

Russia

by Robert W. Ortung

Capital: Moscow
Population: 142.1 million
GNI/capita: US\$14,330

The data above was provided by The World Bank, *World Bank Indicators 2009*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	1999-2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Electoral Process	4.00	4.25	4.50	4.75	5.50	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.75	6.75
Civil Society	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.50	4.75	5.00	5.25	5.50	5.75
Independent Media	4.75	5.25	5.50	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25
Governance*	4.50	5.00	5.25	5.00	5.25	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
National Democratic Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50
Local Democratic Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75
Judicial Framework and Independence	4.25	4.50	4.75	4.50	4.75	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.50
Corruption	6.25	6.25	6.00	5.75	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25
Democracy Score	4.58	4.88	5.00	4.96	5.25	5.61	5.75	5.86	5.96	6.11

* Starting with the 2005 edition, Freedom House introduced separate analysis and ratings for national democratic governance and local democratic governance to provide readers with more detailed and nuanced analysis of these two important subjects.

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

Since first coming to office in 2000, former president and current prime minister Vladimir Putin has used his general popularity and the wealth generated by rising oil prices to consolidate an authoritarian form of government in Russia. His personalized power, wielded from the executive branch, currently dominates other branches of government, key provisions of the Constitution, and even the conduct of presidential and regional elections. Consequently, Russia's top media lack the freedom to independently assess government actions, civil society groups have difficulty monitoring state actions and proposing alternatives, and corruption is pervasive in the country.

In 2008, Putin ostensibly transferred power to Dmitry Medvedev at the end of his constitutionally mandated two presidential terms, but he has continued to define policy as prime minister while maintaining the tacit approval of a majority within the Russian population. During this period, the media were not permitted to objectively cover the war with Georgia or the spreading international economic crisis. President Medvedev identified Russia's "legal nihilism" and widespread corruption as two priority concerns, but his proposed reforms have little chance of success without also addressing the authoritarian nature of the political system.

National Democratic Governance. The uncompetitive presidential election in March 2008 allowed Putin to retain the dominant role in the Russian political system. At the end of the year, unprecedented constitutional amendments strengthening executive power by extending presidential and parliamentary terms were quickly passed without debate. Furthermore, the state has increased its role in the economy while the global economic crisis could undermine its main form of legitimacy: robust economic growth and improving living standards. *Owing to Putin's continued dominant, personality-based role in the governance system, which weakens the potential for establishing meaningful democratic institutions, Russia's rating for national democratic governance worsens from 6.25 to 6.50.*

Electoral Process. The presidential and regional elections held in 2008 were largely formal exercises designed to confirm decisions made by the country's ruling elite. Following this electoral cycle, the Russian leadership continued its practice of fine-tuning the electoral legislation to meet its political needs. The authorities also pared down the number of parties, putting in place a system in which Putin's United Russia dominates a handful of smaller parties. *Given that voters effectively have no ability to influence the outcome of controlled elections, Russia's rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 6.75.*

Civil Society. The state continues to impose extensive regulatory burdens on Russian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and removed tax-exempt status from the majority of foreign NGOs and foundations in Russia. The state provides money for some NGO work but can use these funds to shape the evolution of civil society. The government did little to counter the rising number of racially motivated attacks carried out by extremist and nationalist groups. *State actions have constrained the potential growth of independent efforts to protect political rights and influence state policy; thus Russia's rating for civil society worsens from 5.50 to 5.75.*

Independent Media. The state maintains extensive control over television, radio, and important newspapers, allowing free speech in only a handful of exceptions. Journalists face a climate of violence, with the assassination of Magomed Yevloyev, founder of Ingushetiya.ru, being the most prominent case in 2008. The Internet remains relatively unfettered, though government-sponsored bloggers use sophisticated techniques to disrupt critical online discussions and to spread the Kremlin point of view. *Owing to the state's continued domination of public and independent media and marginalization of critical discussions, Russia's rating for independent media remains unchanged at 6.25.*

Local Democratic Governance. The federal executive continues to appoint Russia's governors, allowing those who can maintain stability in their regions wide-ranging discretion and removing those who cannot. The country's system of local government remains in a state of legislative limbo, and there are no plans to effectively address the local level's chronic budgetary shortages or its lack of independence from regional and federal governments. Lawlessness reigns in large parts of the North Caucasus. *In an era of centralization, citizens have few chances to participate even in local decision making; thus Russia's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 5.75.*

