The already repressive press freedom environment in Russia declined even further with Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, as authorities relied on both crude and sophisticated forms of media management to distract the public from terrorist attacks, economic troubles, and antigovernment protests. The government maintained its grip on key television outlets and tightened controls over the internet during the year, and most state and privately owned mass media engaged in blatant propaganda that glorified the country's national leaders and fostered an image of political pluralism—especially in the months ahead of Putin’s victory in the March presidential election.

Although the constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, officials have used the country’s politicized and corrupt court system to harass the few remaining independent journalists who dare to criticize widespread abuses by the authorities. The constitution and a 2009 law provide for freedom of information, but accessing information related to government bodies, the judiciary, or via government websites is extremely difficult in practice. Russian law contains a broad definition of extremism that authorities frequently use to silence government critics, including journalists; the enforcement of this and other restrictive legal provisions has encouraged self-censorship.

In the summer and fall of 2012, Putin and the parliament—controlled by his United Russia party—approved a series of repressive, vaguely worded measures that significantly expanded the array of regulatory tools available to stifle legitimate news reporting on politically embarrassing issues and limit the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on media matters. A law passed in July reintroduced criminal defamation, with fines of up to five million rubles ($153,000) or up to 12 weeks of forced correctional labor. The year's other new measures included a law that increased fines for participation in unsanctioned rallies from a maximum of 300 rubles ($9.15) to 300,000 rubles ($9,150); a law requiring NGOs with foreign funding to register with the Justice Ministry as “foreign agents”; an expansion of the legal definition of treason to include cooperating with international organizations “against the security of Russia”; and the expulsion of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) from Russia.

In addition, a vague, restrictive law that came into force in November granted the state telecommunications regulator Roskomnadzor broad authority to shutter websites, ostensibly to protect children from harmful information. In the first month of the law’s implementation, Roskomnadzor blocked 4,640 websites for allegedly containing “offensive content” related to drugs and pornography. Internet service providers were already required to block content on a government-maintained list of “extremist materials.” Critics of the restrictions alleged that the growing role of the internet as an alternative source of news had prompted the authorities to expand their control over web-based content.

Prosecutors in 2012 charged a number of government critics—including journalists, media outlets, ordinary citizens, and whistle-blowing civil servants—with defamation, extremism, and other trumped-up offenses in an effort to limit their activities. In a major ongoing case, Aleksey Navalny, one of Russia’s most prominent bloggers, posted embarrassing allegations of corrupt financial practices among senior government officials on his blog. In retaliation, he was...