

# Russia

by Pavel Luzin

*Capital:* Moscow  
*Population:* 144.3 million  
*GNI/capita, PPP:* \$22,540

Source: World Bank *World Development Indicators*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

NIT Edition	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
National Democratic Governance	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	<b>6.75</b>
Electoral Process	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	<b>6.75</b>
Civil Society	5.75	5.75	5.50	5.25	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.50	<b>6.25</b>
Independent Media	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	<b>6.50</b>
Local Democratic Governance	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	<b>6.50</b>
Judicial Framework and Independence	5.50	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.50	<b>6.75</b>
Corruption	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	<b>6.75</b>
<b>Democracy Score</b>	<b>6.11</b>	<b>6.14</b>	<b>6.18</b>	<b>6.18</b>	<b>6.21</b>	<b>6.29</b>	<b>6.46</b>	<b>6.50</b>	<b>6.57</b>	<b>6.61</b>

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017, Russia's authorities prepared for the presidential election in March 2018. Although it is not their only purpose, authoritarian regimes like that in Russia rely on elections to show different elite groups that the leader and his inner circle retain control of the state and still have political and economic power.

However, years of economic mismanagement and stagnation, growing contradictions between formal and informal political practices, and conflicts within the leadership created uncertainty about the system's domestic political prospects during 2017. The threat of growing international pressure in the form of new U.S. sanctions exacerbated the problem. As a result, the approach of the presidential election presented a challenge for the Russian authorities throughout the year.

The government engaged in new crackdowns on dissidents, the opposition, and the LGBT population despite their questionable results. For example, repression of opposition activists and even citizens who post political content on social media only enhanced the public's appetite for protest. Similarly, purges aimed at incumbent governors and other representatives of Russia's ruling class did not improve the regime's situation given its ineffective economic and social policies.

It became increasingly clear during the year that the Kremlin lacked the economic resources to stabilize its authoritarian system: Key elite groups were still involved in grand corruption, spending on defense and security agencies topped out, the Reserve Fund was exhausted, the deficits of regional governments exceeded 1.5 trillion rubles (\$26.5 billion),<sup>1</sup> and the combined public debt of regions and municipalities was 2.14 trillion rubles (\$37.8 billion).<sup>2</sup> Political conflicts among elites derived from their clashing economic interests, and vice versa. For instance, the criminal case against former minister of economic development Aleksey Ulyukayev—initiated in 2016 by Igor Sechin, head of the state-owned oil company Rosneft—was evidently part of Sechin's struggle against Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev's government over power and resources. Nevertheless, the Kremlin tried to maintain a balance among the competing factions to prevent any one of them from becoming dominant.

Meanwhile, opposition leader Aleksey Navalny pressed ahead with his presidential campaign despite being barred from running due to politically motivated criminal convictions. Among the prospective candidates, his team alone had a clear agenda of liberal political and economic reforms for Russia, and only Navalny went to great lengths to create a sustainable regional network of volunteers and supporters, even in the face of increasing government pressure.

However, the gubernatorial elections in September showed that the Kremlin is not interested in real elections, even at the regional level. The process was used as a tool for consolidating the power of regional political elites, and there was no guarantee that the elected governors would keep their seats until the end of their terms, as the president can essentially dismiss them at will. The municipal council elections in Moscow that month were the only example of open political competition in Russia during the year, though the opposition's relative success was not sufficient for it to nominate a candidate for the city's mayoral election in 2018.

The Kremlin continued to use a “carrot and stick” approach to ensure its control over civil society, with an emphasis on the stick. The upcoming presidential vote and the country's high levels of political and economic uncertainty stoked fears that this political pressure would increase even further, evolving from legal harassment into outright violence. Still, the civil society sector demonstrated resilience during the year, using crowd-funding tools and changing legal structures to avoid designation as “foreign agents.”

The authorities tried to increase their stranglehold on independent media, and to more tightly control online communications between Russian society and the rest of the world, though the Kremlin still lacks the capability to establish truly comprehensive control. For example, the so-called Yarovaya law, passed in 2016 in a bid to dramatically intensify online surveillance, was not implemented in 2017 for technical and economic reasons. There is also evidence that the System for Operative Investigative Activities (SORM), which was implemented in 2000 and seeks to monitor all internet users' voice traffic (through keywords) and certain users' full internet traffic, does not work effectively.

The regime's struggle for political survival and dwindling economic assets also affected local governance during the year. In July and August, the federal government used political turmoil in Tatarstan as a pretext for not renewing a 1994 memorandum guaranteeing the republic's autonomy. The decision removed both the last vestiges of Tatarstan's self-government and any illusion of regional autonomy in the Russian Federation as a whole.

Russia's judicial framework remained inconsistent with its constitutional basis and the country's international obligations. Russian officials threatened to ignore European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) decisions if Russia's delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) continued to be denied voting rights; cases originating in Russia account for a third of the ECtHR's caseload.<sup>3</sup> Russian courts remained dependent on powerful political and economic actors, and arbitrary rule in Chechnya continued to corrode the system of justice in the rest of Russia.

Corruption is still the main barrier to the democratization of Russia. The authorities did not make any sustainable efforts in this field during 2017. Moreover, new evidence emerged of corruption at the highest political level, and official anticorruption activity was nothing more than a tool of political struggle within the political and economic establishment.