Judicial Framework and Independence. Although President Medvedev has singled out the judiciary for special attention, Russia's courts still serve the interests of the country's ruling elite. Many citizens have lost faith in Russian courts and appeal to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to obtain justice. At the same time, Russia refuses to ratify Protocol 14 of the ECHR, preventing the streamlining of the Court's work. Lack of independence poses a major problem in the Russian judiciary, along with the baseless detention of citizens before sentencing, lengthy delays in court procedures, lack of public information regarding court cases, and inhumane conditions, including overcrowding (leading to the spread of illnesses such as tuberculosis) and torture. In 2008, authorities sought greater limits to trial by jury. *Owing to the court system's inability to assert greater independence and the government's inactivity in addressing ongoing concerns, which together have undermined the public's trust in Russian courts, Russia's rating for judicial framework and independence worsens from 5.25 to 5.50.*

Corruption. Corruption remains a major problem in Russia. President Medvedev made the issue one of his top priorities, introducing a package of reforms in 2008. These new laws have little chance of improving the situation since they do not address the fundamental problems of authoritarianism, lack of a free media, and the absence of effective civil society watchdog groups. State efforts to mitigate the global economic crisis will increase opportunities for graft as the government distributes funds to help companies cover their debts. *In the absence of a free press, energetic civil society, and independent judiciary, hopes for reducing the abuse of public office are unlikely to be realized; therefore Russia's rating for corruption worsens from 6.00 to 6.25.*

Outlook for 2009. The global economic crisis and declining oil prices will greatly reduce economic growth and state revenues in Russia. For the first time, these adverse conditions will test Putin's system of government, which he built during an era of oil-fueled prosperity. Russian newspapers such as *Vedomosti* have already begun to discuss the possibility of social unrest. While difficult economic conditions may stimulate needed structural and political reforms, many predict that the current leadership will resort to greater repression to strengthen its hold on power. There is little doubt that there will be less funding for NGOs available from non-state sources, and independent media will have greater difficulty surviving.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

1999–2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50

In its current formation, the Russian political system does not function under democratic standards and lacks meaningful citizen participation. After winning the presidency in an uncompetitive election held in March 2008, Dmitry Medvedev carried out the policies defined by former president Vladimir Putin, who de facto continues to rule the country as prime minister, though technically he is subordinate to the president. Although the Constitution places considerable power in the hands of the president, the Russian political system remains personalistic, with Putin in control of key military, security, police, and economic ministries. The current system bears little relationship to the Constitution, which stipulates that the military, security, and police ministries and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are directly subordinate to the president. The former president's preferences also continue to dominate major domestic and foreign policies, while neither the legislature nor the judiciary has sufficient independence to challenge the executive branch.

The current leadership took steps during the year to strengthen executive power. In his November 5 annual address to the Russian Parliament, Medvedev called for an unprecedented amendment to the Constitution to extend the presidential term from four to six years starting with the next electoral cycle and to extend parliamentary terms from four to five years. The national Parliament and regional legislature ratified the proposal in a matter of weeks, with little public discussion, and the amendment went into effect at the end of 2008. There was speculation in Russia that the constitutional reform would open the door for Putin to return to the presidency for another 12 years.

While there are no signs that the current regime faces existential threats in the short term, the Russian political system is poorly equipped to address the global economic crisis. Putin and Medvedev depend on steadily improving living standards in the country to maintain the stability of the political system and their legitimacy within it. While Russia has built up cash reserves of more than US\$600 billion, this cushion will last no more than two years in the face of an international economic slowdown.¹ The Russian economy depends heavily on the price of oil, which at US\$50 a barrel toward the end of 2008 was at historically high levels but below the US\$70/barrel benchmark beneath which the Russian budget and trade balance drop into deficit.²

Observers note that Putin remained popular through the end of the year, but this support did not necessarily extend to the rest of the authorities, who were often viewed critically. Given the absence of democratically functioning institutions and the government's tight control over the media, Putin's real level of popularity is

difficult to assess. Moreover, the current system does not allow citizens to freely choose their leaders. To maintain popular support, incumbents have blamed many of Russia's problems on the United States and have sought to scare domestic and foreign audiences with the claim that alternatives to their leadership would be even more undemocratic and nationalistic.

The Russian state has increased its role in the economy, particularly the energy sector, the country's most lucrative economic asset. Putin's key lieutenants control the boards of the most important companies: First Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov is chairman of Gazprom, while Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin is chairman of Rosneft. The evolving system is one of state capitalism, in which the government forgoes privately managed markets in order to increase political control. Likewise, the state is creating new state corporations that allow it to give money to small groups of individuals with little public oversight. The growing state dominance of the economy creates fertile ground for increasing corruption, which is now a defining feature of Russia's political-economic system.

