

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2024

A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This booklet was made possible through the generous support of the US Agency for International Development, the Dutch Postcode Lottery, and the Hurford Foundation.

The research for *Nations in Transit 2024* was led by Mike Smeltzer and Alexandra Karppi. Mary Hopkins and Katie LaRoque were instrumental in the writing of this booklet. Tyler Roylance edited the report. *Nations in Transit 2024* would not be possible without the contributions of the report’s advisers, country experts, and external reviewers.

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This booklet is a summary of findings for the 2024 edition of *Nations in Transit*. The complete analysis, including detailed reports on all countries, can be found at [FreedomHouse.org](https://www.freedomhouse.org).

ON THE COVER

Polish voters join the March of a Million Hearts, a prodemocracy rally in Warsaw that drew hundreds of thousands of participants on October 1, 2023. (Photo credit: Piotr Lapinski/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

Key Findings

Democratic governance in the *Nations in Transit* region declined for the 20th consecutive year in 2023.

The continued assault on basic freedoms by Eurasian autocracies and the deterioration of democratic institutions in countries ranked as Hybrid Regimes—those with a mix of autocratic and democratic features—easily outweighed the modest gains by European democracies over the past year. Of the 29 countries covered in this report, 10 suffered declines in their Democracy Score, while just five earned improvements.

A geopolitical reordering is underway in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia.

Moscow's ongoing attempt to destroy Ukraine and the Azerbaijani regime's inhumane conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrated once again the deadly consequences of autocracy's expansion. These and other events in recent years have accelerated a geopolitical reordering in the region, with countries sorting themselves into two opposing blocs: those committed to a liberal, democratic order and those that violently reject it.

Autocracies have continued to deepen their repression while cooperating to upend international norms.

Democracy Scores declined in four of the eight countries classified as Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes, as dictatorial leaders closed off the remaining space for dissent and worked to extend their rule indefinitely. These regimes have actively supported one another in evading sanctions, crushing domestic opposition, and blunting any accountability for military aggression and other violations of international law. In effect they are creating a new regional order that better suits their interests, and democracies have yet to muster an adequate response.

Although most democracies upheld their standards at home, Poland's ability to recover from backsliding will be crucial for the future of the wider region.

Four of the five countries that registered improvements in their Democracy Score for 2023 were already classified as Semi-Consolidated or Consolidated Democracies, reinforcing the broader polarization of the region into democratic and autocratic camps. Poland's score declined due to unprecedented electoral manipulation by the ruling party, but an opposition coalition managed to secure victory—amid extremely high voter turnout—by campaigning on respect for the rule of law and individual rights. The result cleared the way for a new government to attempt to correct years of institutional damage under the former leadership.

Hybrid Regimes were caught between the democratic and autocratic blocs, with some on a clearly antidemocratic trajectory.

In this large and heterogeneous group of 11 countries, five experienced an overall decline in their Democracy Scores, and just one—Ukraine—managed to achieve an improvement. Hybrid Regimes can be divided into those on a democratic path, those that are increasingly authoritarian, and a third group that seems trapped in a pattern of partisan oscillation with no lasting structural change. International partners will need to tailor their policies accordingly to achieve resilient democratic institutions in each setting.

To counter the gains that authoritarians have made over the last 20 years, democratic governments must broaden their approach to democracy promotion.

In addition to their traditional focus on free elections, rights protection, trade pacts, and institutional reform, they must be ready to invest more substantially in military preparedness and provide Ukraine with the arms necessary to defeat Moscow's invasion of its sovereign territory. Failure to do so would only perpetuate the current negative trends and make it more costly to check authoritarian expansion in the future, both in this region and around the world.

A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy

By Mike Smeltzer and Alexandra Karppi

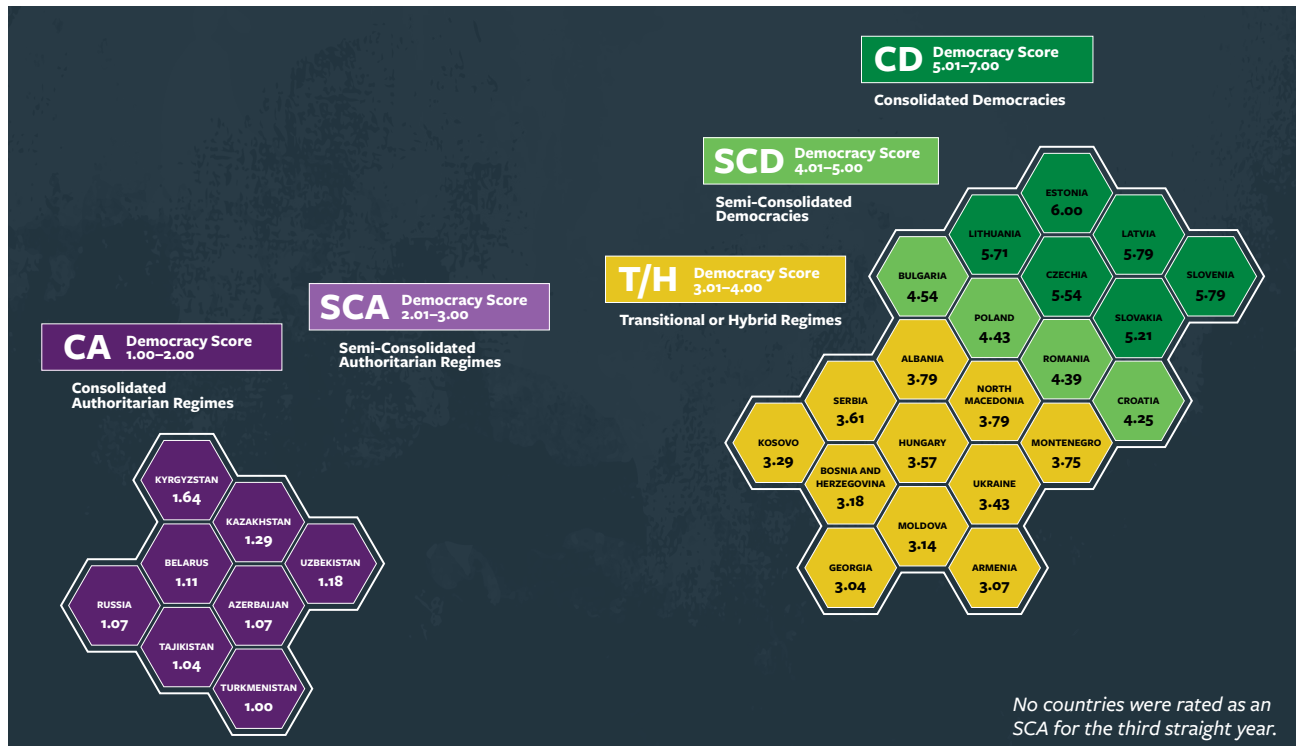
Over the past year, the 29-country region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia experienced further democratic setbacks amid escalating authoritarian attacks on basic rights and liberties. Moscow’s war to destroy Ukraine and the Azerbaijani regime’s military conquest and ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh laid bare the deadly consequences of autocracy’s expansion. These events have critically undermined a fundamental assumption by the creators of *Nations in Transit*, that all the countries in the region are progressing toward the same end point of peaceful, democratic consolidation. Instead, many are moving, or being forced to move, in the opposite direction.

The resurgence of armed conflict has effectively accelerated a geopolitical reordering that was already underway. Decades of deterioration in democratic institutions and norms have profoundly reshaped the region, widening the gulf between nations committed to the principles of liberal democracy and those where such values are overtly rejected.

The countries caught between the two orders are coming to terms with the fact that there is no third option. How these “hybrid regimes” cope with the inevitable choice—between the transatlantic community of democracies and the camp of entrenched autocrats—will help determine both their geopolitical and democratic trajectories.

CALCIFYING REGIONAL BLOCS OF AUTOCRACIES AND DEMOCRACIES

A geopolitical reordering is taking place in the *Nations in Transit* region, with countries sorting themselves into two blocs: a transatlantic, prodemocracy bloc and a bloc of autocracies that reject liberal democracy.



The region's reorganization is unfolding at a time of crisis for democratic leadership. Political changes in the United States have led some policymakers to question its reliability as Europe's longtime security guarantor and partner, putting pressure on European countries to take up more responsibility. But to do so, they will have to dramatically shift their prevailing approach to the defense and expansion of democracy, in part by placing a much stronger emphasis

on military preparedness and assistance. The post-Cold War European focus on trade pacts and institutional alignment is no longer sufficient in the face of an acute military threat. With heavily armed and aggressive autocracies on their frontiers, the region's democratic countries will need to build more robust transnational networks of solidarity, security, and action to reverse the gains that authoritarians have made over the last 20 years. ■

Two Decades of Institutional Destruction and Decay

Nations in Transit 2024 marks the 20th consecutive year of overall decline in democratic governance for the region. In this year's edition, 10 out of 29 countries suffered downgrades in their Democracy Score for the events of 2023, and just five registered improvements. The 20 years of decline have been driven by a complex combination of country-specific and region-wide causes. But much of the region's failure to consolidate democracy can be attributed to authoritarian and antidemocratic leaders who seek to enrich themselves through corruption and remain in power indefinitely. While stronger democracies and even those ranked as Hybrid Regimes may change course and recover from such leadership, authoritarian states have tended to sink ever deeper into graft and repression.

Deepening autocracy

The eight countries designated as Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes continued to lead the race to the bottom over the past year. Half of them experienced score declines for 2023. The Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine ignited a relentless and ongoing crackdown on dissent inside Russia, closing the limited space that previously existed for "systemic" opposition and grassroots resistance. In Uzbekistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's regime enacted audacious constitutional amendments that cleared the way for him to extend his rule until 2040.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which previously scored on the less repressive end of the authoritarian range, now fit the

broader Central Asian trend of authoritarian consolidation. The regimes in these two countries worked to extinguish local autonomy and civil society activity, continuing a broader reduction in opportunities for public dissent. The scores for the remaining four countries in the category—the hardened dictatorships of Belarus, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—were already at or near the bottom of the *Nations in Transit* scale.