### **Score changes:**

- **Civil Society rating improved from 6.50 to 6.25** due to the ability of opposition leader and anticorruption activist Aleksey Navalny to organize nationwide protests despite government efforts to quash his movement, and due to the resilience of Russian civil society after years of repression.
- **Local Democratic Governance rating declined from 6.25 to 6.50** due to the federal government's decision not to renew a memorandum guaranteeing Tatarstan's autonomy, and the continued practice of replacing regional governors outside of electoral cycles.
- **Judicial Framework and Independence rating declined from 6.50 to 6.75** due to the complete absence of due process for members of the LGBT community in Chechnya who experienced brutal attacks endorsed by regional officials during the year, and due to the politicized use of the judicial system to disrupt Aleksey Navalny's activism.

**As a result, Russia's Democracy Score declines from 6.57 to 6.61.**

**Outlook for 2018:** In 2018, Russia's leadership will face a choice between limited economic liberalization and further policy tightening. Factors including foreign sanctions, the war against Ukraine, and the intervention in Syria will influence this decision. While the regime seems likely to remain stable in 2018, the struggle for power and assets among the political elite will continue to escalate, and economic and foreign policy challenges create long-term uncertainty. It is likely that more voices in favor of change will emerge. However, any democratic transition would have to overcome structural obstacles in Russia's constitution, regional divisions, and economic arrangements that serve to fortify the authoritarian establishment.

# MAIN REPORT

## National Democratic Governance

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- Russia is a consolidated authoritarian regime. The president, Vladimir Putin, plays the role of moderator of the formal and informal relations among various political elites. He relies on the Presidential Executive Office (PEO), security agencies, and different interests within the corrupt bureaucracy and state-owned companies. The constitutional system—which features a separation of powers among the government, the parliament, and the judiciary—is fully subjugated in practice by the president, the PEO, and Putin’s inner circle. The authoritarian regime also controls most of the national economy, with up to 70 percent of gross domestic product created in the state sector. In 2017, in the context of economic decline and confrontation with democratic powers, elite competition for limited resources grew and emerged into the open.
- During the year, Russia’s leadership was preparing for a presidential election scheduled for March 2018. Authoritarian rulers use elections to show internal stakeholders that they retain control and still have political and economic power. However, economic stagnation and mismanagement, growing contradictions between formal and informal political practices,<sup>4</sup> and conflicts among the political elite have created uncertainty regarding the Russian regime’s domestic political prospects. International pressure has exacerbated the problem. In many aspects of everyday governance, the authorities are crippled, and some political experts have even spoken of political paralysis,<sup>5</sup> or an incipient political crisis.<sup>6</sup>
- A key example of conflicts within the leadership was the ongoing case of former economic development minister Aleksey Ulyukayev. He was arrested in December 2016 and charged with receiving a bribe from Igor Sechin, head of the state-owned oil company Rosneft. General Oleg Feoktistov, an influential Federal Security Service (FSB) officer who had worked for Rosneft since 2016 and, according to media reports, played a crucial role in the investigation of Ulyukayev,<sup>7</sup> returned to the FSB in March 2017. However, he was then fired from the service in August.<sup>8</sup> His dismissal shed light on certain failings in Ulyukayev’s case, as well as power struggles within the FSB.
- These failings were exposed during court hearings in September, when recordings of conversations between Sechin and Ulyukayev pointed to both the informal workings of Russian governance and the weaknesses of the criminal charges themselves.<sup>9</sup> According to some analysts, the episode ultimately damaged Sechin’s position in Putin’s inner circle,<sup>10</sup> and his repeated refusal, despite subpoenas, to appear as a witness underscored high-ranking officials’ flagrant disregard for the rule of law.<sup>11</sup>
- Among other signs of political struggle among the elite, Rosneft in May initiated a multibillion-ruble lawsuit against the company AFK Sistema—controlled by Vladimir Yevtushenkov, an ally of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev—over the Rosneft subsidiary Bashneft. The unit was previously owned by AFK Sistema before being nationalized and then sold to Rosneft, which now alleged that AFK Sistema had not acted in good faith while managing Bashneft.<sup>12</sup> The case drew fresh attention to the absence of effective protection for property rights and a lack of legitimacy in Russia’s privatization process.<sup>13</sup> In December, AFK Sistema and Rosneft reached an agreement only after Putin directly intervened. As part of the settlement, AFK Sistema was forced to pay Rosneft 100 billion rubles (\$1.7 billion), although this figure was less than what Rosneft initially sought.<sup>14</sup>
- Also in May, Sechin blocked a dividend payout from Rosneft to the Russian federal budget.<sup>15</sup> In September, the government decided to fund research and development in the aviation industry through the planned Rosneft dividend payouts.<sup>16</sup> Some payments from Rosneft were eventually made in

October.<sup>17</sup> Because the state corporation Rostec controls the aviation industry, and Rostec is headed by close Putin ally Sergey Chemezov, this situation led some pundits to speculate that Sechin’s position had weakened in favor of Chemezov’s.<sup>18</sup>

- On June 14, the Federation Council, the upper house of the legislature, established a temporary committee on the protection of state sovereignty and prevention of foreign interference in Russia’s domestic affairs. The committee operated on the assumption that the West interferes with Russia’s domestic political sphere in order to bring about regime change.<sup>19</sup> In effect, the decision was presented as a tit-for-tat response to the ongoing U.S. investigations into Russian meddling in the 2016 general elections. Such moves have tended to increase Russia’s international isolation in recent years.
- On October 10, the temporary committee of the Federation Council presented its first report, recommending that the Russian authorities prepare new measures against nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), independent media, educational institutions, and even individual citizens that cooperate with partners from the United States and Europe.<sup>20</sup>
- In September and October, the Kremlin organized a training program in Sochi for a younger generation of Russian bureaucrats. A few of the alumni of such programs have become acting governors. This method of bureaucratic renewal was intended to prevent any repetition of the phenomenon in which authoritarian leadership was challenged by younger regional elites and careerists in the Soviet Union during the late 1980s.<sup>21</sup> The Sochi training program was essentially an attempt by the Kremlin to improve internal management and avoid bottom-up pressure for democratization from within the regime.