Russia's use of political coercion at home has facilitated an aggressive approach toward the outside world. The government has systematically forced foreign energy companies working in Russia to hand over a larger share of proceeds from their development projects, arguing that the original deals were unfair. In August 2008, following a surprise Georgian offensive seeking to recapture the Russian-backed separatist region of South Ossetia, Russia invaded Georgian territory, occupying large parts of the country, and unilaterally recognized the Abkhaz and South Ossetian secessionist regions.

Ultimately, the key to Putin's dominance is the political passivity of the Russian population. In 2008, only 7 percent of those polled thought that Russians had insufficient political rights, according to the Levada Center, Russia's most respected independent polling agency. On the other hand, only 8 percent believed they had any influence on political processes in Russia, while 87 percent stated they had no influence. One-third of the population follows political news carefully, but only 5 percent stated that they had worked on an electoral campaign in 2008, and only 3 percent stated that they attend party meetings or have participated in public demonstrations. The Russian population's view of democracy differs from standard definitions in the West since the population associates the term with a high standard of living.

Electoral Process

1999–2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
4.00	4.25	4.50	4.75	5.50	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.75	6.75

Russia has thus far failed to demonstrate a commitment to universal and equal suffrage with regular, free, and fair elections conducted by secret ballot. After Putin served his constitutionally mandated two terms as president, he named Dmitry

Medvedev as his successor and used all available state resources to ensure that his choice was duly affirmed. On March 2, 2008, Medvedev won 70.28 percent of the votes with a turnout of nearly 70 percent of registered voters.

To secure Medvedev's victory, the authorities allowed only three other candidates on the ballot: Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and Democratic Party of Russia leader Andrei Bogdanov. They blocked such independent candidates as chess champion Garry Kasparov and former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov from the ballot. Television coverage heavily favored Medvedev, though he refused to participate in televised debates with his opponents.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) refused to monitor the elections because the Russian Central Electoral Commission imposed what the ODIHR considered to be unacceptable working conditions: Russian authorities allowed the observers access less than two weeks before the vote. ODIHR refused to observe Russia's December 2007 parliamentary elections for similar reasons. Local observers from the organization Golos, which receives Western funding, claimed that they were denied access to some polling places. They also reported signs that some voters were coerced to participate in the process.

The regional elections held on March 2 and October 12 encountered similar problems. Only the four parties represented in the State Duma could compete at the regional level, with Putin's United Russia party clearly dominant. All parties are either pro-government or represent a weak opposition. The United Russia leadership typically chooses candidates in a top-down manner, favoring those who have little connection to local constituencies, and regional legislatures are filled with party loyalists who rubber-stamp policies from Moscow. The authorities disqualified unwanted parties by declaring that many of the signatures collected to secure a place on the ballot were invalid. Efforts to heavily suppress the opposition made it unnecessary to manipulate vote totals. However, in the case of the Archangelsk mayoral elections, where Larisa Bazanova won a small majority on the basis of a protest vote, the authorities conducted a recount that put her opponent, the acting mayor, in office.

In his November 5 address to the Parliament, Medvedev proposed eliminating monetary deposits used by some parties to secure a place on the ballot. This move would hit small liberal parties that buy registration with the support of business groups. It also would strengthen electoral committees, which determine the validity of signatures that candidates collect for registration. In a slight concession to smaller parties, Medvedev suggested reducing the number of signatures needed to get on the ballot. Medvedev also proposed that parties that win at least 5 percent in the next State Duma election or that have factions in more than a third of regional parliaments be excused from having to collect signatures at all. Currently, only the four parties in the State Duma that won 7 percent of the vote in the last election have this privilege. The president also proposed additional complex procedures for appointing members of the upper house, thus avoiding direct elections.

In addition to changes in the electoral legislation during the year, the Kremlin further purged Russia's political spectrum of alternative parties, leaving United Russia to dominate over a handful of powerless nominal parties that provide only a show of competition. The fate of the Union of Right Forces (SPS), a liberal party that failed to win representation in the two previous parliamentary elections, was emblematic. On October 2, the SPS political council voted to disband the current party, give up its oppositional character, and merge with other small parties into a pro-Kremlin "liberal" party. By the middle of October, there were 14 registered parties in Russia, down from 35 two years earlier. According to Leonid Gozman, the former SPS ideology secretary who joined the new party's leadership, "it is impossible to create a party without cooperating with the authorities under the existing totalitarian regime."³