The intensification of autocracy in this bloc of Eurasian states has played a powerful role in the reordering of the region into rival democratic and authoritarian camps. By demolishing fundamental freedoms and—most importantly—pursuing or facilitating military aggression, the Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes have also dramatically raised the stakes of that reordering for residents.

Hybrid regimes at a crossroads

The 11 countries designated as Hybrid Regimes, which have characteristics of both autocracies and democracies, are poised between the region's two geopolitical and normative blocs. This uncertainty has left their institutions in a vulnerable position, leading overwhelmingly to democratic setbacks rather than triumphs in 2023. Only one of the countries in the category, Ukraine, improved its Democracy Score, whereas five suffered declines.

The Western Balkans accounted for many of the more worrying developments. Serbia experienced a historic

decline due to President Aleksandar Vučić’s efforts to consolidate power in 2023. Back-to-back mass shootings in May prompted protests throughout the summer, to which the Serbian government responded with rigged snap elections in December. North Macedonia suffered from major setbacks to the rule of law and persistent high-level corruption during the year, as parties clashed over constitutional amendments necessitated by Bulgaria’s veto of the country’s EU accession efforts. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the recriminalization of defamation by the Republika Srpska entity in July, as part of a series of concerning legislation on the media and civil society, put undue pressure on journalists in an environment that was already rapidly deteriorating in terms of hate speech and physical safety. Montenegro, still picking up the pieces from a 2022 constitutional crisis, struggled with dysfunctional and corrupt municipal governments in the absence of national stability.

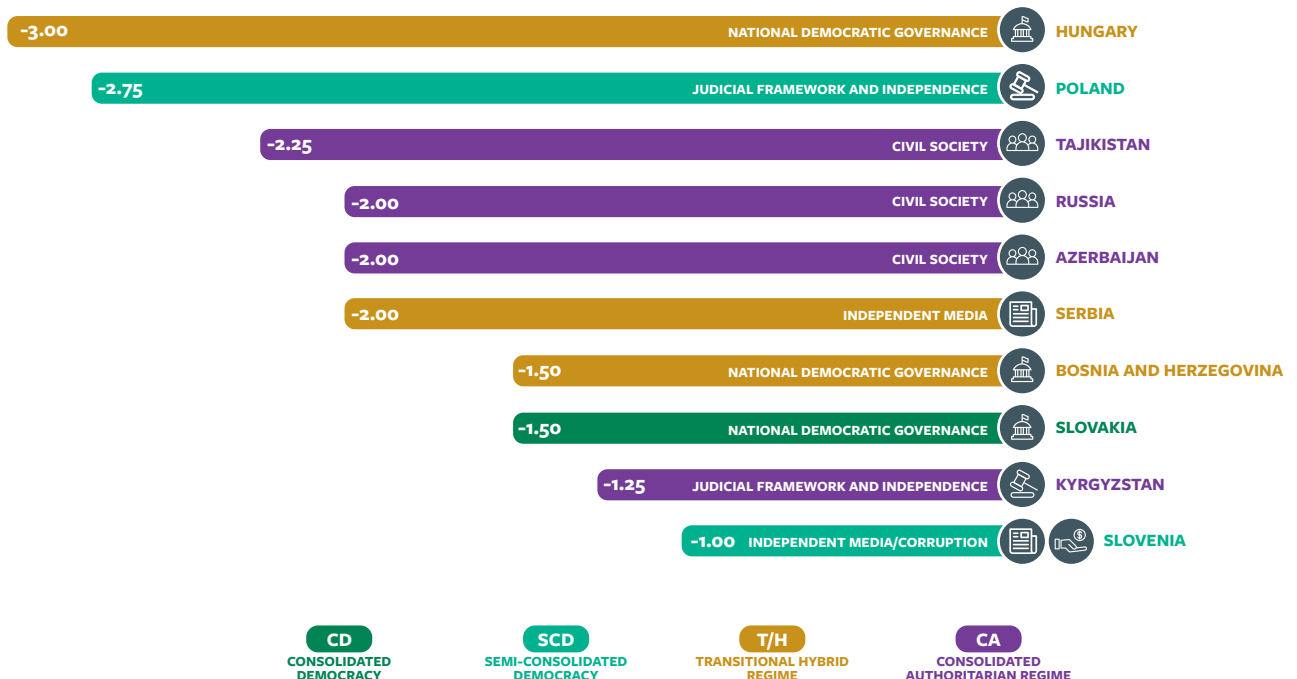
In the South Caucasus, Armenia’s democratization efforts were adversely affected by the Azerbaijani regime’s brutal offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, which prompted the more

than 120,000 ethnic Armenians living there to flee west. They have now settled mostly in Armenia itself, where the government is attempting to address their humanitarian needs while also defending its own territory, consolidating power amid domestic criticism, and responding to the demands for better governance that sparked the country’s 2018 revolution.

The only country among the Hybrid Regimes with an improved Democracy Score was Ukraine, which continued to make considerable progress in building up judicial and anticorruption institutions and actively investigating corruption, including in the military. Meanwhile, the scores for Hungary, Georgia, and Kosovo remained unchanged, despite a turbulent year for civil society and ordinary citizens in these countries. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán obstructed efforts by the European Union (EU) to hold him accountable for violating treaty commitments on fundamental values, even as he pushed through chilling restrictions on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) at home. Georgian civil society narrowly dodged a similar threat in March, when a mass mobilization of Georgian

WHAT IS DRIVING COUNTRY DECLINES

In the 10 countries whose Democracy Scores have declined the most over the last 20 years, these are the *Nations in Transit* indicators driving those overall declines.





Visitors gather with candles to honor the victims of the shooting at Charles University in Prague, Czechia in December 2023. (Photo credit: Michal Krumpfanzl/CTK Photo/Alamy Live News)

citizens and international pressure forced the government to pull back its own anti-NGO bill. In Kosovo, the long-running dispute with Serbia reentered a phase of violent escalation. Kosovo Serb protesters clashed with and injured 30 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops in May, and Serb gunmen staged an attack in September that killed four people, including a Kosovan policeman.

The geopolitical reordering of Europe and Eurasia is increasingly pulling Hybrid Regimes in different directions, toward either further institutional decline or democratic consolidation. In many of these countries, but especially in the Western Balkans, political leaders are using the greater focus on regional security as an excuse to subvert democratic institutions and sidestep democratic norms. In Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, genuinely existential security threats are putting governments under enormous pressure to reform in exceedingly difficult conditions, with the goal of obtaining the protection associated with full membership in democracy-based organizations like the EU and NATO. As the current centrifugal trends continue to intensify, each of these countries will have to choose its path carefully, and democratic powers will need to fine-tune their influence to ensure the best outcomes.

Steady progress in democratic states

Many of the region's democracies have heard the geopolitical call to shore up domestic institutions. Of the five countries that earned improvements in their Democracy Score for the events of 2023, all but Ukraine are categorized as Semi-Consolidated or Consolidated Democracies.

In Slovenia and Lithuania, medium- and long-term improvements in funding models and related legislation

have bolstered media independence. The new Slovenian government has undertaken such efforts as part of its campaign to reverse the institutional damage that accrued under the populist former prime minister, Janez Janša. In Lithuania, progress has been more measured, but it was nonetheless significant for journalists and media organizations last year. In Romania and Bulgaria, years of slow, painstaking work to improve the efficacy and independence of judicial and prosecutorial systems proved successful in 2023: Bulgaria's ruling coalition removed the long-controversial chief prosecutor through proper legal channels, and the Romanian government revised its legal framework in what the European Commission praised as "a comprehensive overhaul."

The standout case among the *Nations in Transit* democracies was Poland, where despite unprecedented electoral manipulation and brazen corruption by the ruling party, the opposition won a historic victory at the polls, paving the way for institutional repair. However, democracy in Slovakia and Czechia hung in the balance in 2023, due to the reelection of a populist prime minister in the former and ongoing economic turmoil in the latter.

The recent achievements of Europe's Consolidated Democracies are admirable, but setting an example of democratic resilience at home is not enough to protect the region as a whole in the current geopolitical moment, as autocracies become increasingly violent and repressive and Hybrid Regimes waver in the face of conflicting pressures. To deliver lasting freedom and security for their own people, these countries must look outward and strengthen solidarity with one another and with neighbors on the front lines of the struggle against an autocratic regional order. ■

