

## Nations in Transit 2019

*Nations in Transit* evaluates the state of democracy in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia.

For the 2019 edition of *Nations in Transit*, Freedom House produced scores but no narrative reports for the 29 countries in the project's coverage area.

For the full methodology, please go to: <https://freedomhouse.org/reports/nations-transit/nations-transit-methodology>

## Albania

*None*

## Armenia

- **National Democratic Governance score improved from 2.00 to 2.50.** The Velvet Revolution and the installation of reformist prime minister Nikol Pashinyan did much to bolster the democratic character of Armenia's governmental system. Pashinyan's election in May (by Armenia's old parliament) and reelection in December (by the country's new parliament) allowed for a de jure transition of power and paved the way for necessary reforms to the governmental system in the year to come.
- **Electoral Process score improved from 2.00 to 3.00.** In 2018, Armenia held two votes—municipal elections in Yerevan in September and parliamentary elections in December—which, in marked contrast to votes in the country's recent past, were largely free and fair. This can be attributed to the political will of the prodemocratic forces empowered by the April-May 2018 Velvet Revolution. While the country's electoral code remained by and large unreformed, amendments in May made several improvements, including criminalizing electoral misconduct, in line with OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations.
- **Civil Society score improved from 4.25 to 4.50.** The Velvet Revolution saw NGOs and citizens' groups successfully mobilize to prevent president-turned-prime minister Serzh Sargsyan's bid to remain in power for an eleventh consecutive year despite state repression. Following the success of this effort, civil society organizations were invited to play an active consultative role in the interim government's deliberations, with many figures from civil society entering government itself.
- **Independent Media score improved from 2.50 to 3.00.** While the ancien régime sporadically and sometimes violently targeted journalists who covered the Velvet Revolution -- with independent outlets distinguishing themselves through reporting in adverse circumstances -- the country's press freedom situation improved dramatically following the transition of power in April-May. Post-revolutionary Armenia's news media landscape remains polarized, but political and economic pressures on outlets have eased up.
- **Corruption score improved from 2.50 to 2.75.** Discontent with endemic corruption fueled the Velvet Revolution and pushed Armenia's interim government to pursue a number of high-profile indictments. In addition, efforts were made to recover billions of drams in public money siphoned off by bribery, embezzlement, etc. However, although there is political will to eradicate corruption, Armenia's new leadership has yet to put together a viable anti-corruption program.
- **As a result, Armenia's Democracy Score improved from 2.57 to 2.93.**

## Azerbaijan

*None*

## Belarus

*None*

### Bosnia and Herzegovina

- **Judicial Framework and Independence score declined from 3.25 to 3.00.** The country's judicial and law enforcement institutions struggled with escalating inefficiency and political pressure. In Republika Srpska, officials failed to investigate the March 2018 murder of David Dragičević and protect his family from reprisals by police believed to be responsible for his death. Meanwhile, authorities at all levels mishandled an influx of migrants, denying them access to shelter, legal aid, and other necessities.
- **As a result, Bosnia and Herzegovina's Democracy Score declined from 3.36 to 3.32.**

### Bulgaria

*None*

### Croatia

*None*

### Czech Republic

*None*

### Estonia

- **Corruption score declined from 5.75 to 5.25.** In December, the most high-profile anti-corruption case in recent memory ended inconclusively when the Supreme Court deemed former Tallinn mayor and Center Party leader Edgar Savisaar medically unfit to stand trial. In addition, officials in several regional municipalities were tarred by corruption scandals at various points during the year. Finally, a bombshell September investigation revealed that US\$230 billion had been laundered through Danske Bank's Estonian branch between 2007 and 2015.
- **As a result, Estonia's Democracy Score declined from 6.18 to 6.11.**

