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2013 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 5.5
Civil Liberties: 5
Political Rights: 6

Trend Arrow ↓

Russia received a downward trend arrow due to the imposition of harsh penalties on protesters participating in unsanctioned rallies and new rules requiring civil society organizations with foreign funding to register as "foreign agents."

Overview

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin won the tightly controlled March 2012 presidential election and returned to the Kremlin after a four-year interlude, during which his chosen placeholder, Dmitry Medvedev, had continued Putin's policies and allowed him to avoid violating constitutional term limits. Putin immediately imposed greater restrictions on public assemblies, nongovernmental organizations, and the internet, seeking to squelch the nascent protest movement that had arisen in response to fraudulent December 2011 parliamentary elections. Vaguely defined amendments to the law on treason potentially criminalized a variety of activities, including ordinary interactions with foreigners. The authorities also launched anticorruption investigations during the year, exposing high levels of fraud in state spending, but as with past

anticorruption drives, actual arrests were limited to lower-level officials rather than members of the elite.

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, which suffered from electoral manipulation by all sides, 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 and some of Putin's critics blamed on him – struck Russian cities in September. The prosecution of the second Chechen war dramatically increased Putin's popularity, and after the December 1999 elections for 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 several months early on December 31, 1999, transferring power to Putin – allegedly in exchange for immunity from prosecution for corruption. 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, a supporter of liberal opposition parties, to eight years in prison. The case was seen as a warning to other business leaders to stay out of politics.

A law enacted in 2006 handed bureaucrats wide discretion in monitoring and shutting down NGOs, which the authorities used to target organizations 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 United Russia 315 of the 450 Duma seats, while two other parties that generally supported the Kremlin, A Just Russia and the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), took 38 and 40 seats, respectively. The opposition Communists won 57 seats in the effectively toothless legislature.

Constitutionally barred from a third consecutive term, Putin handpicked his successor, First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who won the March 2008 presidential election with 70.3 percent of the vote. Medvedev 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. Even as Medvedev continued to implement Putin's policies, civil society became more active during his presidency on issues including corruption and environmental protection.

In September 2011, Medvedev announced that he would step aside so that Putin could return to the presidency in elections set for March 2012. The controversial move came as Putin's popularity was declining, largely as a result of Russia's unchecked corruption and a plateau in the improvement of living standards.

Although the authorities made extensive use of their incumbency in the December 2011 elections, United Russia captured just 238 seats, a significant drop from the 2007 elections. The Communist Party placed second with 92 seats, followed by A Just Russia with 64 and the LDPR with 56. Truly independent parties were not allowed to run. In the weeks following the elections, the largest antigovernment demonstrations since Putin came to power were held in Moscow, with smaller protests taking place in other cities in Russia. The demonstrators called for the annulment of the election results, an investigation into vote fraud, and freedom for political prisoners. Hundreds of people were arrested, and several protest leaders were jailed for short periods.

Despite the growing discontent in Russia at the beginning of 2012, Putin was able to secure victory in the March presidential election, officially winning 63.6 percent of the vote against a field of weak, hand-chosen opponents. Zyuganov, the Communist leader, was his closest challenger with 17.2 percent. With his return to the Kremlin assured, Putin quickly toughened the authorities' response to the protests. The police used violence to suppress a Moscow demonstration linked to his inauguration in May, arresting many of the participants. Putin also pushed through new laws limiting the actions of NGOs, placing new restrictions on the internet, recriminalizing slander, and expanding the definition of treason to include a wide variety of activities in an effort to frighten the population into passivity.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Russia is not an electoral democracy. The 2012 presidential election was skewed in favor of prime minister and former president Vladimir Putin, who benefited from preferential media treatment, numerous abuses of incumbency, and procedural irregularities during the vote count, among other advantages. 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 Cooperation in Europe, but many voters used them to express a protest against the status quo.

The 1993 constitution established a strong presidency with the power to dismiss and appoint, pending parliamentary confirmation, the prime minister. Putin's decision to place Dmitry Medvedev in the presidency for four years so that he could return to office for a third term, now extended from four to six years, violated the spirit of the constitution's two-term limit. 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.

Since the 2007 elections, all Duma deputies have been 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. Medvedev signed legislation in April 2012 that liberalized party registration rules, allowing 42 parties to register by year's end. However, none posed a significant threat to the authorities, and many seemed designed to encourage division and confusion among the opposition.