Rebuilding Democracy in Poland

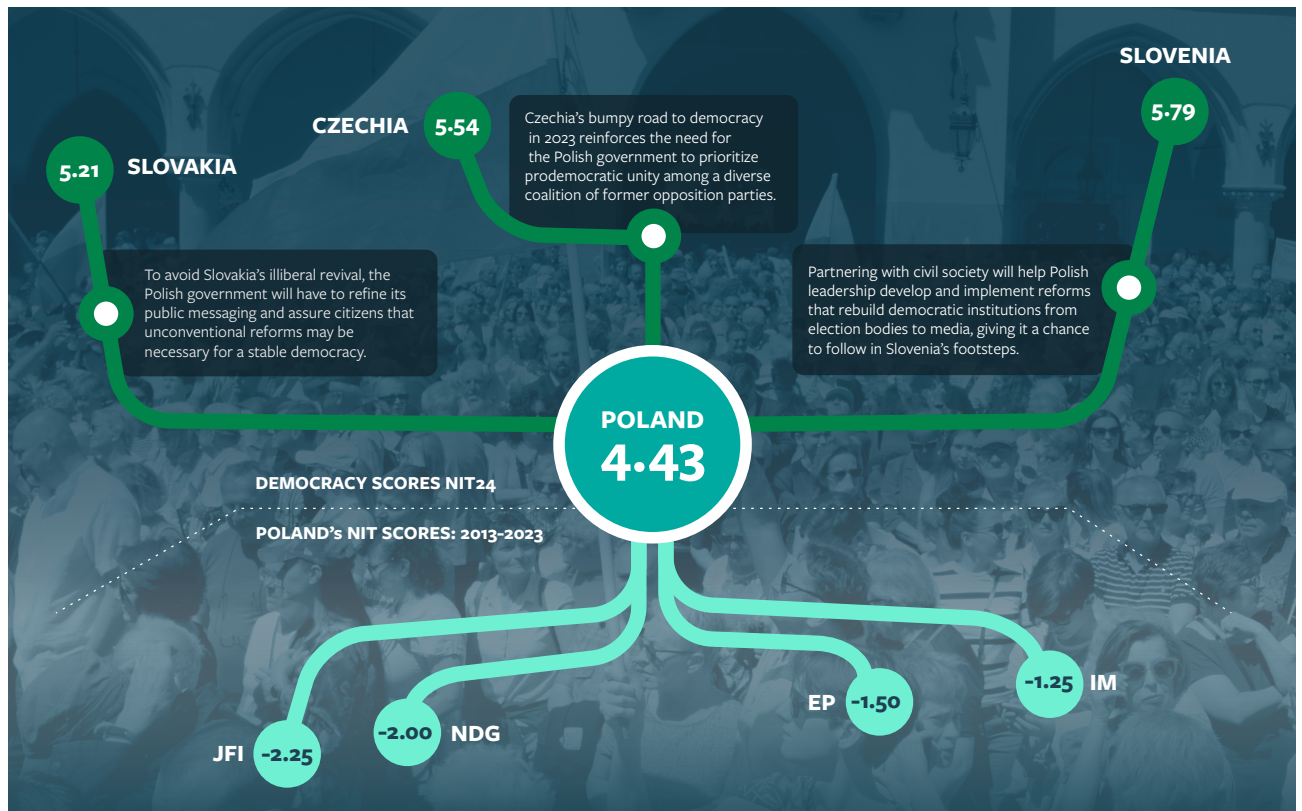
If European democracies are to maintain their positive momentum amid the wider region’s geopolitical reordering, the success of Poland’s democracy will be crucial. Such a large and influential country could provide important leadership, and its experience could set new, exemplary standards for the reversal of democratic backsliding elsewhere.

In the nearly 30-year history of the *Nations in Transit* report, Poland has undergone the second-largest decline, with its Democracy Score falling by 1.39 points (on a scale of 1 to 7) between 2013 and 2023, predominantly under the rule of the illiberal populist Law and Justice (PiS) party. In the October

2023 parliamentary elections, the party deployed extensive state resources and manipulative tactics to tip the playing field in its favor. For example, government-controlled media provided heavily biased coverage throughout the campaign, and state funds were strategically distributed to citizens to boost turnout by PiS supporters. The government also introduced a referendum on four polarizing questions, to be held simultaneously with the parliamentary elections, which allowed PiS and its allies to sidestep campaign finance regulations and draw voters’ attention to certain divisive issues. As a result, Poland’s score on the Electoral Process indicator—once among the strongest in the region—declined sharply in this year’s assessment.

UNDOING DAMAGED DEMOCRACY: THREE LESSONS FOR POLAND

Polish democracy has suffered significant losses, with its National Democratic Governance (NDG), Electoral Process (EP), Independent Media (IM), and Judicial Framework and Independence (JFI) indicators declining sharply in the last 10 years of this report.



Despite the distorted electoral environment, a coalition of opposition forces running on a pledge to uphold the rule of law and human rights defeated PiS and its Euroskeptic and illiberal platform. The Polish elections were a genuine democratic breakthrough, as large numbers of citizens turned out to exercise their most fundamental political right and chart their country's future course.

The new government now faces a daunting task without legal precedent. Within months of taking power in 2015, the PiS-dominated government and President Andrzej Duda began illegally stacking the country's top judicial bodies with like-minded judges and subordinating the institutions to the political whims of the ruling party. PiS's subversion of the judicial system and fracturing of the constitutional order has effectively left the country with two competing legal regimes. Beyond the judiciary, PiS abandoned regular and meaningful consultation with civil society and other experts, instead engaging in opaque and unilateral policymaking. The party also launched direct attacks on the independence of public-sector institutions and publicly owned media. When Polish society pushed back, PiS leaders adopted new tactics, embracing discriminatory rhetoric and restrictions on reproductive rights and LGBT+ people in an effort to divide their opponents and rally their supporters.

Lessons for democratic recovery

In returning to liberal democracy, Poland cannot simply use PiS's tactics in reverse. It must employ democratic means to achieve durably democratic ends. Fortunately, the new government has access to an abundance of examples from its neighborhood, where multiple states have already tried—with varying success—to overcome the damage done to institutions by illiberal leaders. The experiences of Slovenia, Czechia, and Slovakia demonstrate the difficulties, pitfalls, and tradeoffs that Poland will face, but they also bear important lessons on how to recover from years of populist misrule.

Slovenia

The new Slovenian government headed by Prime Minister Robert Golob administered several elections and referendums—without irregularities—only months after taking office in 2022, giving it the early legitimacy to pursue broader reforms. It then turned to restoring the editorial independence of the public broadcaster and rebuilding trust in its reporting in 2023.

However, the conditions that made this fast-paced recovery possible in Slovenia do not exist in Poland. For instance, former prime minister Janez Janša's populist government never succeeded in subverting Slovenia's judicial system, greatly simplifying the new leadership's task. The Slovenian



Slovenian president Nataša Pirc Musar visits damaged areas near Kamnik, Slovenia after major flooding devastated the country. (Photo credit: Luka Dakskobler/SOPA Images/Sipa USA)

approach also has its costs. Golob faced a series of scandals in 2023 over his unilateral style of management, as expressed in rapid and nontransparent ministerial changes.

For Poland's government, the lesson from Slovenia is that an emphasis on speed and top-down policymaking may raise the risk of error and political backlash. Working methodically, in partnership with civil society watchdog organizations, can help leaders develop and implement reforms in a more sure-footed manner. This approach is now gaining ground in Slovenia, and it could also prove critical for Poland.

Czechia

Czech voters took the first steps toward rebuilding their democracy by ousting billionaire populist prime minister Andrej Babiš in the 2021 parliamentary elections and choosing an experienced NATO general, Petr Pavel, as president in 2023. Pavel, accepting the constraints of the Czech constitution, has eschewed former president Miloš Zeman's practice of stretching his powers to the limit, which included an attempt to make a last-minute, preemptive appointment to the Constitutional Court before leaving office. In seeking to reestablish the democratic norms of the presidency, Pavel has engaged in a measured, consultative judicial appointment process and asked for an audit of the former presidential office's operations by the independent Supreme Audit Office.

But the coalition government headed by Prime Minister Petr Fiala has struggled to implement a reform program with anything like the speed seen in Slovenia. Simultaneous and ambitious initiatives to protect the media market against owner influence, improve the efficacy and transparency of the Constitutional Court, and hold Babiš to account for alleged fraud have stalled, and the government has been unable to reinvigorate the ailing Czech economy, harming its public support. With five heterogeneous parties making up the ruling majority, decision-making has proven sluggish and contentious, causing the government to appear divided and even unprincipled at times, according to opinion polls.

The Czech case offers another lesson to Poland, reinforcing the need for continued unity among a diverse coalition of former opposition parties. Programmatic and ideological differences may have to be subordinated to fundamental democratic reforms. Even without PiS's stated plans to play an obstructionist role, a series of pressing geopolitical and economic challenges—such as the concerns voiced by Polish farmers in ongoing protests—could split Poland's government and elevate PiS or other populist parties, exposing democratic institutions to further damage.

Slovakia

Polish democrats would do well to avoid the mistakes of Slovakia's previous governing coalitions, which did not sustain their democratic unity. Populist politician Robert Fico capitalized on these divisions in 2023 to return to the prime minister's office, from which he had overseen a period of democratic decay between 2012 and 2018.

The government that fell in the 2023 elections was the last in a series of short-lived coalitions, whose failures of politics and policy provided fertile ground for the divisive brand of politics practiced by Fico and his allies. Like other populist groups, Fico's Smer party campaigned on a platform of stability and order, while also appealing to Slovaks' relative openness toward Russia. Now back in the premiership, Fico has turned to PiS's playbook, attempting to dismantle the justice system and insulate himself and his associates from legal accountability. In December, the Fico-led parliament introduced a law to close the special prosecutor's office tasked with punishing high-level corruption. In February 2024, the parliament passed a controversial reform of criminal laws, effectively removing the criminal liabilities of Smer officials; a review by the Constitutional Court was pending at the time of writing.

To prevent a similar populist restoration in the next elections, the Polish government will have to refine its public messaging, moving beyond its initially successful anti-PiS campaign to strengthen citizens' confidence in the slow and steady route to a more secure and stable democracy. The most immediate test will come in 2025, when Poland is due to hold a presidential election.

Everything, everywhere, all at once

Given the magnitude of the erosion in Poland's democratic institutions over the last decade, the road to recovery will not be straightforward. And as the regional examples show, there is no perfect model to emulate, nor clear sequential steps for disentangling a knot of structural distortions. Political will and a strong mandate to govern are important starting points, but they are not enough on their own to achieve a democratic transformation.

The new government headed by Prime Minister Donald Tusk has already registered some successes, such as the reorganization of the politicized public broadcaster, albeit through controversial means. And the European Commission has announced its decision to unfreeze €137 billion in EU funds in response to the government's initial moves to strengthen judicial independence. Nevertheless, the immense



Prime minister of Slovakia Robert Fico visits Czechia on his first official trip abroad, where he meets with his Czech counterpart, Petr Fiala. (Photo credit: SOPA Images Limited/Alamy Live News)

challenge of restoring de facto judicial independence, particularly while a pro-PiS president remains in office, should give Poland's cheerleaders pause.

