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Freedom in the World 2019 - Russia

Not Free 20 /100

Key Developments in 2018:

- Vladimir Putin easily won a fourth term as president in a March election that excluded viable opposition candidates.
- In October, compelled by budget constraints, Putin signed deeply unpopular pension legislation that increased the retirement age for men from 60 to 65 and for women from 55 to 60. Thousands of people had participated in protests against the change, leading to hundreds of arrests across the country.
- The pro-Kremlin United Russia party generally dominated regional elections during the year, though it lost its hold on the governorship in four of the 22 regions at stake.
- The authorities blocked the popular messaging application Telegram in April. Also that month, journalist Maksim Borodin was found dead at his Yekaterinburg residence under suspicious circumstances, after investigating the deaths of Russian mercenaries fighting in Syria.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 5 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 0 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The 1993 constitution established a strong presidency with the power to dismiss and appoint, pending parliamentary confirmation, the prime minister. As with his past elections, President Putin's campaign for a new six-year term in 2018 benefited from advantages including preferential media treatment, numerous abuses of incumbency, and procedural irregularities during the vote count. His most potent rival, Aleksey Navalny, had been disqualified before the campaign began due to a politically motivated criminal conviction, creating what the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) called "a lack of genuine competition." The funding sources

for Putin’s campaign were notably opaque. He was ultimately credited with 77 percent of the vote, followed by the Communist Party’s Pavel Grudinin with 12 percent, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy of the ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) with 6 percent, and five others—including token liberals—who divided the remainder.

The Kremlin’s preferred candidates lost in four of the year’s 22 gubernatorial elections, though the nominal opposition contenders who were permitted to participate were also approved by the federal leadership. In Vladimir and Khabarovsk, LDPR candidates ousted United Russia incumbents, and a Communist challenger defeated a United Russia incumbent in Khakasia. In Primorsky Krai, the results of a September runoff election were annulled due to blatant manipulation meant to prevent Communist challenger Andrey Ishchenko’s victory over the incumbent, Andrey Tarasenko. Ishchenko was blocked from participating in the rerun election in December, and the Kremlin used the interim to elevate Oleg Kozhemyako as the new acting governor and United Russia candidate. Kozhemyako won with the help of increased federal spending and support from state-controlled media, defeating an LDPR opponent.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The Federal Assembly consists of the 450-seat State Duma and an upper chamber, the 170-seat Federation Council. Half the members of the upper chamber are appointed by governors and half by regional legislatures, usually with strong federal input. Half of Duma members are elected by nationwide proportional representation and the other half in single-member districts, with all serving five-year terms.

In the 2016 Duma elections, United Russia won 343 seats, securing a supermajority that allows it to change the constitution without the support of other parties. The three main Kremlin-approved “opposition” parties—the Communists, LDPR, and A Just Russia—won the bulk of the remainder, taking 42, 39, and 23 seats, respectively. The Central Electoral Commission reported a turnout of 48 percent, the lowest in Russia’s post-Soviet history. The OSCE and the election monitoring group Golos cited numerous violations, including ballot stuffing, pressure on voters, and illegal campaigning. Some opposition candidates were simply not permitted to register, so the outcome of many races was clear even before election day.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4

Russia’s electoral system is designed to maintain the dominance of United Russia. The authorities make frequent changes in the laws and the timing of elections in order to ensure that their preferred candidates will have maximum advantage. Opposition candidates have little chance of success in appealing these decisions, or securing a level playing field.

Since 2011, only locally elected politicians have been eligible to serve in the Federation Council; the change was designed to benefit United Russia, as most local officeholders are party members. The current mixed electoral system for the Duma was adopted

following the 2011 elections, when United Russia garnered just less than 50 percent of the vote under a system that used only nationwide proportional representation. This and other rule changes were considered to have contributed to United Russia's supermajority in 2016.

In April 2018, regional lawmakers in Sverdlovsk voted to abolish direct mayoral elections in the regional capital, Yekaterinburg, where a genuine opposition figure, Yevgeniy Royzman, was about to complete his term. The change, which followed a series of similar moves in other regions in recent years, reduced the number of regional capitals with direct mayoral elections to just eight out of 83.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 3 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 1 / 4

The multiparty system is carefully managed by the Kremlin, which tolerates only superficial competition with the dominant United Russia party. Legislation enacted in 2012 liberalized party registration rules, allowing the creation of hundreds of new parties. However, none posed a significant threat to the authorities, and many seemed designed to encourage division and confusion among the opposition. In August 2018, the Justice Ministry refused once again to register Navalny's political party. He had been attempting to register a party since 2012, but his applications were always delayed or rejected based on technicalities.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

Russia has never experienced a democratic transfer of power between rival groups. Putin, then the prime minister, initially received the presidency on an acting basis from the retiring Boris Yeltsin at the end of 1999. He served two four-year presidential terms from 2000 to 2008, then remained the de facto paramount leader while working as prime minister until he returned to the presidency in 2012, violating the spirit if not the letter of the constitution's two-term limit. A 2008 constitutional amendment extended presidential terms to six years, meaning Putin's current term will leave him in office until 2024.

