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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2021 - Crimea

NOT FREE

7

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) -2 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 9 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

8 / 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

In early 2014, Russian forces invaded the autonomous Ukrainian region of Crimea and quickly annexed it to the Russian Federation through a referendum that was widely condemned for violating international law. The occupation government severely limits political and civil rights, has silenced independent media, and employs antiterrorism and other laws against political dissidents. Many Ukrainians have been deported from or otherwise compelled to leave Crimea. Members of the indigenous Crimean Tatar minority, many of whom continue to vocally oppose the Russian occupation, have faced acute repression by the authorities.

Key Developments in 2020

- Crimean authorities initiated strict assembly restrictions in March in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but those restrictions were selectively applied, with a June military parade celebrating the Soviet Union's involvement in World War II proceeding with reportedly little modification. Territorial authorities were accused of underreporting COVID-19 deaths by health-care workers in September.
- In September, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a report on human rights in Crimea, noting ongoing arbitrary arrests and searches, torture of detainees, interference with the work of journalists, due process violations, and other serious abuses.
- Territorial courts issued the first prison sentences against Jehovah's Witnesses for their religious activity in March, when a church member received a six-year sentence for attempting to form a congregation. In September, a prison sentence lodged against another adherent was upheld in a separate case.

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 administrative system established by Russia, the Crimean Peninsula is divided into the Republic of Crimea and the federal city of Sevastopol, a port of roughly 436,600 residents. Sevastopol's political institutions largely mirror those of Crimea proper.

The head of the Republic of Crimea is elected by its legislature, the State Council of Crimea, for up to two consecutive five-year terms. Lawmakers choose the leader based on a list of nominees prepared by the Russian president. In October 2014, the legislature unanimously elected Sergey Aksyonov as the head of the republic in a process that did not conform to democratic standards. (Aksyonov had led Crimea since February 2014, when a group of armed men forced legislators to elect him prime minister at gunpoint.) He was unanimously reelected in 2019.

An Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) election monitoring mission noted that polling for Ukraine's presidential election, held in two rounds in March and April 2019, could not be organized in Crimea.

A2 0-4 pts

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

The State Council consists of 75 members elected to five-year terms. Two-thirds of the members are elected by party list and one-third in single-member districts. Legislative elections in 2014 under the Russian-organized Crimean constitution were contested exclusively by candidates who backed the Russian occupation, and Ukrainian parties were banned. Conditions for the September 2019 elections were similar, though the ruling party in Russia, United Russia, lost some support, and won 60 seats, down from 70 previously. The ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) secured 10 seats, and the Communist Party won 5.

OSCE election monitors noted that polling for Ukraine's parliamentary elections in July 2019 could not be organized in Crimea. Crimeans were similarly unable to participate in Ukraine's October 2020 local elections.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant 0 / election management bodies? 4

The Russian occupation authorities have tailored the electoral system to ensure maximum control by Moscow. Legislators electing the chief executive are limited to candidates chosen by the Russian president. In the legislative elections, legitimate opposition forces are denied registration before the voting begins, leaving voters with the choice of either abstaining or endorsing pro-Russian candidates.

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

Ukrainian political parties are banned, allowing Russia's ruling party and other Kremlin-approved factions to dominate the political system. The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), local police, and pro-Russian "self-defense" units use intimidation and harassment to suppress any political mobilization against the current government or the annexation of Crimea.

As in Russia, the authorities in the territory consistently crack down on opposition political activity. Crimean Tatars have continued to voice dissent and openly oppose the Russian occupation, but they risk harassment, arrest, and imprisonment for their actions. Other opposition figures also experience intimidation and police surveillance. In early 2018, Yevgeniy Karakashev, an opposition political activist, was arrested in Crimea on terrorism charges, and in April 2019 was convicted by a Russian court and sentenced to six years in a penal colony. In October 2019, pro-Ukraine activist Oleh Prykhodko was arrested in Crimea and accused of terrorism; his trial was still ongoing at the end of 2020.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through 0 / elections? 4

Because Ukrainian political parties are not allowed to compete in elections and Russia tightly controls the political and electoral systems, there is no opportunity for a genuine political opposition to form, compete, or take power in Crimea.

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? 0 / 4

Sergey Aksyonov, the chief executive, was originally installed by Russian security forces, and subsequent elections have been carefully controlled by the Russian government, which pressures citizens to vote. Among other abuses, during the 2016 Russian parliamentary elections, public- and private-sector workers were threatened with dismissal from their jobs if they failed to vote. During the March 2018 Russian presidential election and September 2019 local elections, public employees were again threatened with termination if they did not vote.

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? 0 / 4

Occupation authorities deny full political rights to all Crimea residents, but Crimean Tatars and ethnic Ukrainians are regarded with particular suspicion and face greater persecution than do ethnic Russians.

