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[Home](#) > Russia

Russia

Country:

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Year:

2015

FIW Status:

NF

PR Rating:

6

CL Rating:

6

Aggregate Score:

23

Combined Freedom Score:

6.0

Overview:

The Russian political environment in 2014 was dominated by events in neighboring Ukraine. In February, a mass protest movement—triggered in late 2013 by corrupt, Russian-aligned president Viktor Yanukovich’s refusal to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU)—overcame police violence and forced the unpopular leader to flee to Russia. To discourage any similar movement inside Russia and regain leverage over Ukraine, Russian president Vladimir Putin ordered a military invasion. Crimea was occupied and formally annexed to the Russian Federation in March, and despite Kremlin denials, Russian troops played a role in ongoing separatist violence in Ukraine’s easternmost regions. The intervention was justified with claims that ethnic Russians in Ukraine were threatened by Ukrainian ultranationalists who had supposedly seized power in Kyiv.

While Russia’s relations with Europe and the United States had already been deteriorating, the invasion of Ukraine forced the democratic powers to respond. The United States, the EU, and other allied countries imposed a series of sanctions that targeted individuals around Putin, key companies that support his regime or allegedly manage his illicit wealth, and important economic sectors like banking and energy. The sanctions, combined with plummeting world oil prices and existing economic weaknesses in Russia, helped to fuel capital flight, a dramatically falling ruble, and a deepening budget deficit. Russia’s own countersanctions, targeting European agricultural imports and other goods, only added to the suffering of businesses and consumers.

Faced with international pressure and the rising potential for domestic discontent, the government expanded its control of the media, stepped up a propaganda campaign to justify its actions and vilify its opponents, and cracked down on independent news outlets, particularly online. Journalists, politicians, and family members who sought to investigate the deaths of Russian servicemen in Ukraine encountered bureaucratic obstruction and trumped-up criminal charges. Regional elections in September were tightly controlled from above, with any coherent opposition eliminated. By the end of the year, Russia's government was increasingly isolated from the international community and struggling to neutralize anticorruption activists and other domestic critics.

Ratings Change:

Russia's civil liberties rating declined from 5 to 6 due to expanded media controls, a dramatically increased level of propaganda on state-controlled television, and new restrictions on the ability of some citizens to travel abroad.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 7 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 1 / 12

The 1993 constitution established a strong presidency with the power to dismiss and appoint, pending parliamentary confirmation, the prime minister. Putin served two four-year presidential terms from 2000 to 2008, and remained the de facto paramount leader while working as prime minister until 2012, violating the spirit if not the letter of the constitution's two-term limit. The March 2012 presidential election was skewed in favor of Putin, who benefited from preferential media treatment, numerous abuses of incumbency, and procedural irregularities during the vote count, among other advantages. He won an official 63.6 percent of the vote against a field of weak, hand-chosen opponents, led by Communist Party leader Gennadiy Zyuganov with 17.2 percent. Under a 2008 constitutional amendment, Putin is set to serve a six-year term, and will be eligible for another in 2018.

The Federal Assembly consists of the 450-seat State Duma and an upper chamber, the 166-seat Federation Council. The 2008 constitutional amendment extended Duma terms from four to five years. The deeply flawed 2011 Duma elections were marked by a "convergence of the state and the governing party, limited political competition and a lack of fairness," according to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, but many voters used them to express protest against the status quo. The ruling United Russia party captured just 238 seats, a significant drop from the 315 seats won in 2007. The Communist Party placed second with 92 seats, followed by A Just Russia with 64 and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia with 56. Registration and other obstacles ensured that truly independent opposition parties could not compete.

Since the 2007 elections, all Duma deputies have been elected on the basis of party-list proportional representation. In February 2014, Putin signed a law restoring a system in which half of Duma members are elected by proportional representation and half in single-member districts. Half the members of the upper chamber are appointed by governors and half by regional legislatures, usually with strong federal input. Since 2011, only locally elected

politicians have been eligible to serve in the Federation Council; the change was designed to benefit United Russia, as most local officeholders are party members.