Civil Society

1999–2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
3.75	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.50	4.75	5.00	5.25	5.50	5.75

Current observers have little systematic data describing the breadth and depth of civic activity in Russia, including charitable institutions, nonprofit agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Beyond impressionistic anecdotes, there is also no way of knowing whether this activity is increasing, decreasing, or staying the same. One report suggests that Russian citizens are much less active than their Western counterparts: Only 7 percent of Russians are actively involved in the work of noncommercial organizations, compared with 43 percent in France and 35 percent in the United States, according to a study by the High School of Economics and the Social Agreement Institute.⁴

On the other hand, observers point to the fact that many people are involved in the work of unregistered groups that address problems of public life such as urban planning. In cities across Russia, groups have blocked the destruction of historic cityscapes by commercial construction companies by preemptively obtaining the rights to demolish existing buildings or green spaces. Additionally, independent newspapers and motivated individuals throughout the regions have organized a wide range of charitable activities to address concrete social needs.

The number of visible protests in Russia grew in 2008. In December, hundreds of Vladivostok residents staged a rally against a tariff hike on imported cars that Putin proposed on December 5. While the Russian government sought to protect the domestic automobile industry, most residents in eastern Russia drive Japanese cars. Russia's main television channels did not cover the event.

The state makes life difficult for most prominent human rights NGOs, indicating that their activities are unwelcome. In the most chilling case of repression, on December 4 a group of masked men armed with truncheons from the Office of

the Procurator raided the St. Petersburg branch of the Memorial Organization and confiscated its computers. The authorities alleged that the group was linked to the publication of extremist material in a local newspaper. In 2006, Russia adopted a law that broadly expands its ability to regulate and monitor the activities of nonprofit organizations. The government has also used legislation against “extremism” to weaken critical voices in Russia and undermine independent activism. Given the overall context in which the law is implemented, it is designed to constrain NGO activity in areas that state bureaucrats define as inappropriate. In the past, Putin met with human rights NGOs on International Human Rights Day, but he abandoned the practice more recently, and Medvedev had not picked it up by the end of the year. The authorities have also pressured a variety of non-Russian Orthodox religious groups. Nevertheless, in some cases official Russia recognizes the authority of NGOs—for example, the head of the Soldiers’ Mothers Committee is a member of the Societal Council of the Ministry of Defense.

The Kremlin has cracked down on foreign funding for NGOs. Such funding plays a large role because human rights groups and others critical of state policy have few domestic sources, particularly since the Kremlin arrested Yukos head and philanthropist Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003, strongly signaling to other tycoons not to engage in independent civil activities. On July 2, 2008, Putin issued a decree that removed the tax-exempt status from 89 of the 101 foreign NGOs and foundations working in Russia, targeting those active in the sphere of human rights and the environment, leaving only 12 foreign organizations that work tax-free.⁵ At the time, Putin said that the government would issue a second list by the end of the year with other organizations that could operate on a tax-free basis. However, the second list did not materialize before the end of 2008. The organizations that lost their tax privileges will have to pay a 24 percent tax on all grants made in Russia after January 1, 2009. This move is another in a continuing effort to push out foreign groups and limit their potential influence on Russian society. Among the organizations affected are the International Red Cross, World Wildlife Fund, Ford Foundation, and Eurasia Foundation.

While curtailing foreign funding, the state has been increasing its own distribution of funding to NGOs, including a limited number of groups that have been critical of government policies. Grants from the Public Chamber, a state body established to coordinate relations with non-governmental organizations, disbursed 1.5 billion rubles (then approximately \$57.5 million) among 1,120 NGOs in October 2008, including the Moscow Helsinki Group, Glasnost Protection Foundation, and regional branches of the Soldiers’ Mothers Committee and Memorial. The state can use its funds to shape the evolution of civil society, generally offering greater support to nonpolitical organizations or groups that have state approval; in 2008, the Public Chamber emphasized groups working to combat violence against children and those helping the handicapped.

Independent trade unions in Russia face great difficulties. The Putin-era labor code sought to stifle independent unions and made it difficult for unions to strike legally. However, strikes have increased across Russia more recently, and

in the context of the global economic slowdown, this activity seems to be gaining strength in a variety of industries, including the automobile and food sectors, and among producers of domestic appliances. Russians working for multinational companies with operations in Russia often gain practical experience in trade union methodologies and then spread this knowledge to Russian companies. As a result, grassroots organizations such as *Edinstvo* are gaining power. The largest trade union is the Federation of Independent Trade Unions, which brings together 90 percent of union membership and maintains close relations with United Russia and the Kremlin.

