

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	416
Land:	Ukraine
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World 2021 – Eastern Donbas
Udgivet:	3. marts 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	12. april 2021

Document #2046509

Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2021 - Eastern Donbas

NOT FREE

4

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) -1 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 5 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

5 / 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 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; the current population cannot be determined with precision, but is likely not more than two million people. Local authority lies in the hands of the so-called People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DNR and LNR, respectively), which claim to be independent states but are not recognized by any country, including Russia. Both are entirely dependent on Moscow for financial and military support, and their leaders have openly proposed joining the Russian Federation. Politics within the territories are tightly controlled by the security services, leaving no room for meaningful opposition. Local media are also under severe restrictions, and social media users have been arrested for critical posts. The rule of law and civil liberties in general are not respected.

Key Developments in 2020

- The coronavirus pandemic had significant detrimental effects on both public health and the area's struggling industrial economy, with reports of crowded hospital wards and shortages of medical staff and medical equipment, as well as recurring labor unrest over wage arrears. Separatist suppressed two miners' strikes in the spring with a mix of repression and financial concessions.
- Crossing points with government-controlled Ukraine were closed in mid-March and only partially reopened in the summer, making it impossible for many pensioners to pick up state payments in government-controlled areas. Bureaucratic and arbitrary movement restrictions also interfered with delivery of aid shipments from Russia, the United Nations, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).
- The issuing of Russian passports to Ukrainian nationals residing in the occupied areas under simplified procedures resumed after a quarantine-related hiatus between March and July. As of mid-December, more than 350,000 locals are thought to have received Russian citizenship, although the rate at which Russian documents are issued seems to be slowing.
- The number of local residents remained unclear, as separatist authorities did not release any results of a census carried out in October 2019.

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

Under the two separatist entities' constitutions, executive authority is exercised by a directly elected "head of the republic," who appoints a prime minister and cabinet with the consent of the legislature.

The winners of the deeply uncompetitive and fraudulent leadership elections in November 2018 remained in place. Both Donetsk leader Denis Pushilin and Luhansk leader Leonid Pasechnik are believed to be widely unpopular but sufficiently loyal to Moscow.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The DNR and LNR constitutions call for "People's Councils" of 100 and 50 seats, respectively. Legislative elections in November 2018 were held under the same flawed conditions as the concurrent leadership elections, with no meaningful competition permitted. Both entities feature only two authorized political "movements." In the DNR, the ruling Donetsk Republic movement was credited with 72.5 percent of the vote, while Peace for Luhansk took 74.1 percent in the LNR. The remaining seats went to the two secondary movements, Free Donbas and the Luhansk Economic Union.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 4

The separatist electoral authorities implemented their entities' laws and regulations arbitrarily in 2018, allegedly manipulating the declared election results and using technicalities to exclude challengers perceived as being able to consolidate enough support to defeat preferred candidates. For example, the DNR election commission approved each of the officially sanctioned candidates' lists of signatures, but it rejected the list submitted by separatist businessman Pavel Gubarev on the grounds that it contained fake signatures.

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 separatist entities feature political duopolies, with both officially sanctioned parties supporting roughly the same policy agenda. Any other political organizations, even if they are also pro-Russian in orientation, are effectively banned. The Communist Party, for instance, has been denied registration in occupied Donetsk.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4

The run-up to the 2018 elections showed that meaningful competition, even within the pro-Russian separatist movement, is not tolerated. Authorities have made efforts to co-opt dissident separatists, and this continued in 2020. In May, Donetsk field commander turned opposition figure Alexander Khodakovsky was rehabilitated when separatist leader Pushilin honored fighters of his "Vostok" militia group. However, former separatist leader Pavel Gubarev remained sidelined.

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? 4

Russia has established a complex web of control over the "People's Republics" that affects all aspects of daily life, including political affairs. Local media, schools and universities, public services, and business structures are dominated by people loyal to the separatist leadership. While many of them are locals, some key positions are held by Russian citizens. Political control is ultimately enforced by the secretive "state security" ministries of the two entities, which are thought to be directed by Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB). The military formations known as "people's militias," which have tens of thousands of men under arms, are believed to be commanded by regular Russian military officers.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4

While the separatist constitutions guarantee equal rights regardless of ethnicity, race, or religious beliefs, in practice ethnic and religious groups not affiliated with the Russian government are excluded from politics, and no segment of society is able to organize independently to advocate for its interests in the political sphere. Professing pro-Ukrainian sentiment is outright dangerous.

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? 0 / 4

None of the separatist officials in Donbas are freely elected, and their de facto governments operate with extreme opacity, making it difficult to discern how much autonomy they have in practice vis-à-vis the Russian government. For example, DNR prime minister Alexander Ananchenko, appointed in 2018, was rarely seen in public until in November 2019. He and the key ministers for the Interior and State Security remain without photographs on the official government website.

