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Freedom on the Net 2021 - Russia

- NOT FREE

30

/ 100

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LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

30 / 100 Not Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)

Overview

Internet freedom in Russia remained restricted during the coverage period. By passing laws, issuing fines, and temporarily throttling Twitter, the government tried to exert more influence over international social media companies' content moderation policies and compel them to delete “prohibited content,” including posts related to January 2021 protests supporting jailed opposition leader Aleksey Navalny. In the wake of those protests, the authorities continued to reduce the space for online mobilization, arresting activists who organized online, banning the most prominent opposition groups, and labeling them as “extremist.” The government also targeted independent online media outlets, employing the “foreign agent” designation to make it more difficult for them to operate. In addition, officials continued to block COVID-19-related content and detained journalists who criticized the government's response to the pandemic.

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.

Key Developments, June 1, 2020 – May 31, 2021

- In March 2021, the communications regulator throttled access to Twitter after the company refused to block “prohibited content,” with the government claiming that the content in question included material related to drug use and suicide. This marked the first time that deep packet inspection (DPI) equipment installed under the scope of the 2019 Sovereign Runet Law was applied to block a global online platform (see A3 and B1).
- The government issued fines and passed several laws in an attempt to exercise control over the content moderation policies of popular online platforms, culminating in the introduction of a law on local representatives. The law, adopted after the coverage period in July 2021, will require these companies to establish in-country offices that liaise with the federal agency responsible for censoring content (see B2 and B3).
- During the mass protests in support of Navalny that began in late January 2021, the authorities limited the space for online mobilization, arresting individuals who promoted the protests and raiding the office of a student-run online media outlet (see B8 and C3).
- In a departure from their strategy in previous years, Russian authorities did not shut down internet service during protests (see A3).

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections? 5 / 6

Internet access in Russia continues to expand gradually, with a more acute increase in fourth-generation (4G) mobile services during the coverage period. According to the Levada Center, a nongovernmental research organization, the overall internet penetration rate reached 76 percent by the fourth quarter of 2019, when the proportion of Russians who used the internet daily or at least several times a week was about 65 percent.¹ The Russian research company Mediascope estimated the country’s internet penetration rate at 80.7 percent for the period from March 2021 to May 2021.²

In 2020, the household subscriber base for fixed-line broadband internet connections increased by 2.6 percent compared with 2019, from 33.4 million to 33.6 million subscribers, according to the Russian research company TMT Consulting. The household fixed broadband penetration rate was about 61 percent, though it reached 89 percent in Moscow.³ The government’s national Digital Economy program aims to provide 97 percent of households with fixed broadband internet connections featuring speeds of 100 megabits per second (Mbps) or more by 2024.⁴

Increasingly, users in Russia access the internet through mobile devices. The subscriber base for mobile internet connections increased to 260.6 million customers by mid-2019; this amounted to more than 175 percent of Russia’s total population, meaning there were multiple subscriptions per person.⁵ The number of mobile internet users in 2019 reached 85.2 million, or almost 89 percent of all internet users.⁶

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2021 Inclusive Internet Index, 3G mobile networks cover 87.7 percent of the population, while 4G services also cover 87.7 percent, a sharp increase from 77 and 62 percent in 2019.⁷ The government planned to roll out 5G services in Moscow starting in 2020.⁸ However, by March 2021 the Security Council still had not agreed to transfer the radio frequencies that are most suitable for 5G services to mobile operators, blocking the development of 5G networks. Currently, these frequencies are reserved for the Russian military.⁹ In November 2020, the government approved the Roadmap for 5G Development until 2024, which allocates 200 billion rubles (\$2.6 billion) to fund the project,¹⁰ though the roadmap does not regulate the transfer of frequencies.

Publicly accessible internet connections in institutions like hospitals, libraries, schools, and mass transit are fairly widespread in large cities. In rural areas, the availability of public internet connections remains limited.

Connection speeds are stable, with fixed broadband download speeds averaging 87.01 Mbps and mobile internet download speeds averaging 26.86 Mbps, according to April 2021 data from Speedtest.¹¹ These speeds place Russia ahead of many of its neighbors in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but behind most European Union (EU) countries.

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the 2 / population for geographical, social, or other reasons? 3

Despite economic strains and recent currency fluctuations, internet connections remain relatively affordable for most of the population. The 2021 Inclusive Internet Index ranks Russia at 10 out of 100 countries in terms of the affordability of connections.¹² According to data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a monthly fixed broadband subscription cost 0.7 percent of gross national income (GNI) per capita in 2019, while a mobile plan offering 10 GB of data cost 1 percent of GNI per capita.¹³ In nominal terms, according to official statistics, as of January 2021 the average monthly cost of a fixed broadband subscription was 562 rubles (\$7.40), while that of a mobile internet subscription was 385 rubles (\$5.10).¹⁴ In mid-2020, the average nominal monthly salary in Russia was almost 50,100 rubles (\$660).¹⁵ While people in the middle class and above can easily afford internet access, a significant portion of the population (14.3 percent as of early 2019) lives below the poverty line, and connections are prohibitively expensive for many in that group.¹⁶

Robust competition in the information and communication technology (ICT) market is one of the most important factors restraining price increases.¹⁷ However, prices have gradually risen due to compliance with the 2016 Yarovaya Law (see C6), which requires that internet service providers (ISPs) install expensive equipment to record and store users’ traffic data on their networks. ISPs have passed installation costs on to their customers. Another factor driving price increases was a hike in the value-added tax (VAT) rate, from 18 to 20 percent, in January 2019. According to a survey of ISPs, average prices increased by 10–12 percent in 2019.¹⁸ The 2019 Sovereign Runet Law (see A3), which obliges operators to install additional equipment on their networks (namely DPI systems) is similarly pushing prices higher. Some ISPs have explicitly named the Yarovaya Law and the Sovereign Runet Law as the main reasons for raising prices.¹⁹

A digital divide persists in Russia along regional lines, with users in smaller, more remote cities, towns, and villages paying significantly more for internet access than users in major urban areas. According to one study, the cheapest fixed internet subscriptions were available in the Central Federal District, which includes Moscow, while the most expensive fixed internet subscriptions, which cost almost twice as much, were found in the remote Far Eastern Federal District.²⁰ This dynamic also held true for mobile internet subscriptions, although the price difference was less extreme. In February 2019, the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media announced that 16,000 of the 18,000 settlements with 500 to 10,000 people had broadband access, as did 8,000 of 14,000 settlements with 250 to 500 people.²¹

There are no clear digital divides along religious or gender lines. Younger people are more likely to use the internet than their elders.

In January 2020 President Putin announced a project to ensure free access for Russian citizens to “socially important Russian internet services.”²² The list of services was approved in March 2020 and comprised some 370 Russian websites, including those of government agencies, most Mail.ru and Yandex services, various media outlets, and e-commerce platforms.²³ The project was piloted from April to December, and it was then extended until July 2021.²⁴ The government did not immediately explain how it would offset the cost of the project to ISPs, which initially requested state compensation based on the expectation of losing 150 billion rubles (\$1.97 billion) annually.²⁵ Telecommunications companies have advocated for compensation from the federal budget to be included in planned legislation that will codify the pilot project.²⁶

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the 3 / purposes of restricting connectivity? 6

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because the Russian government did not shut down internet service during the coverage period, although the internet infrastructure remains centralized.

The government took further steps to centralize its control over the country’s internet infrastructure during the coverage period, but unlike in previous years, there were no localized internet shutdowns.

Centralized installation of DPI systems on the networks of telecommunications companies under the 2019 Sovereign Runet Law allowed the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) to expand its toolkit for censoring social media. In March 2021, Roskomnadzor announced that it would begin to throttle the loading speeds for Twitter in order to punish the platform for systematic noncompliance with content removal requests (see B1). By throttling Twitter, which has a relatively small user base in Russia, the regulator sent a signal to larger platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, that they could face similar penalties.²⁷ However, the throttling demonstrated problems with the centralized installation of DPI systems, because in its attempt to block t.co, Twitter’s link shortener, Roskomnadzor inadvertently blocked any site that had “t.co” in its URL, including major sites such as Reddit and Microsoft.²⁸

While large-scale internet disruptions remain relatively uncommon in Russia, certain Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services are blocked, and local internet access has at times been disrupted during protests. In July and August 2019, amid mass demonstrations related to the September 2019 regional elections, authorities briefly disabled fixed and mobile internet connections in parts of Moscow.²⁹ Public Wi-Fi hotspots were also disabled. When pressed by journalists and users, ISPs denied that their networks had been disabled,³⁰ claiming that overcrowding was to blame for any disruptions; independent experts determined that intentional disruptions did take place.³¹ The government remained silent on the issue.

