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2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 83

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 25

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 34

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 24

Russia's occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine helped to drive an increase in propagandistic content in the Russian news media and tighter restrictions on dissenting views in 2014. Media outlets became more firmly incorporated into the Kremlin's policy efforts, moving from supporting the government with biased news to actively participating in an "information war" with its perceived adversaries. Ongoing insurgencies, corrupt officials, and crime within Russia continued to pose a danger to journalists who reported on them, and the remaining independent media outlets in the country came under growing pressure from the authorities.

Legal Environment

Although the Russian constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, politicians and government officials frequently use the country's politicized and corrupt court system to harass the few journalists who dare to expose abuses by the authorities. Russian law contains a broad definition of extremism that officials invoke to silence government critics, including journalists; enforcement of this and other restrictive legal provisions has encouraged self-censorship.

Two new laws that took effect in 2014 significantly extended state control over the online sphere. Federal Law No. 398, signed by President Vladimir Putin in December 2013, came into force in February 2014, allowing the prosecutor general's office to bypass the court system and order – via the state telecommunications regulator, Roskomnadzor – the blocking of websites that disseminate calls for mass riots, "extremist" activities, and participation in illegal assemblies. The law was regularly invoked against independent and opposition websites in 2014, as were older laws that allowed blocking on a variety of other grounds. In the first half of the year alone, Roskomnadzor blocked more than 85 websites for containing "extremist content" based on orders from the prosecutor general's office. In March, access to opposition leader Aleksey Navalny's blog, hosted on the website of the liberal radio station Ekho Moskv, was blocked after Roskomnadzor notified internet service providers that the blog contained banned information. Ekho Moskv removed the blog, and access to its website was reestablished the following day. Also that month, the prosecutor general issued an order to block access to three websites known for carrying opposition views: the news site Grani.ru, the online magazine *Yezhednevny Zhurnal*, and Kasparov.ru, the site of opposition activist Garry Kasparov. In July, officials used the online extremism law to block mention of a planned march supporting Siberian autonomy.

In May, Putin signed Federal Law No. 97, nicknamed "the bloggers law," which requires any blog or website with more than 3,000 daily viewers to register with Roskomnadzor as a media outlet. The legislation effectively subjects personal blogs and other sites to the same restrictions imposed on formal news outlets, including bans on anonymous authorship and the use of obscenities, and legal responsibility for comments posted by users. Separately, under Law No. 97 and a follow-up law passed in July, social-media platforms and other internet companies processing Russian users' data would have to store the information on servers located in Russia, where it could be accessed by authorities. The final deadline for compliance remained unclear at year's end, but foreign companies warned that they could be forced to close their operations in Russia in light of these and other restrictions.

Prosecutors in 2014 continued their practice of charging individuals – including journalists, bloggers, and whistle-blowing civil servants – with defamation, extremism, and other trumped-up criminal offenses in an effort to limit their activities. In January, Aksana Panova, former editor in chief of the news website Ura.ru in Yekaterinburg, was given a two-year suspended sentence that included a ban on all journalistic activity after a court found her guilty of extortion. Panova denied the charges, claiming they were filed in retribution for her critical coverage of local officials. In September, Siberian journalist and blogger Dmitriy Shipilov was arrested near Moscow after a newspaper published his interview with the organizer of a planned march for Siberian autonomy. Shipilov, known for his criticism of local authorities in articles for the *Novy Kuzbass* newspaper, was arrested for failing to serve a three-month jail sentence for "insulting a government servant" in 2012, according to police officials, though his colleagues maintained that the detention was politically motivated.

Investigative journalist and blogger Sergey Reznik remained in prison in 2014. Reznik, who regularly reported on corruption and abuses by local and regional officials in Rostov-on-Don, was sentenced to 18 months in prison in November 2013 on various charges, including insulting a government official. The verdict was upheld on appeal in April 2014, despite rights groups' insistence that the case was political. In July, a new defamation case was brought against him by three local officials. If found guilty, Reznik faced up to three additional years in prison. Another Rostov-on-Don journalist, Aleksandr Tolmachev, was convicted in October on extortion charges and sentenced to nine years of hard labor. He had already spent nearly three years in preventive detention before his trial.

