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Russia (2006)

Polity:

No polity available

Political Rights:

6

Civil Liberties:

5

Status:

Not Free

Population:

143,000,000

GNI/Capita:

\$2,610

Life Expectancy:

66

Religious Groups:

Russian Orthodox,
Muslim, other

Ethnic Groups:

Russian (79.8 percent), Tatar (3.8 percent), Ukrainian (2 percent), Bashkir (1.2 percent), Chuvash (1.1 percent), other (12.1 percent)

Capital:

Moscow

Additional Info:

[Freedom in the World 2005](#)

[Freedom of the Press 2005](#)

[Nations in Transit 2004](#)

[Countries at the Crossroads 2005](#)

Overview

During 2005, President Vladimir Putin took further steps toward the consolidation of executive authority by increasing pressure on the opposition and civil society, strengthening state control over the economy, and pursuing politically driven prosecutions of independent business leaders. The government introduced legislative changes making governors appointed rather than elected officials, as well as electoral system reforms making it almost impossible for parties outside the control of the Kremlin to enter the State Duma (lower house of parliament). New media legislation adopted in 2005 further restricted freedom of speech.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Russian Federation reemerged as an independent state under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin. In 1993, Yeltsin put down an attempted coup by hard-liners in parliament, and a new constitution creating a bicameral national legislature, the Federal Assembly, was approved. The December 1995 parliamentary elections, in which 43 parties competed, saw strong support for Communists and ultranationalist forces. In the 1996 presidential poll, Yeltsin easily defeated Communist Gennady Zyuganov. The August 1998 collapse of the ruble and Russia's financial markets ushered in a new government that returned to greater state spending and economic control. One year later, Vladimir Putin, then the head of the Federal Security Service, was named prime minister.

Conflict with the separatist region of Chechnya, which included a brutal two-year war from 1994 to 1996, was reignited in 1999. After a Chechen rebel attack on the neighboring republic of Dagestan in August 1999 and deadly apartment house bombings in several Russian cities blamed by the Kremlin on Chechen militants, Russia responded with an attack on the breakaway region. The second Chechen war dramatically increased Putin's popularity, and after the December 1999 elections to the State Duma (lower house of the Federal Assembly), progovernment forces were able to shape a majority coalition.

An ailing Yeltsin—who was constitutionally barred from a third presidential term—resigned on December 31, 1999. Yeltsin turned over power to Putin, who, in the March 2000 presidential election, secured a 53 percent first-round victory over Communist leader Zyuganov, who received 29 percent. After taking office, Putin moved to consolidate his power, including implementing legislation removing Russia's 89 governors from positions in the Federation Council (upper house of

the Federal Assembly) and allowing the president to suspend them from office if they violated federal law. Putin also created seven new "super regions" headed by Kremlin appointees and introduced personnel changes that have considerably altered the composition of the ruling elite through an influx of personnel from the security and military services; they now represent more than 25 percent of the country's ministers, deputy ministers, legislators, governors, and "super governors." Putin also challenged the political clout of some economic magnates through criminal investigations and legal proceedings claimed to be part of an anticorruption campaign, but which critics say are selective political persecutions.

The December 2003 Duma election was marred by extensive bias in media coverage. Questions of vote manipulation were raised when two liberal opposition parties fell just short of the 5 percent threshold required for representation, despite exit polls that showed they had surpassed it. The Kremlin-controlled United Russia Party captured 306 of the Duma's 450 seats. With the national broadcast media and most print media uniformly favorable to incumbent president Putin, no challenger was able to mount a respectable challenge in the March 2004 presidential election. Putin, who refused to take part in debates with his challengers, received 71.4 percent of the vote to 13.7 for his closest rival, Communist Nikolai Kharitonov, in a first-round victory; voter turnout was 64.3 percent.

Using as a pretext the September 2004 Beslan tragedy-in which over 300 hostages, mostly children, were killed after terrorists captured a school building-Putin introduced legislative changes that made the post of governor appointed by the president rather than elected. In the face of Putin's growing power, most governors publicly endorsed the curtailment of their autonomy despite well-known private displeasure with the plan. As a result, most of the governors whose term in office expired in 2005 were reappointed by Putin. The Duma, where Putin's United Russia Party commands more than a two-thirds constitutional majority, rubber-stamped these changes.