In October 2019, an intentional shutdown took place in the Arkhangelsk region, affecting a protest camp occupying the site of a planned landfill.³² Separately, intentional shutdowns were actively used in the Republic of Ingushetia to stymie mass protests there in 2018–19.³³

The most prominent restriction on connectivity affecting the entire population in recent years was the blocking of Telegram, a popular messaging application, which began in April 2018 (see B1). After June 2018, the government scaled back its attempts to block Telegram so as to avoid the blacklisting of millions of internet protocol (IP) addresses belonging to cloud services where Telegram is hosted, which had occurred during the first two months of the blocking campaign. In January 2019, Roskomnadzor stopped blocking most of the IP addresses of Amazon Web Services, focusing instead on banning the IP addresses of proxy services used to access Telegram.³⁴ However, in June 2020, Roskomnadzor and the Prosecutor General’s Office unexpectedly announced that the government would no longer restrict access to Telegram.³⁵

In May 2019, President Putin signed a law aimed at achieving the “sovereignization” of the Russian segment of the internet, or Runet.³⁶ Its basic provisions took effect in November 2019. Other elements of the law, including the creation of a national domain name system (DNS), were set to take effect in 2021.³⁷ The law defines the status of and requirements for the “critical infrastructure” of the Runet, namely international communication links and internet exchange points (IXPs). Their owners and operators are obliged to ensure the possibility of centralized traffic management in the event of external threats. For example, the law attempts to ensure the operability of Russian internet resources in the event that Russian service providers are unable to connect to root DNS servers located abroad. The law also provides for the creation of a Russian DNS as an alternative to the global DNS maintained by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in California. Russian national security authorities have regularly criticized ICANN for being dependent on the US government and have often suggested delegating its functions to an independent international organization. Notably, the law requires service providers to install special equipment that would enable Roskomnadzor to filter traffic. It was this equipment, harnessing DPI technology, that the government deployed in its effort to throttle Twitter in March 2021 (see B1).

The Sovereign Runet Law calls for government authorities, ISPs, and other network operators to regularly simulate large-scale cyberattacks in order to be ready for the rapid restoration of the Runet’s critical infrastructure and the isolation of the Runet from the global internet. The first round of simulations was conducted in late December 2019.³⁸ The Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media planned to hold four more simulations with different aims during 2020.³⁹ However, due to the COVID-19 crisis, these simulations were delayed indefinitely.⁴⁰

In 2017, President Putin approved a new Information Society Development Strategy, which aims to guide ICT development until 2030. Like the Sovereign Runet Law, the strategy broadly seeks to increase the autonomy of Russia’s internet, signaling the authorities’ intention to wield greater control online. Among other things, the document states that imported ICT equipment should gradually be replaced with domestically made alternatives.⁴¹ It also directs officials to ensure that Russian “spiritual and cultural values” are represented in internet governance policy (see B3).

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers? 2 / 6

The ICT market in Russia, despite robust competition among ISPs, remains relatively concentrated due to regulatory and economic constraints. The displacement of local service providers by larger companies, and a number of mergers and acquisitions among these large players, particularly in the European part of Russia, have contributed to market consolidation. This enables Roskomnadzor to more easily secure the cooperation of service providers in carrying out its content-blocking procedures.

Telecommunications providers are licensed by Roskomnadzor.⁴² The costs of complying with data retention requirements under the 2016 Yarovaya Law (see C6) and the installation of DPI systems under the 2019 Sovereign Runet Law created a financial hardship for existing service providers and a deterrent to potential new entrants to the market. These costs are compounded by the government’s import substitution policy, which asks ICT companies to use hardware and software that is produced domestically.⁴³ The looming possibility of further state intervention in the ICT sector constitutes an additional risk to operators.

On the consumer side, state-owned Rostelecom commands 41 percent of the fixed broadband market by revenue. The private firms ER Telecom and MTS held 11 percent and 8 percent, respectively, as of 2019.⁴⁴ The remaining market share is split among smaller, local ISPs.

The vast majority of the mobile market is controlled by four service providers. According to the leading provider’s 2020 annual report, these companies—MTS (30 percent), MegaFon (28 percent), VEON (20 percent), and Tele2 (19 percent)—account for 97 percent of the market.⁴⁵

In March 2019, Rostelecom reported that it would soon assume a controlling stake in Tele2, having previously held a 45 percent stake.⁴⁶ Rostelecom’s board of directors approved the parameters of the transaction in November 2019, and it was completed in March 2020.⁴⁷

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to 0 / operate in a free, fair, and independent manner? 4

Roskomnadzor, which regulates the ICT and media sectors, often fails to act fairly or transparently. The agency is under the control of the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media, meaning it has little to no independence from the government.

Roskomnadzor is responsible for implementing the many laws regulating the internet in Russia, including those governing the blocking of online content (see B1) and the localization and retention of user data (see C6).⁴⁸

In March 2020, Andrey Lipov was appointed as the new head of the agency, replacing Aleksandr Zharov, who had held the post since 2012. Previously Lipov ran the Presidential Directorate for the Development of Information and Communication Technology and Communication Infrastructure, a key initiator of the Sovereign Runet Law.⁴⁹ A number of new deputy managers who previously worked at Lipov’s directorate were also transferred to Roskomnadzor. These appointments underscored the agency’s increasing importance and stature within the framework established by the Sovereign Runet Law.

Roskomnadzor’s powers have gradually expanded under this law. A body called the Center for Monitoring and Management of Public Communication Networks was formed within the agency as part of the legislation.⁵⁰ It is primarily responsible for the implementation of certain provisions, particularly the collection, processing, and storage of information on IXPs and other network infrastructure, the control of cross-border communication links, and the maintenance of “threat countering” equipment.⁵¹ At the same time, the Main Radio Frequency Center, a preexisting body subordinate to Roskomnadzor, has become responsible for the operation and maintenance of special equipment that ISPs must install in accordance with the law.⁵²

The Sovereign Runet Law also gave Roskomnadzor a new role as the government representative at Russia’s country code top-level domain (ccTLD) registrar, which administers the .ru and .РФ domains.⁵³

There are a number of ICT industry associations in Russia, including the Russian Association for Electronic Communications and the Association of Trading Companies and Manufacturers of Household Electrical Equipment and Computers, but they do not have a strong influence on policymaking.

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, 1 / particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 6

Russian authorities routinely block access to sensitive political and social content on the internet. Citing a range of justifications, they also restrict, or have attempted to restrict, access to many social media and communication platforms. According to unofficial data, more than 4.74 million internet resources were blocked in Russia at the end of 2019. Officially, only about 315,000 internet resources were listed as blocked.^{[54](#)} In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Roskomnadzor blocked more than a thousand allegedly false reports about the coronavirus (see C2).^{[55](#)}

In July 2021, after the coverage period ended, Roskomnadzor blocked 49 websites linked to Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), citing “extremist activity.” Earlier in the month, it also blocked Pixabay, the photo-sharing website, and the website of Navalny’s lawyer.^{[56](#)}

In March 2021, Roskomnadzor temporarily throttled Twitter after the company refused to block “banned content,” which the government said included content related to drug use and suicide (see A3).^{[57](#)} However, Twitter expressed concern that the content restrictions would limit free speech, and the throttling began just a day after the government sued Facebook, Google, and Twitter for refusing to delete content related to the opposition protests that began in January.^{[58](#)} If Twitter continued to resist the removal of banned content, it faced the possibility of a full block.^{[59](#)} However, in May 2021, Roskomnadzor reported that the company had deleted more than 90 percent of the disputed material, and that the blocking option was out of consideration. By the end of the coverage period the agency had lifted restrictions on traffic for fixed broadband networks, but it continued to throttle Twitter’s traffic on mobile networks.^{[60](#)}

During the coverage period, the government lifted restrictions on Telegram, the popular messaging app. In April 2018, a district court had ordered Telegram blocked for refusing to comply with the Yarovaya Law, which obliges the app to provide its encryption keys to the authorities (see A3 and C4). Telegram employed various methods to overcome the initial blocking, including the use of alternate cloud-hosting services. Roskomnadzor then targeted many of these services, including Alibaba Cloud, Amazon Web Services, Google Cloud, and Microsoft Azure, resulting in extensive collateral blocking. At one point, over 18 million IP addresses were blocked, affecting online stores, banks, airline ticketing systems, news sites, and other social media and communication platforms such as Viber and Odnoklassniki.^{[61](#)} In June 2020, the government abruptly reversed the ban on Telegram, citing its founder’s “readiness” to “counter terrorism and extremism.”^{[62](#)} The reasons for this reversal are opaque. Observers speculated that the government, realizing the practical impossibility of restricting access to the app, had been searching for an opportune moment to unblock it. The moment came after the leadership shakeup at Roskomnadzor—outgoing chief Aleksandr Zharov had publicly declared that Telegram would remain blocked until it complied with the Yarovaya Law, which, apparently, it still has not—and against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which authorities used Telegram to communicate with the public.^{[63](#)}

Other messaging apps remained blocked during the coverage period. Zello was blocked in 2017 by Roskomnadzor for refusing to hand over its encryption keys under the Yarovaya Law and for failing to register as an “information dissemination organizer” under the Law on Information, Information Technology, and Information Protection, which would grant authorities access to much of the service’s data (see C6).^{[64](#)} BlackBerry Messenger, Imo, Line, and VChat were blocked for similar reasons in 2017.^{[65](#)}

Websites featuring content that touches on a host of sensitive topics are also subject to blocking under the Law on Information, Information Technology, and Information Protection and associated legislation. Forbidden web content formally includes child sexual abuse images; content related to the illegal sale of alcohol; information about illegal drugs; information about illegal gambling; calls for suicide; calls for extremist activities, riots, or unsanctioned protests; violations of copyright; violations of data protection legislation; and information about skirting online censorship (see B3). In October 2019, the independent news outlet Fergana News was blocked for reporting on a suicide.^{[66](#)} Other categories of content are also censored on a less formal basis.

A number of different government bodies are empowered to order the blocking of web content (see B3). For example, the Ministry of Internal Affairs blocked almost 21,000 internet resources containing information about illegal drugs in 2019.^{[67](#)} The Prosecutor General’s Office blocked 81,000 websites that allegedly hosted extremist content that year.^{[68](#)} However, the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs (Rosmolodezh), which can order the blocking of content that encourages minors to break the law, has been relatively inactive in this regard, initiating only 10 blockings in total by March 2020.^{[69](#)} The courts also have wide latitude to block web content.