The Russian education system suffers from a lack of funding. Corruption is rampant, as many students are either willing or forced to pay bribes. However, the country is trying to bring its system up to international standards by joining the Bologna process. It has introduced a single state exam in the hopes of reducing corruption in the university admissions process. In the past, students seeking to matriculate had to pass oral exams scored by professors at their university of choice, a process that was open to abuse.

In addition, a number of private universities offer studies that go beyond curriculums approved by the government. One of these, St. Petersburg's European University, which is independent of the Ministry of Education and a recipient of Western grants, ran into trouble on February 8, 2008, when the authorities closed the university for alleged fire code violations. Professors and students held careful public demonstrations protesting the closure, and the rector worked quietly through inside channels to resume classes while condoning the public actions. Ultimately, the authorities reversed their original decision, and the university resumed operations on March 21. The university may have attracted the authorities' attention with its Inter-Regional Electoral Network of Assistance program, which sought to train regional election observers with European Union funding. Another theory put forward is that investors bribed officials in order to acquire the university property. Many Russian academics outside the university signed petitions protesting the closure, risking their own careers. The activists were also able to mobilize international support to keep the university functioning.

Local observers fear that racially motivated attacks by neo-Nazi skinheads and other extremist groups, particularly against people who appear to be from the Caucasus or Central Asia, are on the rise. Such attacks led to no fewer than 87 murders and 378 injuries in 2008, according to *Sova*, a group that tracks ultranationalist activity in the country. The group notes that the number of convictions is decreasing while the number of crimes is increasing. The authorities also tend to focus more on small offenses rather than taking measures against the radical groups themselves. In December 2008, the previously unknown Militant Organization of Russian Nationalists beheaded a Tajik in Moscow, calling on officials to stop allowing such immigrants into the country and threatening additional killings. It was the first racially motivated killing in Russia linked to a political demand.⁶

Independent Media

1999–2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
4.75	5.25	5.50	5.50	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25

Media freedoms in Russia are strictly limited despite constitutional guarantees. Reporters Without Borders ranked Russia 141 out of 173 countries in its 2008 Press Freedom Index, citing continued violence and harassment against journalists. Five journalists were assassinated, 2 disappeared, and 69 were injured in assaults during the year, according to the Glasnost Defense Foundation. The state controls the country's chief national television networks, either directly or through Kremlin-friendly corporations, and places strict limits on coverage. While outspoken radio stations like Ekho Moskvyy and newspapers such as *Novaya Gazeta* continue to exist, they are the rare exceptions. The circulation of independent newspapers is approximately 700,000 in a country with a population of over 140 million.⁷

The state severely limited coverage of the 2008 war with Georgia. The Russian media presented only the official interpretation of events during the August war, and after fighting had concluded, Putin called a meeting of top media executives in order to berate Ekho Moskvyy editor Alexei Venediktov for the radio station's coverage, citing what he described as errors.⁸ The meeting made clear that the media should not report anything that the government might find objectionable. Prosecutors are investigating whether the station broadcast extremist speech. While Russia does not have a system of overt censorship, under the current system editors must calculate the risks of publishing material without first seeking the authorities' guidelines on what is acceptable.

Coverage of Russia's economic problems is likewise designed to prevent the population from gaining a full picture of the country's situation. The state-controlled and -affiliated media have covered the financial crisis in the rest of the world in detail, including measures that foreign governments have taken to address the problems. However, they have often failed to report the severe impact on Russia, where the stock market was one of the worst hit worldwide and the slumping price of oil dramatically affected Russia's earnings. The Kremlin instructed the media to avoid phrases such as "crisis" and "collapse" in relation to Russia. Likewise, state television did not examine the 19 percent drop in the Russian stock market on October 6, 2008.

Operators of Internet sites covering the volatile North Caucasus encountered violence during 2008. On August 31, police picked up Magomed Yevloyev, founder of Ingushetiya.ru, a news source strongly opposed to then governor of Ingushetia Murat Zyazikov. Minutes later, he was discovered dumped near a hospital with a fatal bullet wound. Although police claimed that Yevloyev was killed when he reached for an officer's gun, most observers describe the case as murder. The authorities declared that the site was "extremist" and closed it. It was reopened as Ingushetia.org with servers in the United States but was at times inaccessible to local residents.

