



РЕПУБЛИКА СРБИЈА
ВЛАДА

Кабинет председника Владе
Office of the Prime Minister

Belgrade, 13 May 2020

Dear Mr. Abramowitz,

I hope this letter finds you and your family well. I am writing to acknowledge and respond to Freedom House's Nations in Transit 2020 Report, in which organization you lead express concern about democratic breakdowns throughout the region stretching from Central and Eastern Europe to Central Asia.

The Government of Serbia welcomes Freedom House's continuing interest in the region and in our country's democratic institutions. We believe independent research is important as we continue to evolve into a modern, innovative nation and a future European Union member state. As highlighted in your organization's work, it is clear that we share a common goal: to see Serbia and the region prosper into nations with high living standards, where people want to live, work and raise families.

This has been our mission throughout the last six years. In recent years, we passed several sound fiscal decisions, which have stabilized the economy, reduced debt levels, and allowed investment in better salaries and a better education. There is a lot of work left to do, and we continue to set up the institutions and leadership necessary to transform Serbia into a country we can all be proud of.

To this end, I am attaching an analysis of your report, done by my Office, which I hope will help answer some of your questions, address some of the discrepancies highlighted in the report, and lay out some of the current realities faced in Serbia today.

I look forward to initiating a constructive dialogue and working closely with you and your organization.

Sincerely,

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FREEDOM HOUSE NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2020 ANALYSIS

REFUTING THE CLAIMS OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN SERBIA

SUMMARY

1. Serbia is not leading “democratic deterioration” in the Western Balkans. On the contrary, **according to the Nations in Transit (NIT) report Serbia is ranked as the most democratic country in the WB** and has consistently been the highest performing democratic country in the WB over the last 10 years.
2. Serbia is not among the few countries “leading the democratic decline” in Europe. In fact, **among the 10 Central Europe and Balkans countries whose democracy scores saw a decrease in the NIT 2020 report, Serbia’s decline has been the smallest**, with a minimal drop of 0.04.
3. **NIT 2020 report’s conclusions that Serbia is no longer a democracy, but rather a transitional/hybrid regime, are not replicated in the other internationally renowned democracy indexes**, such as the latest Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index, and the latest Bertelsmann Political Transformation Index, both of which do not see Serbia “backsliding” into a hybrid mode of governance.
4. Surprisingly, across these other indexes most of the other Central Europe and Balkans countries maintain same regime type categorization. Yet this is not the case for Serbia. **NIT 2020 findings consistently under-assess and under-categorize Serbia compared to other democracy indexes.**
5. The NIT country democracy scores are straight averages of seven indicators. Among these 7 indicators, NIT 2020 report saw Serbia declining over the last year in only one indicator – corruption, and by the slightest margin of 0.25 points. Beyond the corruption indicator, every single other score remained absolutely the same as in 2019. **Explaining the tectonic shift of a country backsliding into hybrid/transitional mode of governance by pointing to one single indicator that recorded a miniscule drop within a year – is counterintuitive and simply cannot be explained or scientifically proven.**
6. NIT 2020 proves Serbia’s drop in corruption score by referring to PrEUgovor coalition monitoring 2019 report and Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index. However, **the PrEUgovor coalition monitoring 2019 report does not speak of deterioration, but of certain improvements in the legislative framework for the fight against corruption in Serbia over the last year!** In this year’s Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, Serbia’s score saw no changes compared to the last year. Even NIT 2020 report’s own sources cannot substantiate claim of Serbia’s drop in the corruption index by 0.25.
7. Other relevant sources monitoring corruption across the world indicate the same. **The European Commission 2019 annual country report sees Serbia as having “some level of preparation in the fight against corruption,”, thus displaying a “limited progress” in this**

area. Also, other global indexes measuring corruption - Bertelsmann Stiftung's 2020 Transformation Index and World Justice Project's 2020 Rule of Law Index – also reported no decline in corruption score for Serbia; i.e. numerical scores have remained the same as in 2019.

