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CAMBRIDGE GOVERNANCE LABS

# Regional Deep Dives: Seven Worlds

How liberty, capability, and institutional erosion  
play out across the world's seven political  
regions

Political Topology Project

91 countries · 7 regions · 225 years

February 2026

## Seven Regions at a Glance

REGION	N	MEAN L	MEAN HCI	R (L×HCI)	% FREE	% CAP. AUTOCRACY	TREND
Europe	23	82	91	0.785	96%	4%	Mixed
Americas	12	58	78	0.642	42%	25%	Declining
Asia-Pacific	15	47	76	0.534	27%	40%	Mixed
Sub-Saharan Africa	15	38	62	0.512	13%	20%	Declining
South Asia	8	42	65	0.471	13%	25%	Declining
MENA	10	22	83	0.298	0%	80%	Stagnant
Eurasia	8	14	75	0.268	0%	100%	Declining

# 1. Europe: Strongest but Fracturing

23 countries · Mean L=82 · Mean HCI=91 ·  $r=0.785$  · 22/23 Free & Capable

Europe remains the world's freest and most capable region, with the strongest correlation between liberty and development ( $r=0.785$ ). Twenty-two of 23 European countries qualify as "Free and Capable." But the aggregate conceals a growing fracture between a stable northwest and a volatile southeast.

## Poland: The Recovery

L=82 · HCI=88 · Velocity: +0.8/yr (since 2023)

The Tusk coalition reversed 8 years of PiS-led erosion. Voter turnout of 74.4% was the highest in Polish democratic history. Remaining challenge: President Nawrocki creates institutional friction. The recovery demonstrates that reversal IS possible before the event horizon.

## France: Stress Testing

L=78 · HCI=93 · Velocity: -0.3/yr

RN normalization, Yellow Vest disruptions, and executive centralization under Macron create institutional strain. France's trajectory echoes the US 10 years earlier — declining slowly from a high base. The question is whether the Fifth Republic's structural safeguards hold.

## Hungary: The Anchor

L=52 · HCI=84 · Velocity: -1.8/yr

Orbán's NER system has been in place for 15 years. 90% of media controlled. EU funds used to sustain patronage networks. Hungary's gravitational pull affects neighbors: Slovakia, Serbia, and parts of the western Balkans are influenced by the "illiberal democracy" model.

## What to Watch

- Hungary's influence on EU institutional norms
- AfD trajectory in Germany (state-level power)
- Western Balkans EU accession and its effect on reform incentives
- Nordic resilience under AI/disinformation pressure

## 2. The Americas: The US Pulls the Average Down

12 countries · Mean L=58 · Mean HCI=78 ·  $r=0.642$

The Western Hemisphere's aggregate decline is driven substantially by the United States. Excluding the US, the region shows a mixed picture: strong performers (Costa Rica, Uruguay, Chile, Canada) offset by entrenched autocracies (Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua) and eroding democracies (Mexico, Brazil).

### United States: The Fast Collapse

L=48 (PTI) · HCI=92 · Velocity:  $-3.1/\text{yr}$

The dataset's most dramatic case. From L=94 (2015) to L=48 (PTI, 2025). V-Dem reclassification as "electoral autocracy" (Sep 2025). Fastest-declining consolidated democracy on record. Credible range: L=48–84. Even at most generous estimates, decline velocity is unprecedented.

### Chile: The Democratic Resilience

L=88 · HCI=87 · Velocity:  $+0.2/\text{yr}$

Chile navigated a constitutional crisis (2019-2022) and emerged with democracy intact. Two constitutional referenda, both resolved peacefully. Demonstrates that institutional stress tests can strengthen rather than weaken democratic norms when institutions hold.

### Venezuela: The Collapse Complete

L=8 · HCI=68 · Velocity:  $-0.5/\text{yr}$  (stabilized at bottom)

Liberty fell 64 points from peak. HCI held initially, then began declining. Now firmly in the tyranny well. Maduro regime survived 2019 challenge when military chose repression. Capital flight preceded the final institutional collapse by approximately 4 years.

### What to Watch

- US 2026 midterm elections and institutional independence
- Mexico's AMLO judicial reform aftermath
- Brazil's democratic consolidation under Lula III
- Venezuela: post-Maduro transition scenarios

## 3. Asia-Pacific: The Divergence

15 countries · Mean L=47 · Mean HCI=76 ·  $r=0.534$

Asia-Pacific contains the world's widest political divergence: from Japan (L=96) and Taiwan (L=92) to North Korea (L=2) and Myanmar (L=8). The region is home to the most successful autocratic modernizer (China) and the world's fastest-growing democracy (Taiwan). It is also where the capability-freedom decoupling is most dramatic.

### Taiwan: The Democratic Ascent

L=92 · HCI=93 · Velocity: +0.6/yr

Taiwan's trajectory is the modernization theory success story: autocratic modernization under KMT, democratic transition in 1987, steady deepening since. Now among the world's freest societies. The external threat from China paradoxically strengthens democratic identity.

### China: The Vertical Miracle

L=5 · HCI=86 · Velocity: 0.0/yr

Maximum decoupling. HCI rose 67 points, Liberty gained 1. The world's most successful proof that autocratic modernization can work at scale. But: debt/GDP 300%+, property sector declining, youth unemployment rising. The model may be approaching structural limits.

### India: Silent Erosion at Scale

L=62 · HCI=68 · Velocity: -1.5/yr

The world's largest democracy is eroding under cover of electoral legitimacy. V-Dem downgrade to "electoral autocracy" (2017). Press freedom, minority rights, and judicial independence all deteriorating. Yet economic growth continues, masking institutional damage.

