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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2022 - Russia

NOT FREE
19
/ 100
Political Rights 5 / 40
Civil Liberties 14 / 60
LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS
20 / 100 Not Free
Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.

Overview

Power in Russia’s authoritarian political system is concentrated in the hands of President Vladimir Putin. With loyalist security forces, a subservient judiciary, a controlled media environment, and a legislature consisting of a ruling party and pliable opposition factions, the Kremlin is able to manipulate elections and suppress genuine dissent. Rampant corruption facilitates shifting links among state officials and organized crime groups.

Key Developments in 2021

- The arrest and detention of leading opposition figure Aleksey Navalny in January resulted in some of the largest protests in a decade. Authorities used excessive force against the demonstrators, and more than 11,500 people were detained.
- The September elections for the Duma, the lower house of parliament, were marked by extensive irregularities, according to election observers and independent media. The official results left the ruling United Russia party with a substantial supermajority.
- Authorities significantly expanded existing legal restrictions on “undesirable” and “extremist” organizations as well as “foreign agents,” contributing to an increase in censorship of the internet and social media and culminating in the forced closure of the respected human rights organization Memorial International.
- Russia continued to experience a severe outbreak of COVID-19, with more than 10 million confirmed cases and 300,000 deaths, according to official statistics; independent experts argued that those figures were artificially low. Low vaccination rates in the country were attributed in part to lack of trust in the government.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

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

The constitution establishes a strong presidency with the power to dismiss and appoint, pending parliamentary confirmation, the prime minister. The president is elected for as many as two consecutive six-year terms. Constitutional amendments approved in 2020 allow Putin, but not future presidents, to run for an additional two consecutive terms as president, potentially extending his rule to 2036.

As with past elections, President Putin’s 2018 reelection campaign benefited from advantages including preferential media treatment, numerous abuses of incumbency, and procedural irregularities during the vote count. His most influential rival, Aleksey Navalny, was 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 also notably opaque.

A2 0-4 pts

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 Federation Council. The 2020 constitutional amendments altered the makeup of the Federation Council to include: two representatives from each of Russia’s 85 regions (including two regions in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory of Crimea), with half appointed by governors and half by the regional legislatures, usually with strong federal input; former presidents, who are lifetime members; and no more than 30 “representatives of the Russian Federation,” appointed by the president, of whom no more than seven can be appointed for life. The rest of the Federation Council’s members are appointed for six-year terms.

Half of Duma members are elected by nationwide proportional representation, and the other half are elected in single-member districts, with all serving five-year terms. Electoral rules are designed to benefit the ruling party, United Russia.

In the 2021 Duma elections, United Russia won 324 seats, maintaining its supermajority. The main Kremlin-approved opposition parties—the Communist Party, A Just Russia, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and the New People party—won the bulk of the remainder, totaling 118 seats. Three smaller parties and five independents garnered 8 seats. The Central Election Commission reported a voter turnout of 52 percent, up from 48 percent in 2016. The election took place over three days, and Russians were permitted to use an opaque online voting system for the first time.

The OSCE was unable to send an observation mission due to new government-imposed restrictions on the number of observers. The Russian election-monitoring group Golos and independent media reported numerous violations, including vote buying, pressure on voters, “clone” candidates, and ballot stuffing. Under pressure from the authorities, Apple and Google removed the Navalny-backed Smart Voting mobile application from their online stores; the app was designed to inform citizens on how to avoid splitting the opposition vote in their respective districts. Some opposition candidates were not permitted to register, including associates of Navalny’s organization. In Moscow, early results showed challengers to United Russia leading in several districts, but pro-Kremlin candidates were later declared the victors in each of these districts after delayed online-voting results were released, prompting further accusations of fraud.