8. With no sources supporting Serbia's corruption score decline, the NIT 2020 authors' inference and conclusions are refuted. **There is no logical and factual basis for a drop in Serbia's democracy assessment and its consecutive framing as a hybrid/transitional regime.**
9. NIT 2020 report mainly focuses on the position and role of the media in political life, as well as on the political conflict initiated by the part of the opposition in Serbia and directed towards the ruling party. Yet, NIT 2020 Serbia's scores in the fields of National Democratic Governance and Electoral Process saw no decline over the last year. The only score in which Serbia registered a decline – the issue area corruption – is not even mentioned with regards to Serbia in the text of the Nations in Transit 2020: Dropping the Democratic Façade report.
10. The authors, while preparing the report, seem to have narrowed its objectivity to the level of impressions, personal attitudes and assessments based on a limited fund of sources and data. **Attitudes in the report are based exclusively on media interpretations (media perception), and not on quantified, objective parameters.**
11. Moreover, the claims put forward by the authors of the NIT 2020 report are frequently unsubstantiated and factually unsupported. More worryingly, they demonstrate a troublesome approach of arbitrary quantifying social data, deriving general conclusions without previously factually substantiating individual claims, and allowing biases to penetrate social science research, which ought to be objective.
12. **Recognizing the high international reputation of the Freedom House, the impact of its work on domestic and international actors, and respecting the autonomy and manner of organization's work - this analysis has been written in the spirit of an open democratic dialogue, convinced that in this way we can only contribute to the more objective view of the state of democracy and democratic institutions in Serbia, whose constant improvement the Government of the Republic of Serbia is deeply committed to.**

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1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Within the framework of its project “Nations In Transit” for 2020, Freedom House marked Serbia as a country belonging to the “transitional or hybrid regime”, which is the 3rd of the 5 levels of democratic development in the nomenclature of this organization - after “consolidated democracy” and “semi-consolidated democracy”.

In the analysis we tried to critically review the validity of the conclusions and their credibility and relevance, while respecting the right of Freedom House to use its own parameters to “measure” the development of certain segments of democracy in society and institutions.

By quantitative and qualitative analysis of this content, we tried to compare its high subjectivity (which is otherwise quite legitimate and common in this type of project) and, on the other hand, objective parameters, the use of which would make the conclusions very different.

The intention of this analysis is not to confront the results of the project, but to analyze its methodological approach, the way of using the sources, as well as the validity of the conclusions drawn from the existing and collected material. The goal is the same as the goal of the author of the project - to provide the most competent and objective picture of the state of democracy in Serbia.

1.1. ABOUT PROJECT

“Nations In Transit” is a project that Freedom House is implementing in 29 countries and territories of Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, in the area that was once under socialism. The project began in 1995, as an annual survey on democratic reforms, and has been conducted according to the current methodology since 2003. The project is implemented through financial assistance from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

This project “measures” the state of democracy in each of the 29 observed countries and territories, through seven categories:

- Democratic governance at the national level
- Democratic governance at the local level
- Election process
- Independent media
- Civil society
- Judicial framework and independence
- Corruption

Based on the ratings from this report, Freedom House made recommendations, primarily intended for the United States and the European Union, regarding what should be done to counteract the declining trend of democracies in the observed region. Eight concrete recommendations in this year's report are divided into two large groups: 1) strengthening and protecting basic values (liberal societies) and 2) establishing a defense against the manipulation of authoritarian actors.

