



## Freedom in the World - ↓ Russia (2010)

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Capital:  
Moscow

Population:  
141,839,000

Political Rights Score: 6 \*

Civil Liberties Score: 5 \*

Status: Not Free

### Explanatory Note

The numerical ratings and status listed above reflect the addition of Chechnya to the Russia report; in previous years Chechnya was the subject of a separate report.

### Trend Arrow

Russia received a downward trend arrow due to electoral abuses, declining religious freedom, greater state controls over the presentation of history, growing police corruption, and the repeated use of political terror against victims including human rights activists and journalists.

### Overview

**The executive branch maintained its tight controls on the media, civil society, and the other branches of government in 2009, and took additional steps to rein in religious and academic freedom. The large-scale disqualification of opposition candidates helped secure a sweeping victory for the ruling United Russia party in local and regional elections in October. In November, a dissident police officer faced punishment after drawing attention to widespread police corruption. Insurgent and other violence in the North Caucasus continued during the year, as did assassinations of prominent human rights activists and journalists.**

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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. The August 1998 collapse of the ruble and Russia's financial markets provided a traumatic but ultimately useful corrective to the Russian economy, ushering in years of rapid growth. 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 consolidate his power, reducing the influence of the legislature, taming the business community and the news media, and strengthening 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 the 1998 ruble collapse.

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 a solid majority to progovernment parties. The ruling United Russia party captured 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, with some presidential powers shifting to the prime minister. In November and December, the leadership amended the constitution for the first time since it was adopted in 1993, extending the presidential term from four to six years.

In 2009, as a global recession took hold, the government drew on reserve funds it had amassed during the oil and gas boom to support the economy. Meanwhile, assassins continued to target the regime's most serious critics with impunity, murdering, among others, human rights activists Stanislav Markelov in January and Natalia Estemirova in July. These deaths were often tied to the conflict in Chechnya, where Ramzan Kadyrov had used harsh tactics to suppress rebel activity with Putin's backing.

The tightly controlled October 2009 local and regional elections, which gave United Russia some 70 percent of the contested seats, provoked protests, including a short-lived walkout by other parties in the normally subservient Duma. Before the elections, the authorities had eliminated most of the opposition candidates by invalidating the signatures they had collected.

### **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 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. Although the 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, Transparency International's Russia chapter reported an increase in bribes in 2009. The state closed the vast majority of Russia's casinos in July, but a presidential report found a growth in organized crime in the fall. A police major, Aleksei Dymovsky, posted videos on the internet in November to shed light on police corruption, including soliciting bribes and fabricating cases against innocent people to meet quotas for solving cases. He was subsequently fired and faced prosecution for abuse of office at year's end. Also during the year, businessmen complained about the extensive use of pliable courts and extralegal methods to seize commercial assets. At the same time, Medvedev criticized state corporations, whereas Putin's presidency had featured a rapid expansion of the state's role in the economy. Russia was ranked 146 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

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 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 authorities have further limited free expression by passing vague laws on extremism that make it possible to crack down on any organization 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 congregations 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, although 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. Also during the year, St. Petersburg State University tried to monitor its professors' foreign publications and presentations, but quickly withdrew the new regulations after an international outcry.

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. 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 extensive 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 a positive development, a St. Petersburg court ruled that a 2008 police search of the human rights group Memorial's offices had been illegal, ordering the police to return confiscated computer hard drives.

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. Two members of the Constitutional Court were punished after decrying judges' lack of independence, with one forced to resign from the court in December 2009. The justice system has also been tarnished by the politically fraught cases of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who faced trial on new charges in 2009 as he neared the end of his prison sentence, and Anna Politkovskaya, whose murderers have yet to be identified. In February 2009, a jury rejected prosecutors' arguments that four men charged with minor roles in the killing were guilty.

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, these 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, and Medvedev in 2009 proposed doing the same for organized crime cases. Russian citizens often feel that domestic courts do not provide a fair hearing and have increasingly turned to the European Court of Human Rights.

Critics charge that Russia has failed to address ongoing criminal justice problems, such as poor prison conditions and law enforcement officials' widespread use of illegal detention and torture to extract confessions. The death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in pre-trial detention provided evidence that the authorities were denying him necessary medical treatment after his client had charged government employees with embezzling millions of dollars. In some cases, there has also been a return to the Soviet-era practice of punitive psychiatry.

Parts of the country, especially the turbulent North Caucasus region, 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. Among other attacks in 2009, an assassination attempt seriously injured Ingushetia's president in June, an Ingush opposition figure was murdered in October, and a train bombing between Moscow and St. Petersburg killed over 25 people in November.

Immigrants and ethnic minorities—particularly those who appear to be from the Caucasus or Central Asia—face governmental and societal discrimination and harassment. Foreign nationals, particularly Georgians, have been targeted for harassment during periods of friction between the Kremlin and their home governments. While racially motivated violence has increased in recent years, the number of murders and injuries fell in 2009, 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.

Property rights remain precarious. State takeovers of key industries, coupled with large tax liens on select companies, have reinforced perceptions that property rights are being eroded and that the rule of law is subordinated to political considerations. The government has forcibly changed the terms of contracts with foreign oil and gas companies working in Russia.

Women in Russia 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. None of the key positions in the federal executive branch are held by 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.

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*\* 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.*