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## Nations in Transit 2012 - Russia

**Capital:** Moscow

**Population:** 141.9 million

**GNI/capita, PPP:** US\$18,330

Source: The data above was provided by The World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2010*.

| Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                                                | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
| Electoral Process                              | 4.75 | 5.50 | 6.00 | 6.25 | 6.50 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 |
| Civil Society                                  | 4.25 | 4.50 | 4.75 | 5.00 | 5.25 | 5.50 | 5.75 | 5.75 | 5.50 | 5.25 |
| Independent Media                              | 5.50 | 5.75 | 6.00 | 6.00 | 6.25 | 6.25 | 6.25 | 6.25 | 6.25 | 6.25 |
| Governance*                                    | 5.00 | 5.25 | n/a  | n/a  | n/a  | n/a  | n/a  | n/a  | n/a  | n/a  |
| National Democratic Governance                 | n/a  | n/a  | 5.75 | 6.00 | 6.00 | 6.25 | 6.50 | 6.50 | 6.50 | 6.50 |
| Local Democratic Governance                    | n/a  | n/a  | 5.75 | 5.75 | 5.75 | 5.75 | 5.75 | 5.75 | 6.00 | 6.00 |
| Judicial Framework and Independence            | 4.50 | 4.75 | 5.25 | 5.25 | 5.25 | 5.25 | 5.50 | 5.50 | 5.75 | 6.00 |
| Corruption                                     | 5.75 | 5.75 | 5.75 | 6.00 | 6.00 | 6.00 | 6.25 | 6.50 | 6.50 | 6.50 |
| Democracy Score                                | 4.96 | 5.25 | 5.61 | 5.75 | 5.86 | 5.96 | 6.11 | 6.14 | 6.18 | 6.18 |

*\* Starting with the 2005 edition, Freedom House introduced separate analysis and ratings for national democratic governance and local democratic governance, to provide readers with more detailed and nuanced analysis of these two important subjects.*

## 2012 Scores

|                                      |                                          |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Democracy Score:                     | <b>6.18</b>                              |
| Regime Classification:               | <b>Consolidated Authoritarian Regime</b> |
| National Democratic Governance:      | <b>6.50</b>                              |
| Electoral Process:                   | <b>6.75</b>                              |
| Civil Society:                       | <b>5.25</b>                              |
| Independent Media:                   | <b>6.25</b>                              |
| Local Democratic Governance:         | <b>6.00</b>                              |
| Judicial Framework and Independence: | <b>6.00</b>                              |
| Corruption:                          | <b>6.50</b>                              |

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this

report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

### **Executive Summary:**

On September 24, 2011, President Dmitry Medvedev announced that he would step aside so that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin could return to the presidency in 2012, presumably for two six-year terms. This fait accompli effectively ended the period since 2008 in which Putin had claimed to share power with Medvedev, who articulated a desire to modernize Russia but failed to implement any significant policies toward that end in practice. Putin's return seemed to signal that Russia would face 12 more years of systemic corruption, control of the country's key assets by a narrow group of magnates closely tied to the leadership, national media that block free discussion of Russia's problems, and courts that decide politically driven cases largely according to the whims of the executive authorities.

However, the December 4 elections for the State Duma, the lower house of parliament, introduced a new dynamic in the Russian political system. Although the balloting was deeply flawed, voters used the process to reject the status quo, leaving the dominant United Russia party with just under 50 percent of the vote, according to official figures. What had been a steadily emerging mobilization of civil society before the elections culminated in large Moscow rallies on December 10 and 24, backed by smaller protests across the country, at which participants denounced the electoral abuses and called for an end to Putin's tenure. Though Russian activists have few institutional ways to turn their proposals into state policy, the elections and their aftermath showed that the authorities could no longer expect the public to passively accept their political decisions and low standards of governance.

**National Democratic Governance.** The authoritarian political system began to lose its legitimacy in 2011 as an increasingly active society expressed its dissatisfaction with the status quo. Public anger at the manipulations in the December 4 State Duma elections, which led to large protest rallies, cast doubt on Putin's ability to continue ruling as he had for the past 12 years. Nevertheless, no concrete institutional improvements were apparent during

the year. *Russia's rating for national democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.50.*

**Electoral Process.** The State Duma elections were neither free nor fair, as foreign and domestic observers pointed out. Only seven parties had permission to compete, and the incumbent forces used the advantages of office to promote their candidates, tipping the field strongly in their favor. Voters used the flawed process to register a protest against the government, in part by turning to the Kremlin-approved opposition parties in large numbers. While the ruling United Russia party failed to clear the 50 percent barrier in the officially reported popular vote, it was widely assumed that even this result was inflated. *Russia's rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 6.75.*

**Civil Society.** Russian civil society was apparently roused to anger by the Duma elections, with thousands of protesters across the country pouring into the streets to denounce the unfair voting and the broader governance system overseen by Putin. Before that point, civic mobilization had been steadily growing in the country, but most actions had been locally directed and rarely coalesced into national movements. *Russia's rating for civil society improves from 5.50 to 5.25.*