Opposition politicians and activists are frequently targeted with fabricated criminal cases and other forms of administrative harassment that are apparently designed to prevent their participation in the political process. Navalny was jailed three separate times in 2018 alone, for stints ranging from 15 to 30 days, in connection with unauthorized demonstrations. Amnesty International declared him a prisoner of conscience, asserting that he had committed no crime.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 1 / 4

Russia's numerous security agencies work to maintain tight control over society and prevent any political challenges to the incumbent regime. The country's leadership is also closely intertwined with powerful economic oligarchs, who benefit from government patronage in exchange for political loyalty and various forms of service. The Russian Orthodox Church similarly works to support the status quo, receiving financial support and a privileged status in return.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

The formation of parties based on ethnicity or religion is not permitted by law. In practice, many ethnic minority regions are carefully monitored and controlled by federal authorities. Most republics in the restive North Caucasus area and some autonomous districts in energy-rich western Siberia have opted out of direct gubernatorial elections; instead, their legislatures choose a governor from candidates proposed by the president.

Women are underrepresented in politics and government. They hold less than a fifth of seats in the State Duma and the Federation Council. Only 4 of 32 cabinet members are women.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 2 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4

Russia's authoritarian president dominates the political system, along with powerful allies in the security services and in business. These groups effectively control the output of the parliament, which is not freely elected. The federal authorities have limited ability to impose policy decisions in Chechnya, where Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has gained unchecked power in exchange for keeping the republic within the Russian Federation.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

Corruption in the government and the business world is pervasive, and a growing lack of accountability enables bureaucrats to engage in malfeasance with impunity. Many analysts have argued that the political system is essentially a kleptocracy, a regime whose defining characteristic is the plunder of public wealth by ruling elites.

Navalny's anticorruption organization has posted a series of videos exposing graft among Russia's leading figures. In August 2018, the group alleged in a video that National Guard head Viktor Zolotov had grown rich by embezzling millions of dollars through procurement contracts, prompting Zolotov to publicly challenge Navalny, then in prison, to a duel. After Navalny responded by proposing televised debates, Zolotov opted to sue him for defamation instead.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

There is little transparency and accountability in the day-to-day workings of the government. Decisions are adopted behind closed doors by a small group of individuals whose identities are often unclear, and announced to the population after the fact.

In June 2018, as many citizens celebrated the opening of soccer's World Cup tournament in Russia, the government announced legislation to raise the retirement age and delay pension eligibility, allowing for essentially no public discussion. After authorities suppressed protests against the deeply unpopular changes and offered symbolic concessions, the final bill was adopted in September, and the president signed it in October.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 15 / 60

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 3 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

Although the constitution provides for freedom of speech, vague laws on extremism grant the authorities great discretion to crack down on any speech, organization, or activity that lacks official support. The government controls, directly or through state-owned companies and friendly business magnates, all of the national television networks and many radio and print outlets, as well as most of the media advertising market. A handful of independent outlets still operate, most of them online and some headquartered abroad.

Attacks, arrests, and threats against journalists are common. In April 2018, Maksim Borodin, an investigative correspondent for the independent news website *Novy Den*, died after falling from the balcony of his fifth-floor apartment in Yekaterinburg under suspicious circumstances. He had reported on the use of Russian private military contractors in Syria. In September, rights activist and website publisher Pyotr Verzilov was rushed to the hospital and received treatment in Germany after apparently being poisoned. *Novaya Gazeta* reporter Denis Korotkov received death threats in October, just before the paper published his article accusing Yevgeniy Prigozhen, a businessman closely connected to the Kremlin, of murder and other crimes.

BlogSochi editor Aleksandr Valov received a sentence of six years in prison and \$10,000 in fines for extortion in December. He had written widely about corruption in and around Sochi. In June, a Russian court sentenced Ukrainian journalist Roman Sushchenko to 12 years in prison for alleged espionage; he had been jailed since 2016.

A Moscow court fined the magazine *New Times* approximately \$330,000, the most ever for a Russian publication, in October for allegedly failing to submit funding declarations to regulators on time. Editor Yevgeniya Albats claimed that the penalty was retribution for her radio interview with Navalny on the liberal station Ekho Moskvyy. Russian readers quickly donated the money to pay the fine.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 1 / 4

Freedom of religion is respected unevenly. A 1997 law on religion gives the state extensive control and makes it difficult for new or independent groups to operate. The Russian Orthodox Church has a privileged position, working closely with the government on foreign and domestic policy priorities.