Virtual private networks (VPNs) have recently faced pressure from authorities (see C4). In a March 2019 letter, Roskomnadzor asked 10 VPN service providers to restrict users' access to websites that are blocked in Russia.⁷⁰ If they failed to comply, Roskomnadzor threatened to "limit access" to the VPN services themselves. In June 2019, Roskomnadzor announced that only one company, the Russia-based Kaspersky Secure Connection, complied with its request.⁷¹ However, by May 2021, Roskomnadzor had not made any attempt to block the other services.

Other circumvention and encryption tools have come under official scrutiny. In March 2019, it was revealed that the two largest Russian ISPs, MTS and Rostelecom, restricted traffic to several nodes of the anonymous web browser Tor, along with the simple mail transfer protocol (SMTP) servers of ProtonMail, an encrypted email service.⁷² The case set a precedent for restricting access to encrypted services, as the Federal Security Service (FSB) directly requested that telecommunications providers impose the block on ProtonMail, without asking Roskomnadzor to first attempt to register the service as an "information dissemination organizer." According to established procedure, ProtonMail's refusal to register would have allowed Roskomnadzor to initiate blocking procedures.⁷³ ProtonMail subsequently introduced special technical functions to prevent traffic restrictions in Russia.⁷⁴

Russia's national security authorities initiated a new blocking campaign against encrypted email services in early 2020, ostensibly in response to a growing number of false and anonymous email messages reporting the presence of explosive devices in public spaces. Officials targeted services including Tutanota,⁷⁵ SCRYPTmail,⁷⁶ StartMail,⁷⁷ and ProtonMail,⁷⁸ arguing that they were facilitating calls for extremist activities.

In February 2020, ProtonMail agreed to comply with the Law on Information, Information Technology, and Information Protection by deleting fraudulent accounts from its service. At the same time, the company, which is headquartered in Switzerland, declared that it would only provide data on users to Russian authorities on the basis of decisions by Swiss courts.⁷⁹ As of May 2021, most Russian ISPs still restricted access to ProtonMail. Also in February 2020, Mailbox.org, another encrypted email service threatened with blocking, agreed to register as an "information dissemination organizer."⁸⁰

A 2015 law allows the government to designate foreign organizations as "undesirable," which bars them from disseminating information (see B3). As of May 2021, a total of 34 foreign organizations—including Open Russia, an NGO founded by Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and the Open Society Foundations, created by philanthropist George Soros—were listed as undesirable; in some cases, their websites are blocked.⁸¹ From July 2019 to April 2020, the Prosecutor General's Office added seven foreign organizations to the list, including the US-based Atlantic Council, Free Russia Foundation, and Jamestown Foundation, as well as the Czech-based People in Need. The websites of the Free Russia Foundation and People in Need were blocked, while the websites of the Atlantic Council and the Jamestown Foundation remained accessible.

Rules requiring companies to store Russian users' personal data on Russian territory (see C6) are invoked by the government as a pretext for restricting access to certain websites. In 2016, LinkedIn became the first major international platform to be blocked in Russia for failing to comply with data localization requirements,⁸² and it remains the most notable blocking of its kind. Roskomnadzor's leadership has repeatedly asserted the need to apply similar measures to Twitter and Facebook. In April 2019, the two companies were fined a token 3,000 rubles (\$40) for their noncompliance.⁸³ Legislative amendments that were adopted in late November 2019 and signed by President Putin in December gradually increase such fines until they are large enough to affect companies' revenues without exposing their platforms to the threat of blocking.⁸⁴ In addition to repeated violations of data localization requirements, the stronger fines can be imposed for illegal activities by audiovisual services, search engines' noncompliance with Russia's content restriction system, and messaging apps' refusal to provide national security authorities with encryption keys at their request (see B3). In February 2020, a court fined Twitter and Facebook 4 million rubles (\$52,000) each after they failed to meet a deadline to inform Roskomnadzor that they had complied with the data localization rules.⁸⁵ In April 2021, Roskomnadzor sent another request to Google, Twitter, and Facebook, demanding they comply with the data localization policies. If they continued to refuse, they could face another fine of up to 18 million rubles (\$236,000).⁸⁶

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 1 / 4

During the coverage period, Roskomnadzor frequently mandated the removal of online content or pressured users and social media companies to delete content, including through the implementation of new laws that further constrain free expression in the digital environment.

In May 2021, Roskomnadzor fined Facebook 26 million rubles (\$341,000) and Google 6 million rubles (\$79,000) for failing to remove "prohibited content."⁸⁷ The agency also threatened to throttle Google if it did not remove such content within 24 hours, after the telecommunications regulator sent the company more than 26,000 notices concerning "illegal information."⁸⁸ After the coverage period, in July 2021, Roskomnadzor informed Google, YouTube's parent company, that it planned to block YouTube channels belonging to associates of Navalny, including political activist Leonid Volkov and former deputy energy minister Vladimir Milov. YouTube notified the owners of these accounts that they had to take down "prohibited content," or

their accounts would be removed.⁸⁹ In the same month, Roskomnadzor sent a letter to Twitter ordering the company to block the account of Lyubov Sobol, an opposition politician.⁹⁰ Google has also come under pressure in the past. In December 2018, Roskomnadzor fined Google 500,000 rubles (\$6,600) for the company's refusal to connect to the regulator's registry of banned websites in order to filter search results (see B3).⁹¹ Two days after the Google fine, the Russian search engine Yandex began filtering search results based on Roskomnadzor's list.⁹² Google reportedly began to filter search results using the registry in February 2019, but in July of that year the company was again fined for failing to do so.⁹³

In March 2021, a magistrate in Saint Petersburg fined social media platform VKontakte, which is owned by Mail.ru, 1.5 million rubles (\$19,700) after it declined Roskomnadzor's order to take down videos originally posted in January that had allegedly incited the ensuing antigovernment protests. VKontakte challenged the decision. Similarly, the social media platform Odnoklassniki was fined 4 million rubles (\$52,000) after it refused to delete content related to the protests.⁹⁴ In the same month, Roskomnadzor sued Facebook, Twitter, and Google for refusing to delete protest-related content (see B1).⁹⁵

New articles punishing fake news and defamation of the authorities were added to Russia's code of administrative offenses in 2019 (see C2), and these have been actively employed to intimidate users and outlets into taking down content. In April 2020, Roskomnadzor reported that after the introduction of the article on fake news in March 2019, the agency had removed 233 items through the end of 2019 and 172 items since the beginning of 2020.⁹⁶ Roskomnadzor actively began to block allegedly false news about COVID-19; in some cases the agency targeted genuine misinformation, but in others it blocked independent reporting about the epidemiological situation in the country.⁹⁷ In late March 2020, the parliament adopted a law to increase fines for fake news about COVID-19 and other circumstances that posed a danger to the health and safety of citizens (see C2). Through June 4, 2020, the Prosecutor General's Office had requested that Roskomnadzor block 120 allegedly fake news items related to COVID-19.⁹⁸

During the reporting period, the right to be forgotten was routinely applied to require search engines to delete links to websites that contained personal information about an individual if it was no longer considered relevant. Russian law does not provide specific criteria governing the right's application. In the spring of 2019, the SOVA Center, a Moscow-based think tank, challenged the right to be forgotten in the Constitutional Court. The court rejected the center's complaint and refused to establish clear guidelines for deleting and deindexing content under the right to be forgotten.⁹⁹

According to a transparency report from Google covering the second half of 2020, the number of content removal requests issued by Russian government agencies increased to 18,710. Google, which came under significant pressure from Roskomnadzor during the coverage period, complied with 75.8 percent of these requests.¹⁰⁰

According to Facebook's transparency report for the same period, the company restricted access to 1,868 items for allegedly violating local laws related to extremism, the sale and use of regulated goods, self-harm, suicide promotion, and COVID-19-related misinformation. Facebook did not report either the total number of content removal requests it received from the Russian government or the percentage of requests it complied with.¹⁰¹

According to Twitter's transparency report for the second half of 2020, Russian authorities submitted 6,351 content removal requests, including court orders. Twitter complied with 25 percent of these requests.¹⁰²

According to Reddit's transparency report for 2020, the company received 89 requests to remove content from the Russian government and complied with 37 of them.¹⁰³

Russian social media platforms generally do not disclose the number of content removal requests they receive from the government, with the exceptions of Yandex and the blogging platform Habr. In March 2021, Yandex published its first transparency report, which highlights requests for user data and requests to delist content under the right to be forgotten law. In the second half of 2020, Yandex complied with 47 percent of the 4,526 requests it received under the right to be forgotten law, and the company complied with 84 percent of them. In 2020, VKontakte debuted an algorithm that automatically removes content included in the federal list of extremist materials from users' personal correspondence.

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the 0 / stated aims, or an independent appeals process? **4**

The government in general and Roskomnadzor in particular justify website blocking and filtering under a range of laws and regulations. The legal framework generally does not provide clear criteria for evaluating the legality of content, and authorities do not always offer a detailed explanation for blocking decisions. Website owners have the right to appeal decisions in court, but they are often given a short time to do so. Furthermore, the judiciary's lack of independence limits the possibilities for redress through the appeals process.