### Georgia

- **Electoral Process score declined from 3.50 to 3.25.** The country's 2018 presidential elections were marred by improprieties, with the ruling Georgian Dream party's candidate and eventual winner, Salome Zourabichvili, enjoying a dubious advantage owing to what OSCE/ODHIR observers called the "[blurred] line between party and state." Just days before the second round of the vote, a charity controlled by billionaire Georgian Dream party leader Bidzina Ivanishvili announced that it would pay off the debts of some 600,000 citizens, a move that opposition figures denounced as vote-buying.
- **As a result, Georgia's Democracy Score declined from 3.32 to 3.29.**

## Hungary

- **National Democratic Governance score declined from 3.50 to 3.25.** The democratic character of the government deteriorated in 2018. Parliament continued to rubber-stamp Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's agenda, passing contentious legislation like a June ban on homelessness with minimal discussion and refusing to submit to oversight by, e.g., denying the opposition quorum at meetings of the national security committee. In a troubling development, several MPs from the opposition were violently removed from the headquarters of the state broadcaster amid protests over an unpopular labor law that was rushed through the legislature.
- **Electoral Process score declined from 4.75 to 4.50.** Hungary's April parliamentary elections, along with several by-elections held in 2018, were free but not fair, according to observers. In January 2018, the State Audit Office, controlled by the ruling Fidesz party, fined six opposition parties on various technicalities in a series of decisions widely criticized as politicized. The fines impacted the opposition parties' ability to compete at the ballot box, as did Fidesz's abuse of state resources, including state media, for electioneering purposes.
- **Civil Society score declined from 5.00 to 4.50.** The space for civil society organizations continued to shrink in 2018. Due to political pressure from the government, the George Soros-funded Open Society Foundations and the Central European University, left the country that year. Parliament passed the so-called "Stop Soros" package, which criminalizes "promoting and supporting illegal migration" and imposed a 25-percent tax on NGOs that engage in "propaganda activity that portrays immigration in a positive light." Officials continued to publicly smear organizations and figures perceived to be critical of the government.
- **Independent Media score declined from 3.50 to 3.25.** In 2018, the government continued to consolidate its control over the information landscape. Critical news outlets Lanchid Radio and Magyar Nemzet shut down following the elections, while news channel Hir TV was taken over by a Fidesz-aligned oligarch (Magyar Nemzet also restarted as a progovernment paper). In December, the owners of 476 progovernment titles donated their outlets to a new non-profit entity called KESMA for free; the merger was exempted from antitrust review on "national interest" grounds.
- **Judicial Framework and Independence score declined from 5.00 to 4.75.** The government intensified its efforts to dominate the judiciary, creating a new court system under direct executive control whose jurisdiction extends to all "public administrative" matters. Following a conflict with Fidesz appointee Tunde Handó, who heads the National Judiciary Office (NJO), several judges resigned from the National Judicial Council (NJC), a self-governing judicial body tasked with overseeing the NJO. Hungary's Constitutional Court regularly neglected to act as a check on the executive.
- **As a result, Hungary's Democracy Score declined from 4.29 to 4.07.**

## Kazakhstan

*None*

## Kosovo

- **Civil Society score improved from 4.25 to 4.50.** In 2018, civil society organizations were significantly more active in many policy processes, consulting on the rule of law, anti-corruption, gender equality, and European integration initiatives, as well as public administration reform among others. In addition, NGOs' capacities to monitor the judicial and prosecutorial systems increased. However, financial stability for civil society organizations remains a challenge, and could become more acute with foreign sources of funding slowly drying up.
- **As a result, Kosovo's Democracy Score improved from 3.07 to 3.11.**

### Kyrgyzstan

- **Civil Society score improved from 3.00 to 3.25.** Kyrgyzstan's president, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, proved much more accommodating of civil society organizations in 2018 than his immediate predecessor, Almazbek Atambayev, had been in years prior. In July, Jeenbekov even met with a select group of activists to discuss anti-corruption measures among other things, providing them with an implicit seal of approval from the highest level.
- **Independent Media score improved from 1.75 to 2.00.** The country's press freedom situation stabilized in 2018 after president Jeenbekov and former president Atambayev both withdrew punitive defamation cases against independent media outlets. An October Supreme Court ruling limited the law under which both leaders filed their claims. Finally, Vecherniy Bishkek, a popular newspaper was returned to its former owner, a critic of Atambayev, after it was seized in 2014.
- **As a result, Kyrgyzstan's Democracy Score improved from 1.93 to 2.00.**