1.2. METHODOLOGY OF PROJECT NATIONS IN TRANSIT

The “Nations In Transit” project “measures” the state of democracy in each of the 7 categories on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being the lowest and 7 being the highest degree of democracy. The average score from each individual area is taken as the overall score (Democratic Score) for the state of democracy in a country. Serbia, for example, gets a score of 3.96 out of a maximum of 7 in this report. As of this year, “Nations In Transit” has introduced another rating - Democratic Percentage, which is actually a Democratic Score transposed to a scale from zero to 100. Serbia is in the report for 2020 according to this criterion at 49.4. Countries are classified into 5 categories:

- Consolidated democracies (score from 5.01 to 7)
- Semi-consolidated democracies (score from 4.01 to 5)
- Transitional or hybrid regimes (score from 3.01 to 4)
- Semi-consolidated authoritarian regimes (score from 2.01 to 3)
- Consolidated authoritarian regimes (score from 1 to 2)

In the analysis below, we will deal with the ratings that Serbia received for each individual area, as well as compare those ratings with several previous reports of “Nations In Transit”.

Rating material is collected on the basis of a comprehensive questionnaire of 103 questions, divided into 7 areas, which are assessed individually. Freedom House does not state explicitly who answers these questions, but states that the final rating reflects the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisors and report authors.

2. REINTERPRETING THE NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2020 RESULTS

The status of democratic governance in the Republic of Serbia in the study is continuously framed in negative terms. The Government of Serbia in the report is described as seeing “democratic deterioration”, “no longer categorized as democracy”, “leading the democratic decline”. Moreover, the report speaks about “the questionable legitimacy of the ruling party’s majority” and a dropping “perception of democracy among ordinary citizens”. Nevertheless, such terms are not only gravely exaggerated, but also misinterpret the report’s quantitative findings.

2.1. IS SERBIA LEADING THE DEMOCRATIC DETERIORATION IN THE BALKANS?

Most apparent of those is the claim that Serbia has seen the most dramatic democratic decline in the Balkans region. “Despite a number of successful political deals and technical progress toward accession to the EU, Nations in Transit has recorded democratic deterioration in the region, especially in Serbia and Montenegro” (p. 18)

Yet, what this statement fails to capture is the fact that **Serbia is ranked as the most democratic county in the Western Balkans region (WB)**. Its democracy score is higher by 0.10 percentage point compared to the second best performing Montenegro, and whole 0.64 percentage points compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

WB Country	Democracy Score
Serbia	3.96
Montenegro	3.86
Albania	3.82
North Macedonia	3.75
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.32

Table 1 2020 Democracy Scores in the WB

Even more importantly, Serbia has consistently been the highest performing democracy in the WB over the last 10 years. In 9 out of 10 previous Nations in Transit reports, Serbia ranked the highest in the WB, every single year scoring significantly higher compared to the WB average.

Country	2019	2020
Serbia	4.00	3.96
WB Average	3.66	3.65
Serbia compared to WB average	+0.35	+0.31

Table 2 Democracy Scores – comparison between Serbia and WB average

Therefore, it is very clear that the Nations in Transit 2020 report’s interpretation of Serbia dropping the most significantly with regards to democracy is not only artificially magnified, but also factually unfounded.

2.2. IS SERBIA LEADING THE DEMOCRATIC DECLINE IN EUROPE?

Another highly misleading part of the report is the one depicting Serbia as among few countries “leading the democratic decline” in Central Europe and the Balkans (graph, p. 3). “Years of increasing state capture, abuse of power, and strongman tactics employed by Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia and Milo Djukanović in Montenegro have tipped those countries over the edge”, leaving the group of democracies and becoming Transitional/Hybrid Regimes.

Yet again, the report’s own scores contradict such interpretations. In fact, among the 10 Central Europe and Balkans countries whose democracy scores saw a decrease compared to the last year’s Nations in Transit 2019 report, Serbia’s decline is the smallest. Its score declined by a minimal margin of 0.04, as compared to the numerous other Central Europe and Balkans countries which saw notably higher score decreases. In fact, framing Serbia, country which has a minimal score drop, as “leading the democratic decline” in Europe, is nothing but a misleading and certainly inaccurate interpretation of the report’s own quantitative data.

