



Freedom in the World - Russia (2011)

Capital: Moscow

Population:
141,839,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

The executive branch maintained its tight controls on the media, civil society, and the other branches of government in 2010. The removal of longtime Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov in September and stage-managed local elections in April and October demonstrated the supremacy of the federal elite. Similarly, the extension of jailed former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky's prison term in December, following a politicized trial based on contradictory new charges, confirmed the political leadership's control over the justice system. In the latest prominent example of violence against critical journalists, *Kommersant* reporter Oleg Kashin was brutally beaten in November. Insurgent and other violence originating in the North Caucasus continued during the year, with high-profile attacks on the Moscow subway and the Chechen parliament. Despite these harsh conditions, civil society found a stronger voice during the year, with large antigovernment protests in Kaliningrad and popular efforts to protect environmental assets and combat an outbreak of summer wildfires.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Russian Federation emerged as an independent state under the leadership of President Boris Yeltsin. In 1993, Yeltsin used force to thwart an attempted coup by parliamentary opponents of radical reform, after which voters approved a new constitution establishing a powerful presidency and a bicameral national legislature, the Federal Assembly. The 1995 parliamentary elections featured strong support for the Communist Party and ultranationalist forces. Nevertheless, in the 1996 presidential poll, Yeltsin defeated Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov with the financial backing of powerful business magnates, who used the media empires they controlled to ensure victory. In 1999, Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin, then the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), as prime minister.

Conflict with the separatist republic of Chechnya, which had secured de facto independence from Moscow after a brutal 1994–96 war, resumed in 1999. Government forces reinvaded the breakaway region after Chechen rebels led an incursion into the neighboring Russian republic of Dagestan in August and a series of deadly apartment bombings—which the Kremlin blamed on Chechen militants—struck Russian cities in September. The second Chechen war dramatically increased Putin's popularity, and after the December 1999 elections to the State Duma, the lower house of the Federal Assembly, progovernment parties were able to form a majority coalition.

An ailing and unpopular Yeltsin—who was constitutionally barred from a third presidential term—resigned on December 31, 1999, transferring power to Putin. The new acting president subsequently secured a first-round victory over Zyuganov, 53 percent to 29 percent, in the March 2000 presidential election. After taking office, Putin moved quickly to reduce the influence of the legislature, tame the business community and the news media, and strengthen the FSB. He considerably altered the composition of the ruling elite through an influx of personnel from the security and military services. Overall, Putin garnered enormous personal popularity by overseeing a gradual increase in the standard of living for most of the population; the improvements were driven largely by an oil and gas boom and economic reforms that had followed a 1998 financial crisis.

In the December 2003 Duma elections, the Kremlin-controlled United Russia party captured 306 out of 450 seats. With the national broadcast media and most print outlets favoring the incumbent, no opponent was able to mount a significant challenge in the March 2004 presidential election.

Putin, who refused to debate the other candidates, received 71.4 percent of the vote in a first-round victory, compared with 13.7 percent for his closest rival, the Communist-backed Nikolai Kharitonov.

Putin introduced legislative changes in 2004 that eliminated direct gubernatorial elections in favor of presidential appointments, citing a need to unify the country in the face of terrorist violence. The government also began a crackdown on democracy-promotion groups and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), especially those receiving foreign funding. The authorities removed another possible threat in 2005, when a court sentenced billionaire energy magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, founder of the oil firm Yukos, to eight years in prison for fraud and tax evasion. A parallel tax case against Yukos itself led to the transfer of most of its assets to the state-owned Rosneft. Khodorkovsky had antagonized the Kremlin by bankrolling opposition political activities.

A law enacted in 2006 handed bureaucrats wide discretion in shutting down NGOs that were critical of official policy. In another sign that safe avenues for dissent were disappearing, an assassin murdered investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya in October of that year. She had frequently criticized the Kremlin's ongoing military campaign in Chechnya and the excesses of Russian troops in the region.

The heavily manipulated December 2007 parliamentary elections gave the ruling United Russia party 315 of the 450 Duma seats, while two other parties that generally support the Kremlin, Just Russia and the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, took 38 and 40 seats, respectively. The opposition Communists won 57 seats in the effectively toothless legislature.

Putin's handpicked successor, First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, won the March 2008 presidential election with 70.3 percent of the vote and nearly 70 percent voter turnout. As with the 2007 parliamentary elections, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) refused to monitor the voting due to government constraints on the number of monitors and the amount of time they could spend in the country. Medvedev immediately appointed Putin as his prime minister, and the former president continued to play the dominant role in government. At the end of 2008, the leadership amended the constitution for the first time since it was adopted in 1993, extending future presidential terms from four to six years.

In 2009, assassins continued to target the regime's most serious critics, murdering, among others, human rights activists Stanislav Markelov in January and Natalia Estemirova in July. In Chechnya, President Ramzan Kadyrov continued to use of harsh tactics to suppress rebel activity with Putin's backing.