Years of democratic deterioration across a wide range of other state institutions also await correction, and external pressures like the war in Ukraine will only complicate matters. The regional precedents suggest that the Polish government—and governments in other countries looking to

revitalize democracy—will need to lean on collaboration with civil society, ensure coalitional unity, and develop innovative, unconventional reforms, though much will depend on the patience of citizens. Fortunately, in Poland, a decisive electoral victory has given the new government a popular mandate to engage in difficult work, and its leaders appear ready to try. Policymakers facing similar problems elsewhere will certainly be watching and learning. ■

The Diversity of Hybrid Regimes

Two decades of democratic decline in the *Nations in Transit* region have produced a large number of Hybrid Regimes. Yet it would be a mistake to think of this category of 11 countries as a homogeneous group, for both analytical and policymaking reasons. The middle band of the report’s rankings actually contains considerable diversity, and the differences among these systems will play an important role in determining which regional order—democratic or autocratic—their citizens and leaders seek to join.

A Hybrid Regime in *Nations in Transit* is typically an electoral democracy where democratic institutions are fragile, and where substantial challenges to the protection of rights and liberties exist. Beyond this report, the term is often used as a broad descriptor for a system of governance that mixes features of democracy and authoritarianism. To better

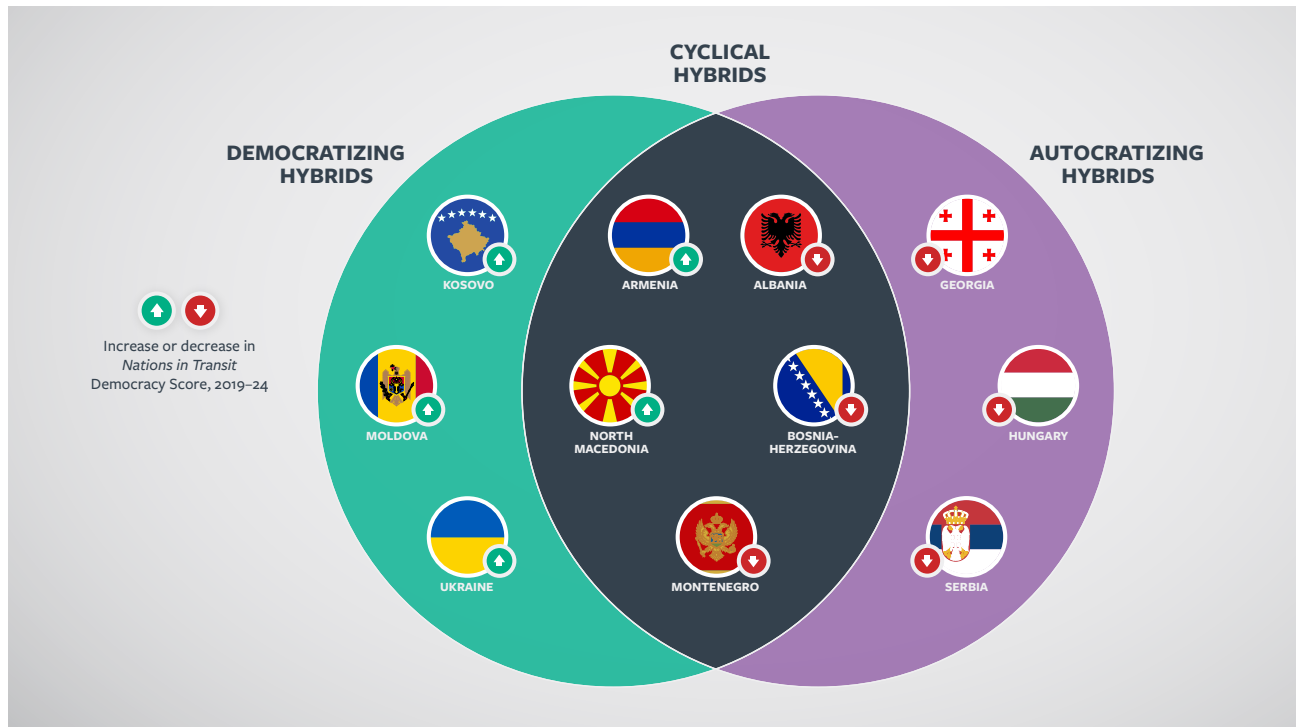
define such a loose category, scholars have introduced additional regime labels, such as “electoral autocracy” or “pseudodemocracy.”

But the recent track record of Hybrid Regimes in *Nations in Transit*, especially over the last 5 to 10 years, suggests that the group’s countries should be organized on the basis of trajectory, using three descriptive subcategories: autocratizing hybrids, democratizing hybrids, and cyclical hybrids.

Just as the region as a whole is sorting itself into distinct blocs, the Hybrid Regimes are diverging along different paths. Having recognized this fact, democratic leaders and other democracy advocates should adapt their toolkit accordingly and develop a more tailored set of policies to achieve their goals.

BREAKING DOWN HYBRIDITY

Transitional Hybrid Regimes make up the largest and most institutionally diverse category of countries in *Nations in Transit*. Over the last five years, these 11 countries are also reordering in three directions—towards democracy, towards autocracy, and cycling between the two.





Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić reacts during a press conference at the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) headquarters in Belgrade, Serbia on election night, December 17, 2023. (Photo credit: Predrag Milosavljevic/Xinhua/Alamy Live News)

Autocratizing hybrids

Autocratizing hybrids like Hungary, Serbia, and to a lesser extent Georgia are on their way to becoming Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes based on the report methodology. Key institutions, from the media to the courts, have gone beyond the level of politicization expected under classical definitions of hybrid regimes and are now effectively captured by ruling parties and abused for partisan or personal gain.

In 2002, democracy scholar Thomas Carothers observed that certain hybrid regimes, like those in this group, suffer from “dominant-power politics,” in which the opposition or civil society has some space to operate, but the ruling political faction is able to prevent any change in leadership. The description applies perfectly to present-day Serbia, where President Vučić’s regime has kept a tight grip on power by rigging electoral processes, dominating both public and private media, brutally smearing opposition members and activists, and cowering municipal governments.

The ability of the opposition or civil society to influence the government’s policies is more limited in hybrids with dominant-power politics. These regimes may appear on the surface to simply ignore dissent, but in practice they are likely to repress critics with more covert tactics, such as the smearing, intimidation, and surveillance that Serbian civil society, independent media, and the opposition movement *Srbija protiv nasilja* (Serbia against Violence) faced during

2023. In other cases, restrictive laws like Hungary’s new Sovereignty Protection Act—which will establish a state institution with the power to surveil, investigate, and report on NGOs’ election-related activities—are used to openly bully and constrain civil society groups. When domestic and international resistance is strong enough, this subcategory of hybrid regimes can be forced to make concessions on particular issues, as when Georgia’s government withdrew a Russian-style “foreign agents” law following an international outcry and mass protests in March 2023. What separates autocratizing hybrids from Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes is a minimal but real margin of respect for freedom of assembly, and the fact that the state rarely uses physical violence to crush dissent.

Scholars like Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics have noted that this class of hybrid regime is also characterized by forms of corrupt “patronalism,” building on a framework that Henry Hale had developed to describe authoritarian governance in Eurasia. Ruling elites in Magyar and Madlovics’s “patronal autocracies” speak the language of democracy while ignoring the rules that separate public institutions from private interest. Hungary is a prime case. Since 2010, Prime Minister Orbán has established a durable power structure in the country, taking control of both political institutions and the economy. Loyal business magnates have made Orbán’s rule tenable by buying up media outlets and buttressing his party’s control over local governments.

As autocratizing hybrids approach fully authoritarian styles of governance, the international community should not be afraid to treat them more like authoritarian regimes. Similar sanctions may need to be contemplated, and not only for geopolitical reasons. Autocratizing hybrids remain responsive to international pressure, as the EU recently demonstrated with respect to Orbán’s resistance to aid for Ukraine.

Democratizing hybrids

The democratizing hybrids in *Nations in Transit* have shown a commitment to reform and the strengthening of democratic institutions. This political will is often the result of an external, catalyzing event, like aggression from an authoritarian power, that upends patronal networks and rattles stubborn political institutions.

Ukraine’s drive to build a resilient democracy while confronting an existential threat from Moscow is the most prominent case. The Revolution of Dignity in 2014, and the Russian invasion that followed, prompted a dramatic transformation in governance as old systems of corruption were exposed and rooted out by new cadres of reformers. Moscow’s full-scale invasion in 2022, rather than halting the process, has intensified it in certain areas. In 2023, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s government took steps to improve the effectiveness of Ukrainian courts and anticorruption bodies, and showed promise in investigating corruption in the judiciary and military.

Moldova is democratizing in the face of similar obstacles. It too is contending with a legacy of corrupt oligarchs, and Russian troops have long occupied a portion of its territory. Some in its oligarch class, including the notorious, US-sanctioned Ilan Șor, are backed by illicit financing from the Kremlin and pose a real threat to the country’s stability, as demonstrated by allegations of an attempted coup in 2023. However, in its efforts to address the problem, the ruling coalition resorted to legislation that barred Șor-affiliated candidates from local elections just days before the vote. Like Ukraine, Moldova must resist the temptation to violate democratic norms in pursuit of long-term democratic orientation if it is to exit the “gray zone” of hybrid governance.

The government that took office in Kosovo in 2021 has tried to steer the country away from its legacy of parliamentary conflict and patronalism, promoting a reform agenda based on the rule of law. Prime Minister Albin Kurti has initiated a new vetting process for judges, not unlike those in Ukraine and Moldova. But Serbia’s refusal to recognize Kosovo’s independence remains a major barrier to democratization. Despite agreements reached between the two governments at the beginning of 2023, the year brought instability and an escalation of violence fueled in part by Belgrade’s informal ties with organized crime groups. Kosovo’s international partners reacted sternly to Kurti’s hard-line approach to negotiations with Belgrade and his lack of consultation with the Kosovo Serb community, complicating the government’s efforts to break free of this long-standing challenge.



Moldovans march in downtown Chișinău, Moldova to celebrate Europe Day and show their support for joining the EU. (Photo credit: Sebastian Murariu/Alamy Photo)

Democratizing hybrids can remain “stuck” in hybridity due to undemocratic institutional legacies as well as external factors. Ongoing conflict and security threats make it difficult for leaders to find the best path to a robust and representative democracy. However, in some cases the threats also clarify the stakes of democratization and help to end harmful patterns of corruption or political division.

