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Freedom in the World - ↓ Russia (2008)

Capital:
Moscow

Population:
141,700,000

Political Rights Score: 6
Civil Liberties Score: 5
Status: Not Free

Trend Arrow

Russia received a downward trend arrow for the Kremlin's stage-managed parliamentary election campaign, which left very little room for opposition parties to criticize the authorities or take their message to the people.

Overview

The 2007 State Duma elections marked a new low in the Kremlin's manipulations of the political process. The authorities sharply restricted outside election observers and ensured that the campaign environment favored Kremlin-backed parties, which won the vast majority of seats. More ominously for Russian democracy, President Vladimir Putin announced that he intended to remain on the political stage after his second term ended in 2008. Putin's continued tenure would benefit the circle of security-agency veterans he has appointed to top positions in the government and state-owned enterprises and set Russia on a firmly authoritarian course. During the year, the authorities continued to place strict limits on opposition political parties, public demonstrations, the media, and nongovernmental organizations, and failed to launch any serious initiatives to address Russia's extensive corruption.

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 tanks to thwart an attempted coup by opponents of radical reform in parliament, after which voters approved a new constitution establishing a powerful presidency and a bicameral national legislature, the Federal Assembly. The December 1995 parliamentary elections, in which 43 parties competed, saw strong support for Communists and ultranationalist forces. Nevertheless, in the 1996 presidential poll, Yeltsin easily defeated Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov with the backing of powerful business magnates, commonly known as oligarchs. The August 1998 collapse of the ruble and Russia's financial markets provided a traumatic but useful corrective to the Russian economy, ushering in years of rapid growth. In 1999, Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin, then the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), as prime minister.

Conflict with the separatist republic of Chechnya, which had included a brutal two-year war from 1994 to 1996, resumed in 1999. After a Chechen rebel attack on the neighboring Russian republic of Dagestan in August 1999 and a series of deadly apartment bombings in Russian cities that the Kremlin blamed on Chechen militants the same year, the central government responded with an invasion of the breakaway region. The second Chechen war dramatically increased Putin's popularity, and after the December 1999 elections to the State Duma, the lower

house of the Federal Assembly, progovernment forces were able to form a majority coalition.

An ailing Yeltsin—who was constitutionally barred from a third presidential term—resigned on December 31, 1999, transferring power to his handpicked successor, Putin. The new acting president subsequently secured a 53 percent–29 percent first-round victory over Zyuganov in the March 2000 presidential election. After taking office, Putin moved to consolidate his power, reducing the influence of the legislature, regional leaders, the business community, and the news media, while strengthening the FSB. He considerably altered the composition of the ruling elite through an influx of personnel from the security and military services; they now represent approximately 25 percent of the country's ministers, deputy ministers, legislators, regional governors, and heads of multiregional federal districts. Overall, Putin garnered enormous personal popularity by stabilizing the Russian political system after years of uncertainty under Yeltsin and overseeing a gradual increase in the standard of living for most of the population.

The December 2003 Duma elections were marred by extensive bias in media coverage. The Kremlin-controlled United Russia party captured 306 of the Duma's 450 seats. With the national broadcast media and most print outlets favorable to the incumbent, no opponent was able to mount a respectable 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, Communist Nikolai Kharitonov. Voter turnout was 64.3 percent.

Putin's second term featured an increase in state power over civil society, with little progress on overall administrative and military reform. In September 2004, Putin introduced legislative changes that eliminated direct gubernatorial elections in favor of presidential appointments. Russia faced mass protests in early 2005 after the government attempted to replace long-standing in-kind social benefits for certain vulnerable groups with inadequate cash payments. The events sparked concerns in the Kremlin that a future protest movement could topple the current leadership, as had recently occurred in Georgia and Ukraine. To prevent such an outcome, Russian officials and state-controlled media supported loyalist groups, such as the youth movement Nashi, to counter potential opposition protesters. The government also began a crackdown on democracy-promotion groups and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) inside Russia, especially those receiving foreign funding.

The authorities removed another possible threat in 2005, when a court sentenced billionaire energy magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, founder of the oil firm OAO Yukos, to eight years in prison for fraud and tax evasion. A parallel tax case against Yukos itself led to the transfer of most of its assets to the state-owned OAO Rosneft. Although an oligarch with a checkered past, Khodorkovsky had transformed his company into one of the most transparent in Russia and was using his wealth to bankroll opposition political activities.

