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FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2024

Eastern Donbas*

NOT FREE

2
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	-1 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	3 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

3/100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.

** Indicates a territory as opposed to an independent country.*



Note

Freedom in the World reports assess the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given geographical area, regardless of whether they are affected by the state, nonstate actors, or foreign powers. Disputed or occupied territories are sometimes assessed separately if they meet certain criteria, including boundaries that are sufficiently stable to allow year-on-year comparisons. For more information, see the report [methodology](#) and [FAQ](#).

Overview

Eastern Donbas comprises the portions of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk Regions that have been occupied by Russian and Russian-backed separatist forces since 2014. It covers about a third of the two regions' territory and was home to more than half of their prewar population of 6.5 million people, though the current population cannot be precisely determined. Local authority rests in the hands of the so-called People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DNR and LNR, respectively), which are entirely dependent on Moscow for financial and military support. The Russian Federation recognized both entities as independent states in 2022 and illegally annexed them later in the year. Security services exercise tight control over local political activity, leaving no room for meaningful opposition. Local media are severely restricted, and social media users have been arrested for critical posts. The rule of law and civil liberties are not respected.

Key Developments in 2023

- Occupation authorities continued to conscript local men into the Russian armed forces and mobilize them to fight in the Kremlin's full-scale war against Ukraine. The towns of Bakhmut and Avdiivka, both just outside the previously occupied portions of the Donetsk Region, were among the centers of destructive fighting during the year. The United Nations reported in September that 4,287 civilians had been killed and 6,324 injured in the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions since the full-scale invasion began in February 2022. Experts noted that the true number was likely higher, citing the difficulty of collecting and corroborating evidence.
- In September, Russian authorities staged illegal regional elections in occupied areas of Ukraine, including Donetsk and Luhansk. Ukrainian officials, foreign governments, and international organizations condemned

the exercises, which featured voter intimidation by the Russian military and a slate of exclusively Russian or pro-Russian candidates who supported the occupation.

- Pressure on local residents to accept Russian citizenship and surrender their Ukrainian passports increased. A decree signed by Russian president Vladimir Putin in April threatened those who refused Russian citizenship with deportation if they are found to pose a national security risk.
- In July, Russia enacted a law—which under the occupation was enforceable in eastern Donbas—prohibiting “medical interventions aimed at changing the sex of a person.” In November, Russia’s Supreme Court declared the “international LGBT public movement” to be an “extremist organization” and banned its activities in Russia, a measure that was similarly enforceable in the occupied Donbas.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

Until 2022, executive authority in the DNR and LNR was exercised by a directly elected “head of the republic,” who appointed a prime minister and cabinet with the consent of the legislature. Donetsk leader Denis Pushilin and Luhansk leader Leonid Pasechnik, who were considered widely unpopular but loyal to Moscow, won deeply uncompetitive and fraudulent leadership elections in 2018.

New constitutions introduced in December 2022, after the Russian annexation, abolished the direct election of leaders. In September 2023, incumbents Pushilin and Pasechnik were reelected in staged votes by the two legislatures. Russia’s TASS news service reported that Pasechnik was backed by all 49 deputies in the LNR parliament; details of the DNR vote were not reported.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

0 / 4

Russian-organized regional elections were held in occupied Luhansk and Donetsk in September 2023. The procedures allowed no meaningful competition and featured voter intimidation by armed soldiers. The only parties authorized to participate were the five with representation in the Russian State Duma: United Russia, A Just Russia, the Communist Party, the ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party, and the quasi-liberal New People party. United Russia was awarded massive majorities in both regions. Democratic governments and organizations condemned the elections as a violation of international law and of Ukraine's sovereignty.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

0 / 4

The Russian-installed electoral authorities implement laws and regulations arbitrarily. As with the sham September 2022 annexation referendums, much of the voting in the September 2023 legislative elections was reportedly conducted door to door by soldiers or poll workers under armed escort.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

0 / 4

The DNR and LNR featured political duopolies in the eight years after the initial occupation, with both officially sanctioned parties (dubbed "public movements")

supporting roughly the same policy agenda. Russia's party system was imposed in both regions following the September 2022 annexation. While on paper the five authorized Russian parties offered a broader set of political options than the previous two "public movements," their leaders have all endorsed the war and expressed loyalty to Russian president Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin. Any other political organizations remain effectively banned.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

O / 4

Meaningful political competition is not tolerated. While some form of nominal opposition is theoretically possible within the framework of the five authorized Russian parties, in practice all of the parties aside from the ruling United Russia are marginal. Any pro-Ukrainian views remain banned from public discourse and can draw heavy punishment when openly expressed.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

O / 4

Since the annexation in 2022, Moscow has imposed more direct control over the occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk and abolished their previous symbols of "independence," such as foreign ministry offices. Russian officials hold key government positions in both the DNR and the LNR, while local media, schools and universities, public services, and business structures are dominated by Putin loyalists, leaving no space for independent political activity. The military formations known as "people's militias," which had some 20,000 men under arms, became part of Russia's armed forces in January 2023, and military personnel have played a prominent role in carrying out Kremlin-backed electoral projects.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political

O / 4

rights and electoral opportunities?	
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While the republics' 2022 constitutions guarantee equal rights regardless of ethnicity, race, or religious belief, in practice members of ethnic, religious, and other demographic groups cannot gain meaningful representation outside of the narrow range of viewpoints tolerated by the Kremlin. No segment of society is able to organize independently to advocate for its interests in the political sphere.