For this set of countries, the international community should do everything it can to resolve territorial conflicts and other such impediments to democratic consolidation. Efforts to insulate these states from authoritarian interference, especially in its more covert forms, are sorely needed. Eventual membership in the EU and NATO is critical. At the same time, supporting local democracy watchdogs in these settings is especially important, as even the most well-meaning reformists in government will require regular oversight to help prevent error and backsliding.

Cyclical hybrids

Among some Hybrid Regimes, regular changes in the ruling elite belie a lack of meaningful structural change over time. As they cycle in and out of power, rival parties dominated by the personalities or personal pursuits of their leaders repeatedly politicize and capture weak institutions. Consequently these regimes may ricochet between democratic and autocratic “breakthroughs” without ever seeming to achieve a full consolidation in either direction.

The 2020 electoral defeat of Montenegrin strongman Milo Đukanović’s Democratic Party of Socialists ended nearly 30 years of single-party rule in the country, potentially opening a new chapter for democracy. The transition continued in 2023, when Đukanović himself lost the presidential election. However, the political landscape remains fractured between the pre-2020 old guard and a younger class of less experienced officials. The rift has produced ineffective governance, interinstitutional conflict, and a yearlong constitutional crisis—all of which has undermined rule-of-law reforms and allowed organized crime to proliferate. Recent infighting within the new leadership, as evidenced by the resignation of President Jakov Milatović from the ruling party in February 2024, could further impede the reform process.

In North Macedonia, the hopes that rose in 2017 after the ouster of antidemocratic prime minister Nikola Gruevski have yet to be realized. Unlike Ukraine or Moldova, North

Macedonia has not taken major steps to eliminate corrupt patronage networks, and power has continued to oscillate between coalitions of the same handful of parties, as it has for decades. Gruevski’s nationalist party has obstructed the work of the parliament while in opposition and was favored to win the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections. Neither Gruevski nor his closest associates have been brought to justice for their abuses in office before 2017. Worse still, controversial changes to the criminal code in 2023 reduced the penalties for such abuses, causing landmark cases to be thrown out while the public was already reeling from fatal corruption scandals in the health sector. The year also featured a polarizing parliamentary debate over constitutional amendments that were needed to lift Bulgaria’s veto on the country’s bid for EU accession.

The defining trait of cyclical hybrids is a combination of real political pluralism and superficial institutional change. They tend to lag on reforms aimed at establishing strong barriers between public service and private gain. It is therefore essential to promote anticorruption mechanisms and judicial overhauls in these countries, and the EU accession process has an important role to play in this regard. If citizens and new governments are provided with the tools and incentives to thoroughly root out antidemocratic legacies after “breakthrough elections,” cyclical hybrids can finally escape from their partisan treadmills and make real progress toward democratic consolidation.

Targeted approaches for the gray zone

The differences within *Nations in Transit*’s Hybrid Regimes category have major implications for each country’s potential success in exiting the “gray zone” of hybridity and achieving a consolidated liberal democracy. International actors hoping to facilitate such exits should develop targeted policy approaches that take account of these differences.

In short, democracy supporters should not focus on the relative rankings of this report’s Hybrid Regimes, or their Democracy Score in a given year. Instead they should be attentive to each country’s direction of democratic travel over the past 5 or 10 years, which provides important perspective on present conditions. By harnessing this information, democratic partners can help develop a course of action that will accelerate reform, reverse declines in governance, or liberate nations from their hybrid status. ■

The New Autocratic Order in Eurasia

Recent events on the eastern side of the *Nations in Transit* region reinforced the hard truth that a large bloc of Eurasian states have not only resisted the great wave of democratization that arrived at the end of the Cold War, but actually intensified their repression and worked to thwart democratization efforts elsewhere. The death of opposition leader Aleksey Navalny in a Russian penal colony in February 2024 illustrated the unyielding punishment of dissent that pervades Eurasia's Consolidated Autocracies. Even before Navalny's death, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine made clear the extremes to which authoritarian regimes will go to realize their revanchist and dictatorial visions for the region and the world.

Throughout the Eurasian part of the survey region, authoritarian leaders have destroyed their peoples' democratic aspirations, shored up the autocracies of like-minded neighbors, and unleashed violence and instability beyond their borders—all with the goal of creating a domestic and international order that is favorable to their indefinite rule.

Nevertheless, the regime in Russia plays a unique role in the region's reordering process. Its war to destroy and annex

Ukraine is a direct challenge to the norms of sovereignty and self-determination that have served as the bedrock of international relations since the end of World War II.

While the democracies of Central and Eastern Europe have striven to maintain their freedom in the face of pressure from Moscow, the result has been a deepening geopolitical and normative chasm that separates them from the autocracies of Eurasia, effectively dividing the region into hostile camps. In addition to raising the risk of further military conflict, this bifurcation reinforces autocratic leaders' dependence on one another for their own regime security.

Expanding authoritarian aggression

The Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was by no means the main cause of the Azerbaijani regime's final assault on Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev had long been explicit about his intent to erase the ethnic Armenian enclave's de facto independence, having already seized some territory in a 2020 war that ended with a Russian-brokered cease-fire. Still, the Russian attack on Ukraine opened the door to the conquest,



Russians visit the grave of opposition leader Aleksey Navalny at the Borisovo cemetery in Moscow the day after Navalny's funeral. (Photo credit: Nikolay Vinokurov/Alamy Live News)



Refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh receive meals and other relief supplies in Masis, Armenia.

(Photo credit: Imago/Alamy Live News)

as the Kremlin's attention and resources were diverted from peacekeeping duties in the Caucasus, and the democratic world was similarly absorbed with its efforts to support Kyiv.

Baku set the stage for its September offensive with a months-long blockade that deprived Nagorno-Karabakh's people of essential goods. When the military assault finally came, local defense forces quickly agreed to lay down arms, and the local government was abruptly dissolved. Russia's peacekeepers made no effort to intervene.

The sudden collapse of the territory's government and defenses prompted the entire population of 120,000 ethnic Armenians to flee for their lives. Azerbaijani troops opened a route for their exit, which made it easier for Baku to take complete control of the land and facilitated what amounted to ethnic cleansing. Many of the refugees had already been displaced multiple times in the last four years. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's military continued to threaten the existence of the Republic of Armenia, having occupied slices of that country's territory after multiple clashes in recent years.

On the domestic front, President Aliyev moved quickly to capitalize on his triumph in Nagorno-Karabakh by further consolidating power and bolstering his legitimacy. In December, he called for a snap presidential election in February 2024, moving up the election date by a full year. At the same time, his regime unleashed yet another crackdown on the country's already beleaguered independent media

and political opposition, claiming that it was breaking up a network of US spies.

Aliyev's victories—political and military—may have simply whetted his appetite. His inauguration speech included renewed demands for additional Armenian territory. Absent any credible deterrents imposed by the United States or the EU, there is an obvious potential for more authoritarian aggression in the Caucasus. Moscow has effectively abdicated as the area's security guarantor, leaving Armenia in a race against the clock to secure new alliances in the democratic world.

Shrugging off democratic norms

The Russian and Azerbaijani wars of aggression are the two most glaring examples of the disdain that today's autocrats hold for fundamental human rights and pluralist societies. These regimes cynically demand respect for their own states and sovereignty even as they violently reject their neighbors' domestic political autonomy, unique histories, and right to exist. Democracies have been inconsistent and often reluctant in defending international norms against such behavior, allowing autocracies to circumvent or disregard any efforts to hold them accountable.

For years, civic activists and human rights advocates have called on democracies to address this impunity by closing financial-crime loopholes and halting international

investments that the kleptocratic authoritarians in the region so often exploit. In response to the invasion of Ukraine, many if not all democracies implemented sanctions to exclude Moscow from their financial and commercial networks in a bid to deplete its resources and turn the Russian public against the war.

While the sanctions have hampered and reshaped Russia’s economy in a variety of ways, they have proven inadequate in constraining Putin. Through prior preparation and subsequent adaptation, the Kremlin has been able to minimize short-term damage, use enormous gaps in the sanctions to import military supplies, and find eager customers for its crucial energy exports.

Democratic policymakers have also deprioritized or ignored glaring contradictions and liabilities in their attempts to end Europe’s dependence on Russian gas supplies, turning to other authoritarian exporters—including Azerbaijan—to fill the gap. In his inauguration speech, Aliyev indicated that he would fully exploit this relationship, pledging to step up military spending and boasting that his regime would “have zero chance of being affected by foreign influence.”

To ensure freedom, security, and prosperity, the world’s democracies must act as effective stewards of an international order based on democratic principles, responding swiftly, consistently, and in unison when the rules are violated. As things stand, regimes like those in Moscow and Baku appear certain that they can pursue their authoritarian projects without serious consequence, accelerating the development of a distinct and defiant autocratic order in the Eurasian subregion.