**Independent Media.** Russia remained a dangerous place to work as a journalist in 2011, and little progress was made in resolving past assaults and murders. Businessmen close to Putin are increasingly buying up key media assets to ensure ultimate regime control over mainstream news and information. During the year, there were several demonstrated cases of censorship in the national media. While internet discussion is still largely free, the authorities are developing additional tools to monitor and influence online activity as the number of Russians getting their information from new media continues to grow. *Russia's rating for independent media remains unchanged at 6.25.*

**Local Democratic Governance.** Medvedev extended the practice of replacing regional leaders to serve the political interests of the federal government. Similarly, the process of replacing directly elected mayors with city managers continued. Extensive violence in the North Caucasus remained a serious concern, reflecting the failure of the federal

government to address the area's long-standing problems. *Russia's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.00.*

**Judicial Framework and Independence.** In the most high-profile cases, Russia's courts continued to make decisions according to the Kremlin's wishes in 2011, even if in some instances the results seemed to provide a measure of justice. The judicial system appeared to protect law enforcement officials accused of serious crimes related to the 2009 death in custody of whistleblowing lawyer Sergey Magnitsky, and new evidence emerged that a 2010 verdict in the case of dissident former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky had been dictated by higher authorities. While the number of prison inmates declined in 2011, conditions for many remained inhuman. Judges typically did not take advantage of new provisions seeking to reduce pretrial detention for people who commit economic crimes. *Russia's rating for judicial framework and independence declines from 5.75 to 6.00.*

**Corruption.** Although Russia's level of corruption improved slightly in 2011 according to some measures, new laws increasing the penalties for graft are only selectively enforced, and the issue remained a key rallying point for the opposition during the year. Police reform has had little impact on corruption in law enforcement bodies. Medvedev removed government officials from the boards of state-owned companies in order to break the incestuous links between the state and business, but the powerful officials in question maintained informal influence over public assets. Corruption in the regions remains extensive, with many governors' children holding considerable property. *Russia's rating for corruption remains unchanged at 6.50.*

**Outlook for 2012.** Before the December 2011 Duma elections, Putin's return to office as president seemed guaranteed, but the sudden and spectacular rise of civic activism in the wake of the flawed balloting cast at least some doubt on his ability to win the March 4 presidential vote in the first round. And though his ultimate victory is likely, it will be difficult for him to continue ruling as he has since 2000, given his dwindling popular support.<sup>[1]</sup> The most vocal elements of Russian society have indicated that they want change, but it remained unclear at the end of 2011 how deep this social dissatisfaction was and what form it would take. Putin and Medvedev have proposed some political reforms, such as reinstating

gubernatorial elections, but such concessions seem unlikely to win over the protesters. Any use of force against peaceful demonstrators could backfire on the regime, further reducing its legitimacy while galvanizing an already motivated opposition.

### **National Democratic Governance:**

At the end of 2011, Russia faced a situation dramatically different from when the year began. For the first time in more than a decade, the political system was characterized by high levels of uncertainty rather than assumptions that paramount leader Vladimir Putin would be able to rule as long as he liked. The governing United Russia party's failure to win more than 50 percent of the vote in the December 4 elections for the State Duma, the lower house of the Federal Assembly, and the subsequent anti-Putin rallies across the country demonstrated that society was no longer quiescent, and that the political establishment would have to adapt to address popular concerns. However, aside from the September dismissal of Finance Minister Aleksey Kudrin, there were few signs of serious disagreement among the key elites surrounding Putin.

The pivotal event of the year occurred on September 24. Just as the State Duma election season was getting under way, President Dmitry Medvedev announced that he would not seek a second term in March 2012, allowing Putin, the prime minister, to return to the presidency.<sup>[2]</sup> Putin had anointed Medvedev as his successor in 2008 after serving the maximum two consecutive terms as president. The fact that the two leaders had amended Russia's constitution shortly thereafter, extending presidential terms from four to six years, suggested that Putin had long been planning a return to office for at least 12 more years, and that Medvedev had simply served as a placeholder. Putin's popularity, as measured by Russian polling agencies, had been declining for a year, and the September 24 announcement left many Russians feeling that they had no say in who would rule them. The obvious unfairness of the Duma elections became a focal point for public frustrations and led directly to the large protests of December 10 and 24.<sup>[3]</sup>

Despite Putin's ostensible power, his decisions on succession and other issues are constrained in practice by the powerful government officials and business magnates who have enriched themselves under his rule. Many of his closest friends have become billionaires during his tenure.<sup>[4]</sup> By one

measure, Putin's allies have gained control over the key financial, natural resource, and infrastructural assets of the Russian economy, amounting to 10-15 percent of gross domestic product.<sup>[5]</sup> And because corruption is an integral part of the current system, if Putin were to step down, he would be vulnerable to prosecution by his successor.<sup>[6]</sup> Since he cannot guarantee his safety or that of his associates under a new leader, he is all but forced to remain in office indefinitely.

The problem of the delegitimization of the existing authorities was widely discussed during 2011.<sup>[7]</sup> The growing gap between Putin's extensive power and his rapidly declining popularity serve to destabilize the system. The established Putin-era method of maintaining legitimacy by supporting a rising standard of living for Russian citizens requires ever greater budget expenditures and has forced the country to postpone investments in modernization.

