONIA DEMOCRACY SCORES SINCE NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2015

Macedonia recorded its first score improvements in the survey since 2010.



RO-DPMNE and the SDSM. But because the VMRO-DPMNE had increasingly run on a Macedonian nationalist platform, parties representing the country's large ethnic Albanian minority refused to join it in a governing coalition as they had done before. After several months, the SDSM reached its own coalition agreement with Albanian parties.

In April 2017, the president refused to give this coalition a mandate to form a government. When it tried to elect a speaker of parliament as a kind of end-run around the president's obstruction, the VMRO-DPMNE mobilized a nationalist mob that stormed

the assault. Despite the attack, at the end of May the SDSM formed a government with its coalition partners. In October, the SDSM and its allies routed the VMRO-DPMNE in local elections.

The new government is strongly committed to breaking up the state capture that VMRO-DPMNE had accomplished. The VMRO-DPMNE for its part is fighting a last-ditch battle to keep its top officials out of jail by obstructing the work of the parliament and trying to rile up Macedonian nationalist sentiment. It failed to prevent a government from forming, but the ongoing name dispute with Greece and concessions that the SDSM made to ethnic Albanian parties in order to form the ruling coalition give the VMRO-DPMNE an opportunity to appeal to Macedonian nationalists.

The first key to success for the SDSM-led coalition is to resolve the name dispute with Greece, which would unlock the path to EU and NATO membership and provide a tremendous international boost to the government. While the EU has been very supportive of the government, its hands are tied until Greece drops its objections to officially opening the accession pro-

"If the name dispute with Greece is resolved, then the hard work begins."

the parliament and physically attacked journalists and lawmakers, including the leader of the SDSM, Zoran Zaev. Police officers still under the authority of the VMRO-DPMNE's Interior Ministry stood aside during

cess. The Macedonian government is making a hard push for a resolution, and the Greek government has reciprocated with a number of positive statements.

If the name dispute is resolved, then the hard work begins. Breaking down the VMRO-DPMNE's many years of investment in patronage networks will be difficult for the new coalition—and doing so without engaging in abuses of its own will be even harder. At this moment, the new government deserves strong support from the United States and the EU, including pressure on Greece to resolve the name dispute and commitments to assist with the painful process of rolling back state capture.



Prime Minister Zoran Zaev with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras.

## Uzbekistan: The First, Meager, Shoots of Spring

The other country that made a significant break with its past in 2017 was Uzbekistan, long one of the most closed and repressive states in Eurasia. President Islam Karimov died in late August 2016. In 2017, new president and former prime minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev took steps to improve the atmosphere for discussion and debate in the country. Uzbekistan consequently earned its first score improvements in *Nations in Transit* since the 2005 edition—ending 13 years of decline and stagnation in which the country reached the absolute bottom in all but one category.

Uzbekistan's prospects are not as rosy as Macedonia's. With the political opposition long since arrested or driven into exile, Mirziyoyev confirmed his position in a badly lopsided election after being appointed acting president unconstitutionally. (The constitution stipulates that the head of the Senate, not the prime minister, should have been named interim president after Karimov's death.) The system that Karimov built, with expansive surveillance networks reaching down to the mahalla (neighborhood) level and autarkic controls on the economy, will remain intact until it is actively dismantled. It will take years to restore even a semblance of the political dynamism needed for real reforms. All the same, last year brought the first

tangible signs that things may be changing.

*Nations in Transit* recorded improvements in the Civil Society and Independent Media categories, as the government took modest steps that were nonetheless impressive given the country's recent history. Thousands of political activists and religious believers remain imprisoned for their opinions, but at least 17 prominent political prisoners have been released since Karimov's death, including journalist Muhammad Bekjanov and human rights defender Azamjon Farmonov.

Authorities showed some openness to cooperation with civil society, inviting local activists to participate in meetings with the International Labor Organization on forced labor in the cotton harvest, even as such activists continued to experience harassment as they monitored the harvest. The state also invited Human Rights Watch, whose Tashkent office was forced to close in 2011, to send a delegation and meet with government officials and members of civil society. Although international human rights organizations have not yet been able to reopen offices—a step that will be necessary to nourish and sustain local activism—this was a positive signal.