The Internet represents the most viable area for freedom of speech in Russia. Twenty-six percent of the population had access in 2007, up from about 8 percent in 2002. In Moscow, Internet usage was 57 percent, while in the average region, it was 23 percent.⁹ There are a variety of Russian-language news sources online with diverse points of view, including *Ezhednevny Zhurnal* (<http://www.ej.ru>) and *gazeta.ru*. Russia has 2.6 percent of international blogs, but the country's avid bloggers account for 11 percent of blog entries worldwide.¹⁰

While politicians frequently call for greater controls over Web content, such checks have not yet been implemented. One bill cracking down on “extremist” Internet sites proposed by United Russia was pulled from the Duma in December 2008. Still, there are significant controls in place: One government decree requires telecom companies and Internet service providers to install equipment at their own expense, which allows the Federal Security Service unrestricted monitoring of all communications, phone calls, text messages, and e-mail without the knowledge of provider or user. In July, a Syktyvkar court sentenced blogger Savva Terentyev to a one-year suspended term of imprisonment for a February 2007 post in which he called for setting fire to city police officers in public squares. Terentyev argued that his statement was private since it was a comment posted in another blog, but prosecutors convinced the judge that it was an extremist act targeted at law enforcement officials. Such cases are typically isolated actions carried out by regional officials. Nevertheless, observers saw this first criminal case against a blogger as an attempt to limit free speech on the Internet.

The government takes the blogosphere seriously and finances an extensive organization to exert control over it. The state uses the Internet to consolidate its power and promote its message among Web audiences. Kremlin affiliates disrupt discussions in opposition forums using a variety of techniques to prevent some issues from reaching important audiences.¹¹ This sophisticated form of manipulation avoids overt censorship, such as occurs in China, making it possible for Russian authorities to claim that they respect freedom of expression. In the regions, the right to speak freely depends on the policies of local leaders; limits are particularly strong in the North Caucasus but less pronounced in the Urals.

Local Democratic Governance

1999–2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75

In recent years, regional and local governments in Russia have lost power as Putin and his allies continued to concentrate resources and authority at the federal level. Putin canceled direct gubernatorial elections in 2004, and now the Russian president appoints governors directly. Moscow's policy toward the regions has not changed under Medvedev. In June 2008, there was some discussion about restoring gubernatorial elections, and a November Levada Center poll showed that 61 percent

of the population supported the idea. But instead, Medvedev suggested tinkering with the system, allowing parties that mustered the most votes in local elections to present gubernatorial candidates to the president, who would retain the right to make the ultimate decision. Since United Russia is controlled from the top and effectively manages the overwhelming majority of regional legislatures, this change will have little practical influence.

The situation in the North Caucasus remains unstable. On October 30, Medvedev removed Ingushetia regional president Murat Zyazikov, a former Federal Security Service general, and replaced him with paratroop commander Yunus-Bek Yevkurov. Putin had appointed Zyazikov in 2002, but the former president was unable to ensure stability in the region. More than 50 security officers were killed in Ingushetia in 2008, while the government claimed to kill nearly as many members of armed groups. The local opposition blamed Zyazikov's use of violence against the population and widespread corruption for the ongoing unrest. The region also suffers from 75 percent unemployment and extensive poverty.

Chechnya is run by Ramzan Kadyrov, who has restored some order to the region following more than a decade of fighting and has rebuilt parts of Grozny. Kadyrov's power is based on the Kadyrovtsy, an armed force that was recently integrated into the Interior Ministry forces but remains loyal to Kadyrov personally. The Kremlin would have difficulty removing Kadyrov from office without provoking conflict in the region. Key Kadyrov opponents have been killed in mysterious circumstances, including Ruslan Yamadayev, who died in a drive-by shooting in Moscow in September. An April 2008 report from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe expressed concern about the ongoing practice of secret detentions, torture, and extrajudicial killings in Chechnya.

Putin-era politics have significantly reduced the accountability of regional leaders, even in relatively progressive cities like St. Petersburg. There, Governor Valentina Matvienko has been in office for more than five years. The city's legislative assembly has not criticized her work since the Yabloko party was disqualified on a technicality from the 2007 elections, which would have given the party some seats had it been allowed to compete. Now Yabloko resorts to street protests to make its points in a city where the political discourse has more recently been characterized by a lack of free speech and political homogeneity.

