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Russia

Country:

Russia

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Not Free

Political Rights:

6

Civil Liberties:

6

Aggregate Score:

22

Freedom Rating:

6.0

Overview:

Russia's economy continued to deteriorate in 2015, and the Kremlin worked to preempt potential domestic discontent through the distraction of foreign interventions. With the conflict in eastern Ukraine settling into a stalemate, President Vladimir Putin sent Russian aircraft to Syria in September and began bombing the opponents of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, directly engaging the Russian military outside the former Soviet Union for the first time since Soviet troops left Afghanistan.

At home, the Kremlin continued a crackdown on civil society, ramping up pressure on domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and branding the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy and two groups backed by billionaire philanthropist George Soros as "undesirable organizations." The regime also intensified its tight grip on the media, saturating the information landscape with nationalist propaganda while suppressing the most popular alternative voices. In the annual round of regional and local elections, serious opposition candidates were again prevented from competing.

The murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov not far from the Kremlin in February marked the first assassination of a prominent political figure since Putin came to power in 2000, though it followed a string of journalist deaths and beatings. The regime also

continued to imprison the brother of anticorruption campaigner and politician Aleksey Navalny in what appeared to be an unsuccessful bid to curb Navalny's activism. In December, Navalny published extensive information implicating Russia's prosecutor general in a web of corruption.

The economy shrank by approximately 4 percent over the course of the year due to structural problems, falling oil prices, Ukraine-related sanctions, and the Kremlin's own countersanctions on European imports. In another sign that the country's aggressive foreign policy was increasing its international isolation, the government imposed new sanctions on a variety of Turkish goods and companies after a Turkish fighter jet shot down a Russian warplane over Syria in November.

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. In the March 2012 presidential election, Putin benefited from advantages including preferential media treatment, numerous abuses of incumbency, and procedural irregularities during the vote count. 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 now serving 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 170-seat Federation Council. (Four new Federation Council seats were added in 2014 to represent the Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories of Crimea and Sevastopol, whose annexation is not internationally recognized.) 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 the opportunity to 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 LDPR (formerly known as 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, but a 2014 law—set to take effect with the 2016 elections—restored 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. In July 2015, Putin signed a law moving the 2016 Duma elections from December to September, which analysts said would give progovernment forces an advantage because fewer voters pay attention to politics during the summer months. 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 2012 law 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 almost every subsequent election. In a rare exception, Communist Party candidate Sergey Levchenko won the Irkutsk gubernatorial election in a runoff vote in September 2015. In the other regional and local races, as in previous years, the authorities blocked serious opposition candidates and ensured victory for the Kremlin-backed contenders. The election-monitoring NGO Golos documented 1,736 violations, including multiple voting, by 11 p.m. on election night, nearly twice as many as in 2014.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 3 / 16

Legislation enacted in 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.

Opposition politicians and activists are frequently targeted with fabricated criminal cases and other forms of administrative harassment. Navalny's brother was sentenced to three and a half years in prison on trumped-up fraud charges in 2014, and he remained behind bars in 2015 in an apparent attempt to limit Navalny's activities. Also during the year, the Justice Ministry and courts continued to reject attempts by Navalny's Progress Party to meet the requirements to register and participate in elections. Separately, four Chechen men were charged with Nemtsov's murder in December, and investigators claimed that a member of Chechnya's security forces ordered the crime; Nemtsov's family argued that higher-ranking officials were likely involved.

The formation of parties based on ethnicity or religion is not permitted by law. In practice, many ethnic minority regions are carefully monitored and controlled by federal authorities. Most republics in the restive North Caucasus area and some autonomous districts in energy-rich western Siberia have opted out of direct gubernatorial elections; instead, their legislatures choose a governor from candidates proposed by the president.

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—led by Putin—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 December 2015, Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation released a video showing evidence of extensive corruption surrounding Prosecutor General Yuriy Chayka. The foundation claimed that Chayka's son illegally took over a shipping company in Irkutsk and used the funds to build a luxury hotel in Greece and purchase a villa in Switzerland. The research also showed that Olga Lopatina, the former wife of the deputy general prosecutor, had business dealings with wives of members of the Tsapok organized crime group, which was responsible for the murder of 12 people, including four children, on a farm in Kushchevskaya, Krasnodar Kray, in 2010. The authorities failed to address the allegations. Separately, although former Defense Ministry official Yevgeniya Vasileva, who was romantically linked to former defense minister Anatoliy Serdyukov, had been sentenced to five years in prison on corruption charges in May, she was released on parole in August, and it was unclear whether she had actually served any of her jail term.

In some cases, the Kremlin appeared to signal to officials that corruption needed to be scaled down given Russia's growing economic difficulties. Vladimir Yakunin, a powerful member of Putin's inner circle, resigned under pressure as head of Russian Railways in August, with some reports saying that corruption was a factor. The move was seen as significant because control over key state companies provides favored individuals with access to considerable funds. Over the course of 2015, federal authorities arrested a number of regional officials in Komi and Sakhalin on corruption charges.

Civil Liberties: 15 / 60 (-1)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 3 / 16 (-1)

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 vehicles for Kremlin propaganda, which vociferously backs Putin's actions in Ukraine and Syria 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 on the internet with the help of viewer subscription fees. A wave of legal and regulatory inspections at the end of 2015 exerted further pressure on the broadcaster.

