

Russia

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 25

Political Environment: 32

Economic Environment: 24

Total Score: 81

Survey Edition	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Total Score, Status	78,NF	80,NF	81,NF	81,NF	80,NF

The already repressive press freedom environment in Russia declined even further with Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, as authorities relied on both crude and sophisticated forms of media management to distract the public from terrorist attacks, economic troubles, and antigovernment protests. The government maintained its grip on key television outlets and tightened controls over the internet during the year, and most state and privately owned mass media engaged in blatant propaganda that glorified the country's national leaders and fostered an image of political pluralism—especially in the months ahead of Putin's victory in the March presidential election.

Although the constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, officials have used the country's politicized and corrupt court system to harass the few remaining independent journalists who dare to criticize widespread abuses by the authorities. The constitution and a 2009 law provide for freedom of information, but accessing information related to government bodies, the judiciary, or via government websites is extremely difficult in practice. Russian law contains a broad definition of extremism that authorities frequently use to silence government critics, including journalists; the enforcement of this and other restrictive legal provisions has encouraged self-censorship.

In the summer and fall of 2012, Putin and the parliament—controlled by his United Russia party—approved a series of repressive, vaguely worded measures that significantly expanded the array of regulatory tools available to stifle legitimate news reporting on politically embarrassing issues and limit the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on media matters. A law passed in July reintroduced criminal defamation, with fines of up to five million rubles (\$153,000) or up to 12 weeks of forced correctional labor. The year's other new measures included a law that increased fines for participation in unsanctioned rallies from a maximum of 300 rubles (\$9.15) to 300,000 rubles (\$9,150); a law requiring NGOs with foreign funding to register with the Justice Ministry as "foreign agents"; an expansion of the legal definition of treason to include cooperating with international organizations "against the security of Russia"; and the expulsion of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) from Russia.

In addition, a vague, restrictive law that came into force in November granted the state telecommunications regulator Roskomnadzor broad authority to shutter websites, ostensibly to protect children from harmful information. In the first month of the law's implementation, Roskomnadzor blocked 4,640 websites for allegedly containing "offensive content" related to drugs and pornography. Internet service providers were already required to block content on a government-maintained list of "extremist materials." Critics of the restrictions alleged that the growing role of the internet as an alternative source of news had prompted the authorities to expand their control over web-based content.

Prosecutors in 2012 charged a number of government critics—including journalists, media outlets, ordinary citizens, and whistle-blowing civil servants—with defamation, extremism, and other trumped-up offenses in an effort to limit their activities. In a major ongoing case, Aleksey Navalny, one of Russia's most prominent bloggers, posted embarrassing allegations of corrupt financial practices among senior government officials on his blog. In retaliation, he was detained, smeared in the pro-Kremlin media, and had three criminal fraud investigations launched against him by the end of the year. Separately, in April a court in Kemerovo convicted blogger Dmitry Shipilov of “insulting a state official in public” for two posts that had mocked the region's governor, Aman Tuleyev. Shipilov was sentenced to 11 months of community service, with 10 percent of his earnings garnished. In May, Maksim Yefimov, a blogger and opposition activist from the northwestern Karelia region, fled to Estonia after being charged with “inciting religious hatred” for criticizing the Russian Orthodox Church's close ties to the Kremlin.

A wave of antigovernment protests in response to widespread fraud in the December 2011 parliamentary elections led authorities to intensify verbal and legal harassment of media outlets covering the demonstrations in the months ahead of the March 2012 presidential vote. In January, Putin publically accused Moscow-based liberal radio station Ekho Moskvyy of continually “pouring diarrhea” on him. The next month, prosecutors briefly subpoenaed Ekho Moskvyy's editor in chief, Aleksey Venediktov, for an alleged labor code violation, while the radio station's owner—Gazprom-Media, an arm of the state-owned natural gas monopoly Gazprom—abruptly announced a change in the board of directors that included the removal of two independent members. In response, Venediktov resigned from the board, but remained editor in chief. Also in February, police and security officers, as well as more than 100 financial auditors, raided the headquarters and 19 branches of National Reserve Bank, whose owner, Aleksandr Lebedev, partly owns the prominent independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. Separately during the year, the authorities used legal technicalities to harass foreign correspondents whose reporting embarrassed the Kremlin. In February, Federal Migration Service officials in Vladimir, east of Moscow, detained French journalist Anne Nivat, interrogated her for four hours, canceled her business visa, and expelled her from the country in retaliation for her interviews with opposition activists.

According to media monitoring by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), more than 25 documentaries praising Putin were aired in the weeks ahead of the March presidential election, while private broadcasters virtually disregarded the campaign activities of other candidates. The media were largely filled with either apolitical entertainment or pro-Kremlin propaganda, avoiding coverage of protests by members of a rising urban middle class who demanded better public services and less corruption. In March and October, Gazprom's national television channel, NTV, broadcast a two-part pseudodocumentary, *Anatomy of a Protest*, in an effort to smear increasingly popular activists such as Navalny and Sergey Udaltsov, a leftist opposition leader.