Under existing rules, some mayors are directly elected, while others are appointed by popularly elected councils. Russia approved extensive local government reform in 2003 but postponed implementation until January 1, 2009. Toward the end of 2008, the government again postponed the reforms for an additional two years. Overall, 65 of 83 regions have implemented the law voluntarily, while 18 have not, including Chechnya and Ingushetia, where there is no local government. A key problem in the process is defining what property municipalities will control. The reforms are unlikely to improve the situation since they centralize power, with mayors typically losing out to powerful governors, and continue to deprive local officials of sufficient financial resources to handle their responsibilities. Also, local governments have little ability to raise money on their own. Dmitry Kozak, one of

Putin's key aides, was the primary author of the original reforms in 2002, but his reassignment from minister of regional development to overseeing preparations for the 2014 Sochi Olympics suggests that this topic will receive little federal attention in the future.

In his parliamentary address in November, Medvedev stated that he would continue to amend the legislation addressing local government, in particular by giving local councils the ability to remove mayors. This move would weaken the only directly elected executive branch officials in Russia besides the president. The government is also working to introduce elements of proportional representation in local elections, which would give united Russia an additional advantage and extend power vertically downward, potentially enhancing the ability of central officials to remove mayors.

Judicial Framework and Independence

1999–2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
4.25	4.50	4.75	4.50	4.75	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.50

While Russian laws theoretically protect basic political, civil, and human rights, the court system in practice serves the political interests of the country's leadership in key areas. President Medvedev described this issue as "legal nihilism" and promised a strong effort to make the courts more independent of political influence, though that will be difficult in the context of the country's broader authoritarianism. The World Economic Forum's 2008–2009 *Global Competitiveness Report* ranks Russia 109 out of 134 countries for judicial independence.

During 2008, there was a continued move by authorities to limit jury trials, which are more likely to return a "not guilty" verdict and are thus unpopular with prosecutors. In December, Medvedev signed a law that made cases connected with treason, revolt, sabotage, espionage, terrorism, and mass disturbances ineligible for jury trials. Prosecutors claimed that in some regions most citizens were connected by clan ties and would not convict defendants. Critics, however, argued that prosecutors often failed to present enough evidence for a conviction and that the lack of jury oversight will remove one of the few potential checks on security service abuses. In these cases, a collective of three judges, rather than a jury, will decide the defendant's fate. At the end of the year, the government proposed amendments to the penal code making it easier to convict a person of treason and espionage against the state, potentially including citizens who merely speak with a foreign journalist. (Medvedev withdrew the draft bill in January 2009.)

Many Russians have lost faith in the domestic court system and appeal to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which acts as a check on abuses by the Russian judiciary. The Council of Europe reported that there were 27,246 cases pending before the ECHR against Russia on December 31, 2008, making up 28 percent of all cases before the Court. The ECHR ruled against Russia in 233 of 244

judgments in 2008. While Russia pays the fines levied against it, it rarely makes policy changes to prevent further abuses. Russia continues to be the only one of 47 Council of Europe members that refuses to ratify Protocol 14 to the ECHR, which would reform and streamline the Court's work, preventing it from coming into force.

Lack of independence is a major problem in the Russian judiciary since judges are beholden to officials for promotions and other benefits. For example, in May 2008, Yelena Valyavina, deputy chairwoman of the Supreme Arbitration Court, testified that presidential administration official Valery Boyev systematically pressured judges, including her, regarding the privatization of a company in Tolyatti. Russian judges are not appointed for life, which would make the procedure for removing them more difficult. Often judges are selected less on their qualifications than for their submissiveness.

Beyond the lack of independent judges, Russia's court system faces other key problems. First, only half of Russian court decisions are actually implemented, and creditors typically receive only 20 percent of what they are owed, according to the Court Bailiff Service. State agencies are often the most flagrant defaulters on court-ordered payments, delaying payment of pensions, child benefits, and Chernobyl compensation payments. Half of the ECHR rulings against Russia deal with the failure to comply with court decisions, according to Anatoly Kovler, a Russian judge at the ECHR. A second failing is the baseless detention of citizens before sentencing. These kinds of violations represent a quarter of the cases lost by the Russian state at the ECHR. Experts on the Russian legal system claim that Russia is working to address this problem, but much work remains to be done.

A third issue is lengthy delays in court procedures. In his November address to the Parliament, Medvedev announced that he would introduce a bill setting a maximum time limit for examining civil cases and increase accountability for those who delay legal proceedings. He also suggested establishing compensation for citizens whose cases are not heard in a timely manner. A fourth problem is the lack of public information about many court cases. Judges often close trials to the public to avoid scrutiny. The most common reason given is the presence of classified documents, but the vagueness of legislation defining secrecy leaves such claims open to abuse.