A law signed in May 2012 restored gubernatorial elections, ending a system of presidential appointments that dated to 2004. The new rules allowed federal and regional officials to screen the candidates for governor, and United Russia has won every subsequent election. Nevertheless, given the ability of anticorruption campaigner Aleksey Navalny to win a relatively strong 27 percent in the 2013 Moscow mayoral election, the country's growing economic strains, and the unpredictable risks of the Ukraine war, the authorities in 2014 sought to close the process further, blocking the registration of genuine opposition candidates. As a result, the Kremlin-backed victors won by large margins and avoided the need for a runoff. Turnout rates were lower than usual, and for the Moscow City Duma, the lowest since the creation of that body in 1993—21 percent. The authorities blocked electoral watchdogs from monitoring the polls; representatives of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Golos were illegally prevented from observing elections in Chelyabinsk, Samara, and Bashkortostan and blocked from many precincts in the Nizhny Novgorod and Moscow regions.

Beginning in 2015, voters in municipal elections will have the option to vote “against all,” according to legislation signed into law in June. Initial versions of the bill sought to return this option to federal and regional elections as well, but the provisions were removed.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 3 / 16

Legislation enacted in April 2012 liberalized party registration rules, allowing the creation of hundreds of new parties. However, none posed a significant threat to the authorities, and many seemed designed to encourage division and confusion among the opposition. Moreover, the Ministry of Justice refused to register Navalny's Party of Progress in September 2014, arguing that even though the party had submitted proof of its branches in 40 regions, the documents on 24 of them came in after the legal deadline.

Opposition politicians and activists are frequently targeted with fabricated criminal cases and other forms of administrative harassment. As Russia's most prominent opposition leader, Navalny spent most of 2014 under house arrest, having faced a series of overlapping investigations and suspended sentences. At the end of December, a Moscow court gave him a suspended 3.5-year sentence in a financial fraud case; his brother was ordered to serve the same term in prison.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12

There is little transparency and accountability in the day-to-day workings of the government. Decisions are adopted behind closed doors, by a small group of individuals whose identities are not often clear, and announced to the population after the fact. Corruption in the government and business world is pervasive, and a growing lack of accountability enables bureaucrats to act with impunity. Many analysts have argued that the political system is essentially a kleptocracy, in which ruling elites plunder public wealth to enrich themselves.

In July 2014, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ordered Russia to pay the

shareholders of the Yukos oil company \$50 billion, finding that Russian officials had manipulated the legal system to expropriate Yukos's assets in 2004. Later that month, the European Court of Human Rights awarded the Yukos shareholders \$2.5 billion on the grounds that the Russian state had violated their property rights by bankrupting the company through punitive tax claims.

In a new case that drew comparisons to the Yukos affair, billionaire businessman Vladimir Yevtushenkov was held under house arrest for 92 days in late 2014 on suspicion of financial crimes. Although ultimately he was not charged, the state seized his highly profitable Bashneft oil company, claiming that it had been illegally privatized. The move was seen as a possible effort to prop up state-owned oil firm Rosneft, which is heavily indebted and controlled by powerful Putin allies.

Foreign companies working in Russia sometimes participate in corrupt practices. In September, U.S. technology company Hewlett Packard agreed to pay a \$58.8 million fine for violating the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act by bribing Russian government officials to win a large contract.

The leadership frequently announces anticorruption campaigns, but their main purpose is to ensure elite loyalty and prevent the issue from mobilizing the opposition. In December 2013, Putin set up a new department in the presidential administration to fight corruption, and in April 2014 he endorsed a new anticorruption strategy; few observers expected either measure to produce concrete results.

Civil Liberties: 16 / 60 (-3)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 4 / 16 (-2)

Although the constitution provides for freedom of speech, vague laws on extremism grant the authorities great discretion to crack down on any speech, organization, or activity that lacks official support. The government controls, directly or through state-owned companies and friendly business magnates, all of the national television networks and many radio and print outlets, as well as most of the media advertising market. These media effectively serve as venues for Kremlin propaganda, which vociferously backs Putin's actions in Ukraine and denounces foreign and domestic opponents. TV Dozhd (Rain), the only politically independent television station, was dropped by multiple cable and satellite providers in early 2014 after angering officials with its reporting, though it survived—partly on the internet—with the help of viewer subscription fees. A law enacted in July banned advertising on cable and satellite channels beginning in 2015, meaning Dozhd and more than 100 regional cable and satellite broadcasters would lose their main source of revenue.

