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Freedom of the Press 2016 - Russia

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Press Freedom Status: Not Free

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

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

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

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

Quick Facts

Population: 144,302,000

Net Freedom Status: Not Free

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 71

Overview

The nationalistic tone of the dominant Russian media continued to drown out independent and critical journalism in 2015, stressing patriotic themes associated with Russia's 2014 military incursions into Ukraine and the launch of air strikes in Syria in September 2015. Russian leaders and progovernment media outlets also sought to mobilize public support and suppress any dissent in the face of an economic downturn linked to falling oil prices and Ukraine-related sanctions. Deterrents to independent reporting and commentary included draconian laws and extralegal intimidation. Although no journalists were killed in connection with their work in 2015, the persistent threat of deadly repercussions for expressions of dissent was reinforced in February, when opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was assassinated in central Moscow.

Key Developments

- At least three internet users received significant prison sentences for posting "extremist" content related to Ukraine on social media.
- TV-2, an independent television station based in Tomsk, was forced off the air due to opaque contract and licensing decisions by state entities. The outlet survived only on the internet.

- European media companies sold their stakes in three important news publications, and in two cases, the new Russian owners subsequently reduced the scope or frequency of their reporting.

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 May 2015, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree that expanded an existing ban on publication of information about military casualties in wartime to include casualties from "special operations" during peacetime, further limiting meaningful coverage of Russian military involvement in Ukraine and Syria. In July, the president signed a "right to be forgotten" law that allows individuals to ask search engines to remove links about them under certain circumstances. Freedom of information advocates criticized the measure for failing to include safeguards pertaining to public figures, the public interest, and the effects of the law beyond Russia's borders. A new law that took effect in September requires companies to store data about Russian citizens on Russian territory. It was still unclear at the end of 2015 how the legislation would be enforced, though it could affect news and information by facilitating surveillance or enabling authorities to penalize noncompliant foreign-based internet platforms.

A law signed in 2013 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 2015, as were laws that allow blocking on various other grounds. More than 20,000 websites were being blocked at year's end, according to the independent watchdog Roskomsvoboda. 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.

Prosecutors in 2015 continued their practice of charging individuals – including journalists, bloggers, and in one case a librarian – with defamation, extremism, and other criminal offenses designed to limit free speech. In January, jailed journalist and blogger Sergey Reznik, who had written articles on alleged corruption and abuses by officials in Rostov-on-Don, received a three-year prison sentence on new charges of insulting and misleading authorities; his earlier 18-month prison term on similar charges would have expired in May.

In December, three internet users received substantial prison sentences for their online activities. Vadim Tyumentsev, a blogger in the city of Tomsk, was sentenced to five years in prison for posting videos on YouTube and the social-networking platform VKontakte that included criticism of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, which prosecutors said amounted to incitement to hatred and extremist activity. A court in Krasnodar found activist Darya Polyudova guilty of "public calls to separatism and extremism" and sentenced her to two years in a penal colony after she posted a handful of items denouncing Putin's leadership and Russian actions in Ukraine on VKontakte. Neither she nor Tyumentsev had a significant following on social media. Oleg Novozhenin, an internet user in Surgut, was sentenced to a year in a penal colony for distributing "extremist material" on social networks. He had posted audio and video files promoting Ukrainian nationalist organizations. A number of other social-media users and journalists faced investigations, fines, and short detentions during the year.

In addition to individuals, seemingly innocuous organizations were subjected to official scrutiny for offering materials that touched on the sensitive topic of Ukraine. In June, a Moscow-based consumer protection group, Public Control, became the target of a criminal investigation after it published an online memo for Russian tourists that called Crimea an "occupied territory" and raised legal and safety concerns about traveling or buying property there. Roskomnadzor blocked the group's website on orders from the prosecutor general's office. In October, the Investigative Committee, Russia's main federal investigative body, launched a criminal case against Natalya Sharina, director of the state-funded Library of Ukrainian Literature in Moscow, on the grounds that the library contained anti-Russian propaganda and incited "national hatred and enmity." Sharina remained under house arrest at year's end.