Russia's prison system is notoriously overcrowded, with many inmates suffering from illnesses such as tuberculosis. At the end of the year, there were 887,500 people in correctional facilities, including 734,300 in colonies and 144,700 under arrest in pre-trial detention centers.¹² Over 2.5 million people pass through the system each year. Former prisoners allege the existence of torture prisons, and judges frequently condone the use of torture as a way of soliciting evidence from suspects, making it possible for police to use such methods without fear of being held accountable. Typically, only prominent cases receive international attention: For example, on December 22 the ECHR ruled that the continued detention of Vasily Aleksanyan, former head of the Yukos legal department who is ill with AIDS and cancer, was "unacceptable."

Corruption

1999–2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
6.25	6.25	6.00	5.75	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25

Upon coming to office, President Medvedev announced that one of his priorities would be to combat corruption, while Putin admitted that he had failed to address this problem during his eight years as president. In 2008, Transparency International ranked Russia 147 out of 180 countries, with an absolute score of 2.1 on a scale where 1 signifies most corrupt and 10 least corrupt. This is the lowest such score for Russia in the last eight years.

Medvedev signed into law a new package of anticorruption measures on December 25, which includes definitions of corruption and conflict of interest, a first for Russian legislation. There is also a new requirement that public officials and their spouses and minor children (but not grown children, parents, or siblings) must publish their incomes. Most declarations will not be required until 2010, when officials make an account of their 2009 income. Additionally, former public officials are prohibited for a period of two years from working for companies with which they did business as an official. The ban would be the first application of conflict-of-interest laws to Russian labor legislation. Another feature is the broader use of property confiscation procedures. The declared intent of the overall legislative package is to cut ties between the state and business, ending the current practice in which state officials use their position to secure lucrative rewards from the private sector.

Yet the current campaign against corruption contains the same worrisome features as previous ones. The laws stiffen penalties for those offering a bribe, not those willing to accept them. The idea of a two-year break between public service and business activities does not fit Russian conditions, as state officials often run businesses while still in public office. There are also many ways to conceal income, and corrupt bureaucrats will have little difficulty skirting the obligations of the new law. Additionally, Medvedev's proposals do not directly reduce the excessive functions of state agencies, trim unnecessary officials, or simplify and clarify inefficient administrative procedures. Critics also worry that law enforcement agencies will abuse their new powers to confiscate property, the reason this provision was originally removed from Russian legislation. Moreover, the law does not mention classified budgets. The state loses up to 30 percent of what it spends on security and military forces as a result of kickbacks and middleman services, according to the Public Chamber's Aleksandr Kanshin.

A 2008 report by the St. Petersburg-based Institute for Information Freedom Development argues that despite new legislative efforts, current Russian laws do not provide the legal means and mechanisms for citizens to access information about the activities of official agencies. Without access to information, the battle against corruption will be nominal. Likewise, without an aggressive opposition,

open media, free and fair elections, and a legislature that monitors the executive branch, it will be difficult to enforce Medvedev's anticorruption proposals.

Efforts to help Russia address the global financial crisis are likely to create new opportunities for corruption since they expand the state's already large role in the economy. Until recently, the government relied on Western financial institutions to lend money to its own companies because of the corruption within Russian capital markets. Under crisis conditions, there are no mechanisms to ensure that the Russian government will disburse money to companies in an effective way.

Since corruption is deeply ingrained in Russian life, businesspeople and ordinary citizens have little objection to paying bribes. Media outlets lack sufficient independence and protection to investigate corrupt practices effectively. While there are extensive discussions of corruption in the press, they are focused largely on accusations by one group against another to gain political advantage. Calls to action by State Duma Security Committee deputy chairman Mikhail Grishankov and other officials have become more emphatic, particularly as the growing organized crime complex appears resistant to law enforcement efforts, having co-opted some of these agencies into Russia's larger problem of corruption.

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 - ⁵ Svetla Marinova, "Russia: No Country for Charitable Souls," *Eurasianet.org*, August 1, 2008, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav080108.shtml>.
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 - ⁹ Floriana Fossato and John Lloyd with Alexander Verkhovskyy, *The Web that Failed: How Opposition Politics and Independent Initiatives are Failing on the Internet in Russia* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2008) 11.

- ¹⁰ Sergei Kuznetsov presentation at Russia On-line conference, Columbia University, October 17, 2008.
- ¹¹ For more information on these topics, see Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net*, www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/specialreports/NetFreedom2009/FreedomOnTheNet_FullReport.pdf, p. 88.
- ¹² "Russia to Conduct Census of Prisoners First Time in 10 Years," ITAR-TASS, February 3, 2009.