Website owners can, in theory, also appeal restrictions at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), since Russia is a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights. However, a 2015 law gives the Russian government the right to ignore ECtHR rulings,¹⁰⁴ meaning the court offers only a limited avenue of appeal. The following were among the relevant ECtHR cases during the coverage period:

- In November 2020, the ECtHR ordered Russian authorities to unblock opposition media sites Grani.ru, Kasparov.ru, and *Yezhednevny Zhurnal*. Roskomnadzor has blocked these websites since 2014 at the request of the Prosecutor General's Office. The court refused the Russian government's appeal.[105](#)
- In October 2020, the ECtHR combined 19 complaints from 17 Russian nationals who were charged with disrespecting state authorities. The plaintiffs included journalist Irina Slavina, who committed suicide that month (see C7). The court gave the parties until January 18 to discuss the case amicably, and then the Russian government had 12 weeks to object.[106](#)

The government grants the authority to block various categories of online content to several state bodies, including Roskomnadzor, the Prosecutor General's Office, the Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing (Rospotrebnadzor), the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media, the Federal Service for Alcohol Market Regulation, the Federal Tax Service, and Rosmolodezh.[107](#) In August 2019, Roskomnadzor published a draft order on behalf of several agencies that established criteria for determining whether content is subject to extrajudicial blocking, superseding a set of criteria laid out in 2017. The order took effect in September 2019. It added criteria for use by Rosmolodezh, which received the power to block internet resources in March 2019 and is responsible for initiating restrictions on content that encourages minors to commit illegal activities.[108](#) It and other agencies can block content that touches on political and social issues enumerated in the Law on Information, Information Technology, and Information Protection, plus related legislation, including legislation prohibiting fake news and content that defames the authorities (see C2). Any other online content may be blocked by a court order if it is found to violate the law. Roskomnadzor typically handles blocking orders from other agencies in addition to the judiciary. For orders to block content on a website, Roskomnadzor instructs the hosting provider to issue a takedown notice to the website owner. Most website owners quickly delete the content in question rather than risk the blocking of their entire site. If the content is not removed, it is included on a list of banned material, and ISPs must block it. If an order seeks to block an entire website, Roskomnadzor simply includes that website on its list.

ISPs are obliged to regularly consult the list of banned websites, which is updated by Roskomnadzor. The means by which ISPs should restrict access to websites is not specified, so they could target IP addresses, domain names, or URLs. Often, the authorities do not clearly indicate the specific pages that they want blocked on a given website. The lack of precise government guidelines sometimes leads ISPs to restrict access to the broadest possible range of websites to avoid fines and threats to their operating licenses. Search engines and VPNs must also connect to Roskomnadzor's list and filter their services accordingly; however, foreign companies do not comply with this mandate.

Restrictions on online content are generally implemented opaquely, and official information does not provide a complete picture of internet censorship in Russia. According to the NGO RosKomSvoboda, which monitors online censorship, as of May 2020 approximately 4.8 million internet resources were blocked in Russia without reference to the decisions of either courts or state bodies, representing about 91 percent of the total blocks in place. The remaining 9 percent—around 463,000 internet resources—were blocked in relation to decisions by the courts or state bodies.[109](#) The extent to which Roskomnadzor effectively blocks websites is unclear, and some reports indicate that over half of the websites proscribed by the regulator continue to operate.[110](#)

Roskomnadzor has additional powers to issue warnings to organizations that are officially designated as mass media and are deemed to abuse their position.[111](#) Article 4 of the Law on Mass Media indicates that such abuse can include, among other things, incitement to terrorism, extremism, propaganda of violence and cruelty, information about illegal drugs, and obscene language. If a media outlet receives two warnings within a year, Roskomnadzor has the right to apply for a court order to shut it down.

During the coverage period, the government continued to expand the legal framework that undergirds internet censorship in Russia. In particular it sought to tighten control over online information ahead of the parliamentary elections set to take place in September 2021.

Since December 2020, President Putin has signed a significant number of laws that pressure social media platforms to remove content at the government's behest:[112](#)

- In December 2020, Putin signed the law prescribing fines for failure to remove content banned by Roskomnadzor. The fines for the first case of violation range from 800,000 to 8 million rubles (\$10,000–\$100,000). Ultimately, the fines for such violations can reach a fifth of the company's income in Russia for the calendar year preceding the year in which the violation was observed.[113](#)
- In February 2021, a law regulating the content moderation policies of online platforms came into effect. It compels social media companies to coordinate their content moderation efforts with Roskomnadzor, which will develop a special e-service for that purpose. When a user issues a complaint about “prohibited content,” which includes “advertisements for the remote sale of alcohol and online casinos; content that offends human dignity and public morality; and content that expresses a clear disrespect for society, the state, official state symbols of the Russian Federation, the Constitution of the Russian Federation, or state authorities,” the company must block it pending a review from Roskomnadzor. The agency will then notify the user who posted the content that it is being reviewed.[114](#)

- In December 2020, Putin signed a law introducing sanctions for alleged censorship of Russian media outlets by foreign online platforms. According to this law, content removal decisions concerning Russian media outlets could “violate rights of Russian citizens.” The general sanctions for such violations are fines ranging from 600,000 to 3 million rubles (\$7,900 to \$39,000) for each particular content removal action. The law specifying these fines was adopted in February 2021.¹¹⁵ This regulation also empowers Roskomnadzor to “restrict access to online resource fully or partially using the technical means for countering threats (i.e., DPI-equipment).” It is not yet clear whether this provision is applicable in practice or intended as a last-resort measure.
- In March 2021, Putin signed a law aimed at counteracting electoral violations that empowers the Central Electoral Commission and the regional electoral commissions to send content removal requests to Roskomnadzor and increases fines for illegal electoral campaigning to as much as 500,000 rubles (\$6,600). The most obvious target of these amendments is the Smart Vote website launched by Navalny’s organization.¹¹⁶
- In June 2021, after the coverage period, the State Duma passed the Law on Blocking Defamatory Information, which allows the Prosecutor General’s Office to extrajudicially block “inaccurate information that discredits the honor and dignity of a citizen or undermines his reputation and is associated with the accusation of this person of committing a crime.”¹¹⁷ The law, which was originally introduced in February 2021, gives the Prosecutor General’s Office 10 days to make a decision on whether to block the content in question.
- In July 2021, after the coverage period, Putin signed a law obliging foreign tech companies with more than 500,000 Russian users to open representative offices in Russia and create special accounts in Roskomnadzor’s information systems to establish direct communications with authorities.¹¹⁸ Lawmakers had introduced the legislation to the lower house in May 2021. The physical representation requirement was set to take effect in January 2022. Foreign companies may face a number of penalties for noncompliance, ranging from a ban on search results and restrictions on accepting payments from Russian residents to complete blocking.¹¹⁹

One of the sponsors of the law on physical representation, Aleksandr Khinshtein, named several online services as its primary targets. They included social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), video services (YouTube, Twitch), messaging platforms (WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber), e-commerce services, hosting providers, and even Wikipedia.org.¹²⁰ Since July 2020, government officials had been discussing potential policies to force global tech companies, such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter, to appoint local representatives. The experts and lawmakers involved in these discussions frequently referred to Turkey’s recent experience with social media regulation.¹²¹

In December 2019, Putin enacted a law that set higher fines for noncompliance with a variety of regulations, including data localization requirements, requirements for messaging apps to hand over encryption keys, requirements for search engines to connect to Roskomnadzor’s proscribed list, and requirements for “information dissemination organizers” to retain user data and provide them to the authorities.¹²² The law also raised the financial penalties for disseminating calls for extremist or terrorist activities, along with other categories of prohibited information.

Separately the same month, Putin signed a law that extended the state’s regulation of media outlets designed as “foreign agents” (see B5) to individuals who “spread information to an unrestricted number of persons, namely on the internet, and receive funding from abroad.”¹²³ The law empowers the government to block so-called foreign agents’ websites, potentially including their social media accounts.

Providers of public internet connections, including libraries, cafés, and educational institutions, are responsible for ensuring that content available to their users is filtered in compliance with Article 6.17 of the code of administrative offenses, which is meant to protect children from harmful content.¹²⁴

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship? 2 / 4

Laws prohibiting extremist materials and other content in Russia have contributed to self-censorship online, particularly with regard to sensitive political, economic, and social topics such as poor governance, corruption, the conflict in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, human rights violations, religion, and the LGBT+ community. The vague wording of laws that touch on online expression, the arbitrary manner in which they are enforced, and the general ineffectiveness of judicial remedies make ordinary users more reticent to express themselves online.¹²⁵ The government’s crackdown on online news media, as well as social media, has intensified self-censorship among journalists in particular. IREX’s 2019 Media Sustainability Index observes that “self-censorship has become an inextricable part of the journalism practice.”¹²⁶ Electronic surveillance by the FSB, the police, and other state actors also intimidates many journalists and ordinary users into self-censorship (see C5).¹²⁷

The authorities have used various drug-related charges as pretexts to censor the news media, and several outlets have been forced to self-censor on this issue.¹²⁸ In January 2020, the government submitted a bill to the lower house of parliament that would impose fines of up to 1.5 million rubles (\$19,700) for promoting drugs and psychotropic substances on the internet.¹²⁹ In December 2020 this law was adopted and signed by the president.¹³⁰

In February 2020 a parliamentary committee prepared amendments to Article 230 of the criminal code (“inducement to use of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances, or their analogues”) that would punish “narcotic drug propaganda” with a minimum of 12 years in prison.¹³¹ A revised version of the bill was signed into law in February 2021, with the maximum prison term set at 10 years.¹³²

Despite the challenging environment, many journalists and ordinary users continue to test the limits of the authorities’ tolerance, particularly on Telegram channels.

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other 0 / powerful actors to advance a particular political interest? 4

Government manipulation distorts the online information landscape. Authorities use paid commentators, or trolls, and automated “bot” accounts to influence online content. This issue came to international prominence following revelations that Russian trolls and bots had been deployed in a bid to influence the 2016 US presidential election by manipulating online discussions and disseminating disinformation through social media.¹³³ Well before that controversy, however, media and other investigations had revealed that a regime-backed “troll factory,” the Internet Research Agency in Saint Petersburg, used a network of trolls to undermine both domestic and international targets.