Greater openness in the media was reflected in the return of live television broadcasts with some criticism of low-level officials and discussion of public issues. Previously taboo topics, like forced labor, started to be raised by journalists, especially in some relatively new online media outlets. While these sorts of discussions previously took place through messaging apps like Telegram and in international or exile media like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, in

The country ultimately registered just quarter-point increases in two categories that had reached the absolute bottom in the *Nations in Transit* methodology. The hard work in Uzbekistan still lies ahead. After decades of personalization of the state, powers will have to be separated anew, political pluralism in the form of actual competition among parties must be restored, and the state's heavy hand must be lifted off the economy to allow people to pursue their own opportunities. There is a long way to go, but something is changing in Uzbekistan, and for the first time in over a decade, the future seems uncertain.

## Uzbekistan recorded its first score improvements in the survey since 2005.

2017 they began to occur inside the country. Even in a year when journalist Bobomurad Abdullayev, blogger Hayot Nasreddinov, and writer Nurullo Otahonov had charges brought against them, there was an improvement in the atmosphere for the press.



Press Service of the Uzbek President

Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev with former president of Kyrgyzstan Almazbek Atambayev. Mirziyoyev's visit to neighboring Kyrgyzstan in September 2017 was the first visit by Uzbekistan's president since 2000.

## NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2018: OVERVIEW OF SCORE CHANGES

▼ Decline ▲ Improvement □ Unchanged

	COUNTRY	DS 2017	EP	CS	IM	NDG	LDG	JFI	CO
BALKANS	Albania	4.14 to 4.11	▲						
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	4.54 to 4.64	▼				▼	▼	
	Croatia	3.71 to 3.75				▼			
	Kosovo	4.96 to 4.93	▲						
	Macedonia	4.43 to 4.36			▲	▲			
	Montenegro	3.89 to 3.93				▼			
	Serbia	3.82 to 3.96		▼	▼	▼	▼		
CENTRAL EUROPE	Bulgaria	3.36 to 3.39							
	Czech Republic	2.25 to 2.29				▼			
	Hungary	3.54 to 3.71	▼	▼	▼	▼			▼
	Poland	2.57 to 2.89		▼		▼▼▼	▼	▼▼▼▼	
	Romania	3.39 to 3.46				▼	▼		
	Slovakia	2.61							
	Slovenia	2.04 to 2.07							▼
EURASIA	Armenia	5.39 to 5.43							▼
	Azerbaijan	6.93							
	Belarus	6.61				▼			▲
	Estonia	1.93 to 1.82				▲	▲		▲
	Georgia	4.61 to 4.68			▼			▼	
	Kazakhstan	6.64 to 6.71		▼				▼	
	Kyrgyzstan	6.00 to 6.07	▼		▼				
	Latvia	2.04 to 2.07		▼					
	Lithuania	2.32 to 2.36		▼					
	Moldova	4.93							
	Russia	6.57 to 6.61		▲			▼	▼	
	Tajikistan	6.64 to 6.79		▼	▼		▼		▼
	Turkmenistan	6.96							
	Ukraine	4.61 to 4.64		▼	▼		▲		
	Uzbekistan	4.96 to 6.89		▲	▲				