Only a small and shrinking number of radio stations and print outlets with limited reach offer a diverse range of viewpoints. A 2014 law will force foreign owners of Russian media outlets to sell all shares above a 20 percent stake by early 2017. Aleksandr Fedotov, owner of Artcom Media, bought the Russian edition of *Forbes* from Germany's Axel Springer group in September 2015 and announced that the magazine would reduce its political content and focus more on "economics and business." Another Russian

businessman and media executive, Demyan Kudryavtsev, bought the stake in the newspapers *Vedomosti* and the *Moscow Times* owned by Finland's Sanoma in April. The chief editor of the *Moscow Times* resigned in October, citing conflicts with the new owner.

Putin decreed in May that it was illegal to publish information about "personnel losses" during "the conduct of special operations during peacetime." Existing rules had considered only wartime losses a state secret. The new measure made it difficult for investigative journalists and others to report on the deaths of Russian soldiers in Ukraine, where the Kremlin denies that active-duty military personnel are operating.

Russian journalists continue to face physical danger in the course of their work. In October, journalist Oleg Kashin, who was beaten almost to death in 2010, argued in an open letter to Russia's leaders that Pskov governor Andrey Turchak ordered the attack but that the authorities refused to charge him because of his connections to Putin. In September, the authorities had released Aleksandr Gorbunov from pretrial detention; Kashin claims that Gorbunov personally hired the men who attacked him.

Pervasive, hyperpatriotic propaganda and political repression over the past two years have had a cumulative impact on open and free private discussion, and the chilling effect is exacerbated by growing state efforts to control expression on the internet. More than 70 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. At the end of 2015, Russia was blocking access to roughly 20,000 websites, according to the independent group Roskomsvoboda. The Kremlin also employs numerous "trolls" to disrupt online discussions and intimidate users.

A law signed by Putin in 2014, requiring that data of Russian citizens be stored on servers located in Russia, took effect in September 2015. The measure could facilitate authorities' surveillance of Russians' internet activity. Companies that fail to comply can be fined and have their sites blocked by the telecommunications regulator, Roskomnadzor.

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 Russian 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, though some academics continue to express dissenting views. The Dynasty Foundation, which sponsored Russian scientists and mathematicians, shut down in July 2015 after being designated a "foreign agent." It was deemed to receive foreign funding because its Russian founder's bank accounts were located abroad.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 3 / 12 (-1)

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.

The authorities intensified their campaign against NGOs in 2015. By the end of the year, the Justice Ministry had included 111 Russian organizations on its list of “foreign agents.” While the designation does not formally close an organization, the label makes it nearly impossible for the groups to pursue their objectives, such as defending human rights. In May, Putin signed a law allowing the prosecutor general, in agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to declare a foreign firm or NGO “undesirable,” after which the group must close its offices in Russia. By year’s end, the authorities had declared the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy and two groups affiliated with George Soros as “undesirable organizations,” and banned Russian groups from working with them. Undesirable entities may also have their accounts frozen, and individuals who violate a ban can face administrative and criminal prosecution, with penalties of up to six years in prison.

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. In November and December 2015, long-haul truckers mounted strikes and protests to oppose a new tax that would be collected by a private contractor; the company is controlled by the son of a close Putin associate.

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. A 2014 law merged 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.

In July 2015, the Constitutional Court ruled that Russia could comply selectively with the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to avoid violating the Russian constitution. Putin then signed a law in December that allowed the government to refer rulings issued under international treaties to the Constitutional Court. Critics pointed out that this violated Article 15.4 of the Russian constitution, which states that international treaties take precedence over Russian law. Meanwhile, the ECHR found in September that Russia violated the rights of three of the individuals arrested on Moscow’s Bolotnaya Square during 2012 protests against Putin’s inauguration to a third term as president. The court found that Russia denied their rights to a timely trial and, for one defendant, the right to a speedy judicial review of his pretrial detention. Despite the ruling, a Moscow court sentenced another protester, Ivan Nepomnyashchikh, to two and a half years in prison for participating in the demonstrations and supposedly attacking police with an umbrella. The

NGO Memorial declared Nepomnyashchikh one of 49 people on its list of political prisoners.

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. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov imposes tight control over his republic with the support of his militia and a flow of generous subsidies from Moscow. The result is a superficial peace and prosperity that masks personalized and arbitrary rule, fierce repression and intimidation, economic inequality, and impunity for abuses.

Immigrants and ethnic minorities—particularly those who appear to be from the Caucasus or Central Asia—face governmental and societal discrimination and harassment. Groups linked to countries antagonized by Moscow’s foreign policy, such as Ukrainians and Turks, have also encountered harassment.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people are 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. In late 2015, the parliament was considering a bill that would penalize people merely for publicly expressing or demonstrating “nontraditional sexual orientations.”

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 7 / 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. More than four million employees tied to the military and security services were banned from traveling abroad under rules issued during 2014. In 2015, the authorities banned flights to Egypt after an alleged terrorist attack destroyed an airliner there, and restricted package tours to Turkey after the downing of the Russian warplane over Syria. Nevertheless, the constitution grants citizens the right to freely leave and return to Russia, and most Russians remained able to exercise this right in practice during the year.

State takeovers of key industries and 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 are underrepresented in politics and government. They hold less than 14 percent of the Duma’s seats and about 17 percent of the seats in the Federation Council. Only 2 of 31 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.

Migrant workers are often exposed to exploitative labor conditions. Both Russians facing economic hardship and migrants to Russia from neighboring countries are subject to sex and labor trafficking.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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