

New Report Slams 'Authoritarian' Russia and Former Soviet Nations

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Seven of the 15 former Soviet countries have become “consolidated authoritarian regimes,” with Russian President Vladimir Putin's “naked embrace of autocracy” driving the decline, the Freedom House monitoring group said in a report released Tuesday.

Data from the so-called nations in transit in Central Europe, the Balkans and Eurasia presented a “grim portrait of decline” over the past decade, when none of the three subregions have shown overall improvements — even though individual countries might have — the political rights monitoring group said.

Weighted for population, the average “democracy score” in the region has been shrinking for 12 years, Freedom House said. Russia accounts for 35 percent of the region's population, and Moscow's “stark return to consolidated authoritarianism ... has been the top driver of the decline,” the report said.

“Vladimir Putin’s naked embrace of autocracy since his return to the presidency in 2012

deepened in 2015 with an ever-harsher crackdown on civil society and political organizing,” the report said, citing a crackdown on non-governmental organizations and the growing list of “political prisoners” in Russia.

“Russian 'innovations' in authoritarianism, such as restrictions on nongovernmental organizations, spread further within Eurasia, in some cases through imitation, and in some cases through active Russian efforts,” the report said.

But the problem goes far beyond Russia's borders. A rise of nationalism in Central Europe, and falling oil prices that undermined the economies of Russia and other former Soviet states are among factors contributing to the region's problems.

“The risk is that these separate developments could converge, with the collapse of Eurasian states adding to Europe’s growing list of troubles,” Freedom House said in its report.

The situation is the gloomiest in the former Soviet Union, where seven countries have scored at the “very bottom” of Freedom House's index.

The seven countries — Russia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan — are ruled by leaders who have stayed in power for at least 10 years. The countries are home to 224 million people, or 77 percent of the total population of the former Soviet states, according to Freedom House figures.

Putin has been in power for 16 years — longer than Turkmenistan's Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow or Azerbaijan's Ilham Aliyev, but lagging behind Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev or Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov, both of whom have ruled their countries for 27 years.

Tajikistan pursued “one of the fiercest consolidations of power the region has seen in the last decade,” Freedom House said, citing the country's ban on its main opposition party and imprisonment of opposition leaders.

In Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbayev held early elections to reaffirm his mandate, while signing a new law to “increase control over civil society.”

Azerbaijan continued a crackdown that began in 2014, handing down a prison term last year to a prominent investigative journalist, Khadija Ismayilova.

By contrast, another of the seven-worst post-Soviet “dictators,” Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, showed “his typical Machiavellian flexibility” by freeing political prisoners and allowing a degree of criticism — “cosmetic” measures that succeeded in persuading the European Union to lift sanctions and the International Monetary Fund to begin talks about an aid package.

Ukraine, despite suffering a 12 percent GDP decline in 2015 — the worst among post-Soviet states in Eurasia — showed success in anti-corruption measures and in democratic reforms in the judiciary system, presenting “small reasons for hope” amid the region's “dark year,” Freedom House said.

Membership in the European Union — the major ambition of protesters who toppled the

administration of Moscow-backed former President Viktor Yanukovich and the national leaders who replaced him — is not on the table for Ukraine.

But “given time and support, Ukraine certainly has the potential to equal or surpass the democratic performance of official EU candidate countries in the near future,” the Freedom House report said.

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