

## Triumphal honours

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PARLA BENE DELL'ITALIA...

Which country improved the most in 2021?

EACH YEAR *The Economist* picks a “country of the year”. The award goes not to the biggest, the richest or the happiest, but to the one that in our view improved the most in 2021. Past winners have included Uzbekistan (for abolishing slavery), Colombia (for making peace) and Tunisia (for embracing democracy).

This year was a difficult one. Covid-19 continued to spread misery, as brilliantly designed vaccines were unevenly distributed and new variants such as Omicron emerged. In many countries civil liberties and democratic norms were eroded. Russia's main opposition leader was jailed. Donald Trump's supporters stormed the US Capitol. Civil wars gripped Ethiopia and Myanmar. Yet amid the gloom, a few countries shone.

In tiny **Samoa** courts defused a constitutional crisis, tossed out the ruling party of 33 years and a prime minister who claimed to have been chosen by God, and installed a reformist, the first woman to hold the job. **Moldova**, one of the poorest countries in Europe, has long been a sink of Russian money-laundering. But in late 2020 it elected the graft-busting Maia Sandu as president and in 2021 it gave her party control of parliament.

**Zambia** reclaimed its democracy. A year ago the country was corrupt and broke. In August its rulers tried to rig an election, but Zambians voted for Hakainde Hichilema, a liberal businessman, by such a wide margin that the rigging failed. Mr Hichilema has since struck a deal with the IMF, promised to cut wasteful subsidies on fuel and electricity, and started to investigate corruption.

**Lithuania** stood up for democratic values, too. If this Baltic state were a city, it would barely make the top 40 in China by population. Yet it defied the government in Beijing by letting Taiwan open a representative office in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital. It also advised its citizens to throw away Chinese-made smartphones, after its spooks found what they called censorship software that could be activated without warning.

Lithuania stood up to other authoritarian regimes as well. It gave sanctuary to dissidents from next-door Belarus and Russia, including the woman who probably won Belarus's most recent election, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. The despot who stole that poll, Alexander Lukashenko, tried to take revenge by forcing crowds of refugees across the Lithuanian border. Lithuania responded firmly, yet more humanely than Poland, which Belarus also provoked in the same way. China is determined to bully Lithuania into submission (see China section). A Chinese newspaper mocked its size, likening it with great originality to “a mouse, or even a flea”. Democrats everywhere admire its pluck. Even so, it is not our winner.

That honour goes to **Italy**. Not for the prowess of its footballers, who won Europe's big trophy, nor its pop stars, who won the Eurovision song contest, but for its politics. *The Economist* has often criticised Italy for picking leaders, such as Silvio Berlusconi, who could usefully have followed the Eurovision-winning song's admonition to “shut up and behave”. Because of weak governance, Italians were poorer in 2019 than they had been in 2000. Yet this year, Italy changed.

In Mario Draghi, it acquired a competent, internationally respected prime minister. For once, a broad majority of its politicians buried their differences to back a programme of thoroughgoing reform that should mean Italy gets the funds to which it is entitled under the EU's post-pandemic recovery plan. Italy's covid vaccination rate is among the highest in Europe. And after a difficult 2020, its economy is recovering more speedily than those of France or Germany. There is a danger that this unaccustomed burst of sensible governance could be reversed. Mr Draghi wants to be president, a more ceremonial job, and may be succeeded by a less competent prime minister. But it is hard to deny that the Italy of today is a better place than it was in December 2020. For that, it is our country of the year. *Auguroni!* ■

