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Russia

CONSOLIDATED AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

7
/100

Democracy Percentage	6.55/100
Democracy Score	1.39/7

LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

7/100

Consolidated Authoritarian Regime

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic.



Score changes in 2020

- Civil Society rating declined from 6.00 to 6.25 due to the extraordinary level of violence exercised by the state against protestors, use of the foreign agent

law against online activists, and increasing state regulation of the internet and control of the public sphere as the regime has prevented the opposition from coalescing nationally.

Executive Summary

By Nicholas Trickett

In 2019, Russia continued to crack down on the political opposition and growing protest movements as the country's political system sank deeper into stagnation and disorder. The regime's "legitimation machine"—the combined system of formal and informal political institutions that create and implement policy and manage elections—has entered a transition period laden with uncertainties and political challenges for the long term. Driven by the ongoing stagnation of real wages and living standards, the year saw continued protest activity across the country, escalating attempts by Moscow to exert greater control over dissent and political speech, and adaptation to the looming challenge of President Vladimir Putin's fourth term in 2024. Moscow took advantage of the creeping criminalization of protest activity, using violent force on an unprecedented scale to undermine political opposition. ¹

Attempts to divide the opposition since Putin's reelection campaign have shown that opposition groups remain politically weak, but the grassroots organization of opposition movements, politicians, and protests strengthened over the course of the year, particularly outside Russia's capital. ² While the rising tide of discontent and local organizing has yet to significantly undermine the Kremlin's grip on local, regional, and national political power, the willingness of authorities to use violence at such an extraordinary level—along with the increased willingness of protesters to endure that force—has exposed just how far the regime will go to preserve its "power vertical," which lags behind current political realities. ³ The previous year's embarrassments in the regional elections prompted a steady reconsideration of how to control electoral outcomes, as United Russia—the Kremlin's operative political party—has become increasingly unpopular with the public. ⁴ The Kremlin needs to maintain, per its own admission, a majority of 226 deputies in the Duma after the next elections to hold the status quo. ⁵ Given the sliding public support for United Russia, the Kremlin will be forced to rely on other tools to keep its control, such as lowering the barrier to entry for smaller, single-

issue parties and competing opposition parties to dilute the vote, as well as maintaining the primacy of United Russia. **6**

This trend of diluting the relative power of institutions and organizations in order to preserve Kremlin control is the end result of a broader breakdown within the regime, which has accelerated as economic stagnation has set in since 2014. Elites linked to the so-called economic bloc in Moscow—in particular, proponents of liberal economic reforms frequently associated with the Ministry of Finance—pushed forward their concerns about the country’s legal system and the behavior of Russian elites tied to the security services. **7** But Russia’s political system continues to be highly personalist in nature, and centered on personal networks running through the presidential administration and Putin. Visible divisions between elite groups over state policy have come alongside findings from the Levada-Center showing an overall decline in the perceived influence of most of Russia’s major political institutions except the military and the FSB. **8** Although declines for leading institutions were generally limited, the perception of the role of the president declined by a significant margin in a year-on-year comparison. As personalism persists, Russians perceive changes in institutional power to be taking place.

The year 2018 saw a visible degradation of formal and informal institutions traditionally used to maintain political power at all levels of government, and this continued and intensified in 2019. The year started off with public discontent with the government near record highs, prompting a succession of policy proposals aimed at buying public support through tax breaks and promises of social spending. **9** Despite the government’s growing unpopularity, Putin’s ratings, having fallen from record highs in 2018, remained relatively stable over the course of the year. Also notable in 2019, figures identified as politically risky were removed and replaced in a sweeping series of managerial changes within Russia’s security services, some leading state-owned enterprises, and various political institutions as concerns about public opinion have risen to the top of the agenda. **10**

The rising influence of Sergei Kirienko, a deputy in the presidential administration, has reflected growing concern over the control of political cadres and developing support for the regime among Russia’s youth. Rather than pursue reforms that compromise the tenuous balance of power between elite groups, increasingly technocratic measures are being aimed at firewalling the Kremlin from public

criticism, promoting competition between political power centers, and promoting newer, younger talent to positions of authority. ¹¹

