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## Freedom of the Press 2012 - Russia

### 2012 Scores

**Press Status:** Not Free

**Press Freedom Score:** 80

**Legal Environment:** 24

**Political Environment:** 32

**Economic Environment:** 24

Russian media freedom remained extremely poor in 2011, with the Kremlin relying on both crude and sophisticated forms of media management to distract the public from widespread government corruption, terrorist attacks, and the country's economic troubles. These problems were made worse by a rapid decline in the popularity of the ruling United Russia party and widespread frustration over Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's decision to run for a third presidential term in March 2012. Most state and privately owned mass media engaged in blatant propaganda that glorified the country's national leaders and fostered an image of political pluralism, as the government maintained control over key television outlets while allowing some coverage of opposition protest rallies that occurred in December in the wake of fraudulent parliamentary elections.

Although the constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, officials used the country's politicized and corrupt court system to harass the few remaining independent journalists who dared to criticize widespread abuses by the authorities. Dozens of civil and criminal cases were launched against journalists during 2011, often for defamation. In March, the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* lost an appeal in the Moscow City Court and was required to pay 100,000 rubles (\$3,320) in damages to the Kremlin's presidential property management office, having published a July 2010 article that alleged corruption in some of the construction projects overseen by the office. In August, the Presnensky District Court in Moscow ordered daily newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets* to pay 150,000 rubles (\$4,920) in damages to the Putin-linked Federatsiya Foundation after publishing a report in which it was claimed that the organization had mismanaged its funds. The authorities also used legal technicalities to harass foreign correspondents whose reporting embarrassed the Kremlin. In February, border guards at Moscow's Domodedovo International Airport annulled the visa of Luke Harding, the Moscow correspondent for Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, and deported him back to London; Harding had covered aspects of the WikiLeaks scandal that portrayed Putin unfavorably.

The authorities charged a number of government critics, including journalists and media outlets, with extremism and other trumped-up charges designed to limit their activities. The independent newspaper *Moi Gorod Kostroma* faced a campaign of legal harassment before the December parliamentary elections. Police began an investigation of the paper, and prosecutors twice questioned editor Ruslan Tsarev in an effort to identify the authors of several articles that criticized local officials. The growing role of the internet as an alternative source of news led the authorities to expand their legal jurisdiction over the web. An amendment to the Media Law that came into force in November encouraged online news websites to register voluntarily as "internet publications" with the government communications regulator, Roskomnadzor.

Journalists continued to find it extremely difficult to cover the news freely, particularly with regard to human rights abuses in the North Caucasus, government corruption, organized crime, police torture, the activities of opposition parties, widespread violations committed during the December parliamentary elections, and the anti-Putin nature of the subsequent

demonstrations. In July, several soldiers assaulted a television crew from Volga TV as they were filming a large fire that broke out at a military warehouse in the central Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod. Police officers blamed the journalists for the assault because they had not "coordinated" their work with the military and emergency responders. When Moscow police were dispersing protesters after the parliamentary elections, at least six journalists were detained, even though they identified themselves as media workers. A billionaire tycoon with close links to the Kremlin fired two media executives – editor Maksim Kovalsky and general director Andrey Galiyev of the weekly *Kommersant Vlast* – after they published an article accusing Putin and the United Russia party of orchestrating the extensive ballot stuffing that occurred during the elections.

Russia remains 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 Glasnost Defense Foundation, six journalists were killed in 2011, although only one was murdered in retaliation for his reporting. Gadzhimurad Kamalov, founder of the independent weekly *Chernovik*, was gunned down as he left work in Makhachkala, capital of the southern republic of Dagestan. The newspaper had endured years of threats and legal harassment for its bold reporting on government corruption, police abuse, and Islamic radicalism. The authorities have failed to investigate or solve the vast majority of crimes against journalists in previous years, and suspects who are identified rarely receive serious punishments. Over the course of 2011, at least three former or current government officials received suspended prison sentences when they were prosecuted in local courts for participating in or organizing attacks against journalists: Viktor Begun, the mayor of a small town in the Perm region; Artur Idelbayev, the former deputy chief of the Bashkortostan government's directorate for the press; and Aleksey Klimov, a former police officer from a village outside of Moscow.