A3 0-4 pts

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 to electoral laws and the timing of elections in order to secure advantages for their preferred candidates. Opposition candidates have little chance of success in appealing these decisions, or in securing a level playing field. In 2020, Putin signed a law permitting the use of electronic voting across Russia, raising concerns about the security and secrecy of ballots in the 2021 Duma polls and other future elections. Also that year, the president signed a law allowing a three-day voting period in future elections; critics argued that the expanded timeframe increased officials’ ability to manipulate electoral outcomes.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

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 against the ruling party. A 2012 law liberalized party registration rules, allowing the creation of hundreds of new parties. However, none posed a significant political threat to the authorities, and many seemed designed to encourage division and confusion among the opposition. The Justice Ministry has repeatedly refused to register Navalny’s political party. In June 2021, Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) was declared an extremist organization, effectively preventing anyone associated with it from running for office.

Three new parties met a voting threshold in the 2020 local elections that would allow them to qualify for the 2021 Duma elections: New People, For Truth, and Green Alternative. In practice, each has links to the ruling party, allowing Kremlin-friendly political figures to distance themselves from the increasingly unpopular United Russia and siphon off voters who might otherwise support genuine opposition parties.

B2 0-4 pts

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, and a 2020 amendment allowed Putin to run for an additional two terms, meaning he could remain in office until 2036.

Opposition politicians and activists are frequently targeted with fabricated criminal cases and other forms of administrative harassment designed to prevent their participation in the political process. Navalny was poisoned with a toxic nerve agent in August 2020 while he was investigating corruption and campaigning in Siberia, with evidence later emerging that the attack was carried out by the Federal Security Service (FSB). He had to be evacuated to Germany to prevent the authorities from interfering with his treatment, and he was arrested upon his return in January 2021 for violating probation, receiving a prison term in February.

Legislation enacted in June 2021 banned individuals associated with extremist organizations from running for election. The Central Election Commission subsequently disqualified a number of candidates who were accused of extremism or association with undesirable organizations. Other opposition activists were sentenced to prison or fled the country due to charges they said were politically motivated. Among other new restrictions, Russian citizens who hold a second citizenship or a foreign residence permit, and people who have been found guilty of one of 400 criminal and administrative offenses, were unable to run for office as of 2021. In June, Golos reported that around nine million Russians, or nearly one in 10 adults, had effectively been denied the right to run for any public office.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 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 business magnates 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. Recent reports from the Riga-based online news outlet Meduza, echoing other research, have shown that many employers—particularly in the public sector—pressure their employees to vote, partly to deliver the government’s desired level of voter turnout.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, 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 regions inhabited by distinct ethnic groups 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. As of 2021, they held less than a fifth of the seats in the State Duma and the Federation Council. Only about a tenth of cabinet members are women, and many issues of importance to women are not prominent in Russian politics.

Constitutional amendments that were approved in the 2020 referendum and enacted in April 2021 formally defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman, both reflecting and deepening the systemic challenges LGBT+ people face in pursuing their political interests.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

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 the business sector. These groups effectively control the output of the parliament, which is not freely elected. The 2020 constitutional amendments formalized the power of the president over the legislature and allow Putin to retain the presidency until 2036, demonstrating his ability to manipulate the system. In 2021, the parliament passed a series of bills designed to increase political centralization at the expense of regional autonomy. However, the federal authorities have limited ability to impose policy decisions in Chechnya, where Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has been granted unchecked power in exchange for violently suppressing dissent and keeping the republic within the Russian Federation.

C2 0-4 pts

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 officials 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. Some of these elites openly work to fulfill President Putin’s policy aims and receive government contracts and protection from prosecution in return for their loyalty.

C3 0-4 pts

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 to the public, and are announced to the population after the fact.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

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. The few still based in the country struggle to maintain their independence from state interests. Television remains the most popular source of news, but its influence is declining, particularly among young people who rely more on social media.

Laws on extremism, foreign agents, and undesirable organizations have been used to harass media outlets, curtailing their access to funding and forcing many to cease operations in Russia. In late 2020, legislators expanded the foreign agents law to apply to individuals and informal organizations. Authorities cracked down on journalists who reported on protest events in 2021, for example by arresting editors at the student-led newspaper *Doxa*. Also during the year, a number of prominent independent media outlets were declared foreign agents, including Meduza, VTimes, Dozhd, OVD-Info, Mediazona, and iStories. Roskomnadzor, the federal media and telecommunications agency, required several media outlets to delete reports by the investigative news outlet Proekt, which was declared an undesirable organization in July.