Despite these maneuvers, the Kremlin has failed to maintain Putin's post-Crimea popularity levels with the public, weakening the tenuous social contract that has underpinned the regime's authority over the last two decades. Some technocratic successes, such as implementing more transparent and comprehensive tax collection systems to reduce business corruption, have done little to change outcomes for the public. ¹² The Supreme Court found that criminal corruption statistics from January to August 2019 showed a year-on-year increase of 4.7 percent in incidence rates. ¹³ In early November, the courts upheld a decision to expand the confiscation of property and financial gains from corrupt activities to anyone who cannot prove the provenance of their property or financial earnings, a move that threatens relatives and friends of individuals suspected of corrupt activities. ¹⁴ This focus seems less to do with weeding out corruption than with drawing political attention to it, including factional fights over the courts' ability to dictate outcomes by bringing cases forward.

These changes symbolize a stark reality: the state is expanding its power to repress and punish activity that the center (or factions and institutions within the center) deems wrong, and yet its power to control outcomes appears weakened. This has perhaps most visibly come with tightening regulatory control over political speech and the internet, and expanding legal actions taken against protesters. At the beginning of May, Putin signed into law a bill designed to guarantee the continued function of the internet in case it was "cut off" from connections internationally, effectively seeking to establish a "sovereign" Russian internet that would allow the state to exert even greater control over the public's access to information. ¹⁵ Yet the tighter the state's grip on control, the greater the space for public blowback and new avenues for civil society to protest either failures of state policy or overreaching state power. This fundamental contradiction appears set to worsen in the coming years.

As pressure grows to manage the end of Putin's fourth term, the regime will likely be forced to curry support via state spending and newer repressive measures. This dynamic will encourage more "policy entrepreneurship" aimed to please the Kremlin and advance personal agendas, and the politicization of issues that have largely been seen by the public to be outside the realm of politics. All of these

developments will take place in a political context defined by Putin's exit of the presidency and his efforts to consolidate and retain political power within Russia's web of formal and informal political institutions.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches.	1.25/7.00
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- Russia remains a consolidated authoritarian state, as President Vladimir Putin continues to rely on the autocratic manipulation of quasi-democratic institutions to generate legitimacy and distribute political power between formal and informal institutions, which are controlled, owned, or otherwise co-opted and coerced by the state. Yet, due to its failure to deliver continued economic growth since 2013, the regime has faced rising societal pressure and sought to refresh its tactics and strategies in order to maintain control. Similarly, the regime has attempted to cultivate an impression of drawing political leaders from all walks of life to give the illusion that systemic renewal is taking place. **1**
- The Kremlin's primary levers for sustaining public support—targeted welfare spending and foreign policy “wins”—have faded as effective tools. State economic statistics are an increasingly unreliable indicator of the health of the economy. Policymakers attempt to sell the notion of progress despite the fact that Russia's record surpluses and macroeconomic stabilization have not touched the lives of average citizens, and 71 percent of business owners consider the country's business climate unfavorable. **2**
- Instead of addressing much-needed reforms, the Kremlin, after several years of budget consolidation, has relied on new spending programs designed to distribute state financial resources to the country's largest firms, supporters, and hangers-on of the regime. **3** A redistribution of state wealth in the wake of adjustments to budgetary and tax policy has masked the lack of any real change, while the Kremlin has rotated technocrats in and out of power to ensure that regime loyalists occupy key posts. **4** In place of even mild liberalization, policies like tax breaks for families with multiple children have been rolled out for retail politicking. **5**