Country	Score Decline Compared to the 2019 Report
Serbia	0.04
Estonia	0.04
Bulgaria	0.07
Czech Republic	0.07
Latvia	0.07
Slovakia	0.07
Albania	0.07
Montenegro	0.07
Poland	0.11
Hungary	0.11

Table 2 Countries’ democracy score decline (2020)

2.3. IS SERBIA A TRANSITIONAL/HYBRID REGIME?

The key finding of the Nations in Transit 2020 report is that Serbia, for the first time since 2003, is no longer categorized as democracy, but is rather a Transitional/Hybrid Regime, characterized as one with “democratic institutions which are fragile” and one in which “substantial challenges to the protection of political rights and civil liberties exist.”

Given the profound significance of the moment in which a country moves from a democratic to non-democratic mode of governance - it is worth seeing if some other democracy researchers and indexes detected such a drastic change. In other words, it is necessary looking into the other internationally recognized democracy measuring indexes and seeing if they also captured the transformation of Serbia from a democratic into a transitional/hybrid regime.

In addition to the Freedom House’s Nations in Transit reports and its flagship annual Freedom in the World reports, other highly reputable approaches to conceptualizing and measuring democracy in the world include The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, also published annually (EIU Democracy Index), and the biannual Bertelsmann Political Transformation Index.

The EIU Democracy Index provides a preview of the state of world democracy for more than 160 countries and territories. It evaluates 5 categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. Using 60 indicators,

each country and territory are assessed on a scale between 0 and 10, and then classified as 1 of 4 types of regime: full democracy; flawed democracy; hybrid regime; and authoritarian regime.

Published by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, independent and nonpartisan think tank, the Bertelsmann Political Transformation Index (BPT Index) analyzes and compares transformation processes towards democracy worldwide. BPT Index is one of the components of the larger Bertelsmann Transformation Index. The state of political transformation in the BPT Index consists of 5 criteria. The concept of democracy goes beyond free elections and political participation and it includes the functioning of the rule of law and stateness as well as the acceptance, representation and political culture of the democratic system. More than 130 countries and territories in the BPT Index are classified as 1 of 5 types of regime: democracy in consolidation; defective democracy; highly defective democracy; moderate autocracy; hard-line autocracy.

Unlike the Freedom House's Nations in Transit 2020 report which reported Serbia's dramatic shift from a democratic into a transitional/hybrid regime, neither The EIU Democracy Index nor the BPT Index detected similar degree of regime transformation. In the latest EIU Democracy Index (published in January 2020) Serbia scored 6.41 out of 10 and is classified as a flawed democracy (same category as all the other 11 EU Central and Eastern Europe countries). Similarly, in the latest BPT 2020 Index (published in April 2020) Serbia scored 6.95 out of 10 and is classified as an incomplete democracy (same category as the majority of other Central and Eastern Europe and Balkans countries). In fact, **in both EIU Democracy Index and the BPT Index, Serbia is clearly seen as a democratic regime with a score significantly above the necessary margin of slipping into a transitional/hybrid regime category.**

While fully respecting the fact that different democracy indexes employ dissimilar indicators and measuring techniques, nevertheless, given the similarity of research topic, it would be expected for their conclusions to be complementary, differing only in degree (minor discrepancies in scores), and not in kind (placing countries in dissimilar categories). Yet, apparently that is not the case.

The biases of certain indexes can be best captured when contrasting them with findings of other similar indexes. For instance, it is worth seeing the score comparison between NIT 2020 report and EIU Democracy Index. When compared, the scores of the EU member states and Serbia in NIT 2020 and EIU Democracy Index, actually display a certain margin of dissimilarity. Indeed, **while the scores of the majority of the observed countries remain similar across the NIT 2020 report and EIU 2019 Democracy**