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.

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 new law signed in May 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. Dozens of Russian nongovernmental organizations have been labeled as "foreign agents," leading some to close. Four foreign organizations were deemed "undesirable" during 2015, including the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy.

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 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. These outlets operate with the understanding that the government has the means to close them at any time.

There is significant evidence that the government 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 2015. TV-2, a regional broadcaster based in Tomsk, was forced to cease terrestrial broadcasting at the beginning of the year after a state-owned transmission monopoly canceled its contract. The station was then forced off cable services when Roskomnadzor terminated its license, and was only able to continue operating online. The reasoning behind the decisions was not fully explained, but TV-2 representatives suggested that the channel was being punished for its independent reporting. The online television outlet Dozhd (Rain), known for critical coverage of the Russian government, remained a target of official harassment after being dropped by cable and satellite services in 2014, apparently under pressure from the authorities. In December 2015, the station was inspected by the Moscow prosecutor's office for possible violations of laws on extremism, labor rules, and licensing regulations. One prominent Russian news site, Meduza, operates from a base in Latvia to avoid interference by Russian authorities.

Both Russian and foreign journalists often encounter physical intimidation or official obstruction while reporting in the field. In July, journalist Anna Gritsevich of the online news outlet

Kavkazskiy Uzel was ordered to serve three days in jail for allegedly disobeying a police order as authorities dispersed a local protest in Sochi in 2014. She was reportedly injured by police, who detained her as she filmed the protest from a distance.

The Committee to Protect Journalists recorded no murders of journalists in connection with their work in 2015, 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 70 reports of attacks on journalists and bloggers over the course of the year.

In January, Sergey Vilkov of the online news portal *Obshchestvennoye Mneniye* was badly beaten by two unidentified assailants in Saratov. Vilkov, who had written critical articles on local officials and businessmen, said the assault was likely connected to his work. In April, four masked men abducted, beat, and eventually released Vyacheslav Starodubets, owner of the news website *My Derbent*, which had exposed official corruption in the Dagestani city. The attackers reportedly threatened to target his family if he did not leave Dagestan. In November, Aleksandr Kholodov of the news portal Fontanka.ru, who reports on abuses by St. Petersburg's road police, was beaten by unidentified assailants in his apartment building. Such crimes against journalists are rarely solved and successfully prosecuted.

In at least one case during the year, a news outlet was used to transmit a threat against a member of the press. A May editorial in *Grozny Inform*, which is associated with the leadership of Chechnya, warned that investigative journalist Yelena Milashina of the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* could meet the same fate as Nemtsov and Anna Politkovskaya, a *Novaya Gazeta* reporter who was murdered in 2006.

Economic Environment: 24 / 30

The Russian state controls, 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. The state also controls more than 60 percent of the country's estimated 45,000 regional and local newspapers and other periodicals. State-run television is the main news source for most Russians and serves as the key propaganda tool of the government. 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 take on global events. Internet access continues to grow and is widely affordable. About 71 percent of Russians used the internet in 2014, and more than half of internet users are able to reach the medium via smartphones.

A law signed in 2014 will restrict foreign ownership stakes in Russian media assets to 20 percent by early 2017. 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 *Moscow Times* subsequently switched from daily to weekly publication, and its chief editor resigned due to conflicts with the new owner. The new publisher of *Forbes* said that the magazine would carry fewer stories on politics and focus on business and economics.

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. In addition, businesses are reported to be reluctant to place advertisements with outlets that are not favorable to the government. In the current economic crisis, publications face both shrinking subsidies and dwindling advertising revenues, putting greater pressure on newsrooms.

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. Observers remained concerned that foreign commercial stations could be excluded from the market, and that many regional stations could be driven out of business if they lose their terrestrial broadcast licenses in a national shift to digital terrestrial transmission, now scheduled for the end of 2018.

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