In spite of its facade of invulnerability, Putin's regime was seriously challenged in 2005. A wave of public protests against the social benefits reform in January-February damaged Putin's public image. The new policy, which replaced privileges and in-kind benefits, such as free transportation, with highly inadequate monetary compensations for underprivileged groups, spurred demonstrations across the country. Many protesters were detained and even arrested, while top government officials issued allegations that the demonstrations had been carefully orchestrated, possibly by the same forces that organized revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia. As a result of the protests, however, some of the privileges rolled back in January were restored in some regions of Russia.

The triumphant Orange Revolution in Ukraine struck a blow to Moscow's plans of reinstating Russia's control over the countries of the former Soviet Union. The demonstration of "people power" in the neighboring country also raised questions about the long-term stability of the government in the Kremlin. Russian officials and state-controlled media launched counterpropaganda efforts

denouncing the democratic revolutions in the former USSR as part of a plot to strip Russia of its power and influence. The government heavily promoted loyalist youth organizations, such as Nashi, in an effort to crowd out potential opposition movements. In July, Putin announced that his government would ban all foreign aid to civil society groups inside Russia. Russia also explicitly committed itself to defending authoritarian governments across the former Soviet Union.

The year saw the conclusion of the trial of billionaire oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his colleague Platon Lebedev on charges of tax evasion. Khodorkovsky and Lebedev were found guilty in a verdict that took almost two weeks to read, and each were sentenced to eight years in prison. Core assets of Khodorkovsky's Yukos energy company were seized and sold to meet huge tax assessments. The government continued to levy tax liens on companies connected to Khodorkovsky by demanding a nearly \$1 billion payment from the oil company TNK-BP in May. The government also continued to support the expansion of the economic power of the state-controlled Gazprom concern into a conglomerate with vast, varied interests including oil, gas, and media interests.

Russia continued its repressive campaign against scholars and academics in 2005. In February, Russian Federal Security Service detained and interrogated Dr. Oscar A. Kaibyshev, former director of the Institute for Metals Superplasticity Problems, on possible espionage charges related to exporting dual-use technology (technology that has both civilian and military uses) to South Korea. Dr. Kaibyshev insisted that all of the technology in question was declassified.

Strife in Chechnya continued throughout the year, with Russian counterinsurgency operations and guerrilla warfare, assassinations, acts of terrorism by Chechen rebels, and punishing raids by the pro-Russian militia. The assassination of Chechen breakaway leader Aslan Maskhadov in March 2005 shattered the already faint hopes for a negotiated solution to the crisis.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Russians cannot change their government democratically. In the State Duma elections of December 2003, more than two-thirds of the seats were won by the Kremlin's United Russia Party, while most of the remaining seats were captured by parties promoted by the Kremlin-controlled media. There was significant evidence that there had been an undercount in the vote for liberal opposition parties that prevented them from attaining the 5 percent threshold required for parliamentary representation. The leader of the third largest legislative party, Motherland (Rodina), backed President Vladimir Putin in the March 2004 presidential race. The Liberal Democratic Party, the fourth largest group in the Duma, is an ultranationalist faction known for the long-standing ties of its leaders to intelligence circles. The Communists are the sole party in the legislature relatively free of Kremlin influence. In the presidential election of March 2004, state dominance of the media was in full display, debate was absent, and Putin won a first-round victory with 71.4 percent of the vote, more

than five times that of his closest rival.

The 1993 constitution established a strong presidency with the power to appoint, pending parliamentary confirmation, and dismiss the prime minister. The bicameral legislature consists of a lower chamber (the State Duma) and an upper chamber (the Federation Council). The power of the president is likely to be strengthened when the president gains control over the appointment of regional governors, who until now have been elected officials.

Amendments to the electoral law introduced in 2005 raised the threshold for political parties for entering the State Duma from 5 to 7 percent; banned the formation of electoral coalitions; and granted party leaders unlimited control over the behavior of rank-and-file legislators. In practice, these changes will make it almost impossible for the parties outside Kremlin control to enter the State Duma.