The headquarters of the Mejlis, the Crimean Tatars' representative body, was closed by the authorities in 2014. The Mejlis's incumbent chairman, Refat Chubarov, and Crimean Tatar leader Mustafa Dzhemilev have since been banned from the territory. The Mejlis was officially banned by Crimea's Supreme Court in 2016. In March 2020, Chubarov was charged with organizing riots for participating in a 2014 demonstration, while Dzhemilev was charged with "illegally crossing the state border of the Russian Federation" in April. Both cases were still ongoing at year's end.

The prohibition on Ukrainian political parties leaves ethnic Ukrainians with limited options for meaningful representation.

Women formally have equal political rights, but they remain underrepresented in leadership positions in practice, and government officials demonstrate little interest in or understanding of gender-equality issues. After the September 2019 election, women held 21 percent of the seats in the State Council.

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

All major policy decisions are made in Moscow and executed by Russian president Vladimir Putin's representatives in Crimea or the local authorities, who were not freely elected and are beholden to the Kremlin.

C2 0-4 pts

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

Corruption is widespread in Crimea and occurs at the highest levels of government. Generally, efforts to investigate and prosecute corruption are inadequate. Some elements of the Russian-backed leadership, including Aksyonov, reputedly have ties to organized crime. In recent years, the Russian FSB has arrested a number of Crimean officials as part of an ostensible campaign against graft; many of the arrests were related to allegations that local authorities embezzled Russian funds meant to support the occupation. However, some have also been linked to infighting between Crimean and Russian officials over control of the peninsula's assets.

C3 0-4 pts

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

With strict controls on the media and few other means of holding officials accountable, residents struggle to obtain information about the functioning of their government. Budget processes are opaque, and input from civil society, which is itself subject to tight restrictions, is limited.

Authorities are similarly opaque about the course of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In September 2020, Crimean health-care workers warned that the occupation authorities were underreporting pandemic-related deaths. In October, former Mejlis chairman Chubarov claimed that Russian authorities were withholding pandemic-related information, and claimed that services in Sevastopol were overwhelmed to the point that some patients could not access care.

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? -2

Since the occupation began, the Russian government has taken decisive steps to solidify ethnic Russian domination of the peninsula and marginalize the Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar communities. The elimination of the Ukrainian language from school curriculums and the closure of most Ukrainian Orthodox churches since 2014 are indicative of this attempt to Russify the population.

Russian and local pro-Russian officials' policies and actions in Crimea have led to an influx of hundreds of thousands of people from Russia, including Russian troops, civilian personnel, and their families. People displaced by fighting and deprivation in eastern Ukraine—home to many ethnic Russians—have also come to Crimea. Ukrainian citizens from Crimea have been drafted into compulsory military service in the Russian armed forces, in contravention of international law. By 2020, more than 25,000 Crimeans had been drafted into the Russian military, with many of them forced to serve far from Crimea.

Meanwhile, political persecution has led to an outflow of ethnic Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars. Russia instituted a policy of mass Russian naturalization for all residents of Crimea in 2014, in violation of international law. Once the policy was enacted, Crimeans had only 18 days to opt out of Russian citizenship. Ukrainian citizens, many of them long-term residents with immediate family on the peninsula, continue to be deported from Crimea, often for opting out of Russian citizenship.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

Media freedom is severely curtailed in Crimea. In addition to other restrictive Russian laws, a penal code provision prescribes imprisonment for public calls for action against Russia’s territorial integrity, which has been interpreted to ban statements against the annexation, including in the media.

Journalists in Crimea risk harassment, arrest, and imprisonment for carrying out their work. In 2019, Crimean Tatar citizen journalist Nariman Memedeminov was handed a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence over YouTube videos he posted in 2013 about the activities of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a pan-Islamist movement that seeks to establish a caliphate but does not advocate violence to achieve it; the group operates legally in Ukraine but is designated as a terrorist group in Russia. Memedeminov’s YouTube channel has more recently covered abuses against Crimean Tatars. Memedeminov was released from a Russian prison in September 2020. In December, a territorial court handed Lenur Islyamov, owner of Crimean Tatar television station ATR, a 19-year prison sentence in absentia on charges including “sabotage.”

Independent and pro-Ukraine media outlets do not openly function on the peninsula. A 2015 reregistration process overseen by the Russian media and telecommunications regulator Roskomnadzor effectively reduced the number of media outlets in Crimea by more than 90 percent. The occupation authorities have cut Crimea off from access to Ukrainian television, and Crimean internet service providers must operate under draconian Russian media laws. Russian authorities continued to block a number of Ukrainian news sites, and interfered with Ukrainian radio signals by transmitting Russian programming on the same frequencies in 2020. The September 2020 OHCHR report noted continued interference with journalistic work by Russian law enforcement agents.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 0 / 4

The occupation authorities forced religious organizations to reregister under new rules, sharply reducing the number of registered groups. All 22 Jehovah’s Witnesses congregations were deregistered after the Russian Supreme Court ruled in 2017 that the group had violated laws against extremism. In March 2020, authorities began issuing prison sentences to adherents for their activity. That month, a Jehovah’s Witness received a six-year sentence for attempting to organize a congregation. In September, the territory’s supreme court upheld a conviction against another member for his religious activity and handed him a six-year sentence.

