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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Russia

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 24

Political Environment: 33

Economic Environment: 24

Total Score: 81

Russian media freedom remained extremely poor in 2010, with the Kremlin relying on alternatively crude and sophisticated media management to distract the public from widespread government corruption, domestic terror attacks, and the country's economic crisis. Most state and private media engaged in blatant propaganda that glorified the country's national leaders and fostered an image of political pluralism – claiming that President Dmitry Medvedev was leading the process of Russian modernization while Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was working to maintain stability.

Although the constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, officials used the country's politicized and corrupt court system to harass and prosecute the few remaining independent journalists who dared to criticize widespread abuses committed by authorities. Dozens of civil cases and hundreds of criminal cases against journalists were launched in 2010. In November, a court in the Moscow suburb of Khimki convicted Mikhail Beketov of criminally slandering Khimki mayor Vladimir Strelchenko when he said in a television interview that the mayor was behind a campaign of harassment against him. Beketov was brutally beaten in 2008 after his newspaper *Khimkinskaya Pravda* opposed the construction of the Khimki highway, a project critics said would cause significant environmental damage to a forest outside Moscow. In December, a city court in Khimki overturned the conviction against Beketov, who remains wheelchair-bound and unable to speak because of the 2008 attack.

Authorities have charged a number of government critics, including journalists and media outlets, with extremism. In April, the independent Moscow newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* received an official warning from the communications registration agency, Roskomnadzor, that an interview published in January with a neo-fascist leader contained "extremist" ideas. *Novaya Gazeta* challenged the warning in court because it faced potential closure if it received future warnings, but in October the Taganskaya Court in Moscow ruled in favor of Roskomnadzor. Authorities also continued to enact legal reforms that strengthened the country's powerful, highly politicized police and Federal security Service (FSB). In July, President Medvedev signed legal amendments to the Law on the Federal Security Service, which authorized officials to detain anyone suspected of hindering the work of the FSB or its employees, as well as to issue warnings instructing individuals, organizations, or media outlets to cease any activities deemed to be potentially "extremist," according to international press reports. One part of the law appeared to silence media criticism of authorities because it brands people who disagree

with the government as extremist, stating that "Certain mass media outlets, including print and electronic, openly aid the formation of negative processes in the spiritual sphere, the affirmation of the cult of individualism and violence, and the mistrust in the ability of the state to defend its citizens, this practically involving the youth in extremist activities," the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported. In September, Russian authorities lost one legal tool that enabled media harassment when Microsoft announced it was unilaterally issuing software licenses to all eligible media and non-profit organizations in Russia, according to international press reports. In previous years, regional authorities in Russia had selectively prosecuted independent media organizations for possessing pirated software on their computers in retaliation for criticizing the government or reporting on politically sensitive subjects.

Journalists remained unable to cover the news freely, particularly with regard to contentious topics like human rights abuses in the North Caucasus, government corruption, organized crime, police torture, the activities of opposition parties, and the country's economic crisis. Throughout the year, prosecutors questioned journalists who published interviews with or articles by imprisoned oil tycoon and Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky, seeking to determine how they had received the articles or interviews from prison. In April 2010, police officers searched the Moscow offices of the independent news website Novoye Vremya seeking to identify the sources for a February article about corruption within an elite police unit, according to local press reports. That same month, two unidentified men attacked and brutally beat Arkady Lander, editor of the independent newspaper *Mestnaya* in the southern city of Sochi, after the newspaper criticized local authorities during a regional election held the previous month. In November, two unidentified men attacked Oleg Kashin, a popular blogger and journalist for the business newspaper *Kommersant*, outside his Moscow apartment and beat him savagely with metal rods, according to local and international press reports. The attack occurred three months after the pro-Kremlin youth group Molodaya Gvardiya had publicly called on its supporters to "punish" Kashin in retaliation for his reporting on the controversial Khimki highway project. Kashin was hospitalized and remained in a medically-induced coma for two weeks as he recovered from a broken skull, jaw, fingers, and leg. No one was arrested in the case by the end of the year.