- Putin's First Deputy Chief of Staff, Sergei Kirienko, has attempted to recruit newer, younger talent for future political positions, but these efforts have further institutionalized access to power rather than increase political competition. ⁶ The public's response to these reforms has been less than positive, with trust in the United Russia ruling party dipping low enough to warrant an expression of concern from Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. ⁷
- These trends reflect an overall decline in the quality of governance at the national level. Growing tension between regime efforts to maintain control and the stagnation of economic and political institutions has led to an increasingly compartmentalized, chaotic policy environment. The Kremlin's refusal in February to intervene in the arrest and corruption case against American businessman Michael Calvey and his private equity firm, Baring Vostok (involving a dispute with Vostochny Bank shareholders) signaled that loyalty to regime-friendly figures comes ahead of maintaining business confidence. ⁸ And where past laws have targeted Russian citizens with fines for online posts, the Duma passed a bill in December leveling fines for "electoral interference" against foreign companies operating online, as Moscow's policies attempt to minimize all foreign influence. ⁹
- Russia has long been plagued by personalist, informal institutions that capture policymaking processes, but 2019 revealed that existing institutions were increasingly ill-equipped to respond to the country's growing social pressures. Reforms in waste management that were instituted to quell rising local protests across the country are indicative of the yawning gaps between federal agendas and regional and local implementation. ¹⁰ Similarly, the mishandling of a failed rocket test carrying nuclear material in Arkhangelsk oblast and wildfires in Siberia exposed the state's limited capacity to govern the country. ¹¹
- On the whole, Russia's national-level institutions are increasingly uncoordinated in their functions. While the state's leading economic policymaking institutions—the ministries of Finance and Economic Development—continue to tout a budget surplus and claim that the country's finances are in good shape, the Kremlin has lumbered into a new midterm electoral cycle with little success toward improving Russian lives. ¹² The country's security organs have expanded their role in economic decision-making, whether in the guise of investigating corruption (as happened with a leading auto dealer in July) or raiding prized businesses for the benefit of

regime-connected individuals. **13** The Kremlin lacks the will, and perhaps the ability, to enforce stricter boundaries between formal and informal institutions that are now fighting to preserve their influence in a political climate where, increasingly, the public seeks significant changes to Russian society. **14**

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process.	1.25/7.00
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- The regime spent much of 2019 responding to electoral setbacks and damaged public perceptions due to the previous year's pension reform, the implementation of a VAT increase in January, and obvious interference in regional electoral results that challenged the Kremlin's monopoly on political power. In particular, support collapsed for the ruling party, United Russia, prompting talk of reforming the country's electoral rules. The proposed changes would replace party-list jurisdictions with single-mandate seats, ensuring that lower vote totals would prevent systemic opposition parties from gaining seats. **1** This conversation started in February when it was announced that a working group within the Kremlin was considering weakening the municipal "filter" used to screen candidates off the ballot for regional elections in a move to encourage greater levels of competition and divert votes away from opposition candidates. **2**
- This divide-and-conquer approach has also been considered in discrete instances at the federal level, including a proposal to create a "green" party. Such a faction would effectively stand in for environmental policies and neuter public protests over the waste-management reforms by providing the appearance of inclusion at the federal level. **3** But the efficacy of this strategy is limited; a Levada-Center poll conducted in July reported that 41 percent of Russians said they did not plan to vote in Duma elections. **4** This lack of engagement undermines legitimacy despite giving the Kremlin greater control, and expected turnout figures in the fall gave United Russia an estimated 42–45 percent of the vote. **5** Even with these potential changes in motion, reform appeared to be delayed when Prime Minister Medvedev, head of United Russia, urged candidates not to run independently of the party. **6**

The message went unheeded, however, and the Kremlin opted to tighten its control over the party's campaigning, handing responsibility to Sergei Kirienko in November. ⁷ The regime seems unwilling to risk letting the non-systemic opposition make any gains in key elections, continuing to rely on systemic opposition parties to diffuse discontent. Yet future cooperation between systemic and non-systemic opposition actors remains a longer-term risk as Russia's democratic political institutions fray.

- Electoral legitimacy below the federal level is fraying as well. The Moscow City Duma elections in September proved to be a PR disaster for the Kremlin. Protests erupted in advance of the polls when the city's electoral commission denied opposition figures the right to appear on the ballot. ⁸ On August 3, Moscow police arrested 800 protesters in a single day, starkly contrasting the regime with public opinion. ⁹ In the end, after Alexei Navalny and other activist opposition leaders called on citizens to vote tactically and frustrate the Kremlin's attempts to control the process, 20 systemic or otherwise acceptable opposition figures were elected to the 45-seat legislative body. ¹⁰
- The municipal filter at the local level, however, appeared unchanged. As a result, the regime lost considerable face in some regions. The elections in Ulan-Ude and Novosibirsk, as in Moscow, resulted in public protests against obvious interventions from the federal level to overturn results the Kremlin found unfavorable. ¹¹ Here, the traditional system for filtering out candidates proved to be inadequate to the task of dictating necessary outcomes.