Although the internet remains freer than other media and provides a wider diversity of news and opinion, the authorities are aware that its growing popularity is undermining the dominance of state-controlled outlets and have been responding with more aggressive intimidation of independent-minded bloggers, content removal, and manipulation of online expression. Kremlin allies have purchased several independent online newspapers or created their own progovernment news websites, and they are reportedly cultivating a network of bloggers and computer hackers who are paid to produce pro-Kremlin propaganda and disable

independent news and blogging sites. The websites of prominent independent media including the newspapers *Novaya Gazeta* and *Kommersant*, Ekho Moskv, the internet-based television station Dozhd, and the news aggregator Slon.ru all experienced denial-of-service attacks in 2012, especially surrounding the presidential election and anti-Putin protests in Moscow in June. The Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Interior Ministry engage in widespread surveillance of e-mail, blogs, online bulletin boards, and websites. Using upgraded technology, the FSB has expanded its ability to monitor all telephone and internet communications of perceived political opponents. Roskomnadzor developed an automated monitoring system that was activated in time for the December 2011 and March 2012 elections to improve its detection of “extremist” content on the web.

Journalists in 2012 faced the threat of intimidation or physical attack when covering sensitive topics such as the situation in the restive North Caucasus, government corruption, organized crime, police torture, electoral violations, and opposition activities and protests. Widespread lawlessness allows politicians, security agents, and criminals to silence journalists with impunity. During postelection protests in Lubyanka Square in Moscow in March, police officers used violence to arrest three journalists. An officer struck *Kommersant* FM radio reporter Ulyana Malashenko on the head with a baton, causing injuries that required hospitalization. In addition, police arrested two journalists and a leading opposition blogger at a demonstration in Moscow’s Pushkin Square on the same day. In April, Elena Milashina, a special correspondent for *Novaya Gazeta* covering rights abuses in the North Caucasus region, was repeatedly beaten by two men in the Moscow suburb of Balashikha. In June, Russia’s chief federal investigator, Aleksandr Bastrykin, took *Novaya Gazeta* deputy editor Sergey Sokolov by car to a forest outside of Moscow, asked his guards to leave them, and allegedly threatened the editor with death, after Sokolov refused to apologize for the content of an article documenting alleged misconduct by Bastrykin and other law enforcement officers in a criminal case. Bastrykin reportedly apologized the next day. In July, the Elektron radio and television station in the southwestern city of Krymsk was besieged by a variety of government inspectors after it aired complaints about the abysmal assistance that flood victims were receiving from local authorities.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, one journalist was killed in retaliation for his work in 2012. Kazbek Gekkiyev, a 28-year-old news anchor for a local affiliate of the state broadcaster VGTRK in Nalchik, capital of the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, was shot in the head and killed in December after Muslim separatist fighters in the region had posted death threats online against journalists working for state media. Investigators said the assailants had asked Gekkiyev if he was a news anchor before shooting him. The authorities have failed to investigate or solve the vast majority of crimes against journalists in recent years. Suspects who are identified rarely receive serious punishments and are often low-level criminals involved in attacks ordered by others. In December, relatives and colleagues of Anna Politkovskaya, a prominent *Novaya Gazeta* journalist who was murdered in Moscow in 2006, denounced a closed two-day trial of former police officer Dmitry Pavlyuchenkov, who was originally charged with organizing her murder. Pavlyuchenkov had struck a plea deal with prosecutors that resulted in him being charged only as an accomplice in the killing, receiving an 11-year sentence, and paying three million rubles (\$99,000) in compensation to Politkovskaya’s family; he was not compelled to publicly identify the mastermind of the killing.

The authorities exert significant influence over the information landscape through a vast state-owned media empire. The state owns, either directly or through proxies, all six of the

national television networks, two national radio networks, two of the 14 national newspapers, more than 60 percent of the roughly 45,000 registered local newspapers and periodicals, and two national news agencies. Government-controlled television is still the primary source of news for most Russians. Media diversity continued to decline in 2012 as private companies loyal to the Kremlin and regional authorities purchased additional outlets, and most other media outlets remained dependent on state subsidies as well as on government printing, distribution, and transmission facilities. Lively if cautious political debate was mostly limited to glossy weekly magazines, news websites, and Ekho Moskvyy, all of whose audiences were composed largely of urban, educated, and affluent Russians. The country's ongoing economic crisis has led to a decline in advertising revenue for the few remaining independent media outlets, forcing some to tone down their news coverage in pursuit of advertising contracts from government agencies. In August, a state-run television channel led by a council of pro-Kremlin Muslim clerics began broadcasting progovernment programs on Islamic themes.

International radio and television broadcasting is restricted. Most private FM radio stations have been pressured to stop rebroadcasting news programs from the British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and Voice of America, relegating those services to less accessible short- and medium-wave frequencies. In November 2012, RFE/RL lost its medium-wave local broadcasting license due to the implementation of a 2011 law prohibiting foreign ownership of broadcast media.

Online media have developed rapidly, and an estimated 49 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2011. In one sign of the changing environment, the market research firm TNS reported that in April 2012, Russia's leading search engine, Yandex, drew more visitors per day—19 million—than the popular state-controlled Channel One television station attracted viewers. Also during the year, journalists widely utilized online news sites, blogs, social media, and smartphone images and videos from citizens to expose election violations and other government abuses.