Russia remained one of the most dangerous countries in the world for the media due to widespread lawlessness that allows politicians, security agents, and criminals to silence journalists with impunity. According to the nonprofit Glasnost Defense Foundation, 12 journalists died or were killed in 2010, though according to CPJ, none of those journalists were murdered in retaliation for their reporting. But authorities' failure to investigate or solve the vast majority of crimes against journalists in previous years perpetuated an atmosphere of impunity. Suspects who are identified rarely receive serious punishments. In March, the Supreme Court in Russia's southern republic of Ingushetia, in the Caucasus region, ordered a police officer recently convicted in the 2008 murder of Ingushetiya.ru news website editor, Magomed Yevloyev, to be released just as he was starting his two-year prison sentence in a low-security prison facility. In September, a CPJ delegation traveled to Moscow and met with officials from the Investigative Committee – a criminal investigation agency that answered to President Medvedev – in order to discuss impunity cases. Investigators reported they were pursuing suspects in the October 2006 murder of the Moscow-based *Novaya Gazeta* journalist Anna Politkovskaya and the July 2009 murder of Grozny-based human rights journalists Natalya Estemirova, but claimed there was no evidence linking the murders to Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, a prime suspect in both cases. At the end of 2010, two neo-fascists suspected of committing the January 2009 murders of *Novaya Gazeta* journalist Anastasiya Baburova and human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov were being held in prison and awaited trial in Moscow.

Authorities continued to exert significant influence on media outlets and news content through a vast state-owned media empire. The government owns, wholly or in part, two of the 14 national newspapers, more than 60 percent of the more than 45,000 registered local newspapers and periodicals, all six national television networks, and two national radio networks. This allowed the government to ensure that the media were filled with pro-Kremlin propaganda and to avoid coverage of rising unemployment, bank failures, declining industrial production, and the falling value of the ruble. Several media outlets providing high quality business reporting are the only small niche in the media that remains strong, the U.S.-based nonprofit group IREX reported. International radio and

television broadcasting is generally restricted. Most private FM radio stations have been pressured to stop rebroadcasting news programs by the British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Voice of America, relegating those services to less accessible short- and medium-wave frequencies. Diversity continued to decline as private companies loyal to the Kremlin and regional authorities purchased media outlets, while most other media outlets remained dependent on state subsidies as well as government printing, distribution, and transmission facilities. The economic crisis also led to a decline in advertising revenue for the country's few remaining independent media outlets, forcing some of them to tone down their news coverage so that they could accept advertising contracts from government agencies. Government-controlled television was the primary source of news for most Russians. Lively but cautious political debate was increasingly limited to glossy weekly magazines, news websites, and the news talk radio station Ekho Moskvyy, outlets whose audience was mostly composed of urban, educated, and affluent Russians. Nevertheless, internet access in rural areas has improved, as connections have reportedly been established at most of Russia's schools.

Online media have developed rapidly, and an estimated 43 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2010. The internet remains relatively freer than other news media in Russia, with most websites remaining available and a wide range of views being expressed. However, the authorities have increasingly engaged in content removal and manipulation of online expression. Kremlin allies have purchased several independent online newspapers or created their own progovernment news websites, and they are reportedly cultivating a network of bloggers who are paid to produce pro-Kremlin propaganda. The FSB continued widespread monitoring of e-mail, blogs and online bulletin boards, and websites during 2010, while government officials harassed some news websites and bloggers. In July, a regional court in Ingushetia instructed area ISPs to block local access to the popular blogging website LiveJournal for over two weeks because prosecutors argued that one blog on the site contained "ideas of extremism and terrorism." In November, police opened an investigation into the Russian-language version of Wikipedia, claiming it hosted unspecified "extremist" information. There is also a growing trend of individual citizens and whistle blowing civil servants using the internet to publicize government abuses and appeal to government officials for intervention, though in many cases they face aggressive state retribution for doing so.

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