### What to Watch

- Taiwan Strait dynamics and democratic solidarity
- India's institutional trajectory under Modi successor
- China's debt restructuring and political stability
- Myanmar: military junta vs. resistance government
- Philippines: Marcos Jr. institutional trajectory

## 4. Sub-Saharan Africa: Capability Gap

15 countries · Mean L=38 · Mean HCI=62 ·  $r=0.512$

Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest mean HCI of any region (62) and modest liberty scores (mean 38). The region's challenge is that both capability and freedom are below global averages. Democratic gains from the 1990s Third Wave have partially reversed, with military coups returning in the Sahel.

### **The Gambia: Slow Rebuilding**

L=30 · HCI=52 · Velocity: +0.5/yr

Post-Jammeh transition (2017) shows that even deeply autocratic states can begin recovery.

Progress is slow and fragile. The Gambia represents the hard work of democratic reconstruction from near-zero.

### **Nigeria: The Unsteady Giant**

L=43 · HCI=55 · Velocity: -0.8/yr

Africa's largest economy and most populous nation is in slow decline. Security challenges (Boko Haram, banditry), corruption, and electoral irregularities erode democratic credibility. The combination of low capability and declining liberty creates a dual vulnerability.

## 5. South Asia: Democracy Under Pressure

8 countries · Mean L=42 · Mean HCI=65 ·  $r=0.471$

South Asia's democratic trajectory is dominated by India (62% of regional population). Sri Lanka's recovery from crisis, Bangladesh's instability, and Pakistan's military-civilian oscillation all contribute to a region where democracy exists but is under sustained pressure. The correlation between liberty and capability ( $r=0.471$ ) is weak, suggesting structural barriers to the development-freedom nexus.

## 6. Middle East & North Africa: Maximum Decoupling

10 countries · Mean L=22 · Mean HCI=83 ·  $r=0.298$  · 0% Free

MENA is the region of maximum decoupling. Mean HCI of 83 paired with mean Liberty of 22 creates a gap of +61 points — the largest anywhere. The Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait) have built world-class infrastructure, healthcare, and education systems without any meaningful political opening. The correlation between liberty and capability ( $r=0.298$ ) is the weakest in the dataset. Zero countries qualify as Free.

### Saudi Arabia: The Extreme Case

L=7 · HCI=89 · Velocity: 0.0/yr

The most extreme decoupling in the dataset. A country where citizens have access to world-class healthcare, excellent infrastructure, and high income — with near-zero political freedom. MBS's Vision 2030 invests heavily in capability while tightening political control. The Saudi model is the ultimate test case for whether capability can substitute for liberty indefinitely.

### Israel: Democracy Under War Cover

L=60 · HCI=92 · Velocity: -0.7/yr

Israel's judicial overhaul (2023-24) and subsequent war provided cover for accelerating institutional erosion. 396 anti-democratic bills introduced during wartime. The trajectory parallels Hungary 2010-2015: incremental capture under cover of democratic legitimacy. Once the freest state in MENA; now its trajectory is the most concerning.

## 7. Eurasia & Central Asia: The Deepest Basin

8 countries · Mean L=14 · Mean HCI=75 ·  $r=0.268$  · 0% Free · 100% Capable Autocracy

Eurasia is the world's least free region and the one where the capability-freedom decoupling is most complete. Every country in the region qualifies as a Capable Autocracy. The correlation between liberty and capability ( $r=0.268$ ) is the weakest anywhere — meaning that capability has essentially zero relationship to political freedom here. This is the endpoint of the decoupling process.

### Russia: The Consolidated Tyranny

L=13 · HCI=79 · Velocity:  $-0.5/\text{yr}$

Russia sits deep in the tyranny well. Under Putin, institutional capture is complete (Stage 8). The Ukraine war has accelerated repression domestically while projecting the authoritarian model externally. Russia is both a data point and an exporter — its playbook (NGO suppression, media capture, foreign agent laws) has been adopted across the post-Soviet space and beyond.

### Central Asian States: Stable Autocracies

Mean L=9 · Mean HCI=71 · Velocity:  $\sim 0.0/\text{yr}$

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan form a block of remarkably stable autocracies. Resource wealth (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan) funds patronage. Russian and Chinese security guarantees reduce external pressure for reform. These states have been in the tyranny well for decades with no movement toward the surface.

**Regional conclusion:** Eurasia demonstrates that the tyranny well is not a temporary condition but a durable equilibrium. States that reach this depth do not spontaneously emerge. The region's complete decoupling ( $r=0.268$ ) means that economic development, education, and healthcare investment have zero predictive power for political freedom here. This is the world that the "Great Decoupling" creates at its logical endpoint.

## Regional Comparison Summary

METRIC	EUROPE	AMERICAS	ASIA-PAC	SSA	SOUTH ASIA	MENA	EURASIA
Mean Liberty	82	58	47	38	42	22	14
Mean HCI	91	78	76	62	65	83	75
L×HCI Gap	+9	+20	+29	+24	+23	+61	+61
Correlation (r)	0.785	0.642	0.534	0.512	0.471	0.298	0.268
% Declining	35%	58%	60%	80%	75%	40%	75%
% Free	96%	42%	27%	13%	13%	0%	0%

**The key insight across all seven regions:** The capability-freedom correlation weakens as you move from Europe ( $r=0.785$ ) toward Eurasia ( $r=0.268$ ). This is not random — it reflects the spread of the autocratic modernization model. Where authoritarian states have learned to deliver material welfare, the assumption that development leads to freedom breaks down. The Great Decoupling is not a single event but a gradient — and that gradient maps onto geography.

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 Data: Freedom House, V-Dem, Fragile States Index, World Bank, UNDP, IMF  
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