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.	1.75/7.00
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- The year 2019 witnessed a violent backlash from the Kremlin after relative gains made by Russian civil society in the previous year, during which grassroots political organizing put considerable pressure on the state. Nearly 3,000 demonstrators from different protest events had been arrested by mid-August in an aggressive campaign by police to suppress dissent. ¹

- Two divergent narratives emerged during the year: the state attempted to push existing civil society organizations (CSOs) out of the realm of politics to focus instead on “real problems,” while opposition political figures and groups sought to politicize local elections and the very issues the state sought to remove from politics. **2** Massive pressure was applied to leading opposition activists such as Alexei Navalny, and coordinated mass raids on the offices of the Navalny-established Fund for the Fight Against Corruption (FBK) in September were followed by further raids on Navalny’s own office in late December. **3**
- Newer methods have been devised to suppress individual activists, most recently the forced conscription of Ruslan Shaveddinov, an employee of Navalny’s FBK, to an Arctic base in late December. **4** These raids have come alongside a broader chilling effect on CSOs from fears of being branded and penalized as a “foreign agent,” a tactic notably targeting Memorial and other national nonprofits. **5**
- Continued protests over the shipment of waste between regions to landfills and incinerators dangerous to public health provided a learning experience for local organizers, who were forced to assess how best to publicly gather based on differing regional laws. **6** Protests against the regime’s interventions to deny the ballot to opposition candidates in the Moscow City Duma elections reportedly drew the largest crowds since the demonstrations of 2011. **7** Although turnout in Moscow is a poor indicator by itself, 1,443 protests were recorded to have taken place nationally between July and September. **8** The annual average in recent years has been from 1,200 to 1,500 protest actions at the national level. Russians are taking to the streets to challenge policies, laws, and authorities at record levels; the Kremlin faces a growing risk that the very issues it has sought to define as apolitical will become increasingly politicized over time. **9** Citizens have shown that they are willing to take greater risks, as the police have turned to increasingly violent means of suppressing protests. OVD-Info, an independent monitoring group, reports a record number of detentions for protests since the group began collecting data in 2011. Additionally, those detentions increasingly entail physical violence in the form of beatings. **10**
- While local and national organizers have made inroads to cooperate with Russia’s systemic opposition, including such targeted cases as the Moscow City Duma elections, less politically motivated nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) and related groups have been co-opted to support the regime's national projects. ¹¹ Activists and groups operating in more sensitive policy areas face considerable pressure from state authorities. ¹² Given the salience of the waste-management protests and the Kremlin's reticence around climate change, it is notable that CSOs have been lacking, cautious, or otherwise targeted in certain contexts. For example, Kaliningrad eco-activist Aleksandr Korolev fled to Germany and requested asylum in June as the police brought multiple false cases against him, a common tactic used to target inconvenient political organizers. ¹³ In general, there is little public engagement with the issue of climate change, but young protesters made their presence felt over the course of the year, with Putin begrudgingly signing the Paris Agreement and the Kremlin issuing plans to reduce emissions. ¹⁴

- Nevertheless, grassroots organizing seems to be entering a new phase with a growing body of talent and knowledge to be tapped by politically engaged individuals, networks, and communities. ¹⁵ For example, public outrage over the case of the Khachatryan sisters, who were found guilty of killing their father despite acting in self-defense, brought the issue of domestic violence and violence against women to the fore in Russian society. ¹⁶ The failure of authorities to take matters seriously has invigorated local organizations to act. Despite growing pressure on NGOs and other political organizations, whether by withholding state funding, personal pressure, or the use of legal instruments including arbitrary arrests, the Kremlin failed to improve Putin's popularity ratings over the course of the year. Some 61 percent of Russians polled by the Levada-Center in October said they felt neutral or distant about Putin. While by no means a death knell for the regime, this suggests that the public's newfound appetite for protest coincides with growing distrust of the state's leading institutions. ¹⁷ As a result, it is increasingly incumbent on the regime to create outlets for democratic participation that are perceived as legitimate, or at least provide avenues to vent legitimate grievances.

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.