### Latvia

- **Civil Society score declined from 6.00 to 5.75.** A law passed in March will require the use of the Latvian language in the country's secondary schools, which, in practice, will deny Latvia's sizeable Russophone minority Russian-language education.
- **Corruption score declined from 5.00 to 4.75** due to the money laundering scandal that ABLV, the country's second-largest bank, was implicated in. ABLV was liquidated after the US Treasury Department found that it facilitated money laundering. Separately, December saw the local government of Riga ensnared in a corruption scandal related to a transportation procurement contract.
- **As a result, Latvia's Democracy Score declined from 5.93 to 5.86.**

### Lithuania

- **Judicial Framework and Independence score declined from 6.25 to 6.00.** A series of scandals in the prison system revealed numerous cases of public misconduct. EU-wide surveys also revealed the underfinanced Lithuanian judicial system is vulnerable to business pressure as well as to violation of certain rights to due process.
- **As a result, Lithuania's Democracy Score declined from 5.64 to 5.61.**

### North Macedonia

- **Independent Media score improved from 3.00 to 3.25.** Violence against journalists in Macedonia declined, and the country's investigative news media are increasingly able to act as a check on the government. While the information landscape remains polarized and systemic reform of the regulatory environment is lacking, the government did adopt toward the end of 2018.
- **As a result, North Macedonia's Democracy Score improved from 3.64 to 3.68.**

### Moldova

- **Judicial Framework and Independence score declined from 3.00 to 2.75.** Judicial independence was further eroded after the government appointed new judges to the Constitutional Court in a non-transparent manner. In June, the courts annulled the results of Chisinau's mayoral election, which was won by a member of the political opposition, citing a dubious technicality. In a much-criticized September operation, Moldovan security services expelled seven foreign citizens linked to the Gulenist movement, reportedly at the behest of the Turkish government.
- **As a result, Moldova's Democracy Score declined from 3.07 to 3.04.**

### Montenegro

- **National Democratic Governance score declined from 3.50 to 3.25.** After Dukanovic's election in April, parliament passed a law greatly expanding the presidency's powers. The legislature's ability to act as a check on the presidency was further weakened by its dysfunction, a result of a boycott by opposition MPs. Public trust in the government continued to erode.
- **Electoral Process score declined from 4.50 to 4.25.** The country's April presidential election was free but not fair with eventual winner Milo Dukanovic—who has dominated political life in Montenegro since the early 1990s—enjoying the access to state resources during the campaign. Dukanovic also refused to publicly debate the other candidates for the presidency. In addition, the country's electoral code remained unreformed in 2018, though a parliamentary committee with a reform mandate was constituted in November.
- **Independent Media score declined from 3.50 to 3.25.** The country's press freedom situation deteriorated in 2018, a year which saw the government smear independent journalists and interfere in the operations of the state broadcaster. In April, a car bomb exploded outside the home of investigative reporter Sead Sadikovic. In May, investigative reporter Olivera Lakic was shot by unknown assailants.

- **Judicial Framework and Independence score declined from 4.00 to 3.75.** The ongoing trial of the 2016 coup d'état suspects (including two leaders of the opposition) revealed a lack of professionalism in Montenegro's judicial system and took on political overtones. Welcome amendments to Montenegro's Judicial Council were adopted in June, but parliamentary gridlock stymied its work.
- **As a result, Montenegro's Democracy Score declined from 4.07 to 3.93.**

## Poland

- **Civil Society score declined from 6.00 to 5.75.** A January law introduced a new criminal offence: disparaging the good name of Poland by wrongly attributing responsibility for WWII-era atrocities. However, after critics condemned the law as a violation of free expression rights, the offense was decriminalized in June. Meanwhile, the government escalated its legal and rhetorical attacks on the LGBT community.
- **Corruption score declined from 4.50 to 4.25.** After the opposition revealed that the government's ministers awarded themselves massive bonuses last year, the ministers neglected to return the money to the state, donating it to a charity run by the Catholic Church instead. In November, Polish Financial Supervision Authority chair Marek Chrzanowski arrested after soliciting a bribe from a major bank.
- **As a result, Poland's Democracy Score declined from 5.11 to 5.04.**