Corruption throughout the government and business world is pervasive. Tough legislation to combat money laundering entered into force in 2002, leading the Financial Action Task Force of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to remove Russia from its list of noncooperating countries. However, the trial of Yukos chairman Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his associates, as well as new tax assessments and pressures on other Russian magnates, coming on the heels of the persecution and prosecution of former media owners Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, reaffirms the view held by many independent Russian analysts that Putin's anticorruption efforts are selectively applied and have often targeted critics and potential political adversaries. Russia was ranked 126 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Although the constitution provides for freedom of speech, the government continues to put pressure on the dwindling number of media outlets still critical of the Kremlin. Since June 2003, when the last independent national television network, TVS, was seized by the government, allegedly to settle the company's debts, all Russian national television networks have been controlled by the government or by economic interests that support the government and uniformly praise the president. While the independent Ekho Moskvyy radio station airs a wide range of viewpoints, it is vulnerable because it is owned by the Kremlin-controlled Gazprom conglomerate. Gazprom continued to consolidate its control over the media market in 2005 by purchasing the veteran daily Izvestiya.

Libel laws are used to intimidate independent media. More than 6,000 lawsuits were filed against newspapers and journalists in 2004. In May, the State Duma approved a package of amendments aimed at penalizing media outlets for reprinting or rebroadcast erroneous news reports during electoral campaigns. Experts have voiced concern that the Kremlin-initiated bill could provide a new pretext for silencing unfavorable media. With print and broadcast media increasingly under government control, the internet, where there is wider access to independent information, is used regularly by 4.2 percent of the population. This cohort of regular users is growing by 20 to 40 percent a year,

according to a Russian government report.

In the breakaway republic of Chechnya, the military continued to impose severe restrictions on Russian and foreign journalists' access to the war zone, issuing accreditation primarily to those of proven loyalty to the government. The government routinely intimidates media outlets for unsanctioned reporting on issues related to terrorism and the war in Chechnya. The newspaper Kommersant received a warning from the government in February, and the ABC bureau in Moscow lost its accreditation in July, for publishing and airing interviews with Chechen breakaway leaders.

Freedom of religion is respected unevenly. A 1997 law on religion requires churches to prove that they have existed for at least 15 years before being permitted to register. As registration is necessary for a religious group to conduct many of its activities, new, independent congregations are consequently restricted in their functions. Regional authorities continue to harass nontraditional groups, with the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons among the frequent targets. Foreign religious workers, including Roman Catholic priests, are often deported, barred from entry, or refused visa renewals. In March, a Moscow court convicted the director of the city's Andrei Sakharov Museum and his deputy of organizing an exhibition of art irreverent to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Academic freedom is generally respected, although the academic system is marred by some corruption at the higher levels and by very low levels of pay for educators. The arrests and prosecutions of scientists and researchers on charges of treason created a chill in some research institutes, engendering a climate that is restrictive of international contacts.

The government provides some space for freedom of assembly and association. However, legislation passed in 2002 gives the authorities the right to suspend political parties or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) whose members are accused of extremism. Critics argue that the law offers an excessively broad definition of extremism, giving the government great latitude to suppress legitimate opposition political activities. Protests by pensioners against the social benefits reform in January-February were met with arrests and detentions in many regions of Russia. Supporters of oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky were routinely detained and arrested in 2005 for waging demonstrations at the site of his trial, while anti-Khodorkovsky groups, assembled by proregime youth organizations, were allowed to demonstrate freely.

The NGO sector is composed of thousands of diverse groups, with many of them dependent on funding from foreign sources. While there had earlier been trends among Russia's newly wealthy to support the NGO sector through charitable giving, the prosecution and repression of business magnates (including Mikhail Khodorkovsky, patron of the Open Russia charitable fund) who had earlier supported NGOs focused on democratic reform has had a chilling effect on such funding. As part of post-Beslan reforms introduced by Putin in attempt to centralize his grip on power, a Public Chamber was

established as an advisory body of civil society representatives to the president. One-third of its members are appointed by the president, and the presidential appointees select the remaining members. The Public Chamber has been criticized as a meaningless body created essentially as window dressing. In July, Putin announced at a meeting with human rights groups that all foreign aid to civil society organizations in Russia would be banned in order to block external interference in Russia's affairs. Legislation restricting the activities of NGOs was introduced in the State Duma in November 2005.