Judicial harassment of Navalny intensified in 2014. In April, he was found guilty of defaming a Moscow city councilor on Twitter and fined \$8,400. Navalny denied posting the tweet. In December, a Moscow court sentenced Navalny to a three-and-a-half-year suspended sentence and his brother, Oleg Navalny, to a prison term of the same length after the two men were found guilty of fraud charges in what was widely seen as a politically motivated case. Roskomnadzor issued a warning to four media outlets that reported on the sentencing and carried links to a video of Navalny calling for demonstrations; the agency accused the websites of inciting extremism.

While the constitution and a 2009 law provide for freedom of information, accessing information related to government bodies or via government websites is extremely difficult in practice.

Civil society organizations, including those advocating for journalists and media freedom, faced ongoing pressure from the authorities in 2014 under the so-called "foreign agents law." The 2012 law, which requires nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that receive foreign funding and engage in broadly defined "political activity" to register with the Justice Ministry as "foreign agents," was amended in 2014 to allow the ministry to register organizations without their consent. Previously, officials were obliged to engage in lengthy court battles to compel NGOs to register. Targets during the year included two media support organizations that were added to the registry in November.

Political Environment

The main national news agenda is firmly controlled by the Kremlin. The government sets editorial policy at state-owned television stations, which dominate the media landscape. The country's more than 400 daily newspapers offer content on a wide range of topics but rarely challenge the official line on important issues such as corruption or foreign policy. Meaningful political debate is mostly limited to weekly magazines, news websites, some radio programs, and a handful of newspapers such as *Novaya Gazeta* or the business daily *Vedomosti*, which generally reach a limited audience among urban, educated Russians. These outlets operate with the understanding that the government has the means to close them at any time.

Propaganda from state-owned media outlets intensified after Russia began its military intervention in Ukraine in early 2014. The most egregious disinformation was often reinforced by altered or falsely identified images. In April, for

example, Russian media reported that Ukrainian authorities were building a concentration camp in eastern Ukraine, citing pictures that actually showed the abandoned construction site of a European Union-funded facility meant to house illegal migrants. Separately, Russian authorities continued to use paid commentators to influence online content. Media investigations have uncovered paid commenting campaigns organized by pro-Kremlin youth movements, and foreign media outlets in 2014 reported a surge in propagandistic user comments on articles related to Russia or Ukraine.

The authorities also put pressure on social-media platforms through their owners and managers. Pavel Durov, the founder and chief executive of the popular social-networking site VKontakte, announced in April that he was resigning and leaving the country due to ongoing intimidation from the Federal Security Service (FSB). He had refused FSB demands to hand over the account data of several Ukrainian activists beginning in December 2013. The e-mail provider Mail.ru, owned by Kremlin-friendly businessman Alisher Usmanov, subsequently increased its stake in VKontakte, taking full control by September 2014.

Dozhd (Rain), often described as Russia's only independent television news outlet, faced increased interference in response to its content during 2014. In January, the station came under fire from authorities after it conducted a website poll asking readers whether the Soviet army should have surrendered the city of Leningrad to German invaders during World War II rather than resisting a lengthy siege that cost nearly a million civilian lives. Roskomnadzor began an investigation into the incident, and within days the major satellite providers in Russia began to drop Dozhd from their subscription packages, reportedly under pressure from the Kremlin. In March, Dozhd general director Natalya Sindeyeva announced that the station was insolvent, although it managed to continue operating through the end of the year. A number of observers alleged that the government's campaign against the broadcaster was actually motivated by its critical reports on other topics, including corruption and human rights abuses surrounding the Sochi Olympics.

Independent or objective coverage of the Ukraine conflict resulted in official pressure on a number of other outlets. In March, when the popular news website Lenta.ru published a link to an interview with a leader of the Ukrainian nationalist group Right Sector, Roskomnadzor issued a warning. The next day, the website's owner fired its editor, Galina Timchenko, and replaced her with media executive Aleksey Goreslavskiy, who had previously edited a progovernment outlet. Almost 40 Lenta.ru employees resigned in protest. In October, Ekho Moskvyy received a warning from Roskomnadzor after it aired first-hand accounts of the fighting between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. The regulator alleged that the program contained "information justifying war crimes."