Medvedev replaced key regional leaders during 2010, including longtime Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov, but he left the top ranks of the law enforcement and security services largely unchanged, and there was little progress on much-needed police reform. United Russia dominated the April and October rounds of local elections, which were marred by widespread violations, including failure to register opposition candidates, ballot stuffing, and restrictions placed on election monitors.

While the political system showed signs of stagnation, civil society became more active. Early in the year, some 10,000 antigovernment protesters took to the streets in Kaliningrad, eventually forcing Medvedev to replace the governor. Numerous other protests during the year sought protection for the right to assemble and to block the destruction of treasured environmental assets. Under public pressure, Medvedev temporarily halted construction of a road through the Khimki forest near Moscow. At the same time, Putin openly expressed hostility toward demonstrators and his government allowed construction to proceed. Many citizens simply sidestepped their ineffective public institutions: when devastating wildfires raged in many parts of the country in August, volunteers organized to help neighbors in need. However, activism also had a dark side. In December, ultranationalists gathered 10,000 supporters for a demonstration near the Kremlin, beating passersby who appeared non-Slavic.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Russia is not an electoral democracy. The 2007 State Duma elections were carefully engineered by the administration, handing pro-Kremlin parties a supermajority in the lower house, which is powerless in practice. In the 2008 presidential election, state dominance of the media was on full display, debate was absent, and incumbent Vladimir Putin was able to pass the office to his handpicked successor, Dmitry Medvedev.

The 1993 constitution established a strong presidency with the power to dismiss and appoint, pending parliamentary confirmation, the prime minister. However, the current de facto political system no longer represents the constitutional arrangement, since Prime Minister Putin's personal authority and power base among the security services make him the dominant figure in the executive branch. The Federal Assembly consists of the 450-seat State Duma and an upper chamber, the 166-seat Federation Council. Beginning with the 2007 elections, all Duma seats were elected on the basis of party-list proportional representation. Parties must gain at least 7 percent of the vote to enter the Duma. Furthermore, parties cannot form electoral coalitions, and would-be parties must have at least 50,000 members and organizations in half of the federation's 83 administrative units to register. These changes, along with the tightly controlled media environment and the misuse of administrative resources, including the courts, make it extremely difficult for opposition parties to win representation. Half the members of the upper chamber are appointed by governors and half by regional legislatures, usually with strong federal input in all cases. As of January 2011, only locally-elected politicians will be eligible to serve in the Federation Council; the change will mainly benefit United Russia, as most local officeholders are party members. Although governors were previously elected, a 2004 reform gave the president the power to appoint them. Under constitutional amendments adopted in 2008, future presidential terms will be six years rather than the current four, though the limit of two consecutive terms will remain in place. The terms for the Duma will increase from four years to five.

Corruption in the government and business world is pervasive. A growing lack of accountability within the government enables bureaucrats to act with impunity. Although Medvedev enacted a package of anticorruption reforms at the end of 2008, he has made little progress on the issue. Russia was ranked 154 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index. Polling data from the Levada Center indicate that nearly 80 percent of Russians consider corruption to be a major problem and believe it is much worse than 10 years ago. Prosecutor General Yury Chaika claimed in 2010 that the average bribe had increased by a third in the past year, from approximately \$770 to \$1,000. In October, Medvedev called for a cleanup of the state tender process, through which the state loses up to \$33 billion each year, or one-tenth of federal spending.

Although the constitution provides for freedom of speech, the authorities continue to put pressure on the dwindling number of critical media outlets. Since 2003, the government has controlled, directly or through state-owned companies, all of the national television networks. Only a handful of radio stations and publications with limited audiences offer a wide range of viewpoints. Discussion on the internet is ostensibly free, but the government devotes extensive resources to manipulating the information and analysis available there. At least 19 journalists have been killed since Putin came to power, including three in 2009, and in no cases have the masterminds been prosecuted. The brutal attack on *Kommersant* journalist and blogger Oleg Kashin in November 2010 was only one of many such incidents during the year, and demonstrated the dangerous conditions for reporters in Russia. The authorities have further limited free expression by passing vague laws on extremism that make it possible to crack down on any speech, organization, or activity that lacks official support.

Freedom of religion is respected unevenly. A 1997 law on religion gives the state extensive control and makes it difficult for new or independent religious groups to operate. Orthodox Christianity has a privileged position, and in 2009 the president authorized religious instruction in the public schools. Regional authorities continue to harass nontraditional groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. In February 2009, the Justice Ministry empowered an Expert Religious Studies Council to investigate religious organizations for extremism and other possible offenses.