A series of new laws that have gone into effect since 2020 require social media networks to take down “illegal” content, fine websites that fail to block illegal content, and enforce prison sentences for online “libel,” among other provisions. In the weeks following the introduction of these laws, Roskomnadzor issued warnings and fines to TikTok, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram for failing to block posts that allegedly encouraged minors to participate in protests. In December, a court fined Google $100 million for failure to delete banned content. Activists have also been fined and jailed for allegedly promoting extremist content on social media.

D2 0-4 pts

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

Freedom of religion is upheld 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. Antiterrorism legislation approved in 2016 grants authorities the power to suppress religious groups that are deemed extremist.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses were declared an extremist organization in 2017, leading to a protracted campaign against worshippers marked by surveillance, property seizures, arrests, and torture. Since the ban, more than 500 Jehovah’s Witnesses have been charged with or convicted of extremism. In October 2021, however, the Supreme Court ruled that authorities could not prosecute adherents merely for individual or collective worship, requiring additional evidence of extremist activity.

Many Muslims have been detained in recent years for alleged membership in banned Islamist groups, including Hizb ut-Tahrir.

D3 0-4 pts

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

The higher education system and the government-controlled 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 still express dissenting views. A number of universities have banned student and faculty participation in antigovernment rallies or threatened students with expulsion should they participate. Educators have also been fired for attending or sharing information about protests on social media.

A law enacted in April 2021 requires educators and academics to receive permission from authorities for public “educational activities” and partnerships involving foreign scholars. In July, US-based Bard College became the first foreign institution of higher education to be designated as an undesirable organization in Russia. In October, the FSB announced that individuals who work on military technology and related issues and share even nonsecret information with foreigners could be named as foreign agents.

D4 0-4 pts

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.

In recent years, authorities have adopted a series of laws that impose fines or prison sentences for insulting the state, spreading false news, committing libel, and using social media to discuss the personal information of judges and law enforcement officials or to share information on corruption. These and other laws are actively enforced to punish and deter expressions of dissent.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

The government restricts freedom of assembly. Overwhelming police responses, the excessive 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.

It is extremely difficult for groups opposing the Kremlin to obtain permission to hold a protest or rally. At the regional level, extensive location-based restrictions prohibit assemblies in as much as 70 percent of public space. While some of these restrictions have been invalidated over the years, authorities can ban rallies on vaguely defined “public interest” grounds. Since 2014, nine major legislative amendments have been introduced to curtail freedom of assembly. Some protesters have resorted to single-person pickets to circumvent limits on mass gatherings, but authorities have used a variety of laws and tactics to crack down on the practice in recent years.

The government has invoked public health concerns to tighten restrictions on assembly during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the rules are selectively applied to target critics of the regime.

In early 2021, mass demonstrations in response to the arrest and imprisonment of Aleksey Navalny were met with excessive force by state security personnel. At least 11,500 people were detained, more than 130 criminal investigations were opened, and multiple protesters and journalists were injured, with many reporting beatings and other abuse in custody. Some of those convicted over the subsequent months received multiyear prison sentences. Facial-recognition technology installed in Moscow and several other cities was reportedly used to identify and arrest participants in the protests.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because authorities pursued a campaign of retaliation against opposition protesters, arresting thousands of participants, engaging in physical abuse during arrests and in detention, and imposing criminal penalties.

E2 0-4 pts

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

The government has relentlessly persecuted NGOs, particularly those that work on human rights and governance issues. Civic activists are frequently arrested on politically motivated charges.

Authorities impede and block NGO work by requiring groups that receive foreign support and are deemed to engage in broadly defined “political activity” to register as “foreign agents.” This designation, which is interpreted by much of the Russian public as denoting a foreign spying operation, entails 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. Under amendments adopted in late 2020, authorities can designate individuals and informal organizations as foreign agents. Those who fail to comply with the law risk fines or prison time.