While trade union rights are legally protected, they are limited in practice. Although strikes and worker protests occur, antiunion discrimination and reprisals for strikes are not uncommon, and employers often ignore collective bargaining rights. In a rapidly changing economy in transition from the former system of total state domination, unions have been unable to establish a significant presence in much of the private sector. The largest labor federation works in close cooperation with the Kremlin.

The judiciary suffers from corruption, inadequate funding, and a lack of qualified personnel. After judicial reforms in 2002, the government has made progress in implementing due process and holding timely trials. Since January 2003, Russia's reformed criminal procedure code has provided for jury trials throughout the country, but the legislature has voted to postpone introducing jury trials in certain areas by up to four years because of financial and technical difficulties. The new code also gives the right to issue arrest and search warrants to the courts instead of prosecutors, and it abolishes in absentia trials. After the Belsan attack, Putin declared his intention to establish full control over an office in the Supreme Court that supervises the hiring and removal of judges.

Critics charge that Russia has failed to address ongoing problems, such as the widespread use of torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officials to extract confessions. Russian police began using scaled-down "cleansing" tactics employed in Chechnya to combat crime in Russia proper in 2005. Police raids in the Bashkir town of Blagoveshchensk in December 2004 following beatings of police officers by hooligans ended with massive arrests, detentions, and, reportedly, torture of mostly innocent residents. Evidence of excessive brutality during crime-combating raids also surfaced in March in two locations in Tver oblast.

While prisons suffer from overcrowding, inadequate medical attention, and poor sanitary conditions, authorities took steps in 2003 to reduce the prison population, including introducing alternative sentences to incarceration. The new criminal procedure code limits pretrial detention to six months and has reduced overcrowding in pretrial detention centers (known as SIZOs). Putin has disbanded the presidential pardons commission, which was viewed as a safeguard against the harsh penal system and had released about 60,000 inmates since its inception in 1991, and ordered the creation of commissions in each of the country's regions. Human rights groups are frequently denied access to prisoners.

Ethnic minorities, particularly those who appear to be from the Caucasus or Central Asia, are subject to governmental and societal discrimination and harassment. Racially motivated attacks by skinheads and other extremist groups occur occasionally. Fringe anti-Semitic and racist parties organize small public rallies, and periodicals with racist and anti-Semitic content are published but attract a small readership.

The government places some restrictions on freedom of movement and residence. All adults are legally required to carry internal passports while traveling, documents that they also need in order to obtain many government services. Some regional authorities impose residential registration rules that limit the right of citizens to choose their place of residence freely. Police reportedly demand bribes for processing registration applications and during spot checks for registration documents, and these demands often unfairly target the Caucasian and dark-skinned populations.

In recent years, property rights have been legally strengthened. A land code that established the legal framework for buying and selling nonagricultural land was adopted in late 2001. In June 2002, parliament passed a law allowing the sale of agricultural land to Russian citizens; such sales had been severely restricted since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. However, prosecutions of economic magnates critical of the Kremlin, coupled with large tax liens on select companies, have reinforced perceptions that property rights are being eroded and that the rule of law is subordinated to political considerations.

Widespread corruption remains a serious obstacle to an effective market economy and is an impediment to genuine equality of opportunity. According to a 2002 report by the Moscow-based INDEM Foundation, Russians spend an estimated \$37 billion annually on bribes and kickbacks, ranging from small payments to traffic police to large kickbacks by companies to obtain lucrative state contracts. Members of the old Soviet elite have used insider information to gain control of key industrial and business enterprises.

Domestic violence remains a serious problem, while police are often reluctant to intervene in what they regard as internal family matters. Economic hardships contribute to widespread trafficking of women abroad for prostitution. There is credible evidence that women face considerable discrimination in the workplace, including lower pay than their male counterparts for performing similar work.