Putin in early 2006 signed a new law that handed bureaucrats wide discretion in registering NGOs and imposed extensive reporting requirements on the groups. The legislation made it easier for the authorities to shut down NGOs that were critical of official policy. In another sign that safe avenues for dissent were disappearing, an assassin murdered investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya in

October of that year. She had frequently criticized the Kremlin's brutal military campaign in Chechnya and the excesses of Russian troops in the region. At least 13 journalists have been killed since Putin came to power, and there have been no convictions in any of the cases. The authorities have further limited free expression by passing vague laws on extremism that make it possible to crack down on any organization that lacks official support.

In the run-up to the December 2007 Duma elections, Russia passed a variety of measures that increased the authorities' ability to control the outcome of the voting. New electoral provisions meant that all Duma members were elected via party list and that a party had to win at least 7 percent of the vote for its members to enter the legislature. The electoral process was slanted in favor of United Russia, which received most of the media attention. Moreover, Russia signaled that the campaign and voting would be neither free nor fair by creating obstacles to the arrival of international observers until late in the campaign. Ultimately, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) decided not to observe the elections because it felt that its monitors did not have the freedom to work professionally.

United Russia captured 315 of the 450 Duma seats. Two parties that generally support the Kremlin, Just Russia and the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, took 38 and 40 seats, respectively. The opposition Communists won 57 seats, and were not expected to wield much influence. There were obvious falsifications in the Kremlin's victory. Turnout in the republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Mordovia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Dagestan, Bashkortostan, and Tatarstan was between 80 and 90 percent, well above the 64 percent average, and support for United Russia ranged from 81 to 99 percent.

On October 1, Putin had announced that he would personally lead the United Russia party list and made it clear that he would not step down from power after the end of his second presidential term. The constitution forbids election to more than two consecutive terms as president, but after the Duma elections, Putin informed the Russian people that he would remain in power as prime minister, working in tandem with his handpicked successor, whose election in 2008 was considered a certainty.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Russia is not an electoral democracy. The December 2007 State Duma elections were carefully engineered by the administration, handing pro-Kremlin parties a supermajority in the lower house. In the presidential election of March 2004, state dominance of the media was on full display, debate was absent, and incumbent Vladimir Putin won a first-round victory with 71.4 percent of the vote, more than five times that of his closest rival.

The 1993 constitution established a strong presidency with the power to dismiss and appoint, pending parliamentary confirmation, the prime minister. How Putin's planned shift from president to prime minister would affect these institutions remained unclear at the end of 2007. The Federal Assembly consists of a lower chamber, the 450-seat State Duma, and an upper chamber, the 176-seat Federation Council. Beginning with the December 2007 elections, all Duma seats, rather than just half, were elected on the basis of party-list proportional representation. Parties must gain at least 7 percent of the vote, rather than the previous 5 percent, to enter the Duma. Parties cannot form electoral coalitions,

and would-be parties must have at least 50,000 members and organizations in half of the federation's 85 administrative units to register. In practice, these changes make it extremely difficult for opposition parties to win representation in the Duma. The upper chamber is made up of members appointed by governors and regional legislatures. Although the governors were previously elected, a 2004 reform gave the president the power to appoint them, meaning he heavily influences the appointment of half of the members of the upper house. The president and members of parliament serve four-year terms, and the president is limited to two consecutive terms.

Corruption in the government and business world is pervasive, and Putin has identified his lack of progress on this issue as one of his greatest failures. In fact, Putin's anticorruption efforts are selectively applied and have often targeted critics and potential political adversaries. The size of the bureaucracy has grown rapidly during the last few years, adding to the difficulty of doing business and creating opportunities for graft and bribery. Russia was ranked 143 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Although the constitution provides for freedom of speech, the government continues to put pressure on the dwindling number of media outlets that are still critical of the Kremlin. Since 2003, the government has controlled, directly or through state-owned companies, all of the national television networks. While the independent Ekho Moskvyy radio station airs a wide range of viewpoints, it is vulnerable because it is owned by the state-controlled natural gas conglomerate OAO Gazprom. The gas monopoly has an extensive media empire that includes the newspapers *Kommersant* and *Izvestiya*, and the gazeta.ru website. Some independent outlets remain in the regional media markets. Discussion on the internet is free, though there are frequent calls for the government to rein it in. The October 2006 murder of well-known investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya, who had covered Chechnya extensively, highlighted the physical danger and intimidation faced by many Russian journalists, in addition to threats of libel suits and other pressures.