Putin's regime survives by eliminating most organized political opposition while marginalizing and harassing the remaining groups, so that there seems to be no viable alternative to his leadership. Since 2000, he has systematically worked to bring the media, business magnates, regional governors, political parties, and civil society under centralized control. The publication by a Kremlin-affiliated website of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov's telephone conversations in December suggests that the intelligence services are violating constitutionally defined privacy protections to monitor and discredit antigovernment activists.<sup>[8]</sup> Nemtsov has filed a lawsuit to bring the perpetrators to justice.<sup>[9]</sup>

Such misuse of state agencies for political or corrupt purposes has left them with little capacity to carry out their primary governance functions, belying Putin's portrayal of an efficient and capable state as a justification for his rule. Security services have expanded their ability to repress the economic and political rivals of the country's leaders, but they are ineffective at fighting crime and terrorism or protecting property rights, tasks which are necessary to preserve a functioning market economy.<sup>[10]</sup>

The hollow nature of Russia's parliament became clear in 2011 when the executive branch decided to replace Sergey Mironov as chairman of the upper house, the Federation Council, which the newspaper *Vedomosti* described as "a purely ornamental structure" that was effectively "a cross

between a club for the elite and a political geriatric home."<sup>[11]</sup> Mironov, who heads Just Russia, one of the parliament's Kremlin-approved opposition parties, had grown increasingly critical of United Russia, possibly as part of a sanctioned effort to bolster his faction's popular credentials as the Duma elections approached. Once Mironov was dismissed, the leadership moved to install the unpopular St. Petersburg governor and Putin ally Valentina Matviyenko in his place. After the authorities heavily manipulated her election to a local council seat so she could qualify for nomination to the Federation Council, her presidentially appointed successor as governor immediately named her as St. Petersburg's representative, and members of the Federation Council duly elected her as the new chairwoman on September 21.

The poor prospects for Russia's future have led many wealthy Russians to move their money outside the country.<sup>[12]</sup> Similarly, foreign businessmen are increasingly hesitant to work and invest in Russia because of rule of law concerns. Ordinary citizens are also fleeing: 100,000 to 150,000 people now leave Russia annually, according to expert estimates. These emigrants are usually young and highly educated, and are typically seeking professional employment options of a kind that they cannot find in Russia. The problem reflects the overall lack of opportunity imposed by the current political and economic system.<sup>[13]</sup>

### **Electoral Process:**

The authorities made extensive use of state resources to support the ruling party in the December 4 elections and prevented authentic opposition parties from competing, enabling United Russia to secure 238 of the 450 Duma seats and retain at least a simple majority.<sup>[14]</sup> Both the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Golos, a Russian nongovernmental election-monitoring group, found many problems with the campaign and balloting, which entailed a "convergence of the state and the governing party, limited political competition and a lack of fairness," according to the OSCE.<sup>[15]</sup> At the same time, United Russia won just 49.32 percent of the vote,<sup>[16]</sup> considerably less than in the 2007 elections, and many Russians believe that even this figure was inflated. Protest voters signaled their dissatisfaction with the "party of swindlers and thieves," as antigovernment blogger Aleksey Navalny dubbed United Russia, by casting ballots for any of the available alternatives. This greatly boosted the

performance of the Communist Party (19.19 percent), the center-left Just Russia (13.24 percent), and the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (11.67 percent).

Voters opposed to the government chose these groups at least in part because other potential options were excluded by the authorities. The Justice Ministry refused to register the People's Freedom Party (Parnas), led by several prominent members of the opposition, on the grounds that its charter allegedly did not have procedures for replacing its leaders and there were 79 dead people and minors among the 46,148 signatures submitted.<sup>[17]</sup> Opposition leader Vladimir Ryzhkov described the decision as politically motivated and illegal.<sup>[18]</sup>

Billionaire businessman Mikhail Prokhorov's short-lived leadership of the Right Cause party, one of only seven parties allowed to compete in the parliamentary elections, illustrated the Kremlin's tight control over the country's political party system.<sup>[19]</sup> In June, Vladislav Surkov, the deputy head of the presidential administration, reportedly secured Prokhorov's election as the party's new leader. Some observers speculated that Right Cause's purpose was to advocate unpopular liberal reforms so that United Russia would look more attractive in the eyes of voters.<sup>[20]</sup> However, Prokhorov reportedly came into conflict with the Kremlin over a variety of issues, including his candidate list and overly eager efforts to win public support. By September 15 he had been removed as party leader in a maneuver allegedly orchestrated by Surkov.

There was an abundance of evidence of electoral fraud,<sup>[21]</sup> including the usual manipulations in areas like the North Caucasus – United Russia received an improbable 99.48 percent in Chechnya. Many members of the opposition called for a rerun of the December elections under fair conditions, but Putin rejected this idea.<sup>[22]</sup> The postelection protesters included the removal of Vladimir Churov, chairman of the Central Election Commission, among their demands, particularly given the perception that he would similarly rig the upcoming presidential election in March 2012.