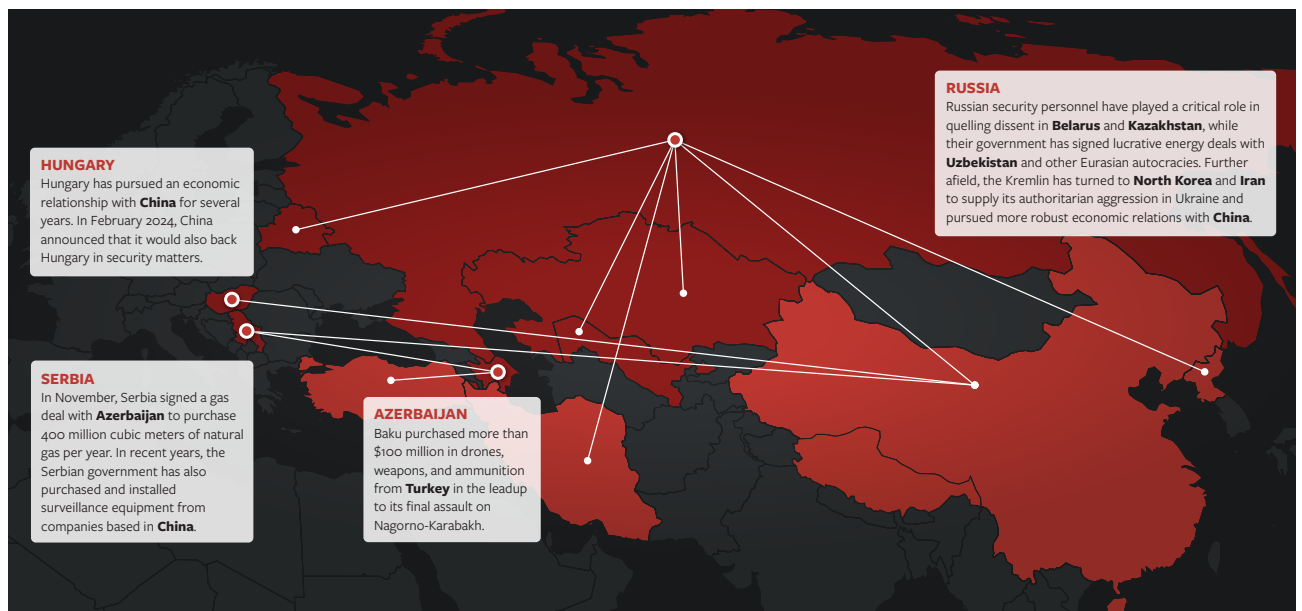
Autocratic cooperation

As democratic states struggle to maintain their solidarity and act decisively to defend their interests and values, autocrats around the world have increasingly cooperated with one another to advance shared goals. These include quashing domestic opposition and creating a global system that allows them to enrich themselves and stay in power.

The phenomenon of authoritarian cooperation is especially prominent in the *Nations in Transit* region. “Peacekeepers” from the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization played a role in quelling unrest in Kazakhstan in January 2022. Amid concerns about its domestic gas reserves, the

AUTOCRACY FLOURISHES WITH THE HELP OF LIKE-MINDED ALLIES

Through security agreements, energy deals, joint investment, and other strategies, today’s autocrats cooperate with like-minded leaders inside and outside the *Nations in Transit* region to quash opposition, cement their rule, and create a global system hospitable to their ilk.



government of Uzbekistan has made plans to invest \$500 million in its capacity to import Russian natural gas, a move that may benefit the economic and political stability of both authoritarian regimes.

When Alyaksandr Lukashenka faced civil unrest surrounding the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, Vladimir Putin dispatched Russian security and state media personnel to help him maintain control. The assistance bore fruit for Moscow in February 2022, when the Belarusian regime allowed Russian forces to use its territory as a staging ground for the invasion of Ukraine. Since then, the two dictators have helped each other weather international sanctions and meet wartime needs, though Lukashenka's growing dependence on Putin—in both foreign and domestic affairs—carries the risk that Belarus will be fully reduced to a vassal state.

Autocrats in the *Nations in Transit* region have also found partners farther afield. The Kremlin has turned to the vicious regimes in North Korea and Iran to replenish its supplies of artillery shells and drones for use in Ukraine. Beijing has been willing to buy cheap Russian oil and gas that previously went to Europe, cementing its status as Moscow's main economic benefactor. And in the months before the 2020 Azerbaijani assault on Nagorno-Karabakh, Baku purchased more than \$100 million in drones, weapons, and ammunition from its authoritarian ally Turkey, which also supported the war with mercenaries recruited from Turkish-backed rebel groups in Syria.

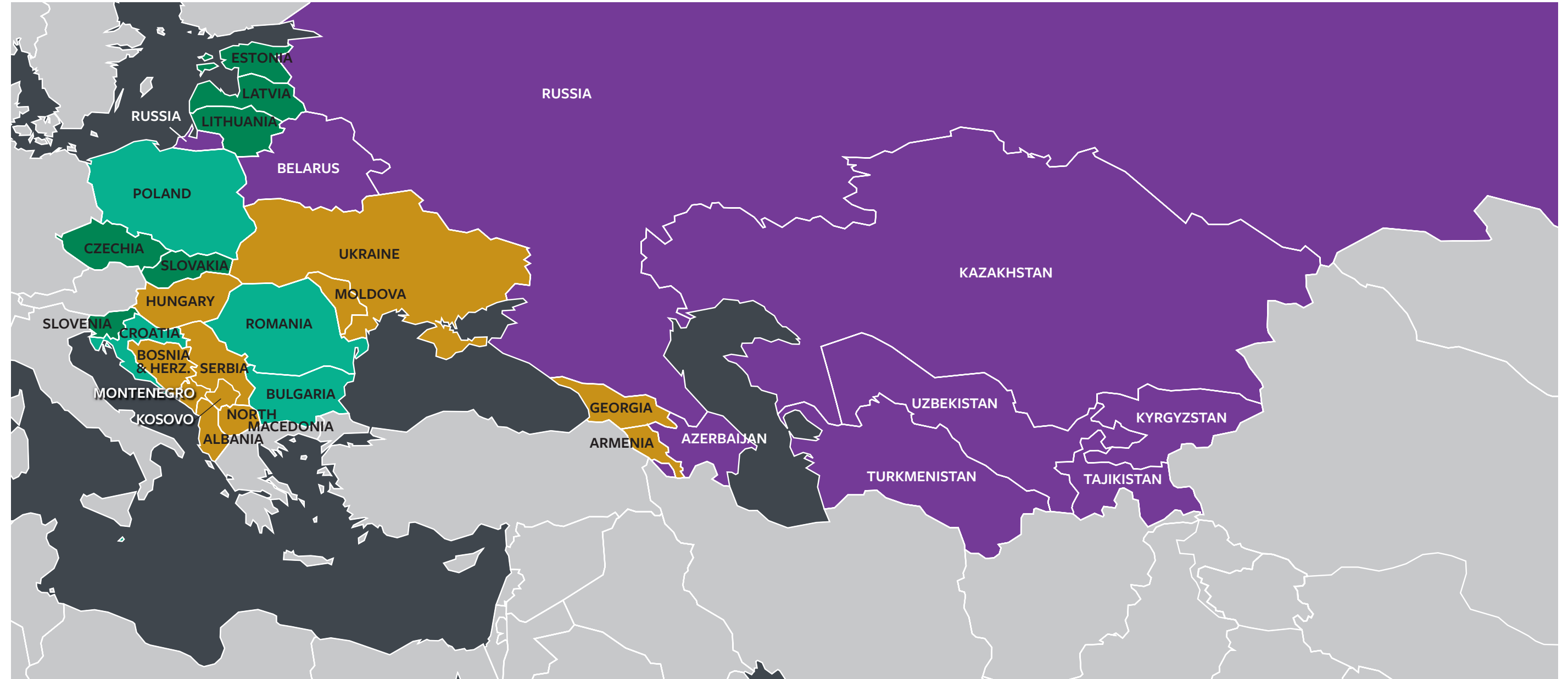
An enduring challenge

Vladimir Putin, Ilham Aliyev, and other autocrats in this region have thrived over the past two decades, growing bolder in their efforts to establish a new and explicitly antidemocratic order that better suits their needs. The failure of the world's democracies to fully recognize and effectively respond to these countries' radical departure from the democratic path has had enormous consequences for global security. Moscow and Baku have demonstrated—repeatedly and on a growing scale—that wars of conquest are not problems of the past, but menaces of the present and very likely the future.

While looming succession challenges still threaten the political stability of the region's autocratic regimes, several of them have already navigated precarious transitions from one dictator to another, disproving any assumption that such moments of crisis will lead to a democratic opening. Indeed, opaque successions in consolidated, kleptocratic systems are more liable to result in violence and a new wave of repression, particularly when the strongest foreign influences come from fellow autocracies.

Democracies—at least in this region—are beginning to wake up to the long-term challenge that autocracies pose in the world. But the more time they take to muster a unified and firm response, the more difficult the task will become. ■

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2024



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
Total	29

The map reflects the findings of Freedom House's *Nations in Transit 2024* survey, which assessed the status of democratic development in 29 countries from Central Europe to Central Asia during 2023. 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)**.

The Urgent Need for Strong Democratic Leadership

History-making elections will take place this year in the United States and Europe. Some fear that a hard-right turn in the European Parliament, spurred by the strength of illiberal and Kremlin-sympathizing parties in the western half of the union, could jeopardize the considerable progress the EU has made in realizing its democratizing power and influence. At the same time, European policymakers are preparing for the possibility that the next US administration could end American support for Ukraine, withdraw security guarantees from its NATO allies, and abandon Washington's traditional commitment to democratic principles more broadly.

Even before these risks emerged, the EU's democratic foundations were being undermined by internal challenges, not least from Hungary's autocratizing government. The European Commission's overly accommodating approach to Orbán's antidemocratic actions has enabled him to extort financial and other concessions from the union without easing his grip on power or distancing himself from the Kremlin. While the recent change in government in Poland eliminated one partner that was willing to join Orbán in blocking the enforcement of EU rules, the return of illiberal leadership in Slovakia may lead to further obstruction.

Democratic leaders and policymakers in the region also face urgent external threats, which have forced them to confront their long-term neglect of an essential tool for protecting democracy and human rights: investment in military defense and procurement. European democracies were caught woefully unprepared by Moscow's military aggression, and they have been far too slow in providing Ukraine with the material assistance it needs to succeed. Governments with the political will to respond decisively often lack the means, while those with the means frequently appear to lack the will.

Indecision and inaction—with regard to Ukraine's defense, broader European democracy and security, and aid for the many victims of repressive regimes—will only raise the costs of countering authoritarianism and defending democracy in the future.