Domestically, Russian trolls and bots have been observed commenting on news sites and on social media, usually to defend President Putin and smear his critics, including journalists (see C7). For example, ahead of the contested 2019 regional elections in Moscow, the city’s government deployed troll factories to boost progovernment candidates and mock the opposition, while also paying for advertisements and sponsored posts on popular social media pages and websites.¹³⁴ Ahead of a June 2020 national referendum on constitutional amendments that reset Putin’s term limits, a number of social media influencers reported that the government offered them lavish sums to surreptitiously promote the president’s cause.¹³⁵ In September 2020, Facebook removed a Russian troll network associated with the ruling United Russia party.¹³⁶ In February 2021, the company removed 530 Instagram accounts that originated primarily in Russia and targeted domestic audiences during the recent protests in support of Navalny. These fake accounts used the same hashtags and geolocations as Navalny’s supporters, as well as locations where protests took place.¹³⁷

Outside Russia, Kremlin-linked trolls and bots have been observed sowing disinformation in dozens of countries, including the United States, but mostly in neighboring countries. In August and December 2020, and again in May 2021, Facebook removed networks of Russian-linked Facebook and Instagram accounts for engaging in “coordinated inauthentic behavior” that primarily focused on the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. Some of the networks were linked to the Internet Research Agency.¹³⁸ In June and October 2020, and again in February 2021, Twitter removed inauthentic accounts linked to fake news agencies and Russian state actors. Those networks targeted both domestic audiences and users in EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries.¹³⁹

In April 2021, the US Department of Justice indicted SecondEye Solutions, a company based in Pakistan, for selling fake identification documents to a number of clients, including Russia’s Internet Research Agency. With the falsified documents, the Russian entity and other actors who purchased them were able to create accounts on social media and digital currency platforms.¹⁴⁰

On the Russian internet, foreign and independent outlets must contend with a powerful array of state-run and state-aligned media outlets that set the domestic news agenda. According to 2019 survey data from the Levada Center, just 35 percent of Russians consume news from independent outlets.¹⁴¹ Television, rather than the internet, remains the primary source of information,¹⁴² though trust in the media in general is low.¹⁴³ The government has sought to carefully control the domestic narrative around COVID-19 through state-run and state-aligned media. Beyond demanding the removal of information that reflects unfavorably on the government’s response to the pandemic (see B2),¹⁴⁴ officials have reportedly barred medical workers from giving interviews to the press and ordered health care administrators to seek approval before speaking publicly.¹⁴⁵

Authorities increasingly use the 2012 law on “foreign agents” to smear organizations known to be critical of the government (see B6). The law, which was strongly opposed by Russian and international human rights organizations,¹⁴⁶ requires NGOs that receive some foreign funding and engage in vaguely defined “political activities” in Russia to register as “foreign agents.” Under 2017 amendments to the Law on Mass Media,¹⁴⁷ the government can designate media outlets receiving foreign funding as “foreign agents,” requiring them to reveal detailed financial information or face fines (see B6).¹⁴⁸ Outlets now considered foreign agents include Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and the local services of RFE/RL.¹⁴⁹ These amendments were adopted in response to the United States compelling the Russian state-run television network RT to register there as a foreign agent. The Russian law was expanded at the end of 2019 to apply to individuals who disseminate information online and receive foreign funding (see B3).

In December 2020, Putin signed a law that makes it possible to assign the status of “foreign agent” to media outlets, individuals, and organizations that are not registered as legal entities, if they are engaging in “political activities.” Moreover, the law obliges media outlets to identify foreign agents as such when they are mentioned in any publication.¹⁵⁰

The authorities use the 2019 law on fake news to smear bloggers and other independent news sources (see B2 and C2). Roskomnadzor has piloted a public list of information resources that “repeatedly disseminate false information” on its website, ostensibly so that media outlets know not to cite them.¹⁵¹ However, it compiled the list in a haphazard manner, initially including the widely respected business daily *RBC*.¹⁵²

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish 1 / content online? 3

There are a number of economic and regulatory constraints that limit users’ ability to publish content online. Onerous regulations and restrictive laws affecting online news media have pushed some outlets to downsize, change owners, or exit the market altogether. Amendments to the Law on Mass Media that came into force in 2016 prohibit foreign citizens and organizations from owning more than a 20 percent stake in a Russian media outlet. As a result, foreign media holdings have left Russia and, in some cases, transferred ownership to Russian entities.¹⁵³ According to Roskomnadzor, 821 media outlets changed their shareholder structure shortly after the amendments entered into force.¹⁵⁴

The foreign agents law is also employed to limit users’ ability to publish content online. For example, in April 2021 the government labelled Meduza, one of Russia’s largest independent media outlets, as a “foreign agent,” threatening its ability to maintain funding.¹⁵⁵ In May 2021, the Ministry of Justice also recognized recently established media outlet VTimes as a foreign agent.¹⁵⁶ Notably, VTimes was created in July 2020 by journalists who had left *Vedomosti*—a leading Russian business newspaper—after its deputy chief editors resigned in mid-2020 over the paper’s acquisition by new pro-Kremlin owners.

Foreign agent status is primarily a form of economic pressure on media outlets, since it deters their private sponsors from providing financial support. The designation also entails significant reporting requirements, including the need to use a special disclaimer on all materials. Even ordinary users who cite these materials without using the disclaimer can be fined.

In December 2020, the Ministry of Justice added five people to the list of “media outlets–foreign agents,” including human rights activist Lev Ponomarev and RFE/RL journalists, marking the first time that individuals were included on the lists. Some of the affected journalists attempted to challenge the decisions. In January and February 2021, RFE/RL and its Russian affiliates that were recognized as foreign agents were fined 1.1 million rubles (\$14,400) and 2.2 million rubles (\$28,900), respectively, because their websites did not label their content according to the law.¹⁵⁷ In March 2021, courts in Moscow and Pskov suspended the foreign agent status of journalists Sergey Markelov and Lyudmila Savitskaya, who worked at 7x7, a media outlet in northwestern Russia.¹⁵⁸

Users convicted of extremism or other offenses involving mass media or the internet are legally barred from serving as editors in chief at publications.¹⁵⁹

The government provides state-run media with several billion rubles in subsidies each year, further distorting the digital media market and making it more difficult for independent outlets to compete.¹⁶⁰

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability? 2 / 4

Russia’s online information landscape is relatively diverse, although the range of news and opinion available to ordinary users has been curtailed by the government. As the space for independent print, radio, and broadcast media shrinks, online publications and social media have become increasingly important platforms for critical expression and civic mobilization. Several online resources, including Google, Yandex, VKontakte, YouTube, and Mail.ru, are more popular than the largest television channels among younger urban audiences.¹⁶¹

According to a survey published by the Public Opinion Foundation in September 2019, while television remains the main source of information for Russians, a growing share (44 percent) get their news from online sources. Confidence in information from the internet is increasing, even as confidence in information from television is decreasing.¹⁶² Similar results were reported in 2020 by the Levada Center, although its research found that trust in television had stabilized.¹⁶³

Russian users can still access critical content online, but independent outlets increasingly publish from abroad due to the repressive environment at home. Many independent online media outlets within Russia have been forced to shut down in recent years due to government pressure. Human rights organizations have noted the intensification of government pressure, with Roskomnadzor and other state agencies penalizing outlets that take an independent editorial line (see C3).¹⁶⁴ In March 2020, a progovernment editor in chief was installed at the renowned business daily *Vedomosti*, allegedly at the behest of the Kremlin.¹⁶⁵ The new editor promptly barred the outlet’s reports from referencing sources deemed unfriendly to the government,¹⁶⁶ and deleted an op-ed criticizing a state-backed oil and gas company.¹⁶⁷

Although VPN usage remains low overall, some people use such services to circumvent censorship. More than 20 percent of Russians between the ages of 18 and 24 used VPNs in 2018.¹⁶⁸ During the coverage period, Russians represented the second-largest share of Tor relay users and the largest share of bridge users.¹⁶⁹ Due to Roskomnadzor’s threats against VPNs (see B1), Avast discontinued its VPN service for Russian users in June 2019.¹⁷⁰

In May 2021, Roskomnadzor asked various agencies and companies to inform the Center for Monitoring and Management of Public Communication Networks about the use of VyprVPN and Opera VPN. Experts believe the requests could be a precursor to blocking these services.¹⁷¹ Shortly after the initial request, the agency’s leader, Andrey Lipov, stated that access to noncompliant VPN services in Russia should be restricted.¹⁷² However, at the end of the coverage period there were no clear signs of blocking, and the services remained available to Russian users.

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly 3 / on political and social issues? 6

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 due to the punitive measures taken by the Russian government against those who organized online, including prominent opposition figures and students.