The authorities exerted intense pressure on Golos in the run-up to the voting. A denial-of-service attack on the group's online map of electoral violations rendered it inaccessible on election day.<sup>[23]</sup> Days before the voting, Golos director Lilya Shibanova was detained at Moscow's

Sheremetyevo airport for 12 hours, and her computer was confiscated. A documentary aired on the state-controlled television station NTV just before the elections questioned whether Golos could be objective given the fact that it received funding from Western governmental and nongovernmental sources. Meanwhile, progovernment news agencies published information hacked from Golos e-mail accounts, and the authorities fined the group \$1,000 on the grounds that its online map violated a law barring the release of polling data during the immediate preelection period.<sup>[24]</sup>

Constraints on election observers are not new in Russia. The OSCE deployed 460 monitors in 2003, but refused to observe the 2007 Duma elections when Russian authorities offered visas for only 70 monitors to enter the country one month before the voting, rather than the usual three months.<sup>[25]</sup> In 2011, the OSCE sought to send 260, but had to settle for 200 (40 long-term and 160 short-term) observers.<sup>[26]</sup> The mission began on October 26, about six weeks before the elections.<sup>[27]</sup> The OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly sent a separate delegation of almost 100 lawmakers, and the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly sent 34.<sup>[28]</sup>

According to a law signed by Medvedev in March, local legislatures with 20 or more seats must distribute at least half of them according to proportional representation, as opposed to the majority system, in future elections. Medvedev claimed that the reform would help develop the party system, but members of the opposition argued that it would simply favor the already dominant United Russia party.

### **Civil Society:**

The December Duma elections seemed to mark a breakthrough for Russian civil society. Before the vote, there were clear signs that civil society activity was increasing, but afterward, it gained new impetus around the themes of electoral fraud and the broader corruption of the system overseen by Putin. On December 10 and 24, experienced activists were joined in the streets by many citizens who had never participated in direct political action before. Approximately 40,000 to 50,000 people took part in the first rally, and 80,000 to 100,000 turned out two weeks later. In contrast to their previous policy of arresting protesters, the authorities allowed these large rallies to proceed. As recently as December 5, police

had arrested several opposition leaders, including Navalny and Ilya Yashin, at spontaneous demonstrations that drew as many as 10,000 people. The detainees were jailed for 15 days, and other participants were beaten.<sup>[29]</sup> The December protesters made clear that the existing political system did not satisfy them and that they wanted free elections, the release of political prisoners, and the rapid adoption of other political reforms, though there are programmatic divisions among liberal, nationalist, leftist, and other opposition factions. While many speakers and banners at the rallies called for the end of Putin's tenure, the formal demands of the demonstrations did not explicitly address this issue.<sup>[30]</sup>

The size and intensity of the December protests took most observers by surprise, but they did not come out of nowhere. Over the course of 2011, the Russian state continued to crack down on a civil society that, while seemingly weak and inactive, had been slowly evolving. Even before the elections, there was growing activity among a variety of groups and associations interested in urban planning, leisure and professional activities, charity, local government, parenting, the environment, and labor issues. While protest movements were rare and mostly focused on specific, local issues,<sup>[31]</sup> such as the prevention of construction in nearby forest land, there were signs that some of these groups were starting to work together. The meeting of the "anti-Seliger" coalition in the Khimki forest – a response to the state-sponsored youth camp held each summer at Lake Seliger – united a core group of prominent activists, such as Navalny, the anticorruption blogger; journalist Oleg Kashin; environmental activist Yevgeniya Chirikova; and television critic Leonid Parfyonov. Civil society groups were in some cases able to change state policy. For example, the Federation of Russian Car Owners has long complained about mandatory automobile inspections that in practice can be passed only by paying a bribe. In May, Putin cancelled all inspections through the end of the year, until after the Duma elections. Moreover, the extensive corruption throughout Russian society had driven some civic activists into politics, as they realized that the problems they faced were of a systemic nature.

Although the election-fueled protests provided a dramatic ending to the year, it was unclear whether they would mark a real turning point in the political engagement of civil society. In general, Russian citizens have not engaged consistently or in large numbers in participatory behaviors that constrain abuses by elites. It is far more common for them to contact

public officials through individual letters, seeking help for their problems, rather than engaging in party development or contentious mass politics. As a result, ruling elites have been able to roll back democratic gains from the earlier post-Soviet period.<sup>[32]</sup> Concessions to public frustration are typically temporary and isolated, and do not change the nature of the system. For example, while the corrupt automobile inspections were cancelled in 2011, they will likely return once the election cycle is over.

The Putin regime has consistently pushed citizens away from opportunities to participate in the political process, reducing the number of elections and limiting the role of the parliament in public life. In an extensive survey of civil society published early in the spring, the Levada Center's Denis Volkov noted that while Russians were launching an increasing number of civic initiatives, they did so in conditions that made it harder to achieve their goals – or even to make the attempt – than had been the case just 10 years earlier.<sup>[33]</sup>

The authorities routinely use spurious or trumped-up criminal charges to persecute activists and intellectuals who are perceived to be odds with the government's agenda. In October, an Arkhangelsk court proceeded with the closed trial of Mikhail Suprun, a historian who was investigating the fate of ethnic Germans deported from the Volga region and Crimea during World War II as "enemies of the Soviet people." The Federal Security Service (FSB) apparently asked the plaintiffs in the case to file complaints against Suprun, allegedly for mishandling the private information of their relatives.<sup>[34]</sup> Though the case was dropped in December, Suprun's lawyer said it was intended as a warning or means of intimidation.<sup>[35]</sup>