Democratic leaders must do the difficult work of identifying and then avoiding the errors, blind spots, and expedients that have allowed authoritarian forces to heap up gains in the region for the past 20 years. Strong leadership will also require strong support from citizens who understand that their freedom is imperiled by these harmful trends. Only by reinvigorating their commitment to democratic principles and deepening their solidarity with frontline allies can the transatlantic community of democracies ensure that peace and liberty prevail, both at home and around the world. ■



A wall in the streets of Tbilisi, Georgia showcases pro-Ukrainian, pro-EU, and pro-NATO graffiti. (Photo credit: avgnews/Alamy Photo)

Policy Recommendations

Authoritarian aggression directly threatens the freedom, security, and prosperity of Europe. The Russian regime's war against Ukraine is nothing less than a war against democracy, and the death and destruction it causes with each passing day are a testament to the consequences of autocracy's expansion over the past two decades. Any Russian victory in Ukraine—including a stalemate that effectively cedes Ukrainian territory to the aggressor—would encourage further attacks, raise the risk of a direct conflict with NATO, and increase the difficulty of reversing the wider region's 20-year decline in democratic governance.

The foremost policy imperative this year, like last year, is to ensure that Moscow's invasion of Ukraine is soundly defeated. The future of European democracy and security is now inextricably linked to the fate of Ukraine. EU and NATO member states must not only invest far more—and more efficiently—in their collective defense, but also provide Ukraine with the assistance it needs to roll back Russian advances and build a durable democracy of its own.

To accomplish this, democratic governments—particularly in the United States and Europe—should take the following steps:

- Sustain and increase much-needed military, humanitarian, and budgetary aid to Ukraine, enabling the government to succeed on the battlefield, care for its people, and maintain crucial state functions until victory is achieved.
- Seize and repurpose frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine's reconstruction.
- Fully enforce sanctions against Russian entities and individuals, close legal loopholes that weaken their effect, and extend sanctions to those outside Russia who enable circumvention.
- Ensure full accountability for the crimes committed in the course of the Russian war against Ukraine, in part by creating a special tribunal to address the crime of aggression.
- Reach consensus on security guarantees in the region and ultimately extend an offer of NATO membership to Ukraine.
- Support Ukraine's ongoing democratic reforms as the country pursues accession negotiations with the EU.

More recommendations on Ukraine are available at freedomhouse.org.



Ukrainian displaced from Soledar wait in the dormitory of an emergency shelter in Dnipro. (Photo credit: imageBROKER/Florian Bachmeier/Alamy)

While Moscow's military aggression poses an urgent threat to European democracy, years of deterioration in democratic governance across the *Nations in Transit* region have created broader deficits that must also be addressed. The United States, the EU, and their partners around the world should consider the following policy priorities, which build on previous years' recommendations:

Support democratic renewal and reform.

In addition to defending the international order from emboldened autocrats, democratic governments must attend to democratic renewal within Europe, particularly among nascent democracies. New leaders in countries with recent democratic breakthroughs—both inside and outside the EU—face internal and external pressure to reform as well as obstruction by antidemocratic forces. Policymakers and donors must recognize that many would-be reformers are struggling to push major changes through a legal and institutional framework that has been heavily damaged by previous illiberal governments. It is crucial for the democratic community to support new governments in the aftermath of breakthrough elections and for years to come. Specifically, EU member states should:

- **Make addressing rule-of-law concerns a strategic priority within the EU.** While continuing their efforts to condition financial assistance on countries' compliance with European standards for the rule of law and human rights, EU institutions should prioritize rule-of-law concerns in all policy and decision-making processes, and set a goal of implementing all judgments by the Court of Justice of the European Union regarding member states' actions.
- **Be consistent and transparent in withholding and releasing EU funds related to fundamental treaty violations.** The European Commission's decisions to lock or unlock funds for member states in response to their actions to address treaty violations should follow a stringent procedure and avoid any use of treaty compliance as a "[bargaining chip](#)." [Proactive transparency](#) on the commission's application of EU law enforcement mechanisms is paramount in the context of nascent reform efforts in Poland, ongoing rule-of-law challenges in Hungary, and accelerating violations in Slovakia.

- **Support voter education on obstacles to reform.**

Reform-minded governments must act in accordance with democratic principles and the rule of law—the basis upon which they were elected—and be as transparent as possible with the public, noting where and when they have encountered obstacles and why they have decided on a given action. Transparency is particularly important in countries classified as Hybrid Regimes, where malign authoritarian influence and disinformation campaigns are commonly used to portray democratic reformers as enemies of democracy and undermine their public support. Strategic government communications about progress toward reforms, independent media coverage, oversight from civil society, and civic education initiatives should all play a role in providing clear and accurate information to citizens.

Provide consistent messaging and support to Europe's aspiring democracies.

Military aggression from autocracies in the region has underscored the dangers of exclusion from democracy-based organizations like the EU and NATO, galvanizing the political will of policymakers in aspiring member states and generating further public pressure to undertake long-sought democratic reforms. The EU, with reinforcement from allied democratic governments and donors, must respond consistently to this increased demand for entry and help ensure that it leads to genuine progress. They should:

- **Provide unambiguous messages, guidance, and parameters for EU aspirant countries.** The fact that the EU has begun accession talks with nine countries presents an extraordinary opportunity to push for democratic reform—if the prospective members are provided with clear benchmarks and timelines. The EU, the United States, and donors should work with governments seeking EU accession negotiations to support reforms that are consistent with democratic principles and the rule of law, and complement government efforts with foreign assistance. The EU's new [Growth Plan for the Western Balkans](#) is a promising effort to spur reforms in exchange for meaningful economic benefits, which could help break the existing accession gridlock for these countries.

- **Empower newer member states to share best practices on democratic reforms with EU aspirants.** As the most recent beneficiaries of EU enlargement, member states in Central and Eastern Europe should actively impart lessons to EU-aspirant countries based on their own experience with democratization efforts. For example, Romania’s admirable strides to improve the independence of its judiciary suggest that it should strengthen its partnerships with Moldova, Ukraine, and the states of the Western Balkans as they work on the same issue. Similarly, there are important lessons to be shared between those aspirants that are new to the negotiation process and those that have been in the process for years. Donors should consider additional assistance along these lines.
- **Tailor bilateral assistance and engagement to address the specific needs of Hybrid Regimes depending on their recent democratic trajectories.** As this report explains, some Hybrid Regimes have been moving toward autocracy for several years, while others have been democratizing or seem trapped in a cyclical pattern. Each of these trajectories warrants a different approach by democratic policymakers as they engage bilaterally with such countries and provide foreign assistance. For example, democratic governments may need to utilize more “sticks” than “carrots” when dealing with countries on an antidemocratic path. This could

include increased use of sanctions against corrupt or undemocratic officials, and more consistent repudiation of harmful actions by illiberal leaders.

Seek accountability for human rights abuses and stand with human rights defenders.

For decades, autocrats in the *Nations in Transit* region and beyond have reaped economic and other benefits from the prevailing democratic order, while simultaneously exempting themselves from its political norms and legal constraints. Even today they continue to flagrantly violate international rules and corrupt international institutions with considerable impunity. Seeking accountability for human rights abuses and justice for victims of political repression must be a priority for democratic governments. Democracies must also stand in solidarity with human rights defenders (HRDs) from authoritarian states, supporting their work on the ground and, if need be, in exile. To advance these overarching goals, democratic governments should:

- **Consistently prioritize democracy and human rights in the region.** When democracies fail to condemn human rights abuses consistently as a matter of principle, autocrats are emboldened and international norms are weakened. Some democracies have admirably supported Ukraine, but when the Azerbaijani military forcibly displaced over 120,000 ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, the



Russian president Vladimir Putin hosts the annual “Victory Day Parade” in Moscow with the leaders of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. (Photo credit: American Photo Archive / Alamy)

international community responded mostly with [symbolic appeals and expressions of concern](#). The EU [continues](#) to rely on Azerbaijani energy exports and overlook human rights abuses by President Ilham Aliyev's regime, apparently prioritizing political and economic expediency over core values and long-term interests.

Similarly, although EU member states have welcomed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees in an irrefutable act of solidarity, other foreign nationals seeking asylum in Europe have not found the same level of acceptance or welcome. Indeed, the December 2023 EU Pact on Migration and Asylum has been [criticized](#) by human rights groups for its lack of protections for asylum seekers. Some EU countries have also [signed deals with non-member states](#) to care for or block migrants on their behalf, effectively outsourcing their legal and moral obligations to countries with worse human rights conditions. Such agreements have notably funneled bilateral and multilateral assistance to authoritarian governments in countries including Turkey and Tunisia. Democracies must do more to track how this and other external aid is being used, and should consider making any further funding conditional on the recipients' adherence to human rights and the rule of law.

- **Use targeted sanctions as part of a comprehensive strategy of accountability for human rights abusers and corrupt officials.** Democracies should impose targeted sanctions in a coordinated fashion for maximum impact. EU member states should also pass their own targeted-sanctions laws, allowing groups of them to act in concert even when the entire EU cannot reach consensus. For example, they could adopt national-level legislation that mirrors the EU Magnitsky Act. Crucially, democracies must ensure that any sanctions are fully and effectively enforced, so that autocrats cannot disregard them as weak or symbolic gestures.
- **Seek criminal charges against officials who engage in human rights abuses and corruption.** Democratic governments should increase their collaboration with civil society to pursue criminal charges against human rights abusers and corrupt actors in the *Nations in Transit* region. The initiative

could include cases in the perpetrator's home country, in foreign countries where the invocation of universal jurisdiction is possible, or at international judicial venues. For example, democracies should seek to support and replicate recent [efforts](#) to prosecute Belarusian dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his associates under the principle of universal jurisdiction for their widespread human rights abuses, particularly surrounding the suppression of mass protests in 2020.