Country	NIT 2020 Democratic Percentage	EIU Democracy Score	Score Discrepancy
Estonia	85	79	6
Slovenia	82	75	7
Latvia	80	75	5
Lithuania	77	75	2
Czech Republic	77	77	0
Poland	65	66	-1
Slovakia	71	72	-1
Romania	57	65	-8
Bulgaria	59	70	-11
Croatia	54	66	-12
Serbia	49	64	-15
Hungary	49	66	-17

Table 3 NIT 2020 and EIU Democracy Scores comparison

Index, a more notable discrepancy is only registered in the case of two countries, Serbia and Hungary. NIT gave these countries significantly lower scores and indeed displayed a negative bias against them. In particular, **Serbia scored 15% worse in NIT 2020 Index compared to EIU 2019 Democracy Index**, while Hungary registered a significant 17% lower democracy assessment.

A similar kind of negative bias against Serbia in the NIT 2020 report can be found when looking at the categorization of regime types in the Western Balkans. While Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia all maintain the same categorizations across NIT 2020 and EIU 2019 Democracy Index reports, **Serbia is again disadvantaged in the NIT 2020 report, being classified as the transitional/hybrid regime.**

Country	NIT 2020 Categorization	EIU Democracy Index Categorization
Albania	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	Hybrid regime
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	Hybrid regime
Montenegro	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	Hybrid regime
North Macedonia	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	Hybrid regime
Serbia	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	Democracy (flawed)

Table 4 NIT 2020 and EIU Democracy Index 2019 categorization comparison – WB countries

The same negative bias against Serbia is registered when contrasting NIT 2020 report with the BPT 2020 Index. While the vast majority of observed countries fall into the corresponding similar categories across these two reports, it is again Hungary, Serbia, and additionally Croatia, which are disadvantaged, misplaced. In fact, **BPT 2020 Index clearly regards both Serbia and Hungary as democratic, and not transitional/hybrid regimes.**

Country	NIT 2020 Categorization	BPT 2020 Index Categorization	Categorization
Czech Republic	Consolidated Democracy	Democracy in Consolidation	Same
Estonia	Consolidated Democracy	Democracy in Consolidation	Same
Latvia	Consolidated Democracy	Democracy in Consolidation	Same
Lithuania	Consolidated Democracy	Democracy in Consolidation	Same
Slovakia	Consolidated Democracy	Democracy in Consolidation	Same
Slovenia	Consolidated Democracy	Democracy in Consolidation	Same
Croatia	Semi-Consolidated Democracy	Democracy in Consolidation	Different
Bulgaria	Semi-Consolidated Democracy	Democracy (defective)	Same
Poland	Semi-Consolidated Democracy	Democracy (defective)	Same
Romania	Semi-Consolidated Democracy	Democracy (defective)	Same
Hungary	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	Democracy (defective)	Different
Serbia	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	Democracy (defective)	Different

Table 5 NIT 2020 and BPT 2020 categorization comparison – selected European countries

Therefore, the abovementioned comparisons clearly demonstrate that the NIT 2020 findings put Serbia in an unmerited disadvantaged position compared to other Central Europe and Balkans countries. Serbia is consistently under-assessed in its scores and miss-categorized as a transitional or hybrid regime. Given the fact that none of the other democracy indexes registered or indicated

such democratic “backsliding” in 2020, joined with the fact that most of the other Central Europe and Balkans countries maintain same categorization across different indexes, it can only be concluded that the NIT 2020 findings have a dubious negative bias against Serbia.

3. WHAT MAKES SERBIA “BACKSLIDE” INTO A HYBRID REGIME ACCORDING TO THE FREEDOM HOUSE?

The Nations in Transit 2020 report pompously declares that, **for the first time since 2003**, Serbia is no longer categorized as democracy, but rather morphed into a hybrid/transitional regime. It is worth scrutinizing why Serbia was, according to the NIT reports, a democratic regime in 2019, but a hybrid regime in 2020. In other words, what made Serbia an “electoral democracy that meets relatively high standards for the selection of national leaders” in 2019 into a regime type in which “democratic institutions are fragile, and substantial challenges to the protection of political rights and civil liberties exist” in 2020. This is best understood by comparing the results from the NIT reports in 2019 and 2020.