As foreign sources of funding dry up, Russia's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must obtain money either from the state or directly from citizens. Raising funds from individuals in Russia is difficult because a large majority, 64 percent, suspect that charities will not use their money for the declared purpose, according to a report prepared by the Russian Donors' Forum.<sup>[36]</sup> Only 107 of Russia's 301 charitable organizations declare financial information. In total, these organizations collected 23.4 billion rubles (\$760 million). The leading areas of operation were environmental projects (3.6 billion rubles/\$117 million), medicine (1.3 billion rubles/\$42.2 million), and education (524.1 million rubles/\$17 million). Tax exemptions for donors will come into effect in 2012.

The state is handing some functions to nonprofit organizations, but it expects total loyalty in return. In 2011, the government provided a billion rubles for the development of civil society institutions,<sup>[37]</sup> and 900 million for social-service organizations.<sup>[38]</sup> Medvedev suggested that the recipient organizations should focus on the prevention of cruelty toward children and harmonizing ethnic relations. The billion rubles were distributed through six NGOs that critics claimed were closely tied to the state.<sup>[39]</sup> No explanation was provided for the choice of these six distributors. In 2010, 60 percent of the billion rubles distributed that year went to NGOs in Moscow, according to a study by the Siberian Civic Initiatives Support Center.

### **Independent Media:**

Russia remains an extremely dangerous place for journalists to work. On December 15, assassins killed the founder of the independent Dagestani newspaper *Chernovik*, Khadzhimurad Kamalov. The Dagestani authorities had been harassing the paper since 2008, when it reported that innocent people had died in a counterinsurgency operation.<sup>[40]</sup> In April, a court convicted Nikita Tikhonov and Yevgeniya Khasis of the 2009 murder of lawyer Stanislav Markelov and *Novaya Gazeta* journalist Anastasiya Baburova. Tikhonov and Khasis are radical Russian nationalists who targeted Markelov for his defense of ethnic minorities. Baburova died trying to protect him.

Unfortunately, the convictions in that case are an exception, as little real progress has been made in resolving some of the most prominent journalist murders of recent years. In August, the authorities arrested retired police lieutenant colonel Dmitry Pavlyuchenkov and charged him with organizing the group that carried out the 2006 assassination of *Novaya Gazeta* journalist Anna Politkovskaya. However, it remains unclear who actually ordered the killing.<sup>[41]</sup> Pavlyuchenkov allegedly procured the murder weapon and hired Rustam Makhmudov, who was arrested in June, to carry out the crime. Makhmudov's two brothers and former police officer Sergey Khadzhikurbanov, also allegedly hired by Pavlyuchenkov, were acquitted by a jury in 2009 for lack of evidence, but the Supreme Court overturned that verdict and they are again under investigation.

More than 80 percent of the population watches television on a daily basis, and around 94 percent receive the latest news from the three main state-controlled networks, meaning they are often left uninformed about topics and events the government prefers to obscure.<sup>[42]</sup> Genuine opposition leaders generally do not have access to airtime, and television commentators who speak on behalf of the state usually cast the opposition in a negative light. The large protests in December forced the state media to provide some coverage of the opposition, but this amounted to a temporary, tactical concession.<sup>[43]</sup> Independent online media presented a much more complete and even sympathetic picture of the protests than did the state media.<sup>[44]</sup>

Business magnates with close connections to the Kremlin continued purchasing key media assets in 2011. Yury Kovalchuk, a co-owner of Bank Rossiya and a longtime Putin associate, purchased a 25 percent stake in Channel One, Russia's main television broadcaster,<sup>[45]</sup> and the radio station Russian News Service (RSN).<sup>[46]</sup> The state retains a majority stake in Channel One, which is a crucial asset for the 2012 presidential election, since it reaches almost all of Russia's population. Kovalchuk's National Media Group already owned 68 percent of Ren TV, 72 percent of Channel Five, a controlling stake in the *Izvestiya* newspaper, and Video International Group, which sells a large share of the country's advertising. Other oligarchs – including Aleksandr Mamut, Alisher Usmanov, Oleg Deripaska, Aleksey Mordashyov, and Roman Abramovich – have extensive media holdings of their own.<sup>[47]</sup> Pressure on Usmanov, who owns the business newspaper *Kommersant*, the news website Gazeta.ru, and the popular LiveJournal blogging platform, apparently increased during the election period.<sup>[48]</sup> In December he fired Maksim Kovalsky, the editor of *Kommersant's Vlast* magazine, for publishing a photograph of obscene comments about Putin written on a ballot.<sup>[49]</sup> A Gazeta.ru editor, Roman Badanin, resigned in response to the owner's request that a link to Golos's map of electoral violations be removed from the news site.<sup>[50]</sup> In a further blow to media diversity, the relicensing process associated with the upcoming switch to digital broadcasting is expected to eliminate many independent regional outlets.