1.50/7.00

- The Russian state directly or indirectly owns or controls the mainstays of the media landscape—television stations, most radio stations, many newspapers, and most regional media. Some space for independent media does exist, particularly online. Yet, despite the persistent efforts of journalists and outlets to report on stories and topics sensitive to the Kremlin and the country’s elites, Russia’s independent media environment remains difficult.
- In December, laws originally created to classify NGOs as foreign agents were expanded to target individual journalists and social-media posters as well. ¹ Regarding the law’s application to NGOs, the new amendments require that any individual who publishes “printed, audio, audiovisual, or other reports and materials” while receiving any foreign funds must register with the Justice Department. The law is so flexible as to include tourists as well, raising concerns about how it might be used in the future to harass foreign citizens.

2

- The beating and arrest of journalist Ivan Golunov in June under fabricated pretenses that he was carrying drugs triggered a national scandal, as the country’s leading publications—namely, *Vedomosti*, *RBK*, and *Kommersant*—all ran banner headlines the following day proclaiming “We are Ivan Golunov.” Many celebrities, even some seen as sympathetic to or cooperative with the regime, criticized Golunov’s treatment. ³ The Kremlin notably shied away from offering any explicit comment, choosing to punt the problem to mid-level officials who fired two police chiefs to appease the public. ⁴ Golunov has brought a legal suit that has yet to uncover any documentary evidence or individuals responsible for his treatment. ⁵
- The solidarity expressed over the Golunov case came just after *Kommersant* correspondent Ivan Safronov and political editor Maxim Ivanov were forced out of their posts for a story about Valentina Matvienko, head of the Federation Council. ⁶ The entire political department quit alongside them, claiming undue interference in their editorial independence. ⁷ *Kommersant*, a longtime leading Russian daily, particularly for economic and political news, will play an important role in covering the country’s principal political figures as questions around succession and the transition of power emerge.
- Journalists continued to face relentless pressure from state institutions, officials, and well-connected elites. For example, Makhachkala-based journalist Abdulmumin Gadzhiev was detained and held for months by Dagestani authorities for “financing terrorism” after running the weekly

Chernovik. ⁸ The Yalta-based blogger and activist Yevgeniy Gaivoronskiy was arrested in March on trumped-up charges of using narcotics, and then arrested again in October for not following prescribed treatments to overcome drug addiction. ⁹

- Pressure has risen on local and regional officials to head off dissent in the media in order to placate Moscow as it seeks not only to clamp down on antiregime sentiment but also prevent the center from learning about failures of governance via independent media sources reaching audiences nationally. For example, a publication in Yaroslavl was pressured by Roskomnadzor, the national telecommunications regulator, to remove a story from its website concerning a public sign that was insulting to Putin. ¹⁰
- The sources of censorship and pressure are evolving alongside Russia's latest law on the "sovereign internet," which empowers authorities to effectively sever connections with the internet abroad. These trends fit into a long-term transition from traditional media and sources of media pressure—including physical attacks or threats, media consolidation, changes to ownership laws, and a focus on print and television—towards creating new means of controlling the flow of information online and via messaging services. ¹¹
- Developments in the Russian media sphere in 2019 were not uniformly negative. Attempts to apply stricter controls over foreign ownership of outlets by setting a 20-percent limit for the equity share of a foreign investor were clarified by the Supreme Court after the liberal news and opinion radio outlet Ekho Moskvyy successfully brought a case over the wrongful application of the law. ¹² After considerable public pushback, the court clarified that the 20-percent rule applied only to the equity shares of the media outlet itself, and not the equity of its beneficial owners. But the courts also sought to clarify the legal status of owners with dual citizenship, a matter that the Ministry of Communications and Mass Media intentionally ignored in its amendments to the law in order to pressure Russians with media interests who live abroad. ¹³