The NIT country democracy scores are actually a straight average of 7 indicators - National Democratic Governance (NDI), Electoral Process (EP), Civil Society (CS), Independent Media (IM), Local Democratic Governance (LDG), Judicial Framework and Independence (JFI) and Corruption (CO). In which of these 7 scores did Serbia in 2020 register a major decline compared to 2019? What made it slip into the category of hybrid/transitional regimes?

Year	NDG	EP	CS	IM	LDG	JFI	CO
2019	3.5	4.5	5.5	3.25	4	3.5	3.75
2020	3.5	4.5	5.5	3.25	4	3.5	3.5
Status change	No	No	No	No	No	No	Decrease

Table 6 NIT 2020: overview of annual score changes - Serbia

What is seen by comparing Serbia’s scores in the NIT 2019 report and NIT 2020 report is that there are actually no major score differences. **Serbia maintained same scores in 6 out of 7 indicators, with only a drop of in one score (0.25 points is the minimal score change that a country can record in the NIT reports).** The only category in which a decline was recorded this year is the category of Corruption, for which Serbia received a score of 3.50, as compared to the last year’s 3.75. Bluntly, **Serbia’s categorization as the hybrid regime is the sole consequence of the smallest possible decline in its NIT 2020 corruption score.** To reiterate, **beyond the corruption indicator, which displayed minimal decline, every single other score remained absolutely the same – yet in 2020 Serbia is no longer framed as democratic, but rather as a hybrid/transitional regime.**

Clearly, such counter-intuitive and unconvincing conclusions suggest to a degree inaccurate and rigid NIT report’s categorization methods. Tectonic shifts of countries backsliding into hybrid/transitional modes of governance and moving from electoral democracy with relatively high standards for the selection of national leaders into regimes whose democratic institutions are fragile – simply cannot be either explained or scientifically proven by pointing to one single indicator that recorded a miniscule drop within a year.

3.1. DID CORRUPTION ACTUALLY WORSEN IN SERBIA OVER THE LAST YEAR? NIT 2020 REPORT'S UNFOUNDED CONCLUSION

According to the NIT 2020 Serbia country report, corruption rating declined “due to the cumulative increase in high-level corruption coupled with the absence, and in some cases actual dismantlement, of policies and institutions that would successfully fight or prevent corruption.” These claims are then substantiated by the *prEUgovor coalition monitoring report* from September 2019, the *Fiscal Council of Serbia March 2019 report*, and most importantly *Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)*, which allegedly also “suggested a deteriorating situation”. These reports are further complemented with only 3 individual instances which the author arbitrarily labeled as cases of alleged corruption. How founded are these conclusions?

First, the author could have referred to the *Annual progress reports of the European Commission for Serbia*. In its last report, The European Commission (EC) assessed Serbia as having “some level of preparation in the fight against corruption,”, thus displaying a “**limited progress**” in this area. Furthermore, the EC points to the Serbian *Law on the prevention of corruption* (also known as law on the *Anti-Corruption Agency*), adopted in May 2019. It also refers to the *Law on organization and jurisdiction of government authorities in suppression of organized crime, terrorism and corruption*, which entered into force in March 2018, and which EC sees as “being implemented, but it is too early to fully assess its impact”. Clearly, the EC Serbia Annual report sees no regression or backsliding with regards to the state of corruption in Serbia, therefore clearly standing in contrast with and refuting the claims of NIT 2020 report that claim corruption in Serbia increased over the last year.