The regime's most important tool for suppressing a wide variety of opposition speech may be its vaguely written legislation against "extremism," adopted in 2002 and amended in 2006.<sup>[51]</sup> The authorities are

increasingly using extremism laws against bloggers, according to Boris Timoshenko of the Glasnost Defense Foundation.<sup>[52]</sup>

Censorship limits the information available in the media. In 2011, state-controlled NTV pulled a report about illegal abductions by law enforcement agencies in Chechnya after it had already begun to air in Russia's eastern time zones,<sup>[53]</sup> resulting in a wide-ranging discussion about the extent of censorship in Russia.<sup>[54]</sup> In another case, the station did not air an episode in which television host Kseniya Sobchak confronted Federal Agency for Youth Affairs chief Vasily Yakemenko as he ate in an expensive restaurant. On November 20, Putin was apparently booed when he addressed 22,000 martial arts fans at Moscow's Olympic stadium,<sup>[55]</sup> but after the event was broadcast live, subsequent airings were edited to eliminate the heckling.<sup>[56]</sup>

Approximately half of the population uses the internet in some way.<sup>[57]</sup> After the December elections, the number of visits to opposition news sites increased dramatically. Blogs diverge from the government line far more than the traditional media, according to the research of Harvard University's Bruce Etling. In fact, blogs represent an alternative public sphere where ordinary people can talk about issues that government officials do not want the mainstream media to discuss.<sup>[58]</sup> Satire targeting Putin and Medvedev is rampant on the internet. The most popular such site is Citizen Poet, which features a weekly satirical poem written by Dmitry Bykov and performed by Mikhail Yefremov.<sup>[59]</sup> Dozhd TV, an internet-only television station, provides a compelling alternative to Russia's state-dominated broadcast sector.

There are currently few state restrictions on the internet, but as the medium becomes more popular, the authorities are finding new ways to monitor and control its content.<sup>[60]</sup> Rather than banning dissent outright, they have generally attempted to shape the narrative of online discussions through progovernment or government-allied websites and commentators. However, more direct pressure is also applied. Before the December 10 postelection protests, for example, the FSB sought to have the social-networking site Vkontakte block seven opposition groups that were calling for demonstrations.<sup>[61]</sup> Also during the year, Fontanka.ru journalist Aleksandra Garmazhapova was fired for writing an article describing how the Kirovsky district authorities in St. Petersburg used their administrative power to help elect Matviyenko to a district council so that she could be

appointed to the Federation Council.<sup>[62]</sup> "New cases of harassment of bloggers and netizens are emerging all the time, especially those speaking on sensitive topics," according to a June news release from Reporters Without Borders.<sup>[63]</sup> As one example, the group pointed to the case of Major Igor Matveyev, who wrote about the abuse of troops in Vladivostok and then faced trumped-up charges that could lead to a 10-year prison sentence.

In the regions, local officials control the vast majority of television and radio stations. They pay less attention to newspapers, but print media often have few readers and little influence. Local officials do not always honor newspapers' requests for information, and the courts generally back the political authorities, making it nearly impossible for journalists to obtain data about local corruption.<sup>[64]</sup> Regional journalists usually censor themselves to avoid serious conflicts with the government or other powerful forces, but the line between permissible and impermissible coverage is rarely clear. Most regional papers are forced to rely on subsidies from an owner or patron, as they cannot survive on ordinary commercial revenue.<sup>[65]</sup>

### **Local Democratic Governance:**

One area where Medvedev's policies as president differed from his predecessor's was in relations with Russia's regional leaders. Whereas Putin largely left incumbents in their positions, Medvedev has actively replaced them. In 2011, when the Kremlin decided to remove Matviyenko as governor of St. Petersburg because of her unpopularity ahead of the Duma elections, its choice to fill the vacancy was Georgy Poltavchenko, a largely unknown figure who had previously served as presidential representative to the central federal district. Both Poltavchenko and Sergey Sobyenin, who had replaced longtime Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov at the end of 2010, were notable for being loyal to Putin and lacking close ties to their new cities' political elites, which presumably made them more likely to implement the federal government's orders. However, in an ostensible step back from such direct central control, Medvedev proposed reinstating gubernatorial elections during his address to the Federal Assembly on December 22. The move was seen as a concession to the postelection protesters. Putin had replaced gubernatorial elections with a system of

presidential appointments in 2004, and both Putin and Medvedev had consistently rejected restoring the elections since then.<sup>[66]</sup>

Since 2003, direct mayoral elections in Russia's cities and towns have gradually been abolished in favor of city managers chosen by the local legislatures. Mayors have been replaced in half of the cities with populations over 200,000.<sup>[67]</sup> The city manager system in practice makes the municipal executives more accountable to the federally appointed governors – the main political powerbrokers of each region – than to city residents. The trend has continued even though Minister of Regional Development Viktor Basargin denounced city managers as ineffective in July.