Although the internet remains the most versatile and effective platform for activism in Russia, facilitating efforts to confront propaganda, hold officials to account, and organize protests, this function has come under increasing pressure from the authorities. A 2019 report from the OVD-Info human rights project highlighted how the government restricts freedom of assembly online. Those calling for demonstrations on the internet may face criminal or administrative penalties, and the government sometimes restricts connectivity before and during demonstrations, as in Ingushetia in 2018 and 2019. Other tactics the government employs to constrain mobilization include cyberattacks against activists, monitoring activists’ social media profiles, placing informers in public or private chat groups that are used to organize demonstrations, harassing journalists who cover protests, and otherwise preventing journalists from gathering information about protests and protesters.¹⁷³

Throughout the coverage period, the government took a number of steps that made it more difficult for individuals to mobilize, both online and offline. In March 2021, data were leaked from Free.navalny.com, a site that Navalny’s supporters had used to estimate the number of individuals at protests. In April 2021, unknown individuals sent intimidating emails to people who had registered on the site (see C8). Many of the individuals whose data were leaked also lost their jobs.¹⁷⁴

Also in April 2021, the Moscow prosecutor’s office suspended the activities of the Navalny movement’s headquarters and regional offices. Shortly afterward, Navalny’s associates stated that they would curtail their organizations’ activities in Russia in order to avoid criminal prosecution of employees and volunteers.¹⁷⁵ In late May, the parliament adopted a law banning persons associated with a court-designated extremist organization from being nominated for elections at all levels. This law effectively prevented any FBK members or volunteers from participating in the 2021 parliamentary and regional elections.¹⁷⁶ In June 2021, after the coverage period, the Moscow City Court ruled that the FBK and Navalny’s headquarters qualified as extremist organizations.

Weeks after the rallies in support of Navalny in early 2021, several journalists were detained on charges of participating in illegal protests—including Baza editor in chief Nikita Mogutin and Dozhd television correspondent Aleksey Korostelev.¹⁷⁷

Separately, police raided the office of the student online media outlet DOXA in April 2021. Members of the editorial board were accused of involving minors in illegal protests and were banned from using the internet and leaving their homes for two months (see C3). The criminal case had been initiated in late January. Leonid Volkov, a close Navalny associate, was accused in absentia in the same case.¹⁷⁸ A law introducing stiff fines and potential jail time for individuals or organizations that encourage minors to participate in unsanctioned protests had been adopted in December 2018 (see C2).¹⁷⁹ Critics at the time argued that it was aimed primarily at Navalny, whose rallies are popular with young people. The first prosecution under this law targeted a Navalny supporter who shared information about a protest on VKontakte. He was found guilty in March 2019 and fined 30,000 rubles (\$390).¹⁸⁰ The authorities have since punished other Russians for the publication of posts urging people to participate in unauthorized rallies.

In the lead-up to the referendum on constitutional changes that would reset President Putin’s term limits, originally scheduled for April 2020 but postponed until a weeklong period in June and July, Roskomnadzor blocked a website, Net2020.ru, that was set up by Navalny’s organization to coordinate his campaign against the amendments.¹⁸¹ In June and July 2020, the Safe Internet League,¹⁸² a government-organized nongovernmental organization (GONGO), reportedly identified nearly 8,500 items of “fake news” related to the conduct of the referendum, such as a report from Navalny’s campaign that election observers were being intimidated.¹⁸³ The referendum was deeply flawed, according to observers, although some of the reports of fraud were indeed false.¹⁸⁴ The Safe Internet League flagged these items for deletion orders by the Prosecutor General’s Office and Roskomnadzor.¹⁸⁵

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, would-be protesters have faced potential fines, and even imprisonment, for violating quarantine protocols.¹⁸⁶ The police in practice have detained even people engaged in solitary pickets (which formally can be held without coordination with law enforcement authorities), citing public health rules. A large wave of detentions of protesters took place from late January to early February 2021.

C Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence? 1 / 6

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression,¹⁸⁷ this right is subject to numerous legislative restrictions and is routinely violated. Censorship is nominally prohibited by the constitution. There are no laws that specifically protect online expression. Online journalists do not possess the same rights as traditional journalists, such as receiving accreditation at official events, unless they register their websites as mass media outlets. However, mass media outlets are subject to additional obligations, such as avoiding the use of offensive language. Both outlets and individual journalists can be designated as foreign agents if they directly or indirectly receive funding from abroad (see B5).¹⁸⁸

Russia’s judiciary is not independent. The courts tend to side with the government, refusing to apply provisions of the constitution and international treaties that protect the rights of citizens. In 2019, the courts acquitted defendants in fewer than 1 percent of criminal cases.¹⁸⁹

Russia remains a member of the Council of Europe and a party to the European Convention on Human Rights, which enshrines the right to free expression. However, a number of restrictive laws, coupled with repressive law enforcement and judicial systems, have eroded freedom of expression in practice (see C2).

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards? 1 / 4

Users in Russia can face civil and criminal penalties under a range of laws, the majority of which are contained in the criminal code and the code of administrative offenses. The criminal code imposes penalties, usually in the form of fines, for defamation (Article 128.1); slandering judges, public prosecutors, or other members of the justice system (Article 298.1); and insulting representatives of the authorities (Article 319).¹⁹⁰ Article 6.21 of the administrative code prescribes fines for “advocacy of nontraditional sexual relations among minors,”¹⁹¹ while Article 148 of the criminal code bans insulting religious feelings, which is punishable by fine or imprisonment.¹⁹² Articles 20.3 and 20.29 of the administrative code prescribe fines for displaying extremist symbols (such as Nazi symbols) and distributing extremist materials.¹⁹³ and Article 354.1 of the criminal code bans spreading false information about the Soviet Union’s actions in World War II.¹⁹⁴ In March 2020, Article 20.3 of the administrative code was amended to allow extremist symbols to be displayed without penalty for nonpropagandistic purposes.¹⁹⁵

Articles 280 and 280.1 of the criminal code punish online calls for extremism and separatism with up to five years in prison.¹⁹⁶ Article 20.3.1 of the administrative code assigns fines or up to 15 days in jail for those found guilty inciting hatred online,¹⁹⁷ and repeat offenders can face longer prison terms under Article 282 of the criminal code.¹⁹⁸ If a criminal case is opened against an individual for “extremist” activities, that person could be included on a list maintained by the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (RosFinMonitoring).¹⁹⁹ Those on the list are banned from certain professions, and their bank accounts can be frozen, even if they are not convicted.

The SOVA Center provides detailed statistics on the application of antiextremist legislation in Russia. According to its 2020 report, the number of sentences citing antiextremist articles of the criminal and administrative codes has risen after a decline in 2019.²⁰⁰ In particular:

- The courts issued two sentences under Article 280 of the criminal code on incitement to extremism during 2020, which is the same number as in 2019. There were no sentences issued in 2020 under Article 282.1 of the criminal code, on the organization of an extremist community.
- However, under Article 282.2 of the criminal code, regarding the activities of extremist organizations, the courts issued at least 31 inappropriate sentences against 57 people, compared with 12 sentences against 40 people in 2019. Notably, 25 sentences under this article targeted Jehovah’s Witnesses.
- For public display of Nazi or other prohibited symbols, which is covered under Article 20.3 of the administrative code, the courts passed at least 44 sentences, compared with 31 in 2019.

In March 2021, the parliament adopted amendments to the administrative and criminal codes that introduced penalties for the rehabilitation of Nazi ideology and defamation of World War II veterans via the internet. The maximum punishments for Russian users are a fine of 5 million rubles (\$66,000) or five years in prison. The provisions related to the defamation of war veterans were added just ahead of the second reading of the bill, and shortly after Navalny was fined for defaming a World War II veteran under the previous version of the law, which prohibited online speech denigrating the honor and dignity of a person.²⁰¹

In August 2020, the Supreme Court recognized the Russian criminal subculture known as AUE (“Prisoner’s Codex Is Unified”) as an extremist organization, approving a request from the Prosecutor General’s Office. Since then, the activities of creators and administrators of AUE-related online communities have fallen under Article 282.1 of the criminal code (“organization of an extremist community”), with a maximum penalty of 12 years in prison. The AUE online communities have millions of followers.

A pair of new laws signed in March 2019 introduced harsh penalties for online speech. One penalizes the dissemination of fake news online under Article 13.15 of the administrative code (see B2).²⁰² Individuals or organizations found to have shared fake news face fines of up to 1.5 million rubles (\$19,700), and if they do not remove the offending content, their websites can be blocked. The second law penalizes the spread of information that “exhibits blatant disrespect for the society, government, official government symbols, constitution or governmental bodies of Russia”—commonly referred to as “defamation of power”—under Article 20.1 of the administrative code with fines or, for repeat offenders, 15 days of jail time.²⁰³ Defamatory content on the internet must be removed within 24 hours of receipt of a notice from Roskomnadzor. Since their enactment, these laws have been actively enforced by the authorities.

In early December 2019, the code of administrative offenses was updated with significant increases in the fines for violation of various content distribution rules (see B3).

In April 2020, Putin signed a law that set increased penalties for spreading fake news related to the coronavirus.²⁰⁴ Following this legislative change, individuals can be fined up to 700,000 rubles (\$9,200), or up to 2 million rubles (\$26,000) if the false information led to anyone’s death, under Articles 207.1–2 of the criminal code, while media outlets and other legal entities can be fined up to 5 million rubles (\$66,000) under Article 13.15 of the code of administrative offenses.²⁰⁵ Individuals who share coronavirus-related fake news can also be imprisoned for up to three years, or five years if the false information led to anyone’s death.²⁰⁶ Later that month, the Supreme Court published clarifications on this law, stating that it could be applied only if two conditions are met: first, the perpetrators knew about the false nature of the information, and second, they knowingly presented it as if it were reliable information.²⁰⁷ Even with these clarifications, the criteria for defining fake news remained vague, leaving the law open to abuse by law enforcement authorities. There were no reported cases of penal custody under this law during the coverage period.

The COVID-19 pandemic spurred Russian authorities to actively enforce legislation meant to counter “fake news.” The courts fined media outlets, their editors in chief, and ordinary users for publications on social media (see C3). In addition, Roskomnadzor ordered the blocking of over 1,000 websites (see B1).