Regional authorities continue to harass nontraditional groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. Antiterrorism legislation approved in 2016 grants the authorities powers to repress religious groups that are deemed extremist. In 2017, the Supreme Court upheld the Justice Ministry's decision to ban the Jehovah's Witnesses as an extremist organization. There are an estimated 175,000 members of the group in Russia. More than 80 had been subjected to detention, house arrest, or restricted liberty as of December 2018, and several thousand had fled abroad. Many Muslims have also been detained in recent years for alleged membership in banned Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 1 / 4

The higher education system and the Academy of Sciences are hampered by bureaucratic interference, state-imposed international isolation, and increasing pressure to toe the Kremlin line on politically sensitive topics, though some academics continue to express dissenting views. In August 2018, the authorities restored the teaching license of the European University in St. Petersburg, having last rescinded it in March 2017. The decision had forced the independent institution, known for its high-quality instruction in the social sciences and humanities, to cancel classes for a full year and put its future in doubt. In June 2018, the state education regulator revoked the teaching license of the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (Shaninka), another important private college, claiming that its courses and instructors did not meet quality standards.

Historians researching the Stalinist era have faced pressure from the regime. Sergey Koltyrin and Yuriy Dmitriyev, who have conducted research at a site in Karelia where many victims of Stalinist persecution are buried, both faced unrelated criminal charges during 2018 that appeared to be motivated by their work.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 1 / 4

Pervasive, hyperpatriotic propaganda and political repression—particularly since Russian forces' invasion of Ukraine in 2014—have had a cumulative impact on open and free private discussion, and the chilling effect is exacerbated by growing state efforts to control expression on the internet.

The government's surveillance capabilities have increased significantly in recent years, and while most citizens are not subject to regular state supervision, authorities are thought to monitor the activities and personal communications of activists, journalists, and opposition members, according to the human rights organization Agora.

The authorities have developed a number of strategies for managing online discussion. In April 2018, a Russian court banned the popular messaging application Telegram after it failed to grant the Federal Security Service (FSB) access to encrypted communications. In September, however, the Supreme Court issued new guidance that raised the evidentiary threshold for using extremism laws to prosecute internet users over their online activity. A number of high-profile cases and sharp numerical increases in prosecutions had led to criticism that the laws were being applied too broadly. Similarly, in December, Putin signed a law that imposed administrative rather than criminal penalties for first-time offenders in cases involving incitement to hatred.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 3 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

The government restricts freedom of assembly. Overwhelming police responses, the use of force, routine arrests, and harsh fines and prison sentences have discouraged unsanctioned protests, while pro-Kremlin groups are able to demonstrate freely. Despite the risks, thousands of people have turned out for a series of antigovernment demonstrations in recent years. In September 2018, police arbitrarily detained hundreds of people who came to the streets to protest the government's pension legislation.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 0 / 4

The government continued its relentless campaign against nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in 2018. Authorities impede NGO activities in part by requiring groups that receive foreign funding and are deemed to engage in political activity to register as "foreign agents." This designation, which is interpreted by much of the Russian public as denoting a foreign spying operation, mandates onerous registration requirements, obliges groups to tag their materials with a "foreign agent" label, and generally makes it extremely difficult for them to pursue their objectives. In 2017, authorities removed the "foreign agent" designation from a number of groups that had stopped accepting funding from abroad. As of the end of 2018, the Justice Ministry classified 73 groups as "foreign agents."

Separately, a total of 15 foreign NGOs have been deemed "undesirable organizations" on the grounds that they threaten national security. This designation gives authorities the power to issue a range of sanctions against the blacklisted groups and individuals who work with them.

Other forms of harassment and intimidation also hinder NGO activities. The head of the human rights organization Memorial's office in Chechnya, Oyub Titiyev, was detained for alleged possession of illegal drugs in January 2018. Shortly before his arrest, the head of the Chechen parliament had blamed US sanctions against Kadyrov on local human rights activists. Titiyev remained in pretrial detention at year's end. In October, Amnesty International researcher Oleg Kozlovsky was detained, beaten, and subjected to a mock execution by masked assailants as he tried to research protests against a recent border agreement between Chechnya and Ingushetia. The attackers sought information about his local contacts and threatened to kill his wife and children.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 2 / 4

While trade union rights are legally protected, they are limited in practice. Strikes and worker protests have occurred in prominent industries, such as automobile manufacturing, but antiunion discrimination and reprisals for strikes are not uncommon, and employers often ignore collective-bargaining rights. The largest labor federation works in close cooperation with the Kremlin, though independent unions are active in some industrial sectors and regions.