Freedom of religion is respected unevenly. A 1997 law on religion gives the state extensive control and requires churches to prove that they have existed for at least 15 years before they are permitted to register. As registration is necessary for a religious group to conduct many of its activities, the operations of new and independent congregations are restricted. Orthodox Christianity has a privileged position in Russian society, and the Church leadership has introduced Christian instruction into many of the country's schools. Regional authorities continue to harass nontraditional groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.

Academic freedom is generally respected, although the academic system is marred by corruption at the higher levels and by very low salaries for educators. The arrest and prosecution of scientists and researchers on charges of treason, usually for discussing sensitive technology with foreigners, has engendered a climate in some research institutes that is restrictive of international contacts. In October 2007, Putin signed a law replacing Russia's traditional five-year university system with Western-style four-year bachelor's degree and two-year master's degree programs, to be implemented by 2009. The move is part of an effort to join the Bologna Declaration on Higher Education. The Russian Academy of Sciences is planning to nearly double the salaries of its scientists, but at the cost of numerous jobs.

The government has consistently reduced the space for freedom of assembly and association. The NGO Legal Team claims that the authorities banned or dispersed almost every public protest held across Russia during 2007. At the beginning of 2006, Putin signed a new law on NGOs that gave government bureaucrats extensive discretion in deciding which organizations could register. The law imposes onerous reporting requirements on the organizations that hampers their ability to operate effectively. The Moscow Federal Registration Service directorate announced in November 2007 that it had denied registration to 1,380 NGOs because of violations of the legislation, 11 percent of the 13,014 that had sought to register. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the problem is much greater, and the Duma was considering amendments to the legislation at the end of the year. The diverse NGO sector is composed of thousands of groups, many of them dependent on funding from foreign sources. The new law places extensive controls on the use of these foreign funds. The Russian state has sought to provide alternative sources of funding, but such support naturally limits what recipient groups can do.

While trade union rights are legally protected, they are limited in practice. Strikes and worker protests occur, but antiunion discrimination and reprisals for strikes are not uncommon, and employers often ignore collective bargaining rights. With the economy continuing to change rapidly after emerging from Soviet-era state controls, unions have been unable to establish a significant presence in much of the private sector. The largest labor federation works in close cooperation with the Kremlin.

The judiciary suffers from corruption, inadequate funding, and a lack of qualified personnel. After judicial reforms in 2002, the government has made progress in implementing due process and holding timely trials. The legislation also authorizes courts rather than prosecutors to issue arrest and search warrants. Although the 2002 law abolished trials in absentia, the practice was revived in 2006 for suspected terrorists. Since January 2003, Russia's reformed criminal procedure code has allowed jury trials in most of the country. While juries are more likely than judges to find defendants not guilty, these verdicts are frequently overturned by a higher court, which can send a case back for retrial as many times as necessary to achieve the desired outcome. Russian citizens often believe 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 torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officials to extract confessions. Many of the reported abuses originate in the turbulent North Caucasus region. Although suppressed in Chechnya in recent years, rebels have moved into surrounding Russian republics, including Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria. During the second half of 2007, they focused their activities on Ingushetia, targeting local security forces, federal troops, and civilians. The Kremlin in turn sent 2,500 reinforcements to carry out counterterrorist operations, which have been marred by numerous cases of illegal detention, torture, extrajudicial killing, and other acts of violence.

The government cracked down on Georgians in 2006 as Russia's relations with Georgia deteriorated, but immigrants and ethnic minorities—particularly those who appear to be from the Caucasus or Central Asia—were already subject to governmental and societal discrimination and harassment. Local observers fear that racially motivated attacks by skinheads and other extremist groups are

increasing. Crimes inspired by ethnic hatred led to 48 murders and 388 injuries during the first nine months of 2007, according to Sova, a group that tracks ultranationalist activity in the country. During the same period in 2006, 44 people were murdered in such attacks.

The government places some restrictions on freedom of movement and residence. All adults are legally required to carry internal passports while traveling, documents that they also need to obtain many government services. Some regional authorities impose residential registration rules that limit the right of citizens to choose their place of residence.

Property rights remain precarious. State takeovers of key industries, coupled with large tax liens on select companies, have reinforced perceptions that property rights are being eroded and that the rule of law is subordinated to political considerations.

Women in Russia have particular difficulty achieving political representation; they won 14 percent of the seats in the carefully controlled 2007 parliamentary elections, up slightly from 10 percent in 2003. Women have had more success in the economic sphere, according to a 2007 report by the World Economic Forum. Domestic violence continues to be a serious problem, and police are often reluctant to intervene in what they regard as internal family matters. Economic hardships contribute to widespread trafficking of women abroad for prostitution.