## Electoral Process

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- Although Russia continued to hold multiparty elections in 2017, the electoral process is ultimately under the Kremlin’s control. Even at the municipal level, real competition is possible only when regional authorities or large—and often state-owned—companies with facilities in the area decide not to engage in electoral politics. There were three prominent developments related to elections during the year. The first pertained to the upcoming presidential election scheduled for March 2018: Opposition leader Aleksey Navalny pressed ahead with his campaign despite being barred from running as an official candidate. Moreover, he was the only putative contender who conducted campaign activities before October 2017. The second development was the election of governors in 16 regions in September. The third was the municipal elections in Moscow, also in September. All three developments illustrated the deadlock affecting Russia’s authoritarian electoral system.
- Navalny’s political activity in 2017 reflected his publicly declared presidential ambitions. He was the only opposition leader capable of organizing a network comprising dozens of campaign offices and more than a hundred thousand volunteers across the country, and he used the upcoming election as an opportunity to increase his public support. His anticorruption activity in previous years became a major campaign issue. On March 26, Navalny organized protests in 99 cities,<sup>22</sup> challenging the Kremlin’s conception of the election as a referendum on trust in Vladimir Putin.<sup>23</sup>
- After mobilizing his supporters through such protests, Navalny opened 84 campaign headquarters and engaged up to 200,000 volunteers.<sup>24</sup> From spring through the end of 2017, he gathered signatures supporting his nomination,<sup>25</sup> developed an electoral program,<sup>26</sup> and conducted a tour of large Russian cities.<sup>27</sup> The authorities’ resistance to Navalny’s activities was consistent at all levels. In cities like Rostov-on-Don,<sup>28</sup> Vladivostok,<sup>29</sup> Omsk,<sup>30</sup> and Krasnodar,<sup>31</sup> local authorities tried to prevent Navalny from campaigning. On June 12, the Russia Day holiday, Navalny was given a 30-day sentence of administrative detention for organizing an anticorruption protest in Moscow as a part of his campaign.<sup>32</sup>

On October 2, Navalny and his chief of staff Leonid Volkov were detained for 20 days in Moscow several hours before a planned protest in Nizhniy Novgorod.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, activists and the heads of regional campaign offices faced growing pressure,<sup>34</sup> including violence.<sup>35</sup> The authorities began to prohibit demonstrations supporting Navalny in Russia’s regions.<sup>36</sup>

- On October 18, well-known Russian media personality Kseniya Sobchak announced her intention to run for the presidency.<sup>37</sup> Observers suggested that the Kremlin intended to use Sobchak as a liberal spoiler candidate against Navalny and his supporters.<sup>38</sup>
- On September 10, gubernatorial elections were held in 16 regions. All of the incumbent and acting governors kept their posts.<sup>39</sup> The elections aimed to legitimize Putin’s reshuffling of governors in 2016 and early 2017. Although the Kremlin’s chosen candidates faced no real competition, the electoral procedures also served to mobilize regional elites and reinforce the regime’s control over them. Voter turnout during the elections ranged from 25 percent in Tomsk to nearly 82 percent in the Republic of Mordovia.<sup>40</sup> The average turnout was 35–40 percent, indicating citizens’ low interest and disappointment with regional governments.
- During the elections, the independent election monitoring movement Golos reported approximately 709 procedural violations.<sup>41</sup> The mayor of Saratov resigned due to significant violations,<sup>42</sup> and voting was canceled in two districts in Mordovia.<sup>43</sup> Significant violations in the Belgorod region even attracted the attention of the Central Electoral Commission.<sup>44</sup> Such violations are an inherent part of the electoral process in Russia’s authoritarian system, and the final results were nowhere in doubt. However, by meting out a limited number of punishments after the elections, the central authorities bolster their dominance over regional elites.
- The only real political competition on September 10 was in the municipal council elections in Moscow. However, voter turnout was below 15 percent.<sup>45</sup> The opposition movement United Democrats, led by Dmitriy Gudkov, challenged the ruling United Russia party. It was a coalition of independent candidates in cooperation with the liberal Yabloko party and the Solidarnost (Solidarity) movement headed by Ilya Yashin. Overall, the United Democrats took more than 270 of 1,502 municipal mandates, winning seats in 63 districts and a majority in 17 districts.<sup>46</sup> However, despite these successes, the so-called “municipal filter”—requiring opposition candidates to be nominated by 110 municipal deputies in 110 districts<sup>47</sup>—ensured that the opposition was still too weak to challenge Sergey Sobyanin, a member of Putin’s inner circle and mayor of Moscow since 2010.
- In December, the Russian authorities formally announced that the presidential election would be held on March 18, 2018. On December 25, Navalny was officially prohibited from contesting the presidency due to a previous criminal conviction,<sup>48</sup> just a day after his supporters from across Russia nominated him as a contender.<sup>49</sup>

