

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

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Freedom of the Press 2017 - Russia

Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Total Score: 83/100 (0 = Most Free, 100 = Least Free)

Legal Environment: 25/30

Political Environment: 34/40

Economic Environment: 24/30

Quick Facts

Population: 144,300,000

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Net Freedom Status: Not Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 73.4%

Key Developments in 2016:

- Legal amendments that were signed into law in July gave the state security services greater access to communications data and increased penalties for promoting "extremism" and other offenses.
- Top editors at the independent RBC media group were dismissed in May after its coverage of the Panama Papers – leaked documents from a Panamanian law firm that revealed possible corruption among President Vladimir Putin's associates – apparently prompted increased legal and political pressure on the group's owner. Other RBC journalists subsequently resigned, and new chief editors were hired from the state-owned news agency TASS in July.
- Media outlets favored the ruling United Russia party in their coverage of the September parliamentary elections.
- Throughout the year there were reports of attacks, threats, censorship, arrests, and prison sentences against both journalists and ordinary citizens who had posted or shared politically sensitive information online. Among other cases, two bloggers were sentenced to prison for commentary on Ukraine and Syria, and an online journalist was jailed in Chechnya on dubious drug-possession charges.

Executive Summary

Russia remains a country with a large array of media outlets, but limited access to critical or independent coverage and diverse political viewpoints. Television, which is still the leading source of news and information, often functions as a propaganda tool for the government. The mainstream media showed significant bias toward the ruling United Russia party in their reporting on the September 2016 parliamentary elections. The media are also expected to conform to official

narratives on issues like Russia's occupation of Crimea and military intervention in Syria, and the dissemination of critical views on those topics can result in website blocking or prison sentences.

While some independent broadcasters, publications, and online news sources continue to operate, their market share is not extensive and they regularly face pressure from the government. Such pressure, including aggressive tax inspections and criminal investigations, apparently led to the ouster of top editors at the RBC media group in May.

The legal framework gives the government broad, discretionary powers to regulate media content. This includes the so-called Yarovaya laws, a package of antiterrorism legislation signed in July that increased prison sentences for promoting terrorism or extremism online and requires internet service providers to retain and allow decryption of communications data for possible inspection by security agencies.

Violence against journalists remained common in 2016. There were widespread reports of attacks, arrests, and threats against both professional journalists and social media users. The risk of violence or prosecution was particularly high in Chechnya, an insurgency-prone Russian republic governed by pro-Kremlin strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. A group of Russian and foreign journalists and human rights workers were attacked and beaten by masked assailants as their bus approached the Chechen border in March.

Legal Environment: 25 / 30

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

In July 2016, President Vladimir Putin signed a package of legal amendments known as the Yarovaya laws. They compel telecommunications and internet service providers to retain all communications records for six months and all metadata for three years, enabling security services to access the information as needed. The maximum penalty for extremism was increased from four to eight years in prison, and internet users who express approval of terrorism – also a vaguely defined term in Russian laws – will face up to seven years in prison. The act of urging people to participate in "mass disturbances" was criminalized, carrying a prison sentence of five to 10 years. Another provision criminalized the withholding of information about certain crimes from the authorities.

A 2013 law allows the state telecommunications regulator, Roskomnadzor, to block websites that disseminate calls for riots, "extremist" activities, or participation in illegal assemblies. The law continued to be invoked against independent and opposition websites in 2016, as were laws that allow blocking on various other grounds. By mid-2016, according to the Russian organization Roskomsvoboda, more than 30,000 websites were blacklisted by Russian authorities. In total, about 600,000 sites were actually blocked because they shared internet protocol addresses with blacklisted sites.