In November 2023, Russia's Supreme Court declared the "international LGBT public movement" to be an "extremist organization" and banned its activities in Russia. The measure is enforceable in occupied eastern Donbas, making any political advocacy for the interests of LGBT+ people subject to prosecution.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	O/4
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No officials in occupied Donbas are freely elected. Since the 2022 annexation, which is not recognized internationally, Donetsk and Luhansk have been governed as regions within the Russian Federation, meaning that most if not all important policy decisions are made in Moscow.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	O/4
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Corruption is thought to be widespread in the occupied territories, and there are no effective mechanisms in place to combat it. While local authorities regularly report arrests among customs and police officials, there is no evidence that systemic corruption is effectively curtailed as a result.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	O/4
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A persistent lack of transparency in public life is an overarching feature of the Russian occupation. Levels of secrecy have steadily increased over the years. The DNR and LNR communicate changes in government positions and personnel with little explanation or prior public discussion.

Add Q

Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group?	-1
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Professing Ukrainian identity in Russian-controlled areas has been dangerous since 2014, and many residents who identified as Ukrainian left thereafter: during the census of 2019, separatist-controlled media stressed that nearly all respondents claimed Russian ethnicity. The DNR and LNR abolished official-language status for Ukrainian and replaced the local educational curriculum with those used in the Russian Federation.

Ukrainian officials have accused the Russian government of conducting population exchanges in occupied areas since the launch of the full-scale Russian military invasion in February 2022. Thousands of Ukrainians have been killed in the occupied eastern regions since then, and thousands more have fled or been forcibly transferred to other occupied Ukrainian territories or to Russia. In a sign of broader Russian government plans to alter the population of the Donbas, Mariupol mayor Pyotr Andryushchenko told journalists in July 2023 that more than 40,000 settlers had arrived in the city from the Russian Federation.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

0 / 4

No free and independent media have operated in the occupied Donbas since 2014, and the local media landscape is dominated by “official” local broadcasters, websites, and print media. Local outlets largely republish information and quotes from local and Russian authorities. Coverage of the war against Ukraine closely resembles that seen in Russian state media. Occupation authorities have been distributing free satellite-television equipment to boost local consumption of Russian state broadcasts.

Both pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian bloggers and journalists who aired criticism of local authorities have been silenced with long prison sentences. In October 2023, freelance Ukrainian journalist Victoria Roshchyna was reported missing while working somewhere in occupied Luhansk; her family said Ukrainian officials had told them she was abducted by Russian forces.

D2 0-4 pts

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

1 / 4

Although both the DNR and LNR guaranteed freedom of religion in their constitutions, adherents of faiths not affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church remain subject to persecution. The most severely affected are Jehovah's Witnesses, who in 2018 were banned completely as an extremist organization and had their properties seized. Mandatory reregistration requirements and raids have been directed at Baptists, members of the Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, the Greek Catholic Church, and some Muslim communities. Most Jews, Catholics, and members of other religious minorities are thought to have left Russian-controlled areas since 2014.

D3 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

Local universities and high schools gradually switched to Russian standards after 2020, introducing new curriculums with revised history lessons and reduced Ukrainian-language instruction. In 2022, the local education system was forcibly integrated into the Russian system, with schoolbooks being sent from the Russian Federation.

Political indoctrination is rampant in the occupied areas and directed at the younger generation. The DNR and LNR have established militarized youth organizations for this purpose.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

0 / 4

Any public expression of criticism aimed at the Russian occupation authorities entails a serious risk of punishment. Former prisoners' accounts of torture and abuse in custody serve to deter free discussion. Wartime censorship rules introduced by the DNR in September 2023 explicitly allow the authorities to eavesdrop on private telecommunications and internet activity. In its report covering August to November 2023, the United Nations described an incident in which a woman was arrested and faced criminal charges for posting to social media a video of herself dancing to popular Ukrainian songs.

Local internet service providers have effectively been displaced in favor of Russian counterparts; internet users in occupied areas of Ukraine connect via Russian telecommunications infrastructure and are subject to the same censorship and monitoring regimes as users in Russia.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

0 / 4

Russian occupation authorities have not tolerated any protests since 2014, when most pro-Ukrainian activists fled. Rare attempts to hold rallies, such as during a miners' strike in 2020, are quickly thwarted by security services. In September 2023, the DNR explicitly banned all forms of mass gatherings, citing martial law; organizers of potential protests in the region must apply for permission from a Russian-controlled regional security agency.

E2 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

Independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are not permitted to operate. The last independent Ukrainian NGO, the Donetsk-based Responsible Citizens volunteer group, had to end its work in 2016 when its leaders were forcibly deported to government-controlled Ukraine. Foreign organizations like the Czech NGO People in Need have also been expelled.