Only a small and shrinking number of radio stations and print outlets with limited reach offer a wide range of viewpoints. The liberal radio station Ekho Moskvyy came under pressure from its state-owned parent company after it broadcast a major interview with Navalny in October, but it continued to operate at year's end. Also in October, Putin signed a law limiting foreigners to a 20 percent stake in media companies. Outlets will face closure if they fail to comply with the cap by January 2017. The measure was expected to damage the independence of key foreign-owned media, including the respected business newspaper *Vedomosti*, which is owned by a Finnish, British, and American consortium.

More than 60 percent of Russians have internet access, and penetration continues to increase. Discussion on the internet had been largely unrestricted until 2012, but following large antigovernment demonstrations in 2011 and 2012, the Kremlin adopted a series of laws that gave it more power to shut down critical websites. Although a Moscow court ordered the closure of the online news agency Rosbalt in October 2013 on the grounds that its website included videos with obscene language, the site was able to continue operating through 2014 under a different license. In March 2014, the prosecutor general instructed the state telecommunications agency Roskomnadzor to block four popular opposition-oriented websites: *Ezhednevny Zhurnal*, Grani.ru, Kasparov.ru, and Navalny's blog. Dozens of other sites were blocked during the year for vaguely defined offenses such as carrying "extremist content."

Also in March, after Roskomnadzor issued a warning to the respected news site Lenta.ru, its editor was fired, and many staff members quit to protest her dismissal. The site subsequently adopted a pro-Kremlin line. The social-networking platform VKontakte came under pressure for resisting the authorities' demands for user data, and owner Pavel Durov resigned as chief executive in April, surrendering control to government-friendly businessmen. In another move to bring blogs and social media under state control, a law that took effect in August required all sites with more than 3,000 visitors a day to register with Roskomnadzor as media outlets, subjecting them to legal measures such as responsibility for the accuracy of posted information.

A law enacted in July required internet companies, including foreign firms, to store the data of Russian users inside Russia, where it could be easily accessed by the authorities; a compliance deadline was set for September 2015 after an earlier January 2015 deadline was deemed impractical.

Russian journalists continue to face physical danger in the course of their work. In August, Kabardian journalist and human rights activist Timur Kuashev was found dead near Nalchik; poisoning was suspected. Before his death, he reported receiving threats from the police for his activities and postings on his blog.

Freedom of religion is respected unevenly. A 1997 law on religion gives the state extensive control and makes it difficult for new or independent groups to operate. The Orthodox Church has a privileged position, working closely with the government on foreign and domestic policy priorities, and in 2009 the president authorized religious instruction in public schools. Regional authorities continue to harass nontraditional groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.

The education system is marred by bureaucratic interference, international isolation, and increasing pressure to toe the Kremlin line on politically sensitive topics. In March 2014, a leading history professor was fired from a Foreign Ministry-affiliated institute for writing an opinion article that compared the imminent annexation of Crimea to Nazi Germany's seizure of Austria. In May, Putin signed a law that prohibits the "rehabilitation of Nazism" and the spreading of "intentionally false information" about the Soviet Union's World War II actions. Historians have warned that the new law could be used to punish scholars who are critical of government policies. Also during the year, the authorities removed more than half of the previously approved school textbooks from the country's classrooms, leaving much of the market in the hands of a publisher owned by a close Putin associate.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12

The government has consistently reduced the space for freedoms of assembly and association. Overwhelming police responses, the use of force, routine arrests, and harsh fines and prison sentences have discouraged unsanctioned protests, though pro-Kremlin groups are able to demonstrate freely. Despite the obstacles, tens of thousands of people turned out for demonstrations against Russian intervention in Ukraine in March and September 2014, and a smaller number gathered in late December to protest Navalny's sentencing, resulting in scores of arrests.