In June 2021, the president signed laws that made it easier to open criminal cases for alleged affiliation with “undesirable” organizations and banned individuals affiliated with “extremist” organizations from seeking public office. As of December 2021, the Ministry of Justice had listed 86 NGOs and public associations, 36 media outlets, and 75 individuals as foreign agents. Separately, a total of 48 organizations had been deemed “undesirable.” That month, Russia’s Supreme Court ordered the closure of Memorial International, one of Russia’s most well-respected human rights organizations, on the grounds that it had repeatedly failed to meet the requirements of the foreign agents legislation.

E3 0-4 pts

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, including automobile manufacturing, but antiunion discrimination and reprisals are common. 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.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

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

independent experience as lawyers. The 2020 constitutional amendments empowered the president to remove judges from the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court, with the support of the Federation Council, further damaging the judiciary’s already negligible autonomy.

F2 0-4 pts

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 to 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 December 2021, the president signed legislation that granted police broader authority to break into homes and vehicles and search personal belongings without a warrant. While arbitrary arrests are rarely punished, a court in May sentenced five former police officers to prison terms for the 2019 arrest of journalist Ivan Golunov on fabricated drug charges.

Memorial Human Rights Center counted 410 people as political prisoners as of August 2021, with 329 of them held in connection with the exercise of religious freedom. Those counted included opposition leader Aleksey Navalny along with several of his supporters, journalists, and potential opposition candidates for the 2021 parliamentary elections.

F3 0-4 pts

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 2021, lawyers for Navalny reported that he had been subjected to sleep deprivation and denied medical treatment while in prison.

Parts of the country, especially the North Caucasus, suffer from high levels of violence; targets include officials, Islamist insurgents, and civilians. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has been accused of using abductions, torture, extrajudicial killings, and other forms of violence to maintain control. This activity sometimes extends to other parts of Russia and foreign countries, where Kadyrov is suspected of arranging the assassination of asylum seekers and political opponents living in exile.

F4 0-4 pts

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. Constitutional amendments establish the primacy of the Russian language within the state, favoring ethnic Russians by implication.

LGBT+ people are also subject to considerable discrimination. A federal law banning the dissemination of information on “nontraditional sexual relationships” has been in force since 2013, making public discussion of homosexuality illegal.

Chechnya remains particularly dangerous for LGBT+ people, with authorities launching a crackdown in 2019 that ensnared nearly 40 people; two of the detainees reportedly died after they were tortured by police. In 2021, police arrested and forcibly returned to Chechnya individuals who were associated with LGBT+ organizations.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

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 members of 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 in 2014.

G2 0-4 pts

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

State power and private 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

Constitutional amendments approved in 2020 define marriage as a union between a man and a woman; the changes were formally adopted in April 2021, effectively barring any future law recognizing same-sex marriage.

Domestic violence receives little attention from the authorities. Instead, survivors who kill their abusers in self-defense are commonly imprisoned; as many as 80 percent of women imprisoned in Russia may fall under this category. A 2017 law decriminalized acts of domestic violence that do not result in permanent physical harm. The measure also relieved police of the obligation to initiate cases, transferring that burden to survivors. During Russia’s COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, Russian NGOs reported a doubling of domestic violence cases, while official police statistics reported a decrease. In December 2020, the Justice Ministry listed the NGO Nasiliu.net, which fights gender-based violence, as a “foreign agent.” In April 2021, the Constitutional Court called on lawmakers to strengthen victim protections as well as penalties for repeat offenders.

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 0-4 pts

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. Both Russians facing economic hardship and migrants to Russia from other countries are vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking. The US State Department’s 2021 *Trafficking in Persons Report* criticized the government’s lack of significant efforts to address trafficking. While it acknowledged the government’s extension of work and residence permits for foreign workers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, its identification of some victims, and other positive steps, the report found that the government records a far lower number of trafficking victims than the estimated scope of the problem would suggest, and that the state is actively complicit in the forced labor of North Korean workers. Trafficking victims are routinely detained, deported, and prosecuted for activity they were forced to participate in.

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