- **Leverage multilateral institutions to support collective responses to and documentation of rights abuses.** Examples of this tactic include the repeated invocation of the Moscow Mechanism at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to officially document rights abuses committed by Russian and Belarusian authorities; the creation of the International Accountability Platform for Belarus, which was launched as a result of the Moscow Mechanism's report to the OSCE Permanent Council in 2020; and the UN Human Rights Council's appointment and renewal of a special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Russia.
- **Support HRDs, civil society, and independent media in their home countries.** Donors should continue to assist front-line democracy activists and organizations across the *Nations in Transit* region, particularly when they are under duress. Recommended support includes emergency assistance; temporary relocation opportunities; psychosocial and psycho-emotional support; medical assistance; digital security installation, support, and training; legal advice; and strengthening of organizational resilience.
- **Continue to support HRDs in exile.** Autocrats in the *Nations in Transit* region are increasingly targeting individual activists and organizations through judicial harassment, violent political persecution, torture, and arrests, compelling many to seek safety abroad. Governments that host HRDs in exile should continuously evaluate their visa processes to facilitate the safe relocation of such activists. According to a 2023 [report](#) from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, while there is no consistent EU approach to harboring HRDs, several countries have adopted effective models. Knowledge sharing among European countries is critical to ensuring that at-risk HRDs are

not denied protection. In the United States, [efforts](#) are underway to create a special, limited visa category for HRDs facing imminent danger, which Freedom House has endorsed. Flexible financing and innovative technological solutions should also be provided

so that HRDs can continue their work in exile and communicate securely with people in the countries they were forced to flee. As one Freedom House expert put it, “Instead of building bridges, we must dig tunnels.” ■

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2024: OVERVIEW OF SCORE CHANGES

▼ Decline ▲ Improvement □ Unchanged

	Country	Democracy Score	Democracy %	NDG	EP	CS	IM	LDG	JFI	CO
BALKANS	Albania	3.79	46%							
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.21 TO 3.18	36%				▼			
	Croatia	4.25	54%							
	Kosovo	3.29	38%							
	Montenegro	3.79 TO 3.75	46%					▼		
	North Macedonia	3.86 TO 3.79	46%						▼	▼
	Serbia	3.79 TO 3.61	43%		▼		▼	▼	▼	
CENTRAL EUROPE	Bulgaria	4.50 TO 4.54	59%						▲	
	Czechia	5.54	76%							
	Estonia	6.00	83%							
	Hungary	3.57	43%							
	Latvia	5.79	80%							
	Lithuania	5.68 TO 5.71	79%				▲			
	Poland	4.54 TO 4.43	57%		▼					▼
	Romania	4.36 TO 4.39	57%						▲	
	Slovakia	5.21	70%							
	Slovenia	5.75 TO 5.79	80%				▲			
EURASIA	Armenia	3.11 TO 3.07	35%	▼						
	Azerbaijan	1.07	1%							
	Belarus	1.11	2%							
	Georgia	3.04	34%							
	Kazakhstan	1.32 TO 1.29	5%					▼		
	Kyrgyzstan	1.68 TO 1.64	11%			▼				
	Moldova	3.14	36%		▼					▲
	Russia	1.11 TO 1.07	1%		▼					
	Tajikistan	1.04	1%							
	Turkmenistan	1.00	0%							
	Ukraine	3.36 TO 3.43	40%						▲	▲
	Uzbekistan	1.21 TO 1.18	3%		▼					

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 2024 ratings reflect the period from January 1 through December 31, 2023.

Methodology

Nations in Transit 2024 evaluates the state of democracy in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia. The 26th edition of this annual study covers events from January 1 through December 31, 2023. 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/report/nations-transit-2024/methodology>.

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2024: 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	3.00	3.79	46
Armenia	2.25	3.50	4.75	3.00	2.25	2.75	3.00	3.07	35
Azerbaijan	1.00	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.00	1.07	1
Belarus	1.00	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.25	1.11	2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1.75	4.50	4.25	3.00	3.25	2.75	2.75	3.18	36
Bulgaria	4.25	5.50	5.50	3.50	4.75	4.50	3.75	4.54	59
Croatia	4.25	5.00	5.25	3.75	4.50	3.50	3.50	4.25	54
Czechia	4.75	6.75	6.25	5.00	6.00	5.75	4.25	5.54	76
Estonia	5.75	6.50	6.25	6.25	5.75	6.50	5.00	6.00	83
Georgia	2.25	3.00	4.00	3.25	2.75	2.50	3.50	3.04	34
Hungary	3.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	4.25	4.00	2.75	3.57	43
Kazakhstan	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.50	1.25	1.25	1.29	5
Kosovo	3.00	3.50	4.75	3.25	3.50	2.75	2.25	3.29	38
Kyrgyzstan	1.00	1.75	2.50	1.75	1.75	1.25	1.50	1.64	11
Latvia	6.00	6.25	6.00	6.00	5.75	6.00	4.50	5.79	80
Lithuania	5.50	6.25	6.25	6.00	5.75	5.75	4.50	5.71	79
Moldova	2.75	3.75	4.75	3.00	2.50	2.75	2.50	3.14	36
Montenegro	3.25	4.25	5.25	3.25	4.00	3.25	3.00	3.75	46
North Macedonia	3.50	4.50	4.75	3.50	4.25	3.00	3.00	3.79	46
Poland	3.50	5.25	5.50	4.25	5.50	3.25	3.75	4.43	57
Romania	4.25	4.75	5.50	3.50	4.25	4.50	4.00	4.39	57
Russia	1.00	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.00	1.07	1
Serbia	3.25	3.75	5.25	2.75	3.75	3.25	3.25	3.61	43
Slovakia	4.50	6.25	6.00	5.00	5.50	5.25	4.00	5.21	70
Slovenia	5.50	6.50	5.75	5.50	6.50	5.75	5.00	5.79	80
Tajikistan	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.25	1.00	1.00	1.04	1
Turkmenistan	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0
Ukraine	2.50	4.50	5.25	3.25	3.50	2.50	2.50	3.43	40
Uzbekistan	1.00	1.00	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.18	3
Average	3.01	3.84	4.16	3.20	3.56	3.18	2.86	3.40	40
Median	3.00	4.25	4.75	3.25	3.75	3.00	3.00	3.57	43

NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2024: DEMOCRACY SCORE HISTORY BY REGION

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
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Central Europe

Bulgaria	4.75	4.71	4.75	4.64	4.61	4.61	4.54	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.54	▲
Czechia	5.75	5.79	5.79	5.75	5.71	5.71	5.64	5.57	5.54	5.54	5.54	
Estonia	6.04	6.04	6.07	6.07	6.18	6.11	6.07	6.04	6.00	6.00	6.00	
Hungary	5.04	4.82	4.71	4.46	4.29	4.07	3.96	3.71	3.68	3.57	3.57	
Latvia	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.96	5.93	5.86	5.79	5.82	5.79	5.79	5.79	
Lithuania	5.64	5.64	5.68	5.68	5.64	5.61	5.64	5.68	5.64	5.68	5.71	▲
Poland	5.82	5.79	5.68	5.43	5.11	5.04	4.93	4.57	4.54	4.54	4.43	▼
Romania	4.54	4.54	4.54	4.61	4.54	4.43	4.43	4.39	4.36	4.36	4.39	▲
Slovakia	5.39	5.36	5.39	5.39	5.39	5.36	5.29	5.32	5.25	5.21	5.21	
Slovenia	6.07	6.07	6.00	5.96	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.86	5.71	5.75	5.79	▲
Average	5.50	5.47	5.45	5.40	5.33	5.27	5.22	5.15	5.10	5.09	5.10	
Median	5.70	5.72	5.68	5.56	5.52	5.49	5.47	5.45	5.40	5.38	5.38	

Balkans

Albania	3.82	3.86	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	3.75	3.75	3.79	3.79	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.57	3.54	3.50	3.46	3.36	3.32	3.32	3.36	3.29	3.21	3.18	▼
Croatia	4.32	4.32	4.32	4.29	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	
Kosovo	2.86	2.86	2.93	3.04	3.07	3.11	3.18	3.14	3.25	3.29	3.29	
Montenegro	4.14	4.11	4.07	4.11	4.07	3.93	3.86	3.82	3.82	3.79	3.75	▼
North Macedonia	4.00	3.93	3.71	3.57	3.64	3.68	3.75	3.82	3.82	3.86	3.79	▼
Serbia	4.36	4.32	4.25	4.18	4.04	4.00	3.96	3.89	3.79	3.79	3.61	▼
Average	3.87	3.85	3.81	3.79	3.76	3.74	3.73	3.72	3.71	3.71	3.66	
Median	4.00	3.93	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	3.82	3.79	3.79	3.75	

Eurasia

Armenia	2.64	2.64	2.64	2.61	2.57	2.93	3.00	2.96	3.04	3.11	3.07	▼
Azerbaijan	1.32	1.25	1.14	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.14	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	
Belarus	1.29	1.29	1.36	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.29	1.18	1.11	1.11	
Georgia	3.32	3.36	3.39	3.39	3.32	3.29	3.25	3.18	3.07	3.04	3.04	
Kazakhstan	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.36	1.29	1.29	1.32	1.32	1.36	1.32	1.29	▼
Kyrgyzstan	2.11	2.07	2.11	2.00	1.93	2.00	1.96	1.86	1.75	1.68	1.64	▼
Moldova	3.14	3.14	3.11	3.07	3.07	3.04	3.11	3.11	3.11	3.14	3.14	
Russia	1.71	1.54	1.50	1.43	1.39	1.43	1.39	1.39	1.32	1.11	1.07	▼
Tajikistan	1.68	1.61	1.46	1.36	1.21	1.21	1.18	1.11	1.11	1.04	1.04	
Turkmenistan	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	
Ukraine	3.07	3.25	3.32	3.39	3.36	3.36	3.39	3.36	3.36	3.36	3.43	▲
Uzbekistan	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.11	1.11	1.14	1.25	1.25	1.21	1.18	▼
Average	1.98	1.97	1.96	1.93	1.90	1.93	1.94	1.91	1.89	1.85	1.84	
Median	1.70	1.58	1.48	1.41	1.39	1.41	1.39	1.36	1.34	1.27	1.23	

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Nations in Transit 2024 was made possible with the generous support of the US Agency for International Development, the Dutch Postcode Lottery, and the Hurford Foundation.



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