To prove the claims on corruption deterioration in Serbia, the NIT 2020 report also refers to the *prEUgovor coalition monitoring report* from September 2019, a study published by a network of Serbian civil society organizations monitoring the implementation of policies relating to the accession negotiations between Serbia and the EU.¹ Yet, even this report does not substantiate such claims. This report states that “generally speaking, **there have been some improvements in the legislative framework for the fight against corruption**, but there have been no improvements in the implementation of the existing one since March 2019”. Again, the general assessment of the *prEUgovor* report is there are some improvements in the legislative framework, with no changes with regards to their implementation. There is no mention of backsliding or regression with regards to the corruption in Serbia, leaving NIT 2020 report's claims highly dubious. A meaningful and academically rigorous link between the *prEUgovor* report and NIT 2020 declining corruption score just cannot be drawn.

Not even does the *Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)*, the leading global indicator of public sector corruption, substantiate the perception of corruption deterioration in Serbia over the last year, as claimed in the NIT 2020 report. The 2019 Transparency International's CPI was published in January of 2020. In this report, unsurprisingly,

¹ Members of the *prEUgovor* are: ASTRA - Anti trafficking Action, Autonomous Women's Center (AWC), Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), Center for Applied European Studies (CAES), Center for Investigative Reporting in Serbia (CIRS), Group 484 and Transparency Serbia (TS).

Serbia's score remained absolutely the same as in the previous 2018 CPI, published in 2019. Its score in both 2018 and 2019 CPI reports remained the same – score 39.

How did the authors of the NIT 2020 report justify and substantiate the claim of a dropping Serbia's corruption situation – given the fact that the documents they refer to in their own study – state just the opposite? This truly remains a puzzle of academic scrutiny and rigor worth discerning.

To further assess the fight against corruption in Serbia, it is worth referring to the other international indexes and rankings that assess corruption across the globe, which NIT 2020 report's authors did not consult. For instance, anti-corruption policy is also measured as a subcategory in the *Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI)*. Describing the anti-corruption policy in Serbia, the 2020 BTI reports that **“the institutional and legal framework to address corruption in Serbia is formally established; some of this legislation is of high quality even by international standards”**. In the 2020 BTI report, Serbia received a score of 6. Only to be expected, in the previous BTI report (published in 2018) Serbia also scored 6. Clearly, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index **saw no decline** in the anti-corruption framework in Serbia over the last 4 years.

Another index measuring corruption in different countries is the *World Justice Project's (WJP) Rule of Law Index*. This Index provides detailed information and original data regarding a variety of dimensions of the rule of law, including corruption. In particular, this factor considers 3 forms of corruption: bribery, improper influence by public or private interests, and misappropriation of public funds or other resources. Its findings are no different than the findings of all the above mentioned indexes – **corruption in Serbia over the last year did not deteriorate**. Its corruption score in 2020 WJP Rule of Law Index was 0.44, exactly the same as in the WJP 2019 Rule of Law Index. Moreover, **with regards to corruption international ranking, Serbia even registered a relative improvement compared to the other countries** (i.e. other countries' scores decreased over the observed period).

	NIT 2020 (Corruption)	TI Corruption Perceptions Index	BS Transformation Index (Anti- corruption policy)	WJP Rule of Law Index (Absence of Corruption)
2019 Score	3.75	39	6 (biannual – last published in 2018)	0,44
2020 Score	3.5	39	6	0,44
Score Change	YES	NO	NO	NO

Table 7 Overview of corruption score changes in different corruption indexes - Serbia

The Nations in Transit 2020 report registered a decline in Serbia's fight against corruption over the last year. Consecutively, that pushed Serbia “over the edge”, moving it from the democratic into the hybrid/transitional regime category. Yet, **there is not a single source supporting such an assessment**. Neither European Commission Serbia 2019 Progress Report and prEUgovor coalition 2019 monitoring report, nor the Transparency International's 2020 Corruption

Perceptions Index, Bertelsmann Stiftung's 2020 Transformation Index, or World Justice Project's 2020 Rule of Law Index – see the area of corruption in Serbia as regressing or backsliding over the last year.