## Civil Society

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
5.75	5.75	5.50	5.25	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.25

- Civil society organizations continue to exist in Russia despite many formal and informal restrictions created by the authoritarian regime. However, the Kremlin tried to dominate civil society during 2017 through a “carrot and stick” approach, with the “stick” being wielded more often. This matched a trend that has persisted for several years, adding to fears that political pressure on civil society may increase further.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, civil society demonstrated resilience and attempted to resist the pressure, including with the widespread civic protests tied to the election campaign.
- The case of Yuriy Dmitriyev, a historian at the human rights group Memorial’s office in Karelia, continued in 2017. In March, in addition to charges of possession of child pornography, Dmitriyev was charged with sexually abusing his foster daughter and illegally keeping a weapon.<sup>51</sup> Human rights

defenders argued that he was arrested because of his research into Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's repressions, and that the case was motivated by a desire for personal revenge among some regional security officials.<sup>52</sup>

- The Ministry of Justice designated 14 Russian NGOs working in the fields of human rights, ecology, and social issues—including Memorial's Krasnodar office and Bellona, one of the oldest ecological NGOs in Russia<sup>53</sup>—as foreign agents in 2017.<sup>54</sup> All were all based in the regions and not in Moscow. The Ministry of Justice also designated four foreign organizations as undesirable; three of them—a pair of British-based entities associated with Otkrytaya Rossiya (Open Russia) and the U.S.-based Institute of Modern Russia—were founded by exiled businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky.<sup>55</sup> On March 28, all undesirable foreign entities were prohibited from establishing new organizations in Russia.<sup>56</sup>
- In September, the public prosecutor's office launched administrative cases against the SOVA Center, an organization specializing in research on racism, xenophobia, and misuses of antiextremism tactics.<sup>57</sup> The cases were launched because the SOVA Center website featured hyperlinks to the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Foundations, both undesirable foreign entities.
- Russian authorities employed the “carrot” approach toward civil society in August, when 970 NGOs from all over Russia received presidential grants. Three NGOs recognized as foreign agents, including the Levada-Center, were among the recipients. The grants totaled almost 2.25 billion rubles (\$37 million), and a further 7 billion rubles (\$80 million) was earmarked for distribution in grants through the end of the year.<sup>58</sup> However, according the official data provided by the Ministry of Justice, Russian NGOs received more than \$1 billion from foreign donors in 2017, indicating that the government's “carrot” approach did not create sufficient opportunities for Russian civil society in the face of politically created risks and redlines.<sup>59</sup>
- In November, Olga Romanova—head of the charity Rus Sidyashchaya (Jailed Russia), which specialized in aid for prisoners and their families—was forced to leave the country due to a conflict with the deputy head of the Federal Penitentiary Service.<sup>60</sup>
- The number of local civic protests grew during 2017. Unlike in previous years, when groups of citizens protested about specific grievances, as with the truck drivers' protests in 2016, civic protests in 2017 became more broadly politicized.<sup>61</sup> One possible reason for this development is a connection between civic protests in different places with different agendas and the protest activity of the political opposition.<sup>62</sup>
- In February, April, and September, citizens and activists in Yekaterinburg protested the proposed construction of an Orthodox church on an artificial island in the city's central pond, one of Yekaterinburg's main public spaces.<sup>63</sup> However, the Sverdlovsk regional governor, Yevgeniy Kuyvashev, in coalition with the head of the Russian Copper Company, Igor Altushkin, and Andrey Kozitsyn, head of the Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company, opposed the protesters and lobbied together for the project. Following the September gubernatorial elections, and amid tensions between Yekaterinburg's popular mayor and Kuyvashev, the church project was canceled in October.<sup>64</sup> In nearby Chelyabinsk, citizens protested the construction of a new mining and processing plant.<sup>65</sup> The plant would be built by the Russian Copper Company. Two new waves of national truck driver protests against new taxes occurred in March and December,<sup>66</sup> while protesters in Moscow demonstrated against the city's proposed renovation of districts built in the 1950s and 1960s (see Local Democratic Governance).<sup>67</sup>
- Russian civil society faced an additional threat during 2017 in the form of illiberal and extremist elements. These groups, inspired by the government's antiliberal propaganda, committed acts of violence against civil society activists and organizations. The Kremlin has periodically delegated violence to nonstate actors; in the 2000s, the PEO flirted with extremist soccer fans and neo-Nazis.
- The South East Radical Block (SERB)—originally founded by pro-Russian street fighters in Dnipro, Ukraine, acted against Russian liberals during the year. On April 27, a SERB activist attacked Navalny, splashing him with a chemical cocktail that damaged his eye.<sup>68</sup> SERB also tried to prevent public commemorations of the death of opposition figure Boris Nemtsov, who was murdered in February