The January 24 bombing of Moscow's Domodedovo airport, which killed at least 37 people, was a tragic reminder of the ongoing failure of the Kremlin's counterinsurgency policy in the North Caucasus. The suicide bomber was a 20-year-old resident of Ingushetiya. Indeed, the situation in the North Caucasus remains extremely dangerous. During 2011, there were 546 insurgent and terrorist attacks, though that represented a 6.3 percent decline from 2010.<sup>[68]</sup>

Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov continues to run his republic with the help of extensive federal subsidies. His lavish lifestyle and extravagant birthday celebration in 2011 provoked protests in other parts of Russia. Despite his dependence on federal funds, Kadyrov operates with greater autonomy than Russia's other regional leaders. Putin visited Chechnya on December 21 and made clear that he intends to continue supporting his ally, arguing that the existing policy was necessary to prevent Chechnya and neighboring republics from seceding.<sup>[69]</sup>

### **Judicial Framework and Independence:**

Russia's courts continue to hand down politicized decisions in high-profile cases. Natalya Vasilyeva, a press officer for Moscow's Khamovnichesky District Court, claimed in February 2011 that Judge Viktor Danilkin was following orders from the Moscow City Court when he sentenced former Yukos oil company head Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his business partner, Platon Lebedev, to new prison terms at the end of 2010.<sup>[70]</sup>

In May the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that Khodorkovsky's rights were violated after his arrest in 2003, but it rejected Khodorkovsky's assertion that the tax evasion case was politically motivated.<sup>[71]</sup> In a separate ruling on September 20, the ECHR found that Russia had deprived Yukos of its right to a fair trial because the company did not have sufficient time to prepare a defense, and because of the disproportionate tax penalties, which effectively destroyed the firm.<sup>[72]</sup> However, as with the case concerning Khodorkovsky personally, the court said that Russian authorities had legitimate grounds to investigate tax fraud and did not pursue the case with the aim of punishing Khodorkovsky's opposition activities and seizing Yukos's assets. Despite these judgments, most members of the opposition and outside observers such as Amnesty International view Khodorkovsky and Lebedev as prisoners of conscience.<sup>[73]</sup>

They are far from the only government opponents to be targeted via the courts. The authorities jailed Left Front leader Sergey Udaltsov in December, after he played an important role in the election-related protests. Human rights activists have also drawn attention to the case of Taisiya Osipova, the wife of an activist for the National Bolshevik Party who was sentenced in December to 10 years in prison for alleged possession of heroin.<sup>[74]</sup> Osipova claims that she is innocent.

The authorities exert political pressure on judges. In the first nine months of 2011, 77 judges voluntarily resigned in Moscow, typically citing such pressure as one of the main reasons for their departure.<sup>[75]</sup> Court chairmen have extensive control over the professional lives of judges and can use this power to keep them in line. Even after judges retire, they often rely on the courts for their pensions and other benefits, meaning very few are willing to speak openly about infringements on their independence.

In some cases, the courts have appeared to make just, if not necessarily independent, decisions. For example, in mid-June a Moscow court ruled that Oleg Orlov of the human rights organization Memorial had not criminally slandered Kadyrov when he implicated the Chechen president in the 2009 murder of human rights worker Nataliya Estimirova. Orlov called the decision "unexpected" and "amazing," having assumed that the court would rule based on political pressure.<sup>[76]</sup> "The situation with our courts is such that a decision based on law is astounding," he said. Although the criminal case against Orlov failed, Kadyrov had already successfully sued

Orlov in a civil case. Also in June, Khamovnichesky District Court ruled against Vasily Yakemenko, the head of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs, who had sued *Kommersant* journalist Oleg Kashin and *Noviye Izvestiya* political analyst Aleksandr Morozov for claiming that he had organized the brutal beating of Kashin.<sup>[77]</sup> And a St. Petersburg court imposed life sentences on two Russian nationalists convicted of killing and beating ethnic minorities in the city, despite a pattern of judicial leniency toward Russian nationalists in previous years.

The Russian courts have punished some organized crime figures. In September, Sergey Butorin, known by the nickname "Osya," was sentenced to life in prison for participating in 29 murders and attempted murders.<sup>[78]</sup> And in a virtually unprecedented instance of an individual using the courts to combat abuses by the security services, banker and *Novaya Gazeta* owner Aleksander Lebedev filed a lawsuit on September 13 against the FSB department tasked with combatting economic crimes (Department K) for raiding his National Reserve Bank in November 2010. He alleged that the raid caused his clients to withdraw \$66 million from the bank in the subsequent two weeks. Although Lebedev served in the KGB and maintains good relations with the Kremlin, it was not clear at year's end how far his case would go in the court system.<sup>[79]</sup>

There were 650,000 prisoners in Russia as of September 2011, down significantly from 880,000 in October 2010, thanks to concerted efforts to reduce sentences and decriminalize some offenses. Nevertheless, Justice Minister Aleksandr Kononov has conceded that many inmates live in inhumane conditions.<sup>[80]</sup> The number of inmates held in pretrial detention centers dropped from 133,000 people in January 2009 to 113,000 at the beginning of 2011, according to the Federal Prison Service.<sup>[81]</sup> But conditions in these centers are considered to be much worse than in regular prisons.<sup>[82]</sup> As many as 50 to 60 people die each year in investigative isolation wards (SIZOs), according to the Moscow Helsinki Group. Medvedev signed a law in 2011 allowing people accused of economic crimes to avoid pretrial detention, but judges rarely use this option, according to Valery Borshchov, head of the Moscow Public Oversight Commission.<sup>[83]</sup> However, in a surprise move, a court released entrepreneur Natalya Gulevich after convicting her of fraud on December 26.<sup>[84]</sup> She had been held in pretrial detention despite failing kidneys and bladder problems.

