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Nations in Transit 2017: **The False Promise of Populism**

WASHINGTON, April 4, 2017 — Populist victories in the United Kingdom and the United States have shaken the post-Cold War order and increased fears of instability in Europe and Eurasia, according to *Nations in Transit 2017*, the 22nd edition of Freedom House’s annual report on democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Eurasia.

“Brexit and the new administration in the United States have emboldened anti-democratic populists in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans,” said Nate Schenkkan, project director of Nations in Transit. “A critical mass of leaders in the region openly reject the idea of liberal democracy. Populism increasingly is combining with crude ethnic nationalism in a way that threatens peace in Europe.”

“Leaders and ordinary citizens should respond to the direct challenge to democracy by speaking up for its basic principles: diversity of opinion and identity, constraints on the will of the majority, and checks on executive power,” said Schenkkan.

NATIONS IN TRANSIT KEY FINDINGS

- In 2017, more than half of the 29 countries in the report had declines in their Democracy Scores: 18 countries’ scores dropped. This is the **second biggest decline** in the survey’s history, almost as large as the drop following the 2008 global financial crisis.
- **For the first time in the NIT project’s history, there are now more Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes than Consolidated Democracies.**
- **Hungary now has the lowest ranking in the Central European region. Poland’s** score reached its lowest point in the survey, well below the last time the Law and Justice (PiS) party was in power in 2005-07. In these countries, populist leaders have attacked constitutional courts, undermined checks and balances, and have turned public media into propaganda arms.

“Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland openly deride the idea that democracy requires independent institutions or constraints on majority rule,” Schenkkan said. “There is no more important theater for the defense of democracy than Central Europe.”

- In Eurasia, **Kyrgyzstan fell back in to the category of Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes**, a category it had left after competitive parliamentary elections in 2011. Kyrgyzstan’s return to the category leaves only Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia as the non-Baltic former Soviet states that are not Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes.

“Kyrgyzstan’s slide back to authoritarianism shows the failed promise of the 2010 revolution,” Schenkkan said. “Unfortunately, President Almazbek Atambayev seems bent on repeating the mistakes of his predecessors.”

- The **bright spots in NIT 2017 were Ukraine, Romania, and Kosovo**. Ukraine and Kosovo made modest gains due to gradual structural reforms, although they now face significant obstacles to deeper transformation that could derail their progress. With its improvements this year, Kosovo achieved a category change, from a Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime to a Transitional/Hybrid Regime. In Romania, a caretaker government addressed a number of outstanding issues, such as problems in the voting process during the previous elections.

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

“There is no more important theater for the defense of democracy than Central Europe.”

- The Central and Eastern European countries saw their **largest average Democracy Score decline since the 2008 economic crisis**.
- Scores in the Civil Society category declined in five countries in this region as **extremist organizations promoting illiberal values gained prominence and support**. The average Civil Society score for Central and Eastern Europe is at its lowest in the history of Nations in Transit.
- Hungary’s democratic deterioration accelerated, and **its score is now the worst in the Central European region. Poland’s score reached its lowest point in the survey**, well below the last time the Law and Justice (PiS) party was in power in 2005-07.

BALKANS

“The weakening of British and American commitments to European integration are encouraging nationalists to outbid each other in a race to the bottom.”

- In the Balkans, four countries’ Democracy Scores declined and two improved, reflecting the **overall trend of gradual deterioration in the quality of governance**.
- The declines were led by Macedonia, whose **score is now nearing the low point of 2001, when there was violent ethnic conflict in the country**.
- Despite its progress in EU accession negotiations, **Serbia’s Democracy Score reached its lowest point since 2003**.
- **Kosovo had positive changes in three categories and registered a status change**, moving from a Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime to the category of Transitional/Hybrid regime.

“From the lowest starting point in the Balkans, over the past decade Kosovo has made progress towards consolidating statehood and building its own institutions,” Schenkkan said. “It only gets harder from here, however, as the country’s government and political parties need to enforce accountability for corruption and make difficult policy decisions on issues including minority representation and European integration.”

EURASIA

“Kyrgyzstan’s President Almbazbek Atambayev seems intent on repeating the mistakes of his predecessors by cracking down on opposition and the media.”

- **Kyrgyzstan fell back in to the category of Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes**, a category it left after competitive parliamentary elections in 2011. Out of 12 countries in Eurasia, only 4 are not Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes—Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia.
- Corruption scores declined in 5 of the 12 countries in the region this year, **and reached the lowest possible score in three: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.**
- Two countries had an overall score improvement, Ukraine and Belarus. While Ukraine saw some progress in judicial independence, corruption, and local democratic governance, **its civil society score declined due to the growing influence of extremist groups.**

“Ukraine continued to make progress in 2016, but there are troubling signs that an old guard resistant to building an accountable state could still defeat reforms,” Schenkkan said. “Ukraine’s international supporters need to continue the ‘tough love’ approach of the last three years.”

To view the summary of findings, see the report here: www.nationsintransit.org

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