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CPI 2021 FOR EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA: DEMOCRATIC HOPES IN THE SHADOW OF GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM

With an average score of just 36 out of 100, Eastern Europe and Central Asia is the second lowest performing region in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI).

In Central Asia, many political leaders used COVID-19 as a smokescreen to introduce new restrictions on rights and accountability during the last year, while populist governments in Eastern Europe have severely cracked down on the freedoms of expression and assembly needed to call out corruption. Across the region, authoritarian regimes spied on, intimidated and attacked activists, journalists, opposition leaders and ordinary citizens.

This year, only three countries from the region score above the global average of 43: **Georgia** (CPI score: 55), **Armenia** (49) and **Montenegro** (46). **Belarus** (41), once also above the average, dropped by 6 points since last year. **Turkmenistan** (19), **Tajikistan** (25) and **Kyrgyzstan** (27, down 4 points since last year) are the region's worst performers.

PANDEMIC, CORRUPTION AND THE SILENCING OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Governments across the region have used COVID-19 as a pretext to further clamp down on critical voices, passing restrictive laws, suppressing free speech and access to information, and undermining judicial independence. Meanwhile, the [Pegasus Project revealed the extensive digital surveillance](#) suffered by journalists and human rights activists. These human rights violations have [increased corruption risks](#), making it even more challenging to oversee how relief funds are spent and hold governments to account.

The government of **Azerbaijan** (30) [targeted political opposition and government critics](#) under the pretext of containing the pandemic. In **Albania** (35), journalists suffer [lawsuits and intimidation](#), including [excessive control of information](#) related to COVID-19 responses. Moreover concerns [over police violence during demonstrations](#) and breaches of [freedom of assembly](#) have been registered throughout the pandemic.

The pandemic was also used as an excuse to reduce oversight and accountability for public procurement and foreign aid spending, [allowing corruption to spread widely](#).

Kyrgyzstan (27), once known as an "island of democracy" in a region of autocracies, has [used pandemic measures](#) to obstruct the work of journalists and curtail freedom of assembly. Lack of transparency and reduced government oversight [made it impossible to track COVID-19 relief funds](#) and ensure that they went to the intended recipients.

A BREEDING GROUND FOR AUTHORITARIANISM

[Corruption undermines democratic rights and institutions](#) by allowing corrupt leaders to use undemocratic practices to protect themselves from prosecution and increase their wealth. The [Pandora Papers exposed](#), once again, how the use of offshore companies allows these ill-gotten assets to be laundered in the advanced economies that often top the CPI. Several countries in the region illustrate the deadly effects of corruption and authoritarianism.

Belarus's decline from 47 points to 41 in the last year is no surprise, given the appalling clampdown on free speech and peaceful assembly witnessed in the country. The nationwide protests that broke out over 2020's rigged presidential elections were met with unprecedented violence. Opposition candidates, their supporters, civil society activists and independent journalists were [viciously suppressed and persecuted](#), while security forces [arbitrarily arrested thousands of citizens](#). Democratic checks and balances have been dismantled or skewed in favour of the regime, letting [grand corruption](#) – where power is concentrated within and for the financial gain of political elites – run rife.

Meanwhile, **Serbia** (38) remains at its lowest score in a decade for the second year in a row. The country is [no longer considered a democracy](#) but a hybrid regime and its government has become notorious for [heavily influencing the media, harassing independent critics and holding unfair elections](#). Lack of government transparency surrounding major foreign investments causes widespread concern, reflected by the [recent wave of public protests](#) against a controversial lithium exploitation project. The nationwide movement forced the president and his ruling Serbian Progressive Party to [amend the new law on referendums](#) and to withdraw legislation that would make it easier for the state [to expropriate land](#).

Throughout the Western Balkans and in **Turkey** (38) a concentration of power in the hands of autocratic leaders and their parties has undermined judicial independence, which is helping to sustain this [state capture](#).

Concentration of power is also a substantial concern in **Georgia**, which leads the region with a score of 55. The influence of the ruling party's founder, formally retired Bidzina Ivanishvili, over key institutions meets the definition of [state capture](#). His party, Georgian Dream, has in recent years solidified its grasp on the judiciary and law enforcement bodies, effectively [killing the political momentum needed](#) to fight corruption.

SOME DEMOCRATIC IMPROVEMENTS?

Kosovo (39) has seen peaceful transitions of power between governments over the last years. Its parliament was the only one in the Western Balkans – and one of only five in all of Europe – that did not transfer decision-making powers to the executive when the

pandemic hit. The country showed a genuine will to fight corruption by [investigating potentially corrupt leaders](#) and adopting a strategy on [rule of law](#). However, the government needs to ensure [public appointments](#) are [timely](#), transparent and impartial to bring necessary improvements to public procurement processes.

After several years of decline, **North Macedonia's** score (39) jumped by 4 points since last year. The country has taken steps to [prosecute high-level officials](#) for corruption and [strengthen independent oversight institutions](#). The government also adopted [an agenda and action plan against corruption](#) – developed in consultation with civil society – which included explicit measures to fight organised crime, reform elections and the judicial system, and address nepotism, cronyism and influence in public hiring practices.

