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NEW REPORT: Moscow's Invasion of Ukraine Deepens Divide between Autocracies and Democracies in Region Stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia

The latest edition of Nations in Transit documents the 19th consecutive year of overall decline in democratic governance for the region.

WASHINGTON— Heightened security threats, a historic refugee crisis and economic disruption stemming from Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have deepened the divide between autocracies and democracies among the 29-nation region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia, according to a report released today by Freedom House.

Nations in Transit 2023: War Deepens a Regional Divide is the 25th edition of this annual report, examining events during 2022 and providing a comprehensive assessment of the impact that Moscow's war of aggression has had on democracy in the region. Russia itself suffered its largest single-year score decline in the history of the report due to a dramatic wave of repression aimed at domestic antiwar speech. The Kremlin's actions in Ukraine represent the gravest challenge to peace, freedom, and democracy in Europe since the end of the Cold War, the report finds.

“Vladimir Putin's brutal, unprovoked war of conquest in Ukraine has seriously endangered democratization efforts and widened political

fissures in the surrounding area,” said Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House. “It is now more critical than ever for democratic partners in Europe and around the world to redouble their solidarity and support. Ukrainians have mounted a valiant defense on the battlefield, but their sacrifices must not be squandered. Only a sustained push for democratic progress across Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia will reverse the damage of the past two decades and deliver a free and prosperous future for this region.”

Nations in Transit analyzes the state of democratic governance in 29 countries and categorizes each by its regime type. Of the eight countries classified as Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes—settings where autocrats prevent political competition and pluralism through widespread violations of basic rights—six suffered declines in their already abysmal democracy scores: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Most of these declines were related to crackdowns on dissent in which governments abandoned their core obligation to protect citizens’ physical safety and security. In fact, unrestrained state violence—whether on the streets or inside detention facilities—has become a distinguishing feature of these regimes.

The report also finds that politics in the Western Balkans have often been dominated by self-serving elites who exclude the voices of civil society and hinder democratic reforms. In addition, long-strained relations between Serbia and Kosovo have continued to undermine democratic progress in both countries. In the European Union’s southeast, meanwhile, the threat posed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine did little to shake member states out of their chronic partisan turmoil. Instead, a pattern of “stable instability” persisted in Romania, Slovakia, and Bulgaria.

Key findings

- **For the 19th consecutive year, democratic governance in the *Nations in Transit* region suffered an overall decline.**

Democracy scores declined in 11 out of the 29 countries in the report. Seven countries earned improvements, however, as civic activists and democratic leaders continued to strive for better governance across the diverse region.

- **Russia and Hungary experienced the year's steepest score declines.** Russia lost ground on five out of seven thematic indicators, resulting in its largest-ever decline in a single year, due to the regime's use of the war to justify intensified repression of dissent and centralization of power. Hungary's government oversaw deeply distorted parliamentary elections and encroached further on civic space and judicial independence, leading to score declines for three indicators.
- **Democratic institutions held up under pressure in Ukraine.** Ukraine's government and people confirmed their commitment to democracy even in the face of unimaginable violence. A robust civil society sector continued to hold the authorities in check, and the country generally rejected the notion that political rights and civil liberties could be cast aside during wartime.
- **The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania continued to receive the best scores in the coverage area.** Lithuania's already high score on civil society improved for the first time since 2004 due to a multiyear trend of increased cooperation with the government in the public interest, as illustrated by the coordinated state and civic response to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.
- **Tajikistan joined Turkmenistan in receiving the report's lowest possible score.** Both countries now have an overall democracy score of 1 on a scale of 1 to 7. Azerbaijan was only a step above the worst performers, as the regime of President Ilham Aliyev continued to suppress domestic dissent while pursuing its territorial ambitions by military means, directly threatening the freedoms of people in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

- **On illiberal populism, European Union member states took diverging paths.** Although the governments of Hungary and Poland continued to challenge democratic standards in the EU, voters' repudiation of populist, illiberal leaders in Slovenia in 2022 and Czechia in 2023 served as a reminder of democracy's inherent potential for self-correction.
- **EU hopefuls made democratic progress, but still face daunting obstacles.** Ten non-EU countries were rated as Hybrid Regimes, where democratic institutions are fragile and there are substantial challenges to the protection of political rights and civil liberties. Five of them earned improvements, compared with three that suffered declines for the year. However, drawn-out EU accession processes in the Western Balkans in particular reinforced disillusionment with the union, and broader accession challenges only increased with the addition of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, and Ukraine as formal candidates for EU membership.

“Even in the most closed autocracies, citizens are striving to recover basic freedoms and demanding justice for state abuses,” said Mike Smeltzer, report author and senior research analyst for *Nations in Transit*. “Democratic governments must not forget or give up on these allies. Democracy’s supporters in the EU would also do well to support those striving for a more democratic future in the region’s hybrid regimes by reinvigorating the accession process. But, first and foremost, they must help Ukraine secure victory. A Ukrainian victory over authoritarian aggression would do more for democracy in this region than any other single policy achievement.”

Since 1995, *Nations in Transit* has evaluated the state of democracy in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia. The 25th edition of this annual study covers events from January 1 through December 31, 2022. 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, Electoral Process, Civil



Society, Independent Media, Local Democratic Governance, Judicial Framework and Independence, and Corruption.

*With thanks to Freedom House