

— THE MONITOR'S VIEW —

## A new insight on Putin's moves against Ukraine

Many former Soviet states like Ukraine are making progress against corruption. Russia is not. Is clean governance a threat to the Kremlin?



Reuters

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy attends a Jan. 20 ceremony in tribute to fallen defenders of Ukraine.

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**By the Monitor's Editorial Board**

Russian troops are poised to invade Ukraine and yet many experts disagree on why. Does President Vladimir Putin want to restore the Russian Empire? Prevent Ukraine from joining NATO? Split Europe from the United States?

Well, now add another theory to the mix. Based on a new report from corruption watchdog Transparency International, seven countries in the former Soviet Union – from Estonia to Uzbekistan – have made significant reforms toward honest and clean governance in the last few years. Not so in Mr. Putin's Russia. In the report's ranking of countries on perceptions of corruption, Russia's score has worsened. A new law, for example, has made reporting on corruption even riskier for pro-democracy activists.

It may be only a matter of time before Russian citizens wonder why so many neighbors are moving toward civic equality, transparent government, and other essentials for curbing corruption. Ukraine's moves toward democratic ideals since 2014 may be driving Mr. Putin to end its progress. The country has a close association with Russian history, culture, and geography.

While Ukraine has instituted a host of anti-corruption reforms under President Volodymyr Zelenskyy since 2019, the Transparency report shows one of Russia's other neighbors, Armenia, is the world's top mover in making anti-corruption changes over the past few years. And that is despite the fact that the small landlocked nation of nearly 3 million suffered an embarrassing defeat in a brief war with Azerbaijan in 2020, triggering political turmoil.

Armenia's military loss in the war, however, has been widely attributed to the country's legacy of corruption from the Soviet era. It has stirred even more support for reforms, such as laws for an independent judiciary and a rule for public figures

to declare their financial interests. By setting up anti-graft watchdogs, Armenia can help guarantee the country's security, says Haykuhi Harutyunyan, head of a new body to prevent corruption.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, a reformer who rose to power in a 2018 nonviolent "velvet" revolution, promised to end the country's oligarch-led kleptocracy. "There will be no privileged people in Armenia and that's it," he said after taking power.

The Transparency report finds Armenia has "expanded civil liberties, paving the way for more sustainable civic engagement and accountability." If such reforms in many of Russia's neighbors are the real threat that worries Mr. Putin, they could also be the best defense against Russian meddling. Many nations have rallied behind Ukraine and are sending arms and money. They would only do so knowing that Ukrainians reject corruption as a social norm. And that also sends a strong signal to Russians to do the same.

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