2015. The group regularly attacked the makeshift memorial erected at the site of Nemtsov’s murder,<sup>69</sup> and in August, an unknown assailant attacked a volunteer, Ivan Skripnichenko, near the memorial. Skripnichenko died several days after the incident,<sup>70</sup> and SERB denied responsibility for the attack. In September, SERB activists removed a memorial tablet from the building where Nemtsov lived before his death,<sup>71</sup> and attacked lawyer Ilya Novikov—the defense attorney for the formerly imprisoned Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko—near the same building.<sup>72</sup> Also in September, the head of Navalny’s Moscow headquarters, Nikolay Lyaskin, was attacked and suffered a concussion;<sup>73</sup> it was unclear at year’s end whether SERB was responsible. In November, evidence emerged that SERB was supervised by police officers who are formally tasked with combating extremism.<sup>74</sup>

- The security services continued to target religious extremism, whether real or imagined. On April 20, the Supreme Court labeled the Jehovah’s Witnesses an extremist organization and prohibited the group’s activities in Russia.<sup>75</sup> On September 4, a man from the Christian State, a radical group, attacked a movie theatre in Yekaterinburg that was screening the romantic drama *Matilda*, which depicts an alleged extramarital affair between a ballerina and the future tsar Nikolay II, who is venerated as an Orthodox saint.<sup>76</sup> On September 11, radicals burned two cars near the office of the movie’s director.<sup>77</sup> On September 20, a number of Christian State activists were detained,<sup>78</sup> suggesting that the Russian authorities understood the threat of uncontrolled religious radicalism, as distinct from the targeted nationalist violence represented by SERB.
- In March, authorities in the Chechen Republic conducted a campaign of violent repression against the local LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community. A journalistic investigation by *Novaya Gazeta* in April confirmed at least three deaths as a result of the campaign, with dozens of men illegally detained and tortured.<sup>79</sup> Evidence that appeared in July suggested that between 27 and 56 people were killed.<sup>80</sup> Chechen authorities denied that the repression was occurring, but the disappearances continued. Even a popular Chechen singer, Zelimkhan Bakayev, disappeared in Grozny in August.<sup>81</sup> By autumn, there was credible evidence of at least 31 deaths of Chechen men who were suspected of being gay, but Russian authorities did not officially confirm any crackdown in Chechnya.<sup>82</sup> Dozens of gay men left Chechnya to seek asylum in other Russian regions or abroad.<sup>83</sup>

## Independent Media

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50

- Although independent media outlets still exist in Russia and are often quite critical of the regime, they remained under constant threat in 2017. Such outlets are limited by a number of factors, including the size of their audiences, their willingness to investigate sensitive topics and individuals, and the readiness of owners and editors to compromise with authorities and other influential members of Russia’s political elite. The Kremlin’s pressure grows in tandem with the expansion of independent outlets’ audience and influence. Economic pressure has become one of the main tools of political leverage in recent years. Owners of independent media are forced—through threats to their businesses or advertisers—to either change the composition of their editorial boards or sell their media assets to the “right” people. However, the authorities also used more direct intimidation during 2017. Most independent media outlets in Russia operate online, enhancing the Kremlin’s interest in controlling the Russian segment of the internet and its links with the wider world.
- In June, Russian authorities registered the popular messaging application Telegram as an organizer of information dissemination, a term introduced into Russian law in 2016.<sup>84</sup> While Telegram is less popular than competitors WhatsApp and Viber, it has end-to-end encryption and provides users with services for the creation of media channels. On September 27, the FSB demanded that Telegram provide access to its encryption keys; Telegram refused.<sup>85</sup> The Russian authorities concurrently tried to

monitor media channels on Telegram.<sup>86</sup> In October, a court fined the company 800,000 rubles (\$13,700) for its refusal to bend to the FSB's demands.<sup>87</sup> However, presidential press secretary Dmitriy Peskov gave assurances that the service would not be banned, and it remained accessible at year's end.