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities.	1.50 / 7.00
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- Russia's local democratic institutions proved increasingly ill-equipped to meet citizens' needs in 2019, a likely focus of criticism by the opposition as it attempts to mobilize a broader coalition of support across the country. Protest actions have historically taken place in St. Petersburg and Moscow, home to the largest politically liberal and active bases of support. But the last year has seen demonstrations shift towards provincial towns and cities across Russia as the public sees no other way to get the attention of authorities and effect change. **1**
- The centrally mandated rotation of governors continued in 2019 as a substitute for elections, but the logic of these dismissals has not always been clear. For example, Putin dismissed the acting governor of Astrakhan region, Sergei Morozov, although his constituent support was a strong 62 percent according to pollster VTsIOM. **2** The head of Sevastopol in Crimea, Dmitry Ovsyannikov, was dismissed after criticizing the region's parliament. **3** Alexander Levintal, head of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, resigned his post. And Sergei Levchenko, Communist governor of Irkutsk region, was pushed out in a Kremlin move likely aimed at restoring direct control after the Communist Party won the 2015 regional election. **4** On the whole, the reasons for various dismissals were idiosyncratic, but a larger pattern did emerge: the Kremlin needed to reassure elite bases of support that it still controlled access to key regional positions of power.
- At protests against the construction of a waste-management location in Arkhangelsk region in April, demonstrators openly called for the removal of President Putin and Prime Minister Medvedev. **5** Although limited in scope, the protest served as a useful example of the weakened ability of local institutions to resolve problems, as the Kremlin has relied on central management over the last two decades to decisively shape political outcomes. Yet, now that the public seems increasingly willing to protest and risk arrest, the hollowing out of local institutions haunts the regime. **6** The more local issues are linked to systemic ones emanating from Moscow, the less credible are the buffers used to insulate Putin from blame, namely, his personal interventions or his attempts to shift responsibility for failures onto regional or municipal authorities.
- Recognizing the growing list of shortcomings as protest activity rises across the country, the Kremlin has hinted at its willingness to examine reforms devolving powers to local authorities. **7** In October, Putin noted the gap in

- governance capabilities between the municipal and federal levels of government in a working meeting with Prime Minister Medvedev and at various public appearances. **8** The initial work behind the scenes took place at the beginning of the year, when Duma deputies were reportedly discussing the creation of new municipal-level groupings for local governance in a play that seemed primarily concerned with better aligning population distribution with existing legal divisions of the federal system. **9** Yet experts argue that, in practice, the reforms were merely cover for expanding the center's power over cities and towns while trying to create a veneer of greater legitimacy. **10**
- In 2009, 70 percent of local mayors were elected. This practice collapsed to 14 percent by 2019 as local governance has effectively been “nationalized.” **11** It speaks volumes that Putin personally took charge of the waste-management reform process, indicating how he has simultaneously become the central point of decision-making for key policy problems facing Russians in everyday life while seeking to assume as little risk or responsibility as possible for the results. **12** This dynamic has filtered into the implementation process for national projects, with a long list of proposed spending and performance targets set by Putin for his fourth term. Local and regional authorities have complained about the lack of qualified technocrats, the challenges in attracting private money, and rising costs. **13** But the Kremlin needs for these projects to move forward in order to show the public it is delivering on at least some of its promises, which means exacting greater control and accountability on outcomes. In this vein, the Duma's proposal to unite city with larger municipal governments around urban areas was adopted by the governor of Primorye in the Far East region, effectively merging its municipal areas. **14** Despite the risks of increasing spending obligations without effectively increasing revenues, the move has centralized responsibility in fewer hands. This makes it easier for the authorities in Moscow to hold individuals accountable for outcomes in both the region and Moscow.

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.	1.25/7.00
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- Russia's courts remained heavily politicized in 2019, with frequent interventions by local, regional, and national elites to settle major cases. But, rather than complete political dependence, the picture is decidedly mixed. The courts operate fairly well and objectively when the outcome is not important politically or does not involve key interest groups or powerful, connected individuals. But interventions are widespread the moment the ruling elite's interests are threatened.
- The annual review of the courts' 2018 performance revealed that the acquittal rate worsened to just 0.22 percent of all criminal cases. At the same time, civil suits over such matters as utilities payments, bankruptcies, and related legal matters are the largest source of cases in Russia: 17.1 million in 2018 against roughly 900,000 criminal cases. ¹
- The Kremlin continued to publicly call for reforms to the courts aimed at improving their effectiveness, namely, addressing the problem of acquittals. Last year saw the introduction of jury trials in district courts, instead of just regional courts. While the sample size was small, roughly 28 percent of district-level jury trials concluded with an acquittal. ² Vyacheslav Lebedev, chairman of the Supreme Court, explicitly stated that he sees no obstacles to the expanded use of jury trials for criminal cases. In addition, reforms passed last year creating nine cassation courts and five new appellate courts took effect in September, purportedly with the goal of furthering justice and objectivity in the legal system. ³
- These developments notwithstanding, it is evident that the combination of deeply entrenched graft, intervention from political elites and institutions, and politicization of a wide range of criminal charges continues to compromise the independence of the legal system. Individuals from families associated with the security services frequently secure postings within the justice system. ⁴ As a result, even well-connected oligarch Oleg Deripaska has complained about the lack of professionalism in the country's courts as a major drag on economic growth. ⁵
- Judicial reform in Russia is largely a matter of sustaining regime legitimacy by delivering targeted improvements that do not interfere with the aim of maintaining political control for key outcomes. The February arrest of American businessman Michael Calvey showed the extent to which courts could be manipulated to target and arrest a U.S. national with a good reputation after years of working in Russia. ⁶ Political pressure from U.S.