Prosecutors in 2016 continued their practice of charging individuals – including journalists, bloggers, and social media users – with defamation, extremism, and other criminal offenses designed to limit free speech. In May, for example, social media user Andrey Bubeyev was sentenced to more than two years in prison for reposting two items that were critical of Russian policy toward Ukraine. In September, blogger Ruslan Sokolovsky was arrested and charged with inciting hatred and offending religious sensibilities for posting a video to YouTube in which he plays the smartphone game Pokémon Go in a church. He faced up to five years in prison. In December, Aleksey Kungurov was convicted of "publicly justifying terrorism" in a 2015 blog post that criticized Russia's military intervention in Syria. He was ordered to serve over two years in a penal colony.

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.

Russian business entities can legally establish and operate commercial media outlets, but licensing decisions are often opaque, arbitrary, or motivated by political considerations. Regulatory bodies are not impartial or politically independent, and have exerted editorial pressure on media outlets through investigations and enforcement actions. A 2014 law requires any website, blog, or public social media account with more than 3,000 daily viewers to register with Roskomnadzor as a media outlet and comply with the regulations accompanying that status, including bans on anonymous authorship and legal responsibility for comments posted by users.

Under a 2012 law, civil society organizations, including those advocating for journalists and media freedom, are registered as "foreign agents" if they are found to receive foreign funding and engage in broadly defined "political activity." A law signed in 2015 allows the prosecutor general's office to designate foreign organizations as "undesirable," after which anyone working with the blacklisted group can face up to seven years in prison. In August 2016, the prosecutor general's office labeled the U.S.-based Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF), which assists independent news outlets in countries around the world, as an undesirable organization.

Media freedom advocates can face retaliation for their work. In October 2016, it was reported that the head of the Union of Journalists of the Khanty-Mansi District, Aleksandr Grigorenko, had been investigated for alleged embezzlement and dismissed from his position after he accused the district government of censorship.

Political Environment: 34 / 40

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 and generate propagandistic content. The country's hundreds of 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 news websites, some radio programs, and a handful of newspapers. These outlets operate with the understanding that the government has the means to close them at any time.

In March 2016, the state-owned channel NTV aired a documentary that smeared independent regional media outlets, claiming that they colluded with the U.S. government in exchange for MDIF funding. In April, the state television channel Rossiya-1 broadcast an "exposé" of opposition

politician and activist Aleksey Navalny, citing apparently fabricated evidence to assert that he was a paid foreign agent in a conspiracy to change the regime in Russia.

The state-dominated media showed significant bias toward the ruling United Russia party in the September 2016 parliamentary elections. Monitoring by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe found that over 90 percent of election coverage on the national television channels was dedicated to Putin and other government officials.

There is substantial evidence that the government also organizes propaganda campaigns online, including by hiring people or creating automated social media accounts to produce positive content about the regime and attack its detractors. Aside from fulfilling specific disinformation and propaganda goals, the practice undermines the Russian internet as a source of reliable news and information.

The country's few independent media outlets struggled to remain operational in the face of political pressure in 2016. The Glasnost Defence Foundation recorded hundreds of media freedom violations during the year, including the dismissal of 22 journalists and editors. In May 2016, three top editors at the independent media group RBC were pushed out of their jobs after overseeing critical coverage of Putin's family and close associates, among other sensitive topics. The editors were replaced in July by hires from the state-owned news agency TASS, and many RBC journalists resigned in protest. One prominent Russian news site, Meduza, operates from a base in Latvia to avoid interference by Russian authorities.

The violations documented by the Glasnost Defence Foundation included numerous instances of censorship, with 34 cases of interference in the activities of online publications. Among other prominent blocking decisions during the year, Roskomnadzor announced in July that it would block four websites calling for a boycott of the September parliamentary elections. The professional networking site LinkedIn was blocked in Russia in November for failing to observe a 2015 law requiring companies to store their data about Russian citizens on Russian territory.

Self-censorship is thought to be common among journalists, especially on sensitive topics such as Russian military activity, government corruption, and the political opposition.

Both Russian and foreign journalists often encounter physical intimidation or official obstruction while reporting in the field. In February 2016, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news crew was harassed by a local progovernment television station in Novosibirsk, which accused the BBC of defaming Russia with its reporting on the economy. In September, journalists from Reuters were prevented from reporting on the parliamentary elections at polling stations in Siberia. Also that month, Paris-based correspondent Roman Sushchenko of the Ukrainian state news agency Ukrinform was detained upon arrival in Russia, where he said he planned to visit relatives. He was charged with espionage and remained in detention at year's end.

