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Nations in Transit 2016 **Europe & Eurasia Brace for Impact**

WASHINGTON, April 4, 2016 – The migration crisis and wrenching economic problems are threatening both the survival of the European Union and the stability of Eurasia’s entrenched dictatorships, according to *Nations in Transit 2016*, the 21st edition of Freedom House’s annual report on democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Eurasia.

“The EU’s fumbling response to the migration crisis has left the door wide open to populists who openly reject fundamental principles of liberal democracy,” said Nate Schenkkan, project director of Nations in Transit. “Renewed nationalism and the erosion of freedom of movement and other fundamental principles are threatening the consolidation of democracy in Eastern Europe, and with it the entire European project.”

“The goal of a Europe whole and free has to be updated,” said Schenkkan. “The threats to unity and liberty in Europe are internal as much as they are external.”

Nations in Transit has been tracking democracy in the formerly Communist countries of Europe and Eurasia since 1995. Weighted for population, the average Democracy Score in these 29 countries has declined every year since 2004—12 years in a row, including 2015.

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The biggest challenge to democracy in Europe is the spread of deeply illiberal politics. In 2015, several Central European leaders joined Hungary’s Viktor Orban in using xenophobic rhetoric to denounce migrants.

“Claiming that Europe faces a Muslim invasion has become standard fare for a range of politicians and political parties in Europe,” said Schenkkan. “This kind of speech undermines democracy by rejecting one of its fundamental principles—equality before the law. There is a danger that this kind of hateful, paranoid speech will lead to violence against minorities and refugees.”

The aggressive moves by Poland’s new government to consolidate control over the Constitutional Tribunal and public media showed that the tactics Orban used to weaken checks and balances in Hungary are spreading. The EU’s quick response to developments in Poland is a positive sign that the union is taking threats to core principles seriously.

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BALKANS

The Balkans were once a bright spot for reform in Europe, but since 2010 the region has backslid, even as several countries have made progress in accession to the EU. Strongmen in Serbia and Montenegro have taken nearly unchallenged control of state institutions. In Macedonia, the ruling party's overreach led to massive corruption and election-rigging scandals in 2015 and a persistent political crisis. The Balkans' average Democracy Score has declined to where it was in 2010.

In Bosnia and Kosovo, state-building has reached an impasse. Governmental structures built to keep the peace are preventing progress, and political and economic stagnation are fueling popular frustration.

These internal developments now risk being compounded by European border closings to prevent migrants from reaching the EU along the Balkans route.

"The migration crisis should not become an excuse to isolate the Balkans from the rest of Europe," said Schenkkan. "With youth unemployment above 50 percent in much of the region, turning the Balkans into an island inside Europe would be catastrophic for the region's development. The EU should not privilege short-term stability over long-term reform in the Balkans."

EURASIA

The biggest driver of decline in the former Soviet Union has been the return to authoritarianism under Vladimir Putin in Russia. Seven of the 15 countries of the former Soviet Union are led by dictators who have been in power for 10 years or more. Low oil prices are now threatening the stability of these consolidated authoritarian regimes.

"Governments in oil producers like Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan built their economies on sand," said Schenkkan. "The profit when oil prices were high went into the pockets of officials connected to the presidents. Now these states must face the consequences after years of failing to diversify their economies or create transparent and accountable systems of government."

The collapse of oil prices is spilling over to the rest of Eurasia, which depends on oil producers for labor remittances and subsidies. Governments in Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are also facing possible recession in 2016. Tajikistan's government pursued one of the harshest crackdowns the region has seen in years, banning the leading opposition party and arresting its leaders.

Ukraine remains the single most important opportunity for establishing democracy in Eurasia. The government achieved some progress in post-revolutionary reforms in 2015, but

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continuing Russian occupation of Crimea and Donbas, and widespread corruption and impunity for crimes during Maidan are holding back progress.

“This is a pivotal year for Ukraine to take on corruption and impunity,” said Schenkan. “Patience is running thin among Ukraine’s supporters. The government cannot lose the urgency of breaking with the past.”

NATIONS IN TRANSIT GLOBAL FINDINGS:

- Weighted for population, the region’s average Democracy Score has declined for 12 years in a row. Unweighted, it has declined for 10 years.
- Eleven countries saw score declines in this year’s report, and nine countries had no change. Nine countries’ scores improved.
- The largest decline was Macedonia’s, where scores dropped in six of the seven different categories that Nations in Transit measures. The second-largest decline was in Tajikistan, which had three downgrades.
- Where there were gains, they were very small. Of the nine countries with gains, six countries improved in only one category, and three countries improved in two categories—Ukraine, Kosovo, and Belarus.
- Ukraine’s gains reflected slow consolidation after extreme violence and instability in 2013-2014. Kosovo’s improvement was related to gradual success in functionalizing local governance and protecting media. Belarus’s gains reflected the “thaw” before presidential elections in 2015 as the government sought support from the EU to replace Russian patronage.

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