Half the members of the upper chamber are appointed by governors and half by regional legislatures, usually with strong federal input. As of January 2011, only locally elected politicians are eligible to serve in the Federation Council; the change was expected to benefit United Russia, as most local officeholders are party members. A law signed by Medvedev in May 2012 restored gubernatorial elections, ending the system of presidential appointments dating to 2004. The first set of elections was held in five regions in October. However, the new rules allowed regional officials to screen the candidates for governor, eliminating strong opposition

contenders and helping to ensure that pro-Kremlin incumbents won all five races. These included one in Ryazan, where the governor was extremely unpopular.

Corruption in the government and business world is pervasive, and a growing lack of accountability enables bureaucrats to act with impunity. The leadership frequently announces anticorruption campaigns, but they are typically superficial in nature. In November 2012, Putin fired Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov amid allegations of fraud in the Ministry of Defense. Other investigations during the year implicated the head of the presidential administration, Sergei Ivanov, and First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov. By year's end, it was not clear how far the campaign would go, or whether it reflected destabilizing conflict among the elite. The top leaders had yet to face prosecution, though some lower-level officials were formally charged.

Although the constitution provides for freedom of speech, the government controls, 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. At least 19 journalists have been killed since Putin came to power, including three in 2009, and in no cases have the organizers of the murders been prosecuted. Vague laws on extremism make it possible to crack down on any speech, organization, or activity that lacks official support. Discussion on the internet is largely unrestricted, but the government devotes extensive resources to manipulating online information and analysis. In November 2012, a broadly worded new law, ostensibly targeting information that is unsuitable for children, created a blacklist of internet outlets that initially led to the shuttering of more than 180 sites.

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. 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. While Russia has long struggled with anti-Semitism, Putin supported the creation of a \$50 million Jewish museum that opened in Moscow in late 2012.

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. Historians who seek to examine controversial aspects of Russian and Soviet history, such as the fate of ethnic minority populations that were deported to Siberia during World War II, and the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33, face severe pressure from the authorities.

The government has consistently reduced the space for freedoms of assembly and association. Overwhelming police responses, the use of force, and routine arrests have discouraged unsanctioned protests, though pro-Kremlin groups are able to demonstrate freely. At least 18 people were arrested at a rally on the eve of Putin's inauguration in May 2012, and the one person tried and convicted to date received four and a half years in prison after he admitted to attacking the police. In August, a

Moscow court sentenced three members of the performance group Pussy Riot to two years in prison for filming and posting on YouTube an anti-Putin "punk prayer" in an Orthodox cathedral in February. Amid international criticism of the verdict, one of the three was freed by an appellate court in October.

A 2006 law imposed onerous new reporting requirements on NGOs, giving bureaucrats extensive discretion in deciding which groups could register and hampering activities that the state deemed objectionable. The law also places tight controls on the use of foreign funds. 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. Noncompliance can be punished by steep fines and prison terms. In November, the Justice Ministry shut down the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), which apparently drew the authorities' ire by opposing development projects. 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.

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.

The judiciary lacks independence from the executive branch, and career advancement is effectively tied to compliance with Kremlin preferences. The justice system has been tarnished by politically fraught cases such as that of Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The criminal procedure code allows jury trials for serious cases, though they occur rarely in practice. 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.

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. In October 2012, opposition activist Leonid Razvozzhayev was allegedly abducted by Russian authorities in Ukraine, where he was preparing an asylum application; forcibly repatriated; and compelled to sign a confession to charges of planning mass riots. Russian officials insisted that he had turned himself in. 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. As many as 50 to 60 people die each year in investigative isolation wards (SIZOs), according to the Moscow Helsinki Group. 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 relative success in suppressing major rebel activity in his republic 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.

Immigrants and ethnic minorities – particularly those who appear to be from the Caucasus or Central Asia – face governmental and societal discrimination and harassment. Institutions representing Russia's large Ukrainian minority have come under selective government pressure. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people also encounter discrimination and abuse, and gay rights demonstrations are often attacked by counterdemonstrators or suppressed by the authorities. In 2012, St. Petersburg and some other cities passed criminal bans on LGBT "propaganda."

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.

In December 2012, Putin signed a ban on the adoption of Russian children by families in the United States. The measure was seen as retaliation for a new U.S. law, named for Sergei Magnitsky, that imposes asset freezes and travel restrictions on Russian officials found to have committed human rights abuses.

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 have particular difficulty achieving political power. They hold 13 percent of the Duma's seats (down from 14 percent in the previous term) and less than 5 percent of the seats in the Federation Council. Only three of 26 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.