Academic freedom is generally respected, though the education system is marred by corruption and low salaries. The arrest and prosecution of scientists and researchers on charges of treason, usually for discussing sensitive technology with foreigners, has effectively restricted international contacts in recent years. In its treatment of history, the Kremlin has sought to emphasize the positive aspects of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's dictatorship, while scholars who examine his crimes have faced accusations that they are unpatriotic, casting a chill over objective efforts to examine the past. In 2009, Medvedev established a Commission for Countering Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests, tasked with exposing "falsifications" that could hurt the country.

The government has consistently reduced the space for freedoms of assembly and association. Overwhelming police responses and routine arrests have discouraged unsanctioned protests,

though pro-Kremlin groups are able to demonstrate freely. In 2010, police used force to break up demonstrations protesting road construction in the Khimki forest and those asserting the right to assemble. The latter protests were held on the 31st of each month with as many days, a reference to Article 31 of the constitution, which guarantees freedom of assembly. A 2006 law imposed onerous new reporting requirements on NGOs, giving bureaucrats extensive discretion in deciding which organizations could register and hampering activities in subject areas that the state deemed objectionable. The law also places tight controls on the use of foreign funds, and in July 2008 Putin lifted the tax-exempt status of most foreign foundations and NGOs. The state has sought to provide alternative sources of funding to local NGOs, including a handful of organizations that are critical of government policy, though such support generally limits the scope of the recipient groups' activities. In 2009, Medvedev amended the NGO law to make it less burdensome, but overall conditions for civil society groups remain difficult. In mid-September 2010, police visited more than 40 NGOs to demand documents in what they claimed was an effort to ensure that the groups were obeying the law.

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. With the economy continuing to change rapidly after emerging from Soviet-era state controls, unions have been unable to establish a significant presence in much of the private sector. The largest labor federation works in close cooperation with the Kremlin.

The judiciary lacks independence from the executive branch, in part because judges are often dependent on court chairmen for promotions and bonuses, and must follow Kremlin preferences in order to advance. The justice system has also been tarnished by politically fraught cases such as those of jailed former oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, whose prison term was extended until 2017 after a conviction on new charges in December 2010, and slain journalist Anna Politkovskaya, whose 2006 murder has yet to be solved.

After judicial reforms in 2002, the government has made gains in implementing due process and holding timely trials, though Medvedev has complained that this progress is not adequate. Since 2003, the criminal procedure code has allowed jury trials in most of the country. While juries are more likely than judges to acquit defendants, such verdicts are frequently overturned by higher courts, which can order retrials until the desired outcome is achieved. Russia ended the use of jury trials in terrorism cases in 2008. Russian citizens often feel that domestic courts do not provide a fair hearing and have increasingly turned to the European Court of Human Rights. In December 2010, Medvedev signed a reform that made the prosecutor general's Investigation Committee a separate agency that answers directly to the president; it remained unclear how this would affect the handling of major criminal cases.

Critics charge that Russia has failed to address ongoing criminal justice problems, such as poor prison conditions and the widespread use of illegal detention and torture to extract confessions. The circumstances surrounding the 2009 death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in pretrial detention, after he accused government employees of embezzling millions of dollars, suggested that the authorities had deliberately denied him medical treatment. In some cases, there has also been a return to the Soviet-era practice of punitive psychiatric treatment.

Parts of the country, especially the North Caucasus area, suffer from high levels of violence. Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov's success in suppressing major rebel activity in his domain has been accompanied by numerous reports of extrajudicial killings and collective punishment. Moreover, related rebel movements have appeared in surrounding Russian republics, including Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Hundreds of officials, insurgents, and civilians die each year in bombings, gun battles, and assassinations. In 2010, suicide bombers attacked the Moscow subway system in March, while insurgents attacked Kadyrov's hometown in August and the Chechen parliament in October. Medvedev appointed Aleksandr Khloponin, a successful businessman and Siberian governor, as his envoy to the new North Caucasus Federal District, but federal policy continues to favor the use of armed force over economic and political development to address the area's problems.

Immigrants and ethnic minorities—particularly those who appear to be from the Caucasus or Central Asia—face governmental and societal discrimination and harassment. While racially motivated violence has increased in recent years, the number of murders and injuries fell in both 2009 and 2010, according to Sova, a group that tracks ultranationalist activity in the country.

Homosexuals also encounter discrimination and abuse, and gay rights demonstrations are often attacked by counterdemonstrators or suppressed by the authorities.

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. In the majority of cases, the targets are ethnic minorities and migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia.

State takeovers of key industries, coupled with large tax penalties imposed on select companies, have illustrated the precarious nature of property rights in the country, especially when political interests are involved.

Women have particular difficulty achieving political power. They hold 14 percent of the Duma's seats and less than 5 percent of the Federation Council's. Only three of 19 federal ministers are women, and the female governor of St. Petersburg is the main exception at the regional level. Domestic violence 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.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*