In two separate events in April 2022, six members of an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe observer mission in Donetsk and Luhansk were detained by local authorities. Two were released in May; another two received 13-year prison sentences in the LNR that September.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

0 / 4

Official trade union federations are headed by lawmakers who defer to the local leadership. These unions' purpose is to rally workers' support for the de facto authorities, rather than to defend labor rights. In September 2023, the DNR explicitly banned strikes and industrial action, citing martial law; organizers of

potential labor actions in the region must apply for permission from a Russian-controlled regional security agency.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

0/4

There are no indications of judicial independence in the occupied territories. Courts routinely hand down lengthy prison sentences against alleged Ukrainian agents and other perceived enemies of the local and Russian authorities, validating spurious charges regardless of the evidence. The work of the judiciary is entirely opaque, as outside observers are not known to have attended court hearings.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

0/4

Russian law is applicable in the occupied areas in practice. Basic due process guarantees are not observed by de facto authorities. Arbitrary arrests and detentions remain common, and interrogators have reportedly used force and torture to extract confessions.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

0/4

Residents of the occupied territories had faced physical insecurity due to fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists since 2014, but the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought a far greater level of violence and destruction. The United Nations reported in September 2023 that 4,287 civilians had been killed and 6,324 injured in Donetsk and Luhansk overall since February 2022. According to previous UN figures, more than 13,000 people had been killed since the conflict began in 2014, including more than 3,350 civilians.

Long-standing reports of abuse, sexual violence, and torture in prisons and detention centers have persisted. A UN human rights report issued in December 2023 listed numerous cases of torture, killings, and other human rights violations in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

0 / 4

The deeply flawed legal system governing the occupied regions offers little recourse for women facing gender-based discrimination, and like in Russia, the basic rights of LGBT+ people are systematically violated.

In addition to the prevailing hostility toward Ukrainian ethnic identity, there are no provisions to protect the region's other ethnic minority groups—such as Greeks, Azerbaijanis, and Armenians—from discrimination.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

0 / 4

Direct travel into territory controlled by Kyiv is nearly impossible due to the war. Travel to Russia is also restricted. In September 2023, the DNR imposed an explicit travel ban for all public-sector employees unless they file for permission one month in advance. Similar restrictions are thought to exist in the LNR.

Moscow's distribution of Russian passports to residents of the occupied territories continued in 2023. Russian officials claimed in May that they had issued more than two million passports in occupied regions, including parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, but they did not provide separate figures for Donetsk and

Luhansk. Previous public information suggested that almost 800,000 passports had been issued by late 2022.

Pressure on local residents to accept Russian citizenship and surrender their Ukrainian passports greatly increased in 2023. A decree signed by President Putin in April threatened those who refused to do so with deportation if they are found to pose a risk to national security.

G2 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

Russian occupation authorities only partially recognize property rights. Ukrainian-owned industrial plants were effectively nationalized in 2017 and later restructured into a secretive holding, the Southern Mining and Metals Complex. The new ownership of apartments seized from lawful owners who fled has been legalized in recent years. Property belonging to owners without Russian passports has been subject to seizure since the annexation.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

1 / 4

Domestic violence is a serious problem. Both the DNR and the LNR have taken nominal steps to improve the protection of women and children. However, the loss of Ukrainian government and NGO services has negatively affected conditions for victims.

Neither the DNR nor the LNR recognize same-sex marriage, and the environment for LGBT+ people in general is hostile. In addition to the November 2023 Supreme Court judgment banning the “international LGBT public movement,” in July 2023 Russia enacted a law prohibiting “medical interventions aimed at changing the sex of a person” as well as changing a person’s gender in public records or official documents. Like other Russian laws, it is enforceable in the occupied areas in

practice. Rights groups report that almost all LGBT+ individuals have long since fled the occupied areas, and those who remain do not openly or visibly express their identity. Ukrainian human rights organizations documented an April 2023 physical assault by Russian military personnel against a Donetsk man whom they perceived as gay.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because the Russian government implemented new legal restrictions on the personal autonomy of transgender people, and because the Russian Supreme Court effectively banned any expression of LGBT+ identity as “extremist.”

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

1 / 4

Economic opportunity is greatly impaired by the war, trade barriers with government-controlled Ukraine, international sanctions, and the concentration of wealth and resources in the hands of Russian and local elites. Many residents are dependent on humanitarian assistance. Exploitative working conditions, including low or unpaid wages, have been widely reported even in tightly controlled local media.

Forced conscription and mobilization, with men being rounded up and pressed into the Russian military, continued in 2023. Russian-led forces have also allegedly trained and enlisted minors for participation in armed conflict.

On Eastern Donbas

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

2/100 **Not Free**

Other Years

2023

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ADDRESS

1850 M St. NW Floor 11
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 296-5101

GENERAL INQUIRIES

info@freedomhouse.org

PRESS & MEDIA

press@freedomhouse.org

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