After three years of intense advocacy by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the authorities announced in February that they would reopen five unsolved cases, but by the end of the year there had been progress in only one. In April, the Moscow City Court convicted two neo-Nazi activists for the 2009 murders of freelance journalist Anastasiya Baburova and human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov, and in May

sentenced one of the defendants to life in prison and the other to 18 years. Regional prosecutors in the southern city of Samara who reopened the case of the murdered editors of the independent newspaper *Tolyattinskoye Obozreniye* – Valery Ivanov, killed in 2002, and Aleksey Sidorov, killed in 2003 – failed to pursue an important lead related to their reporting on police corruption. The colleagues of Natalya Estemirova – a famous journalist and human rights activist based in Chechnya who was murdered in 2009 – criticized prosecutors for relying on flawed evidence and focusing their inquiry on a dead Chechen rebel commander. In the spring and summer of 2011, the authorities charged two people for the 2006 murder of Moscow-based *Novaya Gazeta* reporter Anna Politkovskaya, but failed to make any substantive progress in identifying who ordered the slaying.

The authorities exert significant influence on media outlets and news content through a vast state-owned media empire. The state owns, either directly or through proxies, all six national television networks, two national radio networks, two of the 14 national newspapers, more than 60 percent of the roughly 45,000 registered local newspapers and periodicals, and two national news agencies. In 2011, this allowed the government to fill the media with apolitical entertainment and pro-Kremlin propaganda while avoiding coverage of rising unemployment, bank failures, declining industrial production, election abuses, and the falling value of the ruble. International radio and television broadcasting is restricted. Most private FM radio stations have been pressured to stop rebroadcasting news programs from the British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Voice of America, relegating those services to less accessible short- and medium-wave frequencies.

Media diversity continued to decline in 2011 as private companies loyal to the Kremlin and regional authorities purchased additional outlets, and most other media outlets remained dependent on state subsidies as well as government printing, distribution, and transmission facilities. The economic crisis 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 in order to obtain advertising contracts from government agencies. Government-controlled television was the primary source of news for most Russians. Lively if cautious political debate was mostly limited to glossy weekly magazines, news websites, and the news radio station Ekho

Moskvy, all of whose audiences were composed largely of urban, educated, and affluent Russians.

Online media have developed rapidly, and an estimated 49 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2011. A new internet television site, Dozhd TV, rose to prominence in the period surrounding the December 2011 protests. Claiming that it has no specific political agenda, the station is run mostly by individuals under the age of 30 and prides itself on "producing quality programming" that challenges the state-controlled media outlets. Although the internet remains freer than other news media and provides a wider diversity of news and opinion, the authorities frequently engage in content removal and manipulation of online expression. In February, the news website Ulyanovsk Online was blocked and started receiving threats after it posted a story stating that police had found narcotics in the car of a senior United Russia official in the city of Ulyanovsk. In October, a web moderator censored the blogs of two environmental activists – Suren Gazaryan and Dmitry Shevchenko – after they reported that a senior official in the southern Krasnodar region had seized the land around the governor's mansion. Kremlin allies have purchased several independent online newspapers or created their own progovernment news websites, and they are reportedly cultivating a network of bloggers and computer hackers who are paid to produce pro-Kremlin propaganda and hack independent news and blogging sites. The website of *Novaya Gazeta* and the popular blogging site LiveJournal endured repeated denial-of-service attacks in 2011, especially after they posted stories or blog items that exposed government corruption and electoral abuses.

The Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Interior Ministry engage in widespread monitoring of e-mail, blogs, online bulletin boards, and websites. In April, FSB press officer Aleksandr Andreyechkin suggested that Skype, Gmail, and Hotmail – all U.S.-based online communications platforms – should be banned because they pose a threat to Russian national security. The government's communications regulator, Roskomnadzor, developed an automated monitoring system that was activated in time for the December elections to improve its detection of "extremist" content on the web.

Government officials continued to harass some news websites and bloggers in 2011, especially in the politically volatile North Caucasus area. In

January, Ilya Labunsky was fired from the state newspaper *Nash Krasnodarsky Krai* for writing in his blog about a local deputy governor who allegedly purchased a \$3 million apartment in New York City. There is also a growing trend of individual citizens and whistleblowing civil servants using the internet to publicize government abuses and appeal to higher officials for intervention, though in many cases they face aggressive state retribution for doing so. Aleksey Navalny, one of Russia's most prominent bloggers, was harassed throughout the year in retaliation for his anticorruption activism. At the end of 2011, he was briefly jailed for participating in the postelection protests.

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