officials has had no impact, as the Kremlin has opted not to intervene and Calvey remains under house arrest and his assets frozen. **7** The situation is more dire still for Russian businessmen targeted by the security services. **8**

- The message is clear: Russian courts serve the rule of law only when not politically or materially inconvenient. In October, Prime Minister Medvedev tasked aides and individuals affiliated with the security services to work through reforms to help protect businesses against the security forces themselves. **9**
- Although Russia maintains contacts with legal bodies in Europe and NGOs working in the legal space, the country increasingly is a legal fortress where the leading power blocs are fighting over resources. In 2015, the Duma passed a law allowing courts to disregard findings by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) as part of a broader set of legislative initiatives to increase Russia's sovereign control of its domestic policies. Even though Russian courts have generally opted to honor ECHR findings, this shift has lessened the influence of international stakeholders and turned adherence to rulings or other relevant international decisions into a bargaining chip to relieve dissent over the regime's treatment of the non-systemic opposition and other citizens.

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives.

1.25/7.00

- Corruption continued to impede Russia's democratization in 2019, but the issue took on a different tenor as fights over state resources intensified. Grand corruption—namely, access to state procurements, cheap credit, administrative resources, and influence over key decision-makers—is endemic to the state and most of Russia's political and economic institutions. Anticorruption cases continued to be primarily a vehicle for intra-elite competition rather than a tool to combat corruption.
- In April, the Audit Chamber published damning statistics showing that corruption in the form of abuses of state procurements and contracts more than doubled between 2017 and 2018, reaching a total value of roughly 118 billion rubles (\$1.9 billion). **1** Experts from the Higher School of Economics

in Moscow criticized Ministry of Finance figures reporting that the share of uncompetitive state procurements was declining, estimating that 63.7 percent of all procurements in the first half of 2019 were uncompetitive. **2** That figure was worse for state-owned companies, where 96 percent of contracts are estimated to be uncompetitive. **3** These practices amount to “legal” corruption.

- Concerns about the scale of theft carried out by members of the security services rose in May, when three colonels from the FSB’s economic security division were found to have taken a record 12 billion rubles (\$178 million) worth of bribes in cash and jewelry. **4** Media reports noted an escalating campaign of arrests in the FSB and Ministry of the Interior concerning criminal corrupt activity in the business sector, but there was little evidence of any earnest attempt to clamp down on illicit activities. **5** Rather, the exposure of businesses to corruption in Russia has worsened.
- In 2018, Russia fell from 135th to 138th place in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, with a score of 28 out of 100, as its democratic institutions increasingly turn into “imitations” of their intended functions. **6** In hopes of improving international corruption scores, perceptions, and freeing up administrative resources, Russia’s justice ministry carved out exemptions so that certain corrupt acts deemed to be unavoidable would not be prosecuted. **7** The Council of Europe’s Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) criticized Russian authorities for failing to make greater progress in criminalizing corrupt activities and improving the financial transparency of political parties, citing that only 12 of the 21 recommendations made in 2012 were fully implemented. **8** Reforms aimed at tackling corruption primarily concern improving foreign perception and cutting down on petty corruption among Russian citizens, while leaving untouched the broader corrupt practices underpinning the regime’s political base of support and national economy.

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 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average

of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic.

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**On Russia**

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Country Facts**Global Freedom Score**

20/100 **Not Free**

Internet Freedom Score

30/100 **Not Free**

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