The 2016 Yarovaya Law altered nearly a dozen extant laws with significant ramifications for internet freedom.²⁰⁸ Among these changes were amendments to Article 205.2 of the criminal code, which imposed prison terms of up to seven years for calling for or justifying terrorism online.²⁰⁹ These harsh penalties, along with broad wording in the amendments, are vulnerable to abuse aimed at criminalizing legitimate, nonviolent expression online.

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under 1 / international human rights standards? 6

Criminal and administrative charges are widely used to stifle critical discussion online. Numerous individuals have been charged for their posts or reposts on social media. Many arrests for online activities during the coverage period fell under Articles 205.2, 280, 280.1, and 282 of the criminal code (see C2).

In late January and February 2021, mass demonstrations were held in various Russian cities to protest the arrest of Aleksey Navalny. The authorities detained thousands of participants for alleged offenses that included their online activities. Law enforcement agencies used facial-recognition systems and other methods of surveillance to trace and detain some protesters (see C5).²¹⁰

The top officials in Navalny’s FBK, including lawyer Lyubov Sobol and press secretary Kira Yarmysh, were detained or fined for posting calls to participate in mass protests.²¹¹

In April 2021, a Moscow court convicted Pavel Zelensky, a cameraman who worked for the FBK, of inciting extremism, sentencing him to two years in a penal colony for social media posts that criticized the Russian government. He posted the comments after journalist Irina Slavina self-immolated in October 2020 (see C7).²¹²

The authorities also opened a criminal case on the involvement of minors in the protests, targeting Leonid Volkov, an ally of Navalny and the founder of the Society for the Protection of the Internet. Soon after the case was opened, Volkov was put on a wanted list and charged in absentia.²¹³

In addition to targeting individuals linked to Navalny and the protests, the government fined and sentenced journalists, public officials, students, and members of AUE communities for their online activities during the coverage period:

- In August 2020, the FSB arrested video blogger Andrey Pyzh, charging him with illegally obtaining and distributing state secrets. Pyzh is the owner of the popular YouTube channel Urbanturizm, where

he posts videos about abandoned industrial and other sites. The circumstances of the case were classified, but based on the comments of lawyers, the prosecution may have been related to the international transfer of a flash drive that contained information about classified government transport facilities.[214](#)

- in September 2020, a Yekaterinburg court delivered the first verdict penalizing the creation of an AUE-related community on VKontakte (see C2). Two defendants received prison sentences of seven years and three and a half years, respectively, while their accomplice received four years’ probation.[215](#)
- In October 2020, a Nizhny Novgorod court fined a local resident 400,000 rubles (\$5,200), accusing him of justifying terrorism because he commented on a news article about the illegal construction of a hotel near residential buildings and proposed to blow up the fence around the construction site.[216](#)
- In December 2020, the Tverskoy Court in Moscow sentenced the municipal deputy Yuliya Galyamina to two years of probation under Article 212.1 of the criminal code. According to the investigation, Galyamina posted calls on social networks to participate in protests against the July 2020 constitutional amendments. The Prosecutor General’s Office had initially requested a three-year prison sentence.[217](#)
- In January 2021, the Investigative Committee charged artist Yuliya Tsvetkova with distribution of pornography due to her publication of pictures on a public VKontakte page. At the end of March, the trial was closed to the public.[218](#) Tsvetkova started a hunger strike in April, but soon ended it. There were no new developments in the case by the end of the coverage period.[219](#)
- In February 2021, Sergey Smirnov, the editor in chief of Mediazona, was arrested for 25 days after he shared a joke about his resemblance to Dmitriy Spirin, the leader of the punk-rock band Cockroaches, who had called for participation in a rally to support Navalny.[220](#)
- In February 2021, a court in Chita sentenced video blogger Aleksey Zakrzhny (known online as Lyokha Kochegar) to two years and three months of probation for allegedly inciting extremist activity on YouTube. He had previously been fined several times for criticizing President Putin.[221](#)
- In March 2021, a district court in Krasnodar sentenced Marina Melikhova, leader of the local branch of the Citizens of the Soviet Union movement, to three years and six months in prison for inciting extremist activities; she had posted a video in a VKontakte group calling for the dissolution of the Putin regime and the legal restoration of the Soviet Union. The case was the latest in a series of prosecutions targeting members of the movement, which began in the late 2010s.[222](#)
- In April 2021, authorities searched the office of DOXA, a student-run online journal, and charged four editors, who also had their apartments searched, with “inciting minors to protest in illegal protest rallies.” The charge concerned a January 2021 video (see B8), in which the publication argued that universities could not legally expel students for attending that month’s protests.[223](#)
- In June 2021, after the coverage period, Russian law enforcement officials arrested Andrei Pivovarov, the former director of opposition group Open Russia, as his flight to Warsaw was about takeoff from St. Petersburg. He was arrested for sharing a Facebook post in August 2020, in which he voiced his support for a candidate in Krasnodar, and charged with taking part in an ‘undesirable’ organization,” which could result in a six-year prison sentence.[224](#)

The government also continued to arrest individuals who criticized its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. By early June 2020, according to Agora, the authorities had launched 42 criminal prosecutions for the dissemination of “knowingly false information about circumstances that pose a threat to the life and safety of citizens” under the amended Article 270 of the criminal code. In addition, Agora recorded 157 cases under Article 13.15 of the administrative code during the first three months of the pandemic in Russia.[225](#) The following were among the cases related to COVID-19 during the coverage period:

- In August 2020, a court fined the independent media outlet *Novaya Gazeta* under Article 13.15 of the administrative code for a report detailing several army units’ efforts to conceal massive COVID-19 outbreaks, as well as a report about attempts to conceal the impact of the virus in Chechnya. The outlet was fined 200,000 rubles (\$2,600), and its editor in chief was fined 60,000 rubles (\$790).[226](#)
- In October 2020, a court in Ufa fined Natalya Pavlova, editor in chief of *Kommersant-Ufa*, 30,000 rubles (\$390) for an article about the designation of special areas to bury those who died of COVID-19. The outlet deleted the article at the request of Roskomnadzor. The court handed down its verdict even though representatives of the mayor’s office had directly confirmed the information about the creation of the special cemeteries.[227](#)
- In October 2020, a district court in Moscow fined Anastasiya Sedova, editor in chief of the Sobesednik news site, 60,000 rubles (\$790) for a report about a riot in the Angarsk prison. The judicial procedure was initiated after an inspection by Roskomnadzor, which deemed information about torture in the prison to be unreliable.[228](#)

Because Russia is a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights, internet users can appeal their sentences at the ECtHR, although a 2015 law allows the Russian government to ignore that court’s rulings (see B3).[229](#) The following ECtHR developments occurred during the coverage period:

- In February 2021, lawyer Irina Khrunova appealed to the ECtHR in defense of a Perm resident who was sentenced to compulsory labor in the summer of 2020 for allegedly spreading fake news about the coronavirus. This was the first complaint filed from Russia related to dissemination of pandemic-related misinformation.[230](#)
- In January 2021, the ECtHR awarded compensation of €1,700 (\$2,000) to Kaliningrad anarchist Vyacheslav Lukichev, who had been convicted by the Moscow District Military Court of justifying terrorism under Article 205.2 of the criminal code. In 2019, that court fined him 300,000 rubles (\$3,900) for a Telegram post in which he described the perpetrator of a terrorist attack as a hero. Lukichev spent four months in jail awaiting trial.[231](#)

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption? 2 / 4

Anonymous communication is restricted in Russia, as are encryption tools.

A 2017 law mandates the blocking of VPN services that allow their clients to access banned content.[232](#) In March 2019, Roskomnadzor began to enforce this law for the first time, sending 10 VPN services a request to connect to the Federal State Information System—Roskomnadzor’s list of banned content (see B1).[233](#) Most of the VPNs immediately refused, and others that had not received such a request preemptively refused.[234](#) By the end of May 2020, Roskomnadzor had not yet blocked any of the VPN services for refusing to cooperate.

The national security authorities initiated a campaign against encrypted email services in early 2020. Such services as SCRYPTmail.com, Mailbox.org, ProtonMail, Tutanota, and StartMail were blocked (see B1).

Since 2014, mobile phone subscribers in Russia have been required to register with their official state identification in order to purchase a SIM card, limiting anonymity for mobile users.[235](#)

A 2017 amendment to the Law on Information, Information Technology, and Information Protection requires users of social media platforms and communication apps to register with their mobile phone numbers, further restricting online anonymity.[236](#) In November 2018, the government approved new rules requiring such platforms to verify users’ phone numbers with the help of mobile service providers.[237](#) If a user’s phone number cannot be verified, they will no longer be able to send messages. Furthermore, mobile service providers are now obliged to inform communication apps and social media platforms when users cancel their contracts. In those cases, users will no longer be able to send messages unless they reregister with a new phone number.[238](#) The rules came into force in May 2019.[239](#) Roskomnadzor interprets the rules to apply to both foreign and domestic platforms.[240](#) However, as of May 2020, none of the platforms had reported compliance with the procedures for user identification.

The authorities have also sought to limit the privacy safeguards of encryption tools. The Yarovaya Law requires online services that offer encryption to assist the FSB in decoding encrypted data, including by providing encryption keys. Though this is an impossible task for many service providers, such as those that use end-to-end encryption, companies that fail to cooperate can currently face fines of up to 6 million rubles (\$79,000). Fines for failure to hand over encryption keys were increased in December 2019 (see B3). The Electronic Frontier Foundation has suggested that the impossibility of full compliance is a deliberate feature of the law, giving authorities leverage over the affected companies.[241](#)

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users’ right to privacy? 1 / 6

State surveillance of internet activities greatly affects users’ privacy rights, and a number of laws have increased authorities’ power to conduct intrusive surveillance.