- In July, Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma, adopted a legislative amendment—Federal Law No. 276—banning virtual private network (VPN) services and anonymizers that can be used to reach websites blocked by the Russian authorities.<sup>88</sup> The new law took effect in November.<sup>89</sup> While it was not clear by year's end how the authorities would enforce the restriction, it gave the FSB and Ministry of Internal Affairs an additional point of leverage over the information technology industry. Also in July, the parliament passed Federal Law No. 241, which was set to take effect on January 1, 2018.<sup>90</sup> Under this law, messaging applications and online services are required to identify their users and to cooperate with the Russian government in its efforts to control users' access and online communication behaviors.
- On May 9, Putin signed the Strategy for the Development of an Information Society for 2017–2030.<sup>91</sup> Based on the Russian government's desire to establish “sovereignty” over the Russian portion of the internet, the strategy postulates that Russia must have the capacity to produce its own software and hardware independently, with all core information infrastructure ultimately under state control. Under a new law signed in July, owners of telecommunications networks in Russia must be Russian entities or entrepreneurs.<sup>92</sup>
- The government's offensive against media independence online has faced challenges. In 2017, it became clear that telecom companies were incapable of complying with the Yarovaya law, Federal Law No. 374-FZ of 2016, which amended the Russian Counterterrorism Act.<sup>93</sup> The measure compels telecom companies to record all traffic in the Russian segment of the internet and in domestic mobile networks, and provide the FSB with the ability to decrypt this information.<sup>94</sup> Consequently, the government has started to search for a way to delay enforcement of the law.
- On September 20, the FSB and Roskomnadzor, the authority responsible for regulating media and communications, barred Russian internet providers from using Google Global Cache servers, because this equipment does not have a Russian license.<sup>95</sup> In October, Roskomnadzor established a new department tasked with developing measures for blocking online services and applications.<sup>96</sup>
- In addition to legal and regulatory restrictions, independent media and individual journalists continued to face extralegal violence. On July 19, unknown assailants sprayed the house of Yuliya Latynina—a columnist at *Novaya Gazeta* and radio host at Ekho Moskvyy—with a pungent chemical agent.<sup>97</sup> On September 3, Latynina's car was burned,<sup>98</sup> and she and her family were forced to move abroad.<sup>99</sup> In October, experts said that the chemical agent sprayed on her house was highly toxic.<sup>100</sup>
- The Russian government moved against international media outlets during 2017. In September, Roskomnadzor warned CNN International over alleged violations of Russian media law.<sup>101</sup> In October, the Ministry of Justice warned Radio Svoboda and *Nastoyashcheye Vremya*—the Russian-language outlets of U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)—about the possibility of being designated as foreign agents.<sup>102</sup> These warnings were apparently aimed at preparing a legal basis for countermeasures if the United States required Kremlin mouthpieces RT and Sputnik to register as foreign agents under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). RT was in fact forced to register in the United States in November, and Russia passed a law that month allowing foreign agent status to be conferred on media outlets.<sup>103</sup> In December the Ministry of Justice designated Voice of America and eight media outlets associated with RFE/RL as foreign agents.<sup>104</sup>
- In the domestic sphere, the independent Russian radio station Ekho Moskvyy experienced government pressure. Editor in chief Aleksey Venediktov expressed his belief in October that eliminating his radio station's independence was still part of the leadership's agenda.<sup>105</sup> On October 23, a man named Boris Gritz attacked Ekho Moskvyy's studios with a knife and seriously wounded deputy editor in chief and radio host Tatyana Felgengauer.<sup>106</sup> Though the circumstances were unclear, the attack appeared to be a personal act inspired by state propaganda against those expressing independent and opposition opinions.

- Also in October, investigators raided the editorial office of the Open Russia website in Moscow, as well as employees' homes. Officially, the investigators were searching for information pertaining to a criminal case related to Yukos, the former oil company once owned by Khodorkovsky, Open Russia's founder.<sup>107</sup> However, the authorities have used this justification as a pretext for persistent pressure on those involved with Khodorkovsky's civic projects in Russia, as the Kremlin continues to view the exiled businessman and opposition supporter as a threat. In December, Roskomnadzor blocked access to websites affiliated with Open Russia and its main projects after a request by the Prosecutor General's Office.<sup>108</sup>

## Local Democratic Governance

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.50

- The system of local governance in Russia, incorporating regions and local communities, remained firmly under the Kremlin's control in 2017. The central leadership exercised this control through laws, taxes, and budget redistributions, as well as through state-owned companies and security agencies. The year's main trend was the continuing struggle among regional and local elite groups for political survival and decreasing economic assets. This struggle coincided with the Kremlin's aim of increasing the manageability of local political processes in the face of growing domestic turbulence. Consequently, personal loyalty to the Kremlin became the only criterion for new gubernatorial appointments, and any significant political and economic autonomy for regional elites (as in Tatarstan) became unacceptable.
- The Kremlin tried to reinforce its grasp on local governance through a huge reshuffle of governors in February, and further changes in September and October. The reshuffles were partly connected with regional and local economic problems, and with competition among regional leaders.<sup>109</sup> In keeping with the Potemkin nature of Russia's local politics, these reshuffles showed that it does not matter whether a governor was elected, or how many people voted for him. In every decision concerning regional governance, the Kremlin and other actors preferred informal bargains hidden behind the facade of fake local elections.<sup>110</sup>
- In February, the governors of the Perm, Novgorod, and Ryazan regions, and the Buryat and Karelia republics, were replaced with acting governors appointed by Putin.<sup>111</sup> In April, against a backdrop of protests concerning the proposed Orthodox church in the heart of Yekaterinburg (see Civil Society), the governor of Sverdlovsk region, Yevgeniy Kuyvashev, resigned, but stayed on as acting governor.<sup>112</sup> Both the conflict over the construction of the church and Kuyvashev's long-term tensions with the popular Yekaterinburg mayor Yevgeniy Royzman resulted in Royzman being barred from running for the Sverdlovsk governorship, and Kuyvashev returned to office following the gubernatorial elections in September.
- In September and October, Putin appointed 11 acting governors to replace the governors of the Nenets Autonomous District, Samara, Nizhniy Novgorod, Krasnoyarsk, Primorsky, Oryol, Novosibirsk, Omsk, Ivanovo, and Pskov regions and the Republic of Dagestan.<sup>113</sup> In December, the governor of Voronezh region, former agriculture minister Aleksey Gordeyev, was also replaced, and Gordeyev became presidential envoy for the central federal district.<sup>114</sup> Overall, 17 of the federation's 83 governors, plus two governors in the occupied Ukrainian jurisdictions of Crimea and Sevastopol, were replaced during 2017. The overarching reasons for this reshuffle were complicated. First, Putin's cronies, and the financial-industrial groups affiliated with them, were trying to improve their positions in the regions. Second, the Kremlin was preparing for the 2018 presidential election and removed weak governors in problematic regions. Third, Putin might have been seeking to give bureaucrats of the younger generation—many of the new acting governors were aged around 40—an opportunity to prove themselves, possibly as part of the aging president's planning for an eventual succession.<sup>115</sup>