The sole conclusion that can be drawn is that **the claims put forward by the authors of the NIT 2020 report are unsubstantiated and factually unsupported. They draw conclusions against the key findings of the sources they quote, demonstrating notable deficiencies in their academic correctness and research rigor.** More worryingly, they demonstrate a troublesome approach of arbitrary quantifying social data, deriving general conclusions without previously factually substantiating individual claims, and allowing biases to penetrate social science research, which ought to be objective. Such an approach should not have an unquestionable and guaranteed place in the field of social science research.

4. OTHER FACTORS UNDERMINING THE VALIDITY OF NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2020 REPORT

4.1. DISTORTED FOCUS

The most present terms and categories in the entire conclusion of the report are “media” and “opposition”. The term “media” is mentioned 24 times, and the “opposition” 29 times, in all sections of the report, while the term “government” is mentioned 20 times, and “Vučić” 14 times. This can be an illustration for the conclusion that the Freedom House report mainly focuses on two trends in 2019 - the position and role of the media in political life, as well as on the political conflict initiated by the part of the opposition in Serbia and directed towards the government. The report also pays great attention to the project of a number of opposition parties to boycott the regular parliamentary and local elections. Only the word “boycott” is mentioned 13 times in this report, almost as much as the word “Vučić”.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the biggest proportion of Freedom House’s Nations in Transit 2020 report dedicated to Serbia is focusing on allegations of the ruling party systematically curtailing “the ability of the opposition to play a role in the business of governing” in the parliament. The report speaks vocally of “the questionable legitimacy of the ruling party’s majority” which is “exerting pressure on voters, particularly those employed in the public sector,”, actions to which, the Alliance for Serbia, an umbrella group of opposition parties, reacted by boycotting the parliament sessions.

However, all of these political happenings frequently mentioned in the report, by the NIT methodology, actually **fall under the categories of National Democratic Governance (NDI) and Electoral Process (EP) – both of which Serbia recorded no score change or decrease in 2020 report.**

4.2. ONE SIDED AND FRAGMENTED DEPICTIONS OF REALITY

There are several instances in the NIT 2020 Serbia country report titled Executive Summary, as well as in NIT 2020 in which the author made one sided remarks or failed to genuinely depict the entirety of the situation. The following are just few examples, depicting the extent of factual misrepresentation in the whole country report:

1. The NIT 2020 Country report states: *The process of adopting a media strategy was drawn out over the year. Although the working group tasked with drawing up the document had submitted a draft at the end of 2018, the version the government shared with the European Commission in July 2019 was stripped of numerous safeguards. (...) Representatives of journalist associations stressed that years had been squandered thanks to such government foot-dragging.*

It is important to note that **Serbia adopted its Media Strategy in January 2020 through an inclusive, transparent and consensual manner**. This was done with the support of representatives of the OSCE, the EU Delegation to Serbia, the Embassy of Norway and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The Working Group continues to work on the Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy.

2. The NIT 2020 Country report states: *During the course of 2019, Serbia's EU accession process slowed down noticeably, with the country opening only two additional negotiating chapters.*

Speaking about the process of Serbia's accession to the European Union, the author creates the impression of Serbia's unwillingness to progress **without mentioning that the principal reason is that the whole of 2019 was marked by elections for the European Parliament and the constitution of EU institutions**, which is why the Union was not ready to offer Serbia a larger number of chapters. It is also important to note that Serbia fulfilled all criteria to open additional chapters in 2019, which will hopefully be opened at the next Intergovernmental Conference.

3. The NIT 2020 report states: *In February 2019, the Alliance for Serbia, an umbrella group of opposition parties, walked out what it dubbed the "usurper parliament," forming a so-called free parliament in a bid to undercut the former's legitimacy. The "free parliament" has been in session ever since, to little effect.*

Contrary to the author's claim in Report, **the so-called "free parliament" does not exist in Serbia, and has never been "in session"**.

5. References

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