Foreign journalists faced difficulties while working in Russia during the year. In July, Yevgeniy Agarkov, a reporter with the Ukrainian television station 1+1, was arrested in the city of Voronezh, where he had gone to cover the trial of a Ukrainian military pilot who had been captured in Ukraine and accused in the killing of two journalists with the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK). Russian immigration officials charged Agarkov for not having proper accreditation to work as a journalist in the country. He was convicted, deported, and banned from returning to Russia for five years. In September, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news team was attacked in the southern city of Astrakhan, where they had gone to investigate the deaths of Russian soldiers in eastern Ukraine – an especially sensitive subject given the Kremlin's denials that it had deployed troops across the border. The BBC crew's camera was smashed and their recordings were deleted.

At least two journalists died in Russia under unclear circumstances during the year. Timur Kuashev, a correspondent for the independent magazine *Dosh*, was found dead on August 1 after disappearing the previous day in the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, part of the restive North Caucasus area. He had also blogged and contributed to news websites covering the region, and received numerous threats in response to his critical reporting on law enforcement and local officials. In October, freelance journalist Valeriy Donskoy died of pneumonia in Moscow after being held in harsh conditions near the Russian-Ukrainian border, though the details of his detention and the identity of his captors were not reported. The Committee to Protect Journalists has documented 56 work-related murders of journalists in Russia since 1992, finding that the perpetrators nearly always enjoyed impunity. In May 2014, after numerous delays, five suspects were convicted for the October 2006 murder of prominent investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya. They received sentences ranging from 12 years to life in prison in June. Press freedom advocates noted that those who ordered the defendants to carry out the contract-style killing remained unidentified and at large.

Physical assaults on journalists were reported in a range of Russian regions in 2014. Several reporters investigating the deaths of Russian soldiers in Ukraine were threatened and attacked. In August, Lev Shlosberg, a Pskov-based newspaper publisher and member of the opposition Yabloko party, suffered a serious assault that left him unconscious.

Shlosberg said the attack was related to his paper's investigation into the secret deployment of Russian troops from the Pskov region to eastern Ukraine. Also in August, investigative reporter Aleksandr Krutov was beaten by unknown assailants in the city of Saratov. It was the fourth attack suffered by Krutov, who covers crime for a local publication, in his 20-year career. In September, a television crew in Novosibirsk was attacked by a group of men who smashed the videographer's camera and struck him in the face. The team had been reporting on an employment company suspected of fraud for the *Precedent* television show. In a separate attack in Novosibirsk in December, two men disguised as couriers entered the offices of the Taiga.info news website, searched for editor in chief Yevgeniy Mezdrikov, and began beating him before being chased off by employees.

Economic Environment

The authorities exert significant influence over the information landscape through a vast state-owned media empire. The state owns, either directly or through proxies, all five of the major national television networks, as well as national radio networks, important national newspapers, and national news agencies. Key proxy owners include Gazprom Media, an arm of the state-owned energy giant Gazprom, and National Media Group, owned by Yuriy Kovalchuk, a close ally of Putin and board chairman of the powerful Rossiya Bank. The state also controls more than 60 percent of the country's estimated 45,000 regional and local newspapers and periodicals. State-run television is the main news source for most Russians and generally serves as a propaganda tool of the government, while the newspapers and radio stations with the largest audiences largely focus on entertainment content. The Kremlin bolstered its international media presence in 2014 with the creation of a new multimedia news service, dubbed Sputnik, which merged and replaced existing services. The government also owns RT, an international, multilingual satellite news network, which generally seeks to promote the Kremlin's take on global events.

A law signed in October 2014 will restrict foreign ownership stakes in Russian media assets to 20 percent by early 2017. The law was expected to have the greatest impact on respected, independent publications like *Vedomosti* and *Forbes Russia*, which are owned by U.S. and European media groups.

Government advertising allocations are an important means of influencing content, and most media businesses remain dependent on state subsidies and government printing, distribution, and transmission facilities. Private businesses are reported to be reluctant to place advertisements with outlets that are not favorable to the government. In July, Putin signed a series of amendments to the federal law on advertising that, beginning in January 2015, would ban satellite and cable channels from carrying commercial advertising if they also charge viewers a subscription fee. Stations with terrestrial broadcasting licenses would be exempt from the ban, meaning it would seriously damage the financial viability of Dozhd, foreign content providers, and many other services, but not the dominant progovernment channels.

About 61 percent of Russians accessed the internet in 2013, though the rate was higher in the cities. Russians have joined social-networking sites in large numbers and are among the heaviest social-media users worldwide.