- The replacement of the governor of Dagestan in October stood out as particularly significant. Putin's choice for acting governor was Vladimir Vasiliyev, the head of the United Russia faction in the State Duma and a former police general.<sup>116</sup> Vasiliyev's appointment marked the first time in the post-Soviet history of Russia that Dagestan was headed by a person not originally from the republic. Dagestan is a complicated multiethnic entity, marred by insurgency and local corruption; in the past, Moscow has usually tried to rely on locals to govern the restive republic.<sup>117</sup> Vasiliyev's appointment appeared to signal the Kremlin's desire to change current conditions and make the region more amenable to central rule.
- Also significant was the appointment of Andrey Turchak—the outgoing governor of Pskov and the son of Anatoliy Turchak, a Putin ally since the 1990s and owner of the defense company Lenintets—to the office of secretary of the general council of United Russia.<sup>118</sup> In this role he would manage relations between the party and Russian authorities at the federal and local levels. Turchak would also be responsible for the party's mobilization during the presidential campaign. In November, Turchak became a deputy chairperson in the Federation Council, the upper chamber of Russia's parliament, where he received a seat as a representative of the Pskov regional legislature.<sup>119</sup> In this position, he would also be involved in managing Russia's local governance system.<sup>120</sup> Turchak was notorious for his alleged role in a brutal 2010 attack on independent journalist Oleg Kashin.
- In March, a political crisis began in the Republic of Tatarstan, one of the most developed regions in Russia, following the collapse of the two biggest regional banks and subsequent public protests.<sup>121</sup> In April, the president of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov, dismissed the republic's premier, Ildar Khalikov.<sup>122</sup> In July and August, the Kremlin used this weakness in the republic's leadership as the basis for deciding against the renewal of a 1994 agreement on the delineation of authority between the federal government and Tatarstan, which had been extended several times.<sup>123</sup> From 1994 until the end of the 1990s, such agreements between the federal and regional authorities were a common practice under Article 11 of the constitution. However, after Putin came to power the practice was eliminated, and only Tatarstan kept its agreement due to the strength of its political and economic elites. The end of the pact represented the demise of the last real example of relative regional autonomy in the Russian Federation.<sup>124</sup>
- Putin also ended the practice of requiring Russian children to learn regional languages in the federation's republics, and retained the Russian language as a mandatory language of instruction across the country.<sup>125</sup> Tatarstan's authorities took this message to heart and increased Russian-language classes in the republic's schools.<sup>126</sup> However, the decision stirred political dissatisfaction among Tatars.<sup>127</sup>
- Another key development in local governance occurred in Moscow. In February, Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyanin decided to start a program of renovation for the city. For the plan to be implemented, more than 1.5 million Muscovites would have to be moved from their old apartments into new buildings. The moving procedure, as well as property rules and future plans for gentrification of the land surrounding the old buildings, were unclear. This led to local protests during 2017, as Moscow's authorities attempted to ignore property rules and the interests of citizens; banks and construction companies were expected to be the main beneficiaries of the program. Moreover, the plan could create a precedent for other regions, with potentially painful consequences for the weak system of private property in Russia.
- The Republic of Chechnya continued to exhibit unique local governance conditions in 2017. Among other unusual traits, the republic's leadership played a disproportionate role in Russian foreign policy.<sup>128</sup> Beginning in January, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's security forces were used in Syria as Russian military police. In September, Kadyrov mobilized Muslims in Moscow, as well as in Chechnya, to protest Myanmar's ethnic cleansing of its Muslim Rohingya minority,<sup>129</sup> despite the Russian government's official support for the government of Myanmar.<sup>130</sup> These differences were eventually resolved through the involvement of Kadyrov representative Ziyad Sabsabi, a member of the Federation Council, in Russia's state policy toward Myanmar.<sup>131</sup> The development further

strengthened Kadyrov’s position in Russia’s authoritarian system and his self-assigned function as a mediator between the Kremlin and foreign Islamic communities.

## Judicial Framework and Independence

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
5.50	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.75

- The Russian judicial system remained fully dependent on the Kremlin in 2017 and continued its traditional support for the authorities and their associates in civil, commercial, and criminal cases. For example, no more than 0.5 percent of criminal cases end in acquittal.<sup>132</sup> Throughout the year, Russia considered whether to withdraw from the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) or at least to not execute its decisions.<sup>133</sup> The country also failed to address key judicial challenges, including violations of the rule of law in Chechnya. This failure had a negative effect on the justice system throughout the country.
- After opposition protests on March 26, Russian courts penalized some activists who were detained by police.<sup>134</sup> This tactic of selective repression was aimed at intimidating individual activists and protesters, and followed a strategy that had been honed since mass demonstrations against Putin’s return to the presidency in May 2012. Policemen served as the only witnesses in such trials.
- During and after the campaign of persecution against the LGBT community in Chechnya in March and April, victims were denied their rights to protection, due process, and the presumption of innocence throughout the Russian court system. The families of disappeared people in Chechnya were even prohibited from making complaints to the human rights commissioner, Tatyana Moskalkova, when she visited Grozny in September.<sup>135</sup>
- Russia’s latent conflict with the ECtHR came to a head in October. The court recommended abrogating the prison term of Yaroslav Belousov, who had been charged as a participant in the May 2012 protests and spent more than three years in prison. The ECtHR also ordered Russia to pay Belousov compensation. However, the Supreme Court of Russia rejected the recommendation and the decision. Also that month, the ECtHR ruled that Navalny and his brother Oleg had been unfairly sentenced, respectively, to probation and prison in 2013.<sup>136</sup>
- Later in October, both the chairperson of the Federation Council, Valentina Matviyenko,<sup>137</sup> and the State Duma speaker, Vyacheslav Volodin,<sup>138</sup> said Russia would not accept ECtHR decisions as long as the head of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) is a person elected without Russia’s involvement. In other words, Matviyenko and Volodin signaled that Russia wants PACE to lift its sanctions against, and restore voting rights to, the Russian delegation. Russia also chose not to pay its part of the ECtHR budget.<sup>139</sup>

