



PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Jennifer Stapleton
stapleton@freedomhouse.org
+1 202.577.8720

NEW REPORT: Nations in Transit 2020 finds weakened institutions in Europe and Eurasia as politicians flout democratic norms

COVID-19 creates inflection point that could accelerate downward trends or reinvigorate democracy

Washington, May 6, 2020 — A growing number of leaders in Central and Eastern Europe have dropped even the pretense that they play by the rules of democracy. They openly attack democratic institutions and are working to restrict individual freedoms, according to *Nations in Transit 2020*, an annual report on democratic governance in the region.

These attacks have resulted in a dramatic democratic breakdown across Central Europe, the Balkans, and Eurasia, leading to category declines for four countries in the past two years: Poland has dropped out of the group of Consolidated Democracies and become a Semiconsolidated Democracy, while Hungary, Serbia, and Montenegro have all left the category of democracies entirely and become Transitional/Hybrid Regimes.

“Many leaders in this region are no longer pretending to care about democracy or the rule of law,” said Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House. “It is time for European leaders who are committed to freedom to address the crisis in their own neighborhood. The United States also has a pivotal role to play and should rededicate itself to a foreign policy that emphasizes the defense of democratic values.”

“The coronavirus crisis has created an inflection point, after which things could become much worse, or democracy could be revitalized,” said Abramowitz. “We hope that this experience will illustrate the importance of transparent and accountable governance and catalyze new demands for change.”

The institutions of democracy monitored by *Nations in Transit* are under attack across the board, and governments’ exploitation of COVID-19 may be accelerating these disturbing trends. The electoral framework has been manipulated in a way that gives undue advantage to incumbents, parliaments have

become sidelined or hollowed out by opposition boycotts, and the independent media and civil society continue to face smear campaigns.

In a new development, the judiciary and the rule of law have also become targets in many countries. Governments are packing courts with loyalists, adopting restrictive laws that do away with judicial independence, and in some cases persecuting individual judges. The indicator with the largest number of declines in *Nations in Transit 2020* was Judicial Framework and Independence, with six countries deteriorating: the Czech Republic, Georgia, Latvia, Montenegro, Poland, and Slovakia.

These shifts are taking place in an environment that was vulnerable to abuse even before the arrival of COVID-19, with long-term trends leaving countries increasingly exposed to malicious foreign interference as democratic consensus has been replaced by great-power rivalry. The Chinese government is actively taking advantage of institutional weaknesses, while political leaders in democracies on both sides of the Atlantic are failing to stand up for core values in the region, enabling and aggravating the democratic deterioration.

“It is essential for democratic countries to stand up to bullies, but that’s only possible if leading politicians promote democratic principles through their words and actions,” said Zselyke Csaky, research director for Europe and Eurasia. “So far this has been lacking, resulting in shortsighted and desultory responses. To tackle the crisis and to arrest the democratic decline, we will need cooperation, transparency, and accountability. If democracy is to survive in the world, it must be reinvigorated from the inside, by the democratic community itself.”

Nations in Transit 2020 has found that people’s yearning for democracy remains strong. New protest movements, often focusing on the environment, have been springing up in many locations, with citizens demanding better governance. A few countries have also been opening up or undergoing transitions toward more democratic rule. While the jury is still out on these transformations, they demonstrate the unceasing appeal of democracy in a variety of settings.

Nations in Transit 2020 assesses the state of democratic governance in 29 countries in Europe and Eurasia. The country scores pertain to conditions and developments between January and December 2019.

Key Findings:

- **The number of democracies is at its lowest point in the 25-year history of the report: of the 29 countries assessed, 10 were rated as democracies, 10 as hybrid regimes, and 9 as authoritarian regimes.** Over the last decade, the number of hybrid regimes has more than tripled, while the number of democracies has declined by one-third.
- **The average Democracy Score for the region has declined every year since 2005—16 years in a row—but the tide might be turning.** The past two years featured more improvements due to gradual reforms; in the 2020 report, nine countries improved their scores, almost double the number that registered gains in the 2019 edition.

Central Europe

- **Hungary** has experienced the largest drop ever recorded in *Nations in Transit*, with its Democracy Score exceeding the average decline eightfold in the past decade. In the 2020 report, with declines related to elections, local governments, and corruption, Hungary left the group of democracies.
- **Poland** similarly changed categories, becoming the second European Union member state to lose its Consolidated Democracy designation, after Hungary. The country's losses in Judicial Framework and Independence over the past five years have been the largest ever recorded for that indicator.

Balkans

- **Serbia**, whose scores have declined each year for five years, recently dropped into the Transitional/Hybrid Regime category. **Montenegro** joined Serbia in leaving the group of democracies in the 2019 report, after hovering above the threshold for a decade. Both countries registered further declines in *Nations in Transit 2020*.
- Positive news emerged elsewhere in the Balkans, as **Kosovo** and **North Macedonia** earned multiple score improvements. Kosovo is the only country in the report's coverage area to secure gains in each of the last five years. Still, recent developments in both countries have cast doubt on future progress.

Eurasia

- **Armenia** registered the largest two-year Democracy Score improvement in the report's history, and the score has reached its highest-ever point for the country, with improvements related to elections and corruption in the latest edition. Developments regarding the judiciary, however, have raised concerns.
- The new administration in **Ukraine** is facing significant challenges with structural reforms and COVID-19 in 2020. Nevertheless, the election of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and a peaceful transfer of power from the defeated incumbent in 2019 earned the country a slight improvement in its National Democratic Governance score.
- While **Moldova's** "compromise coalition" of 2019 ultimately fell apart, the brief united front demonstrated a reduction in informal oligarchic control over the country's institutions and led to improvements in its Corruption and National Democratic Governance scores.
- As several of Eurasia's autocrats were grappling with succession plans, **Russia** registered a decline due to an extraordinary level of violence against protesters, and **Uzbekistan's** Corruption score improved from rock bottom due to recent efforts to root out petty graft.

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Freedom House is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to the expansion of democracy and freedom around the world. We analyze the challenges to freedom, advocate for greater political rights and civil liberties, and support frontline activists to defend human rights and promote democratic change.

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