Following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, **Armenia** (49) initially made both significant democratic improvements and positive strides against corruption, climbing 15 points on the CPI over the last decade. But despite progress, in 2021 [promised anti-corruption and judicial reforms stalled](#) in the wake of the political and economic crisis triggered by the pandemic and renewed conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

In **Moldova** (36, up 5 points since 2017), the parliamentary elections of July 2021 were met with optimism – the pro-European party, which [campaigns on an anti-corruption platform](#), won the majority and formed a government led by two women. The government now needs to make good on its promises to de-politicise the anti-corruption bodies and genuinely reform the country's justice system.

Uzbekistan (28) has been a steady improver on the CPI, gaining 11 points since 2012. The country is setting an example in Central Asia by showing some signs of democratisation and sanctioning corruption and abuse of power within government agencies. In recent years, the country undertook a number of [key reforms in anti-corruption policies](#), identifying prevention as one of its priorities. Despite these positive changes, Uzbekistan remains an authoritarian state with activists and civil society facing persecution, interrogation and dismissals.

COUNTRY TO WATCH: RUSSIA

In **Russia** (29), the "[foreign agent law](#)" has made reporting on corruption even more dangerous. Authorities raided the homes and offices of journalists and activists investigating government corruption and declared them "foreign agents" subject to burdensome financial reporting and publishing constraints.

The Russian authorities sent another clear signal to critics when they jailed opposition leader and anti-corruption activist Alexey Navalny upon his return from Germany, where he was recovering from nerve agent poisoning. At the same time, Navalny's team released [a bombshell investigation into a secret luxury estate](#) on the Black Sea coast, allegedly owned by President Putin's inner circle.

Authorities used the pandemic as a pretext to [ban all mass gatherings](#) and apply restrictions to so-called “single pickets”, or one-person protests. Corruption and abuse also disproportionately affected [people already facing discrimination](#), such as LGBTQIA+ communities.

This dire situation was brought to worldwide attention when the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize was [jointly awarded to Dmitry Muratov](#), editor of the independent paper *Novaya Gazeta*, and Filipino investigative journalist Maria Ressa, "for their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace." During Muratov's time at the *Novaya Gazeta*, six of its journalists have been murdered.

COUNTRY TO WATCH: KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakhstan (37) was rocked by a seemingly sudden civil unrest at the start of 2022. What started as a protest over a spike in fuel price, quickly turned into countrywide demonstrations over corruption and inequality. The wealth that the country's political elite allegedly amassed through corruption was a [particular concern](#) during protests.

A [2019 investigation](#) uncovered offshore properties – reportedly worth US\$785 million – that allegedly belong to the relatives of former president Nursultan Nazarbayev. More recently, the Pandora Papers investigations [included reports](#) that a woman with close ties to Nazarbayev received a suspicious payment of US\$30 million from shell companies that journalists have linked to two Kazakh oligarchs.

These disclosures were ignored by authorities, even as they pursued several high-profile corruption cases in recent years. However, convicted senior officials have [usually been pardoned or released early](#).

[Reporting directly to the president](#), the Anti-Corruption Agency of Kazakhstan has focused on sectors like agriculture and healthcare. The largest industries – including oil and gas, finance and construction – remain beyond its attention, as guided by the [2022-2026 draft anti-corruption policy](#).

The tragic 5 January events that ensued in Almaty [underscore the dangers of ignoring corruption](#) in priority areas. So that policies and decisions benefit the common good – not just a privileged few – the way forward should also include meaningful opportunities for civil society participation.

COUNTRY TO WATCH: BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Bosnia and Herzegovina (35) has stagnated at the country's lowest score since 2012. The [current political crisis](#) exacerbates ethnic divisions and threatens the very existence of the state. It also raises suspicions about [its protagonists' interests and motives](#), as it draws attention away from [human rights violations](#) and blocks the [critically important anti-corruption reforms](#) the country needs to make.

The crisis endangers Bosnia and Herzegovina's upcoming general elections in October 2022 and is hindering [much-needed electoral reforms](#) to ensure elections are transparently financed, independently run and without pressure on voters.

Meanwhile, journalists face verbal threats, lawsuits and physical attacks, and the government [continues to manipulate the media](#). Also, whistleblower protection laws are inadequately implemented, with court rulings often ignored and [whistleblowers intimidated](#).

The courts' inability to prosecute corruption cases, [particularly grand corruption](#), is another serious consequence of the ongoing abuse of power. For any [meaningful anti-corruption progress](#), the government must address these issues and pass laws on conflicts of interest, transparent public procurement and judicial reform.

TIME FOR ACTION

The European Union accession process in the Western Balkans and Turkey – and potentially in some Eastern European countries in the future – offers an opportunity and many incentives to reverse the decline in the region.

However, governments in the region are ultimately responsible for fighting corruption and making the necessary reforms, including creating an environment where journalists and civil society can safely act as checks on abuses of power.

If not, corruption will continue to take hold, warping public decisions in favour of elites and siphoning public money away from critical services, like healthcare and education.