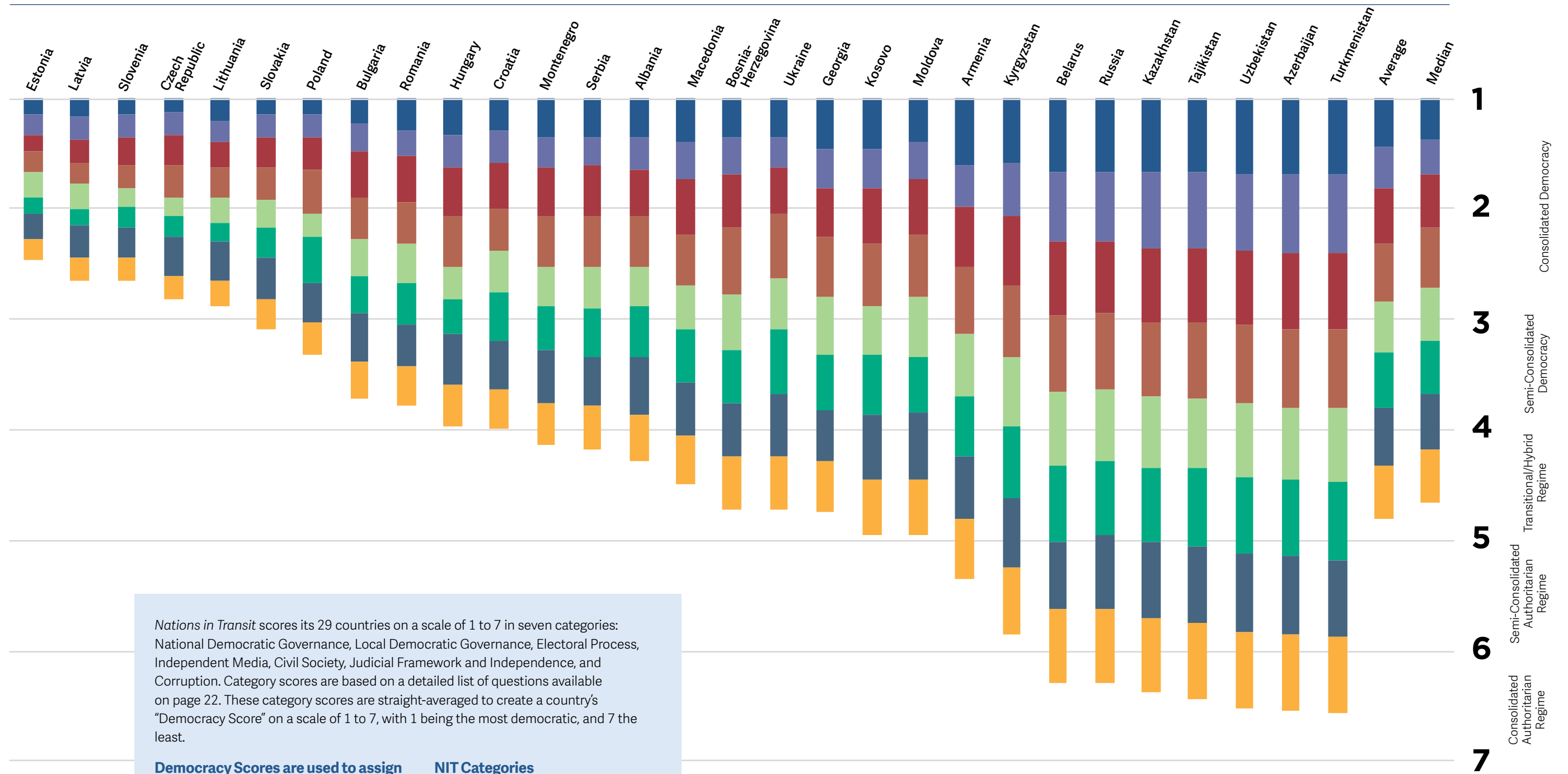
## Categories:

EP – Electoral Process  
 CS – Civil Society  
 IM – Independent Media  
 NDG – National Democratic Governance  
 LDG – Local Democratic Governance  
 JFI – Judicial Framework and Independence  
 CO – Corruption  
 DS – Democracy Score

The NIT ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The NIT 2017 ratings reflect the period from 1 January through 31 December 2016.



# Nations in Transit 2018 Scores



## Methodology

*Nations in Transit 2018* measures progress and setbacks for democratization in 29 countries from Central Europe to Central Asia. This edition of the annual study covers events from January 1 through December 31, 2017. In consultation with country report authors, a panel of academic 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 and stability of the governmental system; the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of legislative and executive branches; and the democratic oversight of military and security services.
- **Electoral Process.** Examines national executive and legislative elections, electoral processes, the development of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process.
- **Civil Society.** Assesses the growth of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), their organizational capacity and financial sustainability, and the legal and political environment in which they function; the development of free trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups in society.
- **Independent Media.** Addresses the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the emergence of a financially viable private press; and internet access for private citizens.
- **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.** Highlights constitutional reform, human rights protections, criminal code reform, 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.** Focuses on public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption mechanisms.

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest and 7 the lowest level of democratic progress. Minor to moderate developments typically warrant a positive or negative change of a quarter point (0.25), while significant developments warrant a half point (0.50). It is rare for any category to fluctuate by more than a half point in a single year. A country's Democracy Score is the average of its ratings on all seven indicators covered by Nations in Transit. Based on the **Democracy Score**, Freedom House assigns each country to one of the following regime types:

**Consolidated Democracies (1.00–2.99):** 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 (3.00–3.99):** 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 (4.00–4.99):** 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 (5.00–5.99):** 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 (6.00–7.00):** 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/report/nations-transit-2018/methodology>.



**NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2018: CATEGORY AND DEMOCRACY SCORE SUMMARY**

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

**Categories**

**EP** - Electoral Process  
**CS** - Civil Society  
**IM** - Independent Media

**NDG** - National Democratic Governance  
**LDG** - Local Democratic Governance  
**JFI** - Judicial Framework and Independence  
**CO** - Corruption

Country	CATEGORIES							
	EP	CS	IM	NDG	LDG	JFI	CO	DS
Estonia	1.5	1.75	1.5	2	2.25	1.5	2.25	<b>1.82</b>
Latvia	1.75	2	2	2	2.25	1.5	3	<b>2.07</b>
Slovenia	1.5	2	2.5	2.25	1.5	2	2.75	<b>2.07</b>
Czech Republic	1.25	2	2.75	3	1.75	1.75	3.5	<b>2.29</b>
Lithuania	2	2	2.25	2.75	2.25	1.75	3.5	<b>2.36</b>
Slovakia	1.5	2	2.75	3	2.5	2.75	3.75	<b>2.61</b>
Poland	1.5	2	3	4	2	4.25	3.5	<b>2.89</b>
Bulgaria	2.25	2.5	4.25	3.75	3.25	3.5	4.25	<b>3.39</b>
Romania	3	2.25	4.25	3.75	3.5	3.75	3.75	<b>3.46</b>
Hungary	3.25	3	4.5	4.5	3	3	4.75	<b>3.71</b>
Croatia	3	2.75	4.25	3.75	3.75	4.5	4.25	<b>3.75</b>
Montenegro	3.5	2.75	4.5	4.5	3.5	4	4.75	<b>3.93</b>
Serbia	3.5	2.5	4.75	4.5	3.75	4.5	4.25	<b>3.96</b>
Albania	3.5	3	4.25	4.5	3.5	4.75	5.25	<b>4.11</b>
Macedonia	4	3.25	5	4.75	4	4.75	4.75	<b>4.36</b>
Bosnia-Herzegovina	3.5	3.5	4.75	6	5	4.75	5	<b>4.64</b>
Ukraine	3.5	2.75	4.25	5.75	4.75	5.75	5.75	<b>4.64</b>
Georgia	4.5	3.75	4.25	5.5	5.25	5	4.5	<b>4.68</b>
Kosovo	4.5	3.75	5	5.5	4.5	5.5	5.75	<b>4.93</b>
Moldova	4	3.25	5	5.75	5.5	5	6	<b>4.93</b>
Armenia	6	3.75	5.5	6	5.75	5.5	5.5	<b>5.43</b>
Kyrgyzstan	5.75	5	6.25	6.5	6.25	6.5	6.25	<b>6.07</b>
Belarus	6.75	6.25	6.75	6.75	6.75	7	6	<b>6.61</b>
Russia	6.75	6.25	6.5	6.75	6.5	6.75	6.75	<b>6.61</b>
Kazakhstan	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.5	6.75	6.75	<b>6.71</b>
Tajikistan	6.75	6.75	6.75	7	6.25	7	7	<b>6.79</b>
Uzbekistan	7	6.75	6.75	7	6.75	7	7	<b>6.89</b>
Azerbaijan	7	7	7	7	6.5	7	7	<b>6.93</b>
Turkmenistan	7	7	7	7	6.75	7	7	<b>6.96</b>
<b>Average</b>	4.31	3.94	4.96	5.23	4.61	4.99	5.25	<b>4.76</b>
<b>Median</b>	3.75	3.25	4.75	5.50	4.63	4.88	5.13	<b>4.64</b>

## NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2018: DEMOCRACY SCORE HISTORY BY REGION

Country	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	
<b>Central Europe</b>												
Bulgaria	2.86	3.04	3.04	3.07	3.14	3.18	3.25	3.29	3.25	3.36	<b>3.39</b>	▼
Czech Republic	2.14	2.18	2.21	2.18	2.18	2.14	2.25	2.21	2.21	2.25	<b>2.29</b>	▼
Estonia	1.93	1.93	1.96	1.93	1.93	1.96	1.96	1.96	1.93	1.93	<b>1.82</b>	▲
Hungary	2.14	2.29	2.39	2.61	2.86	2.89	2.96	3.18	3.29	3.54	<b>3.71</b>	▼
Latvia	2.07	2.18	2.18	2.14	2.11	2.07	2.07	2.07	2.07	2.04	<b>2.07</b>	▼
Lithuania	2.25	2.29	2.25	2.25	2.29	2.32	2.36	2.36	2.32	2.32	<b>2.36</b>	▼
Poland	2.39	2.25	2.32	2.21	2.14	2.18	2.18	2.21	2.32	2.57	<b>2.89</b>	▼
Romania	3.36	3.36	3.46	3.43	3.43	3.50	3.46	3.46	3.46	3.39	<b>3.46</b>	▼
Slovakia	2.29	2.46	2.68	2.54	2.50	2.57	2.61	2.64	2.61	2.61	<b>2.61</b>	
Slovenia	1.86	1.93	1.93	1.93	1.89	1.89	1.93	1.93	2.00	2.04	<b>2.07</b>	▼
<b>Average</b>	2.33	2.39	2.44	2.43	2.45	2.47	2.50	2.53	2.55	2.61	<b>2.67</b>	
<b>Median</b>	2.20	2.27	2.29	2.23	2.24	2.25	2.31	2.29	2.32	2.45	<b>2.49</b>	
<b>Balkans</b>												
Albania	3.82	3.82	3.93	4.04	4.14	4.25	4.18	4.14	4.14	4.14	<b>4.11</b>	▲
Bosnia-Herzegovina	4.11	4.18	4.25	4.32	4.36	4.39	4.43	4.46	4.5	4.54	<b>4.64</b>	▼
Croatia	3.64	3.71	3.71	3.64	3.61	3.61	3.68	3.68	3.68	3.71	<b>3.75</b>	▼
Kosovo	5.21	5.14	5.07	5.18	5.18	5.25	5.14	5.14	5.07	4.96	<b>4.93</b>	▲
Macedonia	3.86	3.86	3.79	3.82	3.89	3.93	4.00	4.07	4.29	4.43	<b>4.36</b>	▲
Montenegro	3.79	3.79	3.79	3.82	3.82	3.82	3.86	3.89	3.93	3.89	<b>3.93</b>	▼
Serbia	3.79	3.79	3.71	3.64	3.64	3.64	3.64	3.68	3.75	3.82	<b>3.96</b>	▼
<b>Average</b>	4.03	4.04	4.04	4.07	4.09	4.13	4.13	4.15	4.19	4.21	<b>4.24</b>	
<b>Median</b>	3.82	3.82	3.79	3.82	3.89	3.93	4.00	4.07	4.14	4.14	<b>4.11</b>	
<b>Eurasia</b>												
Armenia	5.21	5.39	5.39	5.43	5.39	5.36	5.36	5.36	5.36	5.39	<b>5.43</b>	▼
Azerbaijan	6.00	6.25	6.39	6.46	6.57	6.64	6.68	6.75	6.86	6.93	<b>6.93</b>	
Belarus	6.71	6.57	6.50	6.57	6.68	6.71	6.71	6.71	6.64	6.61	<b>6.61</b>	
Georgia	4.79	4.93	4.93	4.86	4.82	4.75	4.68	4.64	4.61	4.61	<b>4.68</b>	▼
Kazakhstan	6.39	6.32	6.43	6.43	6.54	6.57	6.61	6.61	6.61	6.64	<b>6.71</b>	▼
Kyrgyzstan	5.93	6.04	6.21	6.11	6.00	5.96	5.89	5.93	5.89	6	<b>6.07</b>	▼
Moldova	5.00	5.07	5.14	4.96	4.89	4.82	4.86	4.86	4.89	4.93	<b>4.93</b>	
Russia	5.96	6.11	6.14	6.18	6.18	6.21	6.29	6.46	6.5	6.57	<b>6.61</b>	▼
Tajikistan	6.07	6.14	6.14	6.14	6.18	6.25	6.32	6.39	6.54	6.54	<b>6.79</b>	▼
Turkmenistan	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.96	<b>6.96</b>	
Ukraine	4.25	4.39	4.39	4.61	4.82	4.86	4.93	4.75	4.68	4.61	<b>4.64</b>	▼
Uzbekistan	6.86	6.89	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.96	<b>6.89</b>	▲
<b>Average</b>	5.84	5.92	5.96	5.97	5.99	6.00	6.02	6.03	6.04	6.06	<b>6.10</b>	
<b>Median</b>	5.98	6.13	6.18	6.16	6.18	6.23	6.31	6.43	6.52	6.56	<b>6.61</b>	

“The answer to the illiberal challenge must not be to walk away, but to step up.”

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Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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