## Romania

- **National Democratic Governance score declined from 4.25 to 4.00.** Social Democratic Party leader Liviu Dragnea's informal grip on the government tightened, despite being convicted on abuse of power charges. Under his rule, contentious judicial and penal code reforms were rushed through parliament in 2018.
- **Civil Society score declined from 5.75 to 5.50.** The government imposed onerous reporting requirements on NGOs in 2018, while also reducing their ability to receive financial support from both the state and business entities. In addition, a mass demonstration against official corruption was violently dispersed by police in August.
- **Corruption score declined from 4.25 to 4.00.** A culture of impunity continues to protect corrupt officials. In July, the government dismissed of top corruption prosecutor Laura Codruta Kovesi, crippling the country's National Anti-Corruption Directorate, which had secured the conviction of several criminal politicians under her leadership.
- **As a result, Romania's Democracy Score declined from 4.54 to 4.43.**

## Russia

*Civil Society score improved from 6.25 to 6.00.* While civil society remains in the government's crosshairs, protests at the national and local levels—particularly around the issue of pension reforms—breathed new life into Russia's third space in 2018. However, new legal restrictions on free assembly were put in place, while activists braved state violence in the course of their work.

### Serbia

- **Local Democratic Governance score declined from 4.25 to 4.00.** Central control grew with the ruling SNS party further increasing its power at the local level. Local elections in Belgrade and some smaller municipalities were marred by irregularities, including extensive abuse of state resources, the use of parallel voter rolls, and pressure and intimidation. These demonstrated the great lengths the ruling party is willing to go to cement its power.
- **As a result, Serbia's Democracy Score declined from 4.04 to 4.00.**

### Slovakia

- **National Democratic Governance score declined from 5.00 to 4.75.** An internal consortium of journalists, which took up Kuciak's investigative work, revealed an extensive network of ties between the government and business interests. Though several officials who were implicated in this network eventually resigned, they first attempted to interfere with the state's inquiry into the circumstances of Kuciak's death.
- **Civil Society score improved from 6.00 to 6.25.** The February murder of investigative reporter Jan Kuciak brought tens of thousands to the streets in a series of protests, energizing the country's NGO scene in the process. Though Prime Minister Robert Fico encouraged an investigation into several organizers, whom he denigrated as foreign-funded saboteurs, he eventually caved to popular pressure and resigned.
- **Independent Media score declined from 5.25 to 5.00.** Kuciak's assassination marked the first time a journalist had been killed in modern Slovakia's history. Press freedom in the country was also adversely affected by government interference in the state broadcaster, which saw dozens of reports sacked or otherwise forced out of their jobs, coupled with hateful rhetoric from the office of Prime Minister Robert Fico.
- **As a result, Slovakia's Democracy Score declined from 5.39 to 5.36.**

### Slovenia

*None*

### Tajikistan

*None*

### Turkmenistan

*None*

## Ukraine

- **Civil Society score declined from 5.25 to 5.00.** Observers counted over 50 assaults against Ukrainian activists and human rights defenders in 2018. Some were perpetrated by the country's small but growing far-right, with the state turning a blind eye. In June, environmentalist Mykola Bychko was found hanged. In November, anti-corruption campaigner Kateryna Handzyuk succumbed to complications from an acid attack.
- **Judicial Framework and Independence score improved from 2.25 to 2.50.** Ukraine's new Supreme Court began its work in 2018, while the government moved to create an anticorruption tribunal. Despite these structural reforms, the independence of the judiciary remains in doubt, while high-profile assaults sometimes go unpunished.
- **As a result, Ukraine's Democracy Score remained at 3.36.**

## Uzbekistan

*None*