The Committee to Protect Journalists recorded no murders of journalists in connection with their work in 2016, but the organization has documented 56 such murders in Russia since 1992, finding that the perpetrators nearly always enjoyed impunity. Nonfatal assaults remain relatively common. The Glasnost Defence Foundation collected 54 reports of attacks on journalists and bloggers in 2016. For example, in May Denis Kuchmenko, a journalist and general director of a local television company who had reported on electoral corruption, was assaulted with a taser in Bratsk, and

journalist and activist Grigoriy Pasko was attacked in September after arriving in Barnaul to train local journalists in investigative reporting.

Administrators and users of antigovernment groups on social media were subject to physical attacks and intimidation, including beatings and arson, during 2016. In March, for example, administrator Aleksandr Markov was beaten at his home by a group of unknown attackers.

In Chechnya, journalists and citizens who aired critical views about the regime or pro-Kremlin Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov faced a widespread campaign of retribution, including murders, abductions, threats against family members, and public humiliation via televised "apologies." On January 1, the body of university lecturer Khizir Yezhiyev was found outside Grozny, showing signs of torture. Yezhiyev, who had participated in a closed group that was critical of the Chechen administration on the social-networking platform VKontakte, was abducted by unknown gunmen in December 2015 and reportedly taken to a local police station. In March 2016, a busload of Russian and foreign journalists traveling to Chechnya were beaten by masked men, who then set the bus on fire. Journalist Zhalaudi Geriyev of the independent news website *Kavkazsky Uzel* was detained in Chechnya in April and sentenced to three years in prison in September on trumped-up charges of drug possession after being abused in custody.

Economic Environment: 24 / 30

The Russian state controls, either directly or through proxies, all of the major national television networks, as well as national radio networks, important national newspapers, and two major news agencies. Although numerous private outlets also operate in each medium, state and state-affiliated outlets account for most of the media sector. State-run television is still the main news source for most Russians, though internet access continues to grow. About 76 percent of Russians used the internet in 2016, and online media represented some 11 percent of the roughly 83,000 media outlets registered with Roskomnadzor. In addition to domestic media, the government owns an array of media assets directed at foreign audiences, including RT, an international, multilingual satellite news network that promotes the Kremlin's views and interests.

A law signed in 2014 restricted foreign ownership stakes in Russian media assets to 20 percent as of early 2016, with a final deadline of early 2017 for some companies. In 2015, Germany's Axel Springer group sold the Russian edition of *Forbes*, and Finland's Sanoma sold its stakes in the business newspaper *Vedomosti* and the English-language *Moscow Times*. Russian media executives were the buyers in both transactions.

The authorities sometimes disrupt production and distribution of news content through means including eviction of news outlets from their offices, interruptions of broadcast transmissions, obstruction of print circulation, and seizure of newspaper pressruns. According to the Glasnost Defence Foundation, 16 publications had pressruns seized during 2016.

Most media businesses remain dependent on subsidies from the state or private owners. Government advertising allocations are an important means of influencing content, and private businesses are reportedly reluctant to place advertisements with outlets that are not favorable to the government. Strains on the Russian economy have reduced both subsidies and advertising revenue in recent years.

In February 2015, Putin signed amendments to 2014 legislation that had banned advertising on television channels that charged subscription fees for cable and satellite viewers and did not hold terrestrial broadcasting licenses. The initial ban threatened the commercial viability of many outlets, though notably not the traditional progovernment broadcasters. Under the 2015 amendments, pay channels can air advertisements if their share of foreign programming does not exceed 25 percent.

Corruption is endemic in Russia, and recent declines in the pay rates of journalists and editors have increased their vulnerability to bribery and conflicts of interest, particularly in struggling regional and local markets.