In February, Putin signed a law that increased the penalties for "extremism," adding to an array of restrictions that can be used against activists and NGOs. Groups that investigated Russian aggression in Ukraine and the death of Russian soldiers there faced particular pressure from the authorities during the year. A law enacted in 2012 required all organizations receiving foreign funding and involved in vaguely defined "political activities" to register as "foreign agents" with the Justice Ministry. After organizations refused to register voluntarily, Putin in June 2014 signed a law allowing the Justice Ministry to put them on the list at its discretion. At year's end, the ministry listed 30 organizations on its website, including Golos, the Sakharov Center, the PIR Center, Agora, Memorial, Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg, the Institute for the Development of Information Freedom, and Public Verdict. To remove themselves from the list, NGOs must appeal the decision and pass a snap inspection. In October the justice minister asked the Supreme Court to liquidate Memorial, a prominent human rights group, but the court had not ruled on the case at year's end.

While trade union rights are legally protected, they are limited in practice. Strikes and worker protests have occurred in prominent industries, such as automobile manufacturing, but antiunion discrimination and reprisals for strikes are not uncommon, and employers often ignore collective-bargaining rights. The largest labor federation works in close cooperation with the Kremlin, though independent unions are active in some industrial sectors and regions.

F. Rule of Law: 2 / 16

The judiciary lacks independence from the executive branch, and career advancement is effectively tied to compliance with Kremlin preferences. In February 2014, Putin signed a law merging the Supreme Arbitration Court, which headed the system of courts handling commercial disputes, into the Supreme Court, which oversees courts of general jurisdiction and will now also supervise the arbitration courts. The Supreme Arbitration Court had been widely respected as one of the most independent of Russia's courts. Its judges were required to go through a new round of confirmation procedures, and most did not secure seats on the Supreme Court. Some simply retired to avoid the court's planned move to St. Petersburg, which also led to the loss of experienced staff and a reduced applicant pool.

In October, Putin signed a law that reversed a 2011 reform of the criminal procedure code, restoring the power of police and other investigators to press charges for tax fraud, even if tax authorities find no evidence of wrongdoing. The 2011 changes had allowed only the tax authorities to press such claims, with the aim of reducing the ability of officials to harass and extort companies.

Parts of the country, especially the North Caucasus area, suffer from high levels of violence.

Hundreds of officials, insurgents, and civilians die each year in bombings, gun battles, and assassinations. A December 2014 assault in the capital of Chechnya, which had been considered relatively secure in recent years, killed 14 policemen and at least 10 militants. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov called for the attackers' families to be punished, and masked men subsequently burned down a number of homes in apparent reprisals for the raid.

Immigrants and ethnic minorities—particularly those who appear to be from the Caucasus or Central Asia—face governmental and societal discrimination and harassment. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people are also subject to considerable discrimination. A 2013 law banned dissemination of information promoting “nontraditional sexual relationships,” putting legal pressure on LGBT activists and encouraging violent attacks. Several teachers have been removed from their jobs on the basis of their sexual orientation or their support for equal rights for LGBT people.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 6 / 16 (-1)

The government places some restrictions on freedom of movement and residence. Adults must carry internal passports while traveling and to obtain many government services. Some regional authorities impose registration rules that limit the right of citizens to choose their place of residence, typically targeting ethnic minorities and migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Even though the Russian constitution gives each citizen the right to freely leave and enter the country, more than four million employees tied to the military and security services were banned from leaving under rules issued during 2014. Often employees who are not themselves banned from travel feel obliged not to go abroad because they would be out of step with colleagues. In June Putin signed a law forcing citizens to disclose any dual citizenship, and in October Russia withdrew from a long-standing U.S. student exchange program.

Women are underrepresented in politics and government. They hold less than 14 percent of the Duma's seats and about 8 percent of the seats in the Federation Council. Only two of 32 cabinet members are women. Domestic violence against women continues to be a serious problem, and police are often reluctant to intervene in what they regard as internal family matters. Economic hardships contribute to widespread trafficking of women abroad for prostitution.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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