## Corruption

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- Russia’s authoritarian system is based on grand corruption. Officials at all levels are involved in corruption networks that lavishly reward their members for loyalty and have extensive informal links with private businesses and organized crime. In 2017, corruption remained the main barrier to Russia’s democratization. The authorities did not make any sustainable efforts to combat corruption, and new evidence of egregious high-level corruption appeared during the year. The official anticorruption campaign remained nothing more than a tool of political struggle within the ruling establishment.

- One of the most prominent privatizations of 2017 was the sale in January of 19.5 percent of the shares in Rosneft. However, the process, which began at the end of 2016, was not transparent, nor were the names of the sale's beneficiaries publicly accessible. In September, Rosneft announced that a Chinese company, CEFC China Energy, had purchased a 14.2 percent stake in Rosneft, worth \$9 billion. The details of the privatization were still unclear at year's end,<sup>140</sup> but there were strong indications of possible corruption.
- In February, Navalny presented a documentary film about real-estate assets linked to Prime Minister Medvedev with an estimated value of more than \$1.5 billion.<sup>141</sup> The investigation alleged that while the assets are formally owned by nonprofit foundations and companies controlled by Medvedev's close friend Ilya Yeliseyev, the prime minister regularly utilizes the properties as if they were his own. Medvedev did not provide an explanation, and the Russian authorities refused to respond to Navalny's investigation.
- In April, Prosecutor General Yuriy Chayka presented a report about billions of rubles stolen during the construction of the Vostochny space launch site.<sup>142</sup> However, only one person, the chief executive of one of the construction companies, Vadim Mitryakov, was charged for the embezzlement of 1.3 billion rubles (\$2.29 million). Mitryakov was sentenced to four years' imprisonment and fined 1 million rubles (\$17,000).<sup>143</sup> The conviction of only one person suggested that there was no substantive investigation: Contrary to the official narrative, the Spetsstroy construction company played the main role in the Vostochny embezzlement. The Ministry of Defense owned Spetsstroy but disbanded the company in December 2016 due to the many financial violations during the Vostochny project.<sup>144</sup>
- In July, police in the Tyumen region arrested a group of FSB and police officials who were suspected of committing murders and operating a criminal racket.<sup>145</sup> The case illustrated how security services in Russia coalesce with organized crime. That same month, two FSB colonels were arrested in Moscow and charged with extortion.<sup>146</sup>
- In August, the National Bureau of Economic Research, a U.S. nonprofit organization, reported that Russia's richest citizens accumulated about 75 percent of Russia's national income in offshore accounts.<sup>147</sup> While this does not directly mean that all these funds were the product of graft, it does speak to the absence of transparency in Russia's political and economic system. Moreover, in October, the government decided against implementing a policy to incentivize large Russian corporations, including Alrosa and Gazprom, to avoid using offshore accounts in their financial dealings.<sup>148</sup>
- In September, a bureaucratic attack against the European University in Saint Petersburg (EUSPb) continued, and the university lost its license. The attack against the independent and influential university began in 2016, but in 2017 the main purpose of the campaign became clear. According to a journalistic investigation by independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, the university's campus is close to luxury real estate owned by Medvedev's cronies, who presumably initiated the case to expand their property.<sup>149</sup> By the end of the year, the EUSPb had moved into other building and continued its work in the capacity of a research center.<sup>150</sup>
- From September to December, a number of criminal corruption trials began against officials from the Ministry of Defense,<sup>151</sup> the Ministry of Internal Affairs,<sup>152</sup> the Investigative Committee,<sup>153</sup> the Federal Penitentiary Service,<sup>154</sup> and the Federal Guard Service (FSO).<sup>155</sup> However, the proceedings had the appearance of internal power struggles rather than a genuine attempt at stamping out corruption, as they did not touch the highest leadership, only deputies and midlevel officials. In an authoritarian system like Russia's, such officials would likely be involved in patron-client relationships with their superiors.
- In October, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) published an investigative report on the assets of Putin's inner circle, finding that Putin and his associates collectively own assets worth at least \$24 billion.<sup>156</sup> Also in October, authorities charged Roskomnadzor press secretary Vadim Ampelonsky and two other officials with stealing from the state budget.<sup>157</sup> However, the hearings in their cases were closed to the public.<sup>158</sup> According to prosecutors, Ampelonsky and his colleagues created fictitious jobs in one of Roskomnadzor's subsidiaries. These jobs existed on paper but were unfilled, and prosecutors alleged that the defendants collected the salaries. However, one of

the accused, Anastasiya Zvyagintseva, said that the scheme was used to give rewards to key Roskomnadzor employees for several years.<sup>159</sup>

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