Russian officials exert considerable influence on politics in the region. Vladislav Surkov, an adviser to the Russian government whose portfolio included oversight of the two entities, resigned in February 2020 and was replaced by Dmitry Kozak—a rival whose appointment as a deputy head of the Kremlin administration in January apparently triggered Surkov’s resignation. Kozak is widely seen as a more pragmatic policymaker than Surkov, who tended to install loyalists into the regions’ political positions. However, Russia’s policies towards the Donbas did not change significantly after the transition.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0 / 4

Corruption is thought to be widespread in occupied Donetsk and Luhansk, and there are no effective mechanisms in place to combat it. The assassination of Donetsk separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko in 2018 and the ouster of Luhansk counterpart Igor Plotnitsky one year earlier have been explained by analysts as a reaction from Moscow to excessively corrupt practices among local elites. While separatist authorities regularly report arrests among customs and police officials, there is no evidence that corruption is effectively curtailed.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0 / 4

Lack of transparency is an overarching feature of both separatist regimes, and levels of secrecy increased over the past year. In early 2020, the DNR information ministry ended the tradition of interviews with separatist officials, which had previously allowed some limited insight into the separatist administration’s functioning. Both republics continued the practice of communicating the removal of cabinet members by presenting successors without explanation or 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

Professing Ukrainian identity in the separatist-controlled areas of Donbas is considered dangerous, and most residents who identified as Ukrainian have left since 2014. Both entities abolished the official-language status to Ukrainian in the first half of 2020, making Russian the sole official language. School is conducted in Russian, and Ukrainian-language materials were eliminated from school curriculums at the start of the 2020–21 academic year.

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. The local media landscape remains in the hands of “official” DNR and LNR broadcasters and websites. The relatively insignificant local print media have also been brought under control. Separatist outlets largely republish information and quotes from separatist and Russian officials. Reports about the armed conflict are exclusively based on statements from separatist militias, which blame the Ukrainian government side for every cease-fire violation. Coverage of government-controlled Ukraine is almost always negative, whereas reporting on the local economy is restricted to positive events like the opening of new coalfaces.

Pro-Ukrainian bloggers and journalists have been silenced by long prison sentences and eventual deportation to government-controlled Ukraine via prisoner exchanges. The most prominent example is that of Stanislav Aseyev, a freelancer for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL); he was convicted of “organizing an extremist organization” and espionage, and handed a 15-year sentence before being returned to Ukrainian government-controlled territory in 2019, after two years in detention. Pro-Russian bloggers critical of the separatist leadership remain, but usually operate anonymously.

Ukrainian journalists generally do not enter the DNR and LNR for safety reasons, and most foreign media remain subject to extremely restrictive accreditation policies, with the result amounting to a virtual prohibition on reporting.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 1 / 4

Although both “People’s Republics” guarantee freedom of religion in their constitutions, adherents of faiths that are 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. Also that year, a mandatory reregistration process left many groups without recognition, and raids or other pressure were directed at Baptists, members of the Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, the Greek Catholic Church, and some Muslim communities. Most members of religious minority groups, including Roman Catholics and Jews, are thought to have left the separatist-held 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 were brought under separatist control in 2014. Some, like Donetsk National University, split into two rival institutions, with one established in government-controlled territory and the other run by separatist authorities at the old location. Political indoctrination remains rampant in the occupied areas; high schools were forced to switch to Russian standards in September 2020, having previously introduced new curricula with revised history lessons and reduced Ukrainian-language instruction.

Political indoctrination is rampant, especially for the younger generation. Both republics have set up militarized youth organizations for this purpose. Membership in the "Young Guards–Yunarmia" is open to children as young as eight years old, prompting allegations of a children's army.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of 1 / surveillance or retribution? 4

Any public expression of criticism is highly risky, and private citizens' online activities are monitored. In December 2020, for example, Donetsk-based pro-Russian commentator Roman Manekin was detained and accused of cooperating with Ukrainian intelligence on the basis of both public and private Facebook exchanges. He has been detained at least twice before, in 2017 and 2018, for criticizing the DNR leadership on social media.

Testimony from former prisoners about abuse in custody also serves to deter free expression.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

No significant protests have been held in the separatist-held areas since 2014, when most pro-Ukrainian activists fled. Even gatherings of nationalists who favor integration with Russia are not tolerated if they are critical of separatist authorities. In the spring of 2020, relatives and colleagues of striking coal miners held unauthorized rallies in support of them in the Luhansk region. The protests ebbed after the miners were paid some of their wages and members of the separatist security ministry detained some protesters; there were reports that some miners were tortured while in detention, or that their family members were arbitrarily detained.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human 0 / rights- and governance-related work? 4

Independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are not permitted to operate. The last independent NGO in the separatist-held areas, the Responsible Citizens volunteer group, stopped functioning in 2016 when several of its leaders were forcibly deported to government-controlled Ukraine. Foreign aid organizations like the Czech group People in Need were also expelled. The only remaining international organizations operating in the area are the ICRC, some UN agencies, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 0 / 4

The DNR and LNR have official trade union federations, and both are headed by separatist lawmakers who defer to the local leadership. The officially sanctioned unions' purpose is to rally workers' support for separatist authorities, rather than to defend their labor rights. In 2020, for example, LNR miners' union leaders supported the "restructuring" of 56 mines, a process that came with significant wage and job losses.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

There are no signs of judicial independence in the two separatist entities. Courts continued to hand down lengthy prison sentences against alleged Ukrainian agents and other perceived enemies of the local authorities, validating spurious charges regardless of the evidence. The work of the judiciary is entirely opaque, and 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

Basic due process guarantees are not observed by separatist authorities or affiliated armed groups. Arbitrary arrests and detentions remain common, and interrogators have reportedly used force and torture to extract confessions. The United Nations' Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine said in a report released in September 2020 that interviews with released prisoners "confirmed patterns of torture and ill-treatment."

F3 0-4 pts**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4**

Combat between Russian-backed separatist forces and the Ukrainian military continued in the first half of 2020, frequently endangering civilians. The second half of the year was much calmer, as a renewed ceasefire, brokered in July, continued to hold. More than 13,000 people have been killed since the conflict began in April 2014, including more than 3,300 civilians, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The OHCHR has condemned the lack of institutional mechanisms to prevent and punish enforced disappearances, which have been reported during the conflict, particularly in its early years.

There have been numerous reports of abuse, sexual violence, and torture in separatist prisons and detention centers. The self-proclaimed state security ministries of both entities regularly publish videos in which detainees confess to spying and other forms of subversive activity while showing signs of physical abuse or severe psychological pressure.

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 operating in the occupied regions offers little recourse for women facing gender-based discrimination, and the basic rights of LGBT+ people are not recognized. In 2018, two Russian transgender activists traveled to Donetsk with the aim of carrying out an art performance in support of transgender rights. They were quickly arrested and expelled.

In addition to the prevailing hostility toward the Ukrainian ethnic identity, there are no provisions to protect the separatist-held areas' 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, 0 / employment, or education? 4**

Travel between the separatist-held areas and government-controlled Ukraine was already severely restricted, and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, harsh, excessively bureaucratic, and frequently arbitrary additional restrictions were implemented. All five crossing points between separatist and government-held areas were closed between late March and mid-June, and thereafter only two reopened. Restrictions in the DNR were more severe than in the LHR, allowing entry only for previously approved individuals, who were then forced to undergo two weeks of “observation” in a hospital. Crossings between the two territories themselves did not reopen at all. Most of those affected by the restrictions were the more than one million old-age pensioners, who could no longer travel to government-controlled Ukraine to pick up state payments, receive health care, or conduct other important personal business. Travel to and from Russia was less impeded, but senior separatist officials must still inform their leaders before leaving the territories.

The Russian government's distributing of Russian passports to residents of the occupied territories continued in 2020, and the separatists claimed in December that more than 350,000 had been issued. At least 1.5 million of the areas' 3.6 million prewar residents are believed to have left their homes since 2014, suggesting that no more than 14 percent have accepted Russian passports. However, the intensifying campaign against the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian identity has raised fears that Ukrainian passport holders will face increasing difficulties in the future.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because COVID-19-related restrictions on movement were selectively implemented to limit travel to and from government-controlled parts of Ukraine.

G2 0-4 pts**Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without 0 / undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4**

The separatists continued to ignore property rights. In the LNR, the de facto authorities regrouped coal mines into a state-run holding called Vostok-Ugol, including enterprises previously nationalized by separatist authorities under the pretext of “external administration.” The main external administrator in both “republics” is a secretive holding firm with Russian management, reportedly registered in the Russian-occupied Georgian region of South Ossetia. There have been numerous reports of other property seizures, including the expropriation of apartments whose lawful owners have fled.

G3 0-4 pts**Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, 2 / protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 4**

Domestic violence is a serious problem, and both separatist entities 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 separatist entity recognizes same-sex marriage.

G4 0-4 pts**Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4**

Economic opportunity is impaired by the ongoing conflict, trade barriers with government-controlled Ukraine, international sanctions, and the concentration of wealth and resources in the hands of Russian- and separatist-affiliated elites. Many residents are dependent on humanitarian assistance. Exploitative working conditions, including low or unpaid wages, have been reported even by separatist-controlled media. Separatist forces have allegedly trained and enlisted minors for participation in armed conflict.

ecoi.net summary:

Eastern Donbas: Annual report
on political rights and civil liberties
in 2020

Country:

Ukraine

Source:

Freedom House

Original link:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/eastern-donbas/freedom-world/2021>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

3 March 2021

Document ID:

2046509

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