In January 2018, a St. Petersburg court liquidated the independent Interregional Trade Union Workers' Association, accusing it of improperly accepting funds from abroad. The group had about 4,000 members and first gained prominence for a series of strikes at a Ford plant in 2007 that served as a model for numerous subsequent strikes.

F. RULE OF LAW: 2 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

The judiciary lacks independence from the executive branch, and career advancement is effectively tied to compliance with Kremlin preferences. The Presidential Personnel Commission and court chairmen control the appointment and reappointment of the country's judges, who tend to be promoted from inside the judicial system rather than gaining independent experience as lawyers.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Safeguards against arbitrary arrest and other due process guarantees are regularly violated, particularly for individuals who oppose or are perceived as threatening the interests of the political leadership and its allies. Many Russians have consequently sought justice from international courts, but a 2015 law authorizes the Russian judiciary to overrule the decisions of such bodies, and it has since done so on a number of occasions. In November 2018, the European Court of Human Rights ordered Russia to pay financial damages to Navalny for several arrests in 2012–14 that it found to have been politically motivated with the purpose of "suppressing political pluralism."

Memorial designated 195 people as political prisoners in Russia as of October 2018, up from 117 a year earlier. The list included human rights activists, journalists, Ukrainian citizens opposed to Russia's occupation of Crimea, and people imprisoned for their religious beliefs, among others.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

Use of excessive force by police is widespread, and rights groups have reported that law enforcement agents who carry out such abuses have deliberately employed electric shocks, suffocation, and the stretching of a detainee's body so as to avoid leaving visible injuries. Prisons are overcrowded and unsanitary; inmates lack access to health care and are subject to abuse by guards. In August 2018, *Novaya Gazeta* posted videos of guards engaging in organized beatings of prisoners in Yaroslavl. The authorities arrested at least 12 guards at the prison after a public outcry, but the NGO Public Verdict reported systematic abuse at another prison in the region in December.

Parts of the country, especially the North Caucasus area, suffer from high levels of violence; victims include officials, Islamist insurgents, and civilians. In Chechnya, Kadyrov allegedly uses abductions, torture, extrajudicial killings, and other forms of violence to maintain control.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4

Immigrants and ethnic minorities—particularly those who appear to be from the Caucasus or Central Asia—face governmental and societal discrimination and harassment.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people remain subject to considerable discrimination. Beginning in 2017, hundreds of men suspected of being gay were kidnapped and tortured by Chechen authorities, and some were killed. Many fled the republic and the country. An OSCE report released in December 2018 found serious human rights violations in Chechnya, including the crackdown on LGBT people, and called on Russia to conduct a full investigation. Separately, a 2013 federal law bans dissemination of information promoting “nontraditional sexual relationships,” effectively making it illegal to talk about homosexuality in public. The ECHR ruled in 2017 that the law was discriminatory and violated freedom of expression, but it remains in place and has led to increased harassment and violence against LGBT people. In November 2018, the ECHR ruled that Russia had violated human rights by consistently prohibiting demonstrations by the LGBT community.

Despite some legal guarantees of gender equality, women continue to face various forms of discrimination. In July 2018, the State Duma rejected a bill first drafted in 2003 that would have expanded employment protections for women, in part by setting a definition for sexual harassment as unwanted sexual attention. The only existing law on the topic is a criminal code article that addresses the use of coercion to compel a person to perform sexual acts.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 7 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 2 / 4

The government places some restrictions on freedoms of movement and residence. Adults must carry internal passports while traveling and to obtain many government services. Some regional authorities impose registration rules that limit the right of citizens to choose their place of residence, typically targeting ethnic minorities and migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Most Russians are free to travel abroad, but more than four million employees tied to the military and security services were banned from foreign travel under rules issued during 2014.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 1 / 4

Power and property are intimately connected, with senior officials often using their government positions to amass vast property holdings. State takeovers of key industries and large tax penalties imposed on select companies after dubious legal proceedings have illustrated the precarious nature of property rights under Putin's rule, especially when political interests are involved. Private businesses more broadly are routinely targeted for extortion or expropriation by law enforcement officials and organized criminal groups.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 2 / 4

Domestic violence is a serious problem, but it receives little attention from the authorities. In 2017, Putin signed a law that decriminalized acts of domestic violence that do not result in permanent physical harm. Residents of certain regions, particularly in the North Caucasus, face tighter societal restrictions on personal appearance and relationships, and some so-called honor killings have been reported. In Chechnya, Kadyrov has spoken in favor of polygamy and sought to compel divorced couples to remarry.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

Legal protections against labor exploitation are poorly enforced. Migrant workers are often exposed to unsafe or exploitative working conditions. At least 21 workers reportedly died in accidents at World Cup construction sites ahead of the 2018 tournament. Both Russians facing economic hardship and migrants to Russia from other countries are vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking.

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