In the case of Sergey Magnitsky, who died in pretrial detention in 2009 after exposing extensive corruption among law enforcement officials, the Investigative Committee filed charges against two of the medical officials at Moscow's Butyrskaya prison. However, human rights defenders argued that these officials played only a minor role in Magnitsky's death, and were being used as scapegoats for the higher-level officials who wanted to silence Magnitsky.<sup>[85]</sup> The investigators did not explain evidence that Magnitsky had been beaten by guards in the Matrosskaya Tishina detention center shortly before his death.<sup>[86]</sup>

### Corruption:

Russia's battle against corruption in 2011 produced a few symbolic results, but graft remains a defining feature of Putin's tenure and a major source of frustration for anti-Putin activists and protesters. Russia's score on Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index was 2.4, a slight improvement from 2.1 in 2010. The group cited Medvedev's anticorruption measures and Russia's decision to join the antibribery convention of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.<sup>[87]</sup> Similarly, a biannual survey by the international accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers reported less economic crime than in previous years.<sup>[88]</sup> Overall, 37 percent of the 126 companies surveyed reported being victims, down from 71 percent in 2009 and 59 percent in 2007, though 73 percent said they felt vulnerable to future economic crimes.

Despite these apparently improving figures, corruption remains a pervasive problem. The sinking of the Volga river vessel *Bulgaria* on July 10, which killed 129 people, served as another tragic reminder of the fatal consequences of Russia's thoroughly corrupted systems for enforcement of health and safety rules. The boat was unfit for passenger service, had too many people aboard, and had violated a number of safety procedures. Corrupt inspectors frequently overlook such violations, making deadly accidents and fires a chronic affliction.

On May 4 Medvedev signed new legislation that raised fines for taking bribes to as much as 100 times the amount of the illegal payment.<sup>[89]</sup> The minimum fine is 25,000 rubles, and the maximum is 500 million rubles. The president said imprisonment would remain the main form of punishment.

However, since the authorities only selectively prosecute such crimes, stronger penalties have little meaning in practice.

In a separate action in April, Medvedev ordered all government officials to withdraw from any positions they held on the boards of state-owned companies, ostensibly with the aim of reducing opportunities for high-level bureaucrats to convert their political status into material wealth. Among the most prominent figures affected was Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, a close Putin ally, who had to step down as chairman of Rosneft, the state oil company. Nevertheless, senior officials like Sechin maintained close informal ties to their respective enterprises, and the government will likely continue to exert extensive and often personalized control over state-owned firms. As Rosneft president Eduard Khudainatov explained, "We are a company with state ownership, and we directly report to the government via orders and other administrative tools. The daily control is in the hands of Igor Ivanovich [Sechin]."<sup>[90]</sup> According to Navalny, the three most corrupt spheres in Russia are companies with state ownership, the system of state procurement contracts, and the setting of government-regulated prices for utilities and other services.<sup>[91]</sup>

The website Election2012.ru, edited by Marina Litvinovich, lays out the considerable business interests of the current ministers and their closest family members. The information gathered on the site shows how officials control not only oil and gas in Russia, but most of the key financial flows. It also lists the alleged connections between ministers and organized crime groups. The dense ties between the state and business were the focus of attention at a 2011 London trial pitting exiled tycoon and former political power broker Boris Berezovsky against Roman Abramovich, his erstwhile business partner. The proceedings, in which Berezovsky was seeking compensation for breach of contract, revealed in detail how in the 1990s he had used his Kremlin connections to manipulate the privatization of oil companies, which Abramovich could then buy, earning huge profits for both men.

The problem of personal enrichment by government officials is as pervasive in the regions as it is in the capital. In 2011 the business newspaper *Vedomosti* found evidence that 23 governors' children owned sizeable stakes in various companies.<sup>[92]</sup> One governor's 18-year-old daughter

reportedly owned shares in 10 companies and was the general director of 20.

In a meeting with writers on September 28, Putin denied that he had helped a personal associate, Gennady Timchenko, turn his Gunvor oil-trading company into a billion-dollar business, one of the most prominent charges of corruption against Putin's regime. Putin also rejected Navalny's charge that \$4 billion had been embezzled from the state pipeline monopoly Transneft, arguing that the use of funds for something other than the assigned purpose did not amount to theft. Aleksey Venediktov, editor in chief of the often outspoken radio station Ekho Moskv, later accused Putin of being "disingenuous" about both Timchenko and the Transneft issue.<sup>[93]</sup>

Although a new law on police reform came into effect on March 1, it had little impact on corruption during the year. The police were formally renamed *politsiya*, replacing the Soviet-era term *militsiya*. However, the interior minister kept his position, and aside from the firing of some high-ranking officers, the leadership structure remained largely intact. The police are still ultimately accountable to the federal authorities, not regional or local leaders and residents. Proposals for more effective police reform include decentralizing law enforcement authority, allowing police chiefs to be appointed locally, and removing the police's jurisdiction over economic matters to reduce their involvement in extorting businesses.<sup>[94]</sup>

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