The government utilizes the System for Operational Investigative Measures (SORM) for its online surveillance activities. Under current legislation, in order to receive an operating license, ISPs are required to install equipment that allows security services to monitor internet traffic. Providers that do not comply with SORM requirements are promptly fined and may lose their licenses if problems persist. The latest version of the system, SORM-3, uses DPI technology, enhancing the ability of security services to monitor content on all telecommunications networks in Russia. The Sovereign Runet Law provided authorities with additional DPI capabilities, which were tested in late 2019 (see A3).[242](#)

Also in December 2019, President Putin signed a law requiring that mobile devices in Russia come preloaded with Russian software, raising privacy concerns among advocates who suspect that such software could be compromised.[243](#) As of April 2021, Russian smartphones will come with the predetermined Russian software after the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media expanded the scope of the law.[244](#)

Russian authorities are nominally required to obtain a court order before accessing electronic communications. According to Supreme Court data, in 2019 security services requested 514,974 court orders to tap telephones, open letters, and intercept electronic communications; the data were not disaggregated. Of these requests, 514,115—over 99 percent—were granted.[245](#)

The authorities are not required to show interception warrants to service providers, and FSB officers have direct access to providers’ servers through local control centers.²⁴⁶ Experts note that there is no publicly available information about accountability for FSB officers who may abuse this power.²⁴⁷

In May 2019, RosKomSvoboda reported that the government was soliciting bids for a social media and news media monitoring service that would perform “sentiment analysis” of posts on platforms including Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, and VKontakte to determine whether they supported or opposed the government’s positions.²⁴⁸ In 2018, the government awarded a larger contract for monitoring work of a similar nature.²⁴⁹

Law enforcement agencies often conduct their own human monitoring of social media, mainly on VKontakte, the most popular and most cooperative social media platform in Russia. For example, in the words of one former employee at an antiextremism center, officers work proactively to “sort through shared posts on VKontakte” and field complaints about “extremist” posts on social media from third parties.²⁵⁰

In February 2020, it was reported that in the summer of 2019, the FSB had sent letters to a dozen Russian online services—including Avito, Habr, and Rutube—demanding that they provide the agency with encryption keys allowing it to decrypt users’ correspondence, and that they organize “around-the-clock access to their information systems.”²⁵¹ Exactly how these services responded is not publicly known.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the government stepped up mass surveillance of users through three internet-enabled tools, but it eased these efforts starting in June 2020.²⁵² Initially, the government repurposed its growing network of security cameras equipped with facial-recognition technology to track the movements of COVID-19 patients in Moscow and elsewhere.²⁵³ In addition, COVID-19 patients in Moscow who were required to remain at home were instructed to install the Social Monitoring mobile app, which tracks geolocation and also has access to a large amount of information on the host device. Users of this app regularly received notifications on the need to take a selfie to confirm compliance with quarantine rules, also using a facial-recognition mechanism. If such a notification was ignored for an hour, users were almost guaranteed to receive a fine of 4,000 rubles (\$52), which was difficult for them to challenge while isolated at home.²⁵⁴ By mid-May 2020, Muscovites using the app had reportedly racked up over 200 million rubles (\$2.6 million) in fines. Finally, in regions throughout the country, authorities mandated the use of electronic passes that combined QR (quick response) codes and information from citizens’ identification cards to track their movements.²⁵⁵

Amid the protests of January 2021, authorities used facial-recognition technologies to detain citizens, including civic activist Mikhail Shulman, who was arrested after the system identified him at the entrance to a Moscow metro station.²⁵⁶ The Moscow metro reportedly planned to let all passengers pay their fare using facial recognition by the end of 2021.²⁵⁷

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies 1 / infringe on users’ right to privacy? 6

The legal system requires service providers and technology companies to cooperate with the government in its surveillance operations. According to the Law on Communications, service providers must grant network access to law enforcement agencies conducting search operations and turn over other information requested by the Prosecutor General’s Office, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the FSB, or the Investigative Committee.²⁵⁸ The Law on Investigative Activities states that court orders are needed to intercept communications, although exceptions can be granted if there is an “immediate risk” that a serious crime, defined as a crime that can draw 10 or more years of prison time, will be committed or if an “immediate threat” to national security is ascertained.²⁵⁹

Under provisions of the Yarovaya Law that came into force in July and October 2018,²⁶⁰ service providers and “information dissemination organizers” are required to store the content of users’ online communications—including video, text, and audio communications—for six months, while metadata must be stored for three years by service providers and one year by other entities.²⁶¹ Service providers must store users’ browsing history for 30 days.²⁶² Companies are required to arrange a storage plan with the authorities and increase their storage capacity by 15 percent annually, beginning five years after implementation.²⁶³ Under the law, the authorities are nominally obliged to obtain a court order to access the data.

In December 2019, it was disclosed that ISPs had purchased 10 billion rubles (\$130 million) in special equipment from the state corporation Rostech in order to comply with the Yarovaya Law.²⁶⁴ Previously, service providers had warned that the legislation would impose excessive costs on them. MegaFon estimated the cost of enforcing the law at 40 billion rubles (\$520 million) over five years; VimpelCom (VEON) estimated 45 billion rubles (\$590 million), and MTS 60 billion rubles (\$790 million).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government in 2020 temporarily eased traffic storage requirements for service providers under the Yarovaya Law. In particular, it approved a one-year suspension of increases in traffic storage requirements and a one-year moratorium on the storage of heavy video traffic until September 1, 2021.²⁶⁵

Service providers operating in Russia typically do not disclose the scale and scope of government requests for

user data. It is not clear whether they may do so under Russian law.[266](#)

As of April 2021, 280 companies were in the register of “information dissemination organizers,” including social networks, communication apps, online dating services, file-sharing services, and email platforms.[267](#)

The data localization law enacted in 2015 requires foreign companies that possess Russian citizens’ personal data to store their servers on Russian territory (see B1), potentially enabling easier access for security services.[268](#) Some foreign companies, such as Uber and Viber,[269](#) have moved to comply with the law.

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any 1 / other actor in relation to their online activities? 5

Physical attacks on online activists and journalists by state and nonstate actors are relatively common in Russia, and authorities rarely conduct meaningful investigations of such incidents. Law enforcement agents also apply other forms of extralegal pressure against journalists and break into their devices.[270](#)

In the fall of 2019, investigators who initiated a criminal case against Pskov journalist Svetlana Prokopyeva for alleged justification of terrorism hacked her iPhone, which they had previously seized during a house check. According to Prokopyeva, investigators looked at her correspondence in messaging apps, trying to interpret her messages as attempts to bribe criminal experts.[271](#) In July 2020, a court found Prokopyeva guilty and fined her 500,000 rubles (\$6,600).[272](#)

In April 2021, the FSB conducted a night search at the house of Roman Anin, the editor in chief of independent online media outlet Vazhnie Istorii (Important Stories), in relation to a criminal case initiated in 2016. The journalist was considered a witness in the case.[273](#)

In October 2020, Irina Slavina, editor in chief of the Nizhny Novgorod media outlet KozaPress, publicly self-immolated in front of the regional Ministry of Internal Affairs office. She had previously been fined several times both for civic activism and for publications in her outlet. The day before the suicide, her apartment was ransacked.[274](#)

The authorities of the Chechen Republic routinely kidnap and torture activists. In September 2020, individuals linked to the Chechen government kidnapped Salman Tepsurkayev, a teenage activist who frequently moderated the critical IADAT Telegram channel. A video that appeared on the internet after he was kidnapped showed Tepsurkayev, who was clearly under duress, torturing himself.[275](#)

Online intimidation and physical violence against LGBT+ people has escalated since the adoption of the 2013 law banning so-called propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations to minors.[276](#) In July 2019, LGBT+ activist Yelena Grigoryeva was stabbed to death in Saint Petersburg after her name was included on a “death list” circulated on the internet by an anti-LGBT+ group called Saw.[277](#)

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to 0 / widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? 3

Cyberattacks against independent media and civil society organizations continue to inhibit users’ ability to access these resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic generally increased the scale of cybercrimes in Russia, according to law enforcement agencies.[278](#)

Government-backed organizations allegedly engaged in coordinated attacks on digital media during the coverage period. For example, ahead of mass protests in late January 2021, the social media accounts of many opposition-oriented outlets faced massive bot attacks, which temporarily prevented them from functioning.[279](#)

In March 2021, associates of Navalny announced preparations for a large-scale protest against his criminal prosecution. The organizers encouraged Russians who wanted to take part to register on a special website, Free.navalny.com, to enable a preliminary estimate of the number of protesters. However, the database of registered users was soon compromised. In April 2021, registered users started receiving emails containing their personal information from unknown accounts. The perpetrators may have correlated the email addresses from the hacked database with other personal details available on Russia’s extralegal information market.[280](#) Subsequently, some of the users were fired by their employers (see B8).[281](#)

Navalny’s team announced in April 2021 that they would start taking donations exclusively through YouTube because they felt that Google, YouTube’s parent company, would better protect user data.[282](#)

Also in April, the US government imposed sanctions on Positive Technologies, which was accused of developing offensive hacking tools for the FSB and Russian military intelligence, with a focus on “exploit discovery, malware development, and even reverse engineering of cyber capabilities used by Western nations.” The sanctions came in response to the SolarWinds attack, in which hackers associated with the Russian government accessed data from a number of US federal agencies.[283](#)

Journalists and civil society activists have been notified of attempts in recent years to compromise their online accounts, including on Telegram and Gmail, suggesting a coordinated campaign to access their data.

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