Mosques associated with Crimean Tatars have been denied permission to register, and Muslims have faced legal discrimination. At least 10 Crimean Tatars received prison sentences for their alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir membership in 2020. A December 2020 report from the Crimean Human Rights Group, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), separately counted the detention of 69 individuals accused of membership in “extremist” Muslim organizations in the previous month.

Occupation authorities have confiscated numerous properties in Crimea from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU); in June 2019, a de facto court nullified a prominent Simferopol cathedral’s lease with Ukrainian authorities; it was the last cathedral in Crimea to have maintained an affiliation with the Ukrainian church authorities. (Earlier that year, police detained Ukrainian archbishop Clement in Simferopol, but he was released a few hours later in the face of international pressure.) In July 2020, authorities ordered the demolition of a smaller OCU structure in Yevpatoria.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 due to escalating persecution of the Muslim, Ukrainian Orthodox, and Jehovah’s Witness communities.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 1 / 4

Schools must use the Russian state curriculum. Schoolchildren in Crimea are exposed to Russian military propaganda. Some schoolchildren have also received basic military training in recent years. Instruction in the Ukrainian language has been almost completely eliminated. In a 2017 ruling, the International Court of Justice ordered Russia to ensure the availability of education in Ukrainian, but the authorities did not comply with this order. Access to education in the Crimean Tatar language has been more stable, declining only slightly since 2014.

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

The FSB reportedly encourages residents to inform on individuals who express opposition to the annexation, and a climate of fear and intimidation seriously inhibits private discussion of political matters. Social media comments are reportedly monitored by authorities. The FSB frequently opens criminal cases against those who criticize the occupation and the oppression of Crimean Tatars.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Freedom of assembly is severely restricted. Public events cannot proceed without permission from the authorities, and the Crimean government lists only 366 locations where they can be held. Permission to hold demonstrations is frequently denied, and when protests do proceed, participants are often arrested. Authorities have at times handed

activists advance warning notes threatening them with administrative or criminal prosecution for holding events. A number of such warning notes were handed to Crimean Tatar activists before the anniversary of the Stalin-era mass deportations and Crimean Tatar Flag Day.

Authorities further restricted public gatherings in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but were selective in enforcing those restrictions. A June military parade celebrating the anniversary of the Soviet Union’s World War II victory proceeded without significant modification. In comparison, Venera Mustafayeva, the mother of imprisoned human rights activist Server Mustafayev, was cited for violating COVID-19-related restrictions when she held a one-person protest in the town of Bakhchysarai in September, and received a fine in December.

E2 0-4 pts

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

The de facto authorities, including the FSB, repress all independent political and civic organizations. NGOs are subject to harsh Russian laws that enable state interference and obstruct foreign funding. NGO leaders are regularly harassed and arrested for their activities.

In September 2020, Server Mustafayev, a coordinator for NGO Crimean Solidarity, was sentenced to 14 years’ imprisonment in a Russian penal colony for his alleged ties to Hizb ut-Tahrir.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

Trade union rights are formally protected under Russian law but limited in practice. As in both Ukraine and Russia, employers are often able to engage in antiunion discrimination and violate collective-bargaining rights. Pro-Russian authorities have threatened to nationalize property owned by labor unions in Crimea.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

Under Moscow’s rule, Crimea is subject to the Russian judicial system, which lacks independence and is effectively dominated by the executive branch. Russian laws bar dual citizenship for public officials, and Crimean judges were required to obtain Russian citizenship in order to retain their positions after the annexation.

In recent years, Russian judges have been transferred to from Russia to work in Crimea. These judges regularly hand down politically motivated judgements against residents who oppose the annexation.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4

Russian authorities replaced Ukrainian laws with those of the Russian Federation. In December 2020, Russian president Putin enacted criminal code amendments allowing for harsher punishments against those accused of “violating” or “alienating” Russian territorial integrity.

Many detainees and prisoners are transferred from occupied Crimea to Russia, in violation of international law; the September 2020 OHCHR report noted that individuals accused of membership in banned religious groups, espionage, or subversion are often tried in Russian military courts.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions, harsh interrogation tactics, falsification of evidence, pressure to waive legal counsel, and unfair trials are common. The OHCHR report noted that prosecutors are heavily favored in military court proceedings, and separately noted that state-appointed defense lawyers participating in cases in Crimea were often ineffective.

F3 0-4 pts

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

The Russian occupation authorities commonly engage in torture of detainees and other abuses. The September 2020 OHCHR report noted accounts of “mock executions, beatings, electric shocks, and sexual violence.” Victims of torture have no legal recourse, allowing security forces to act with impunity.

Detention centers are often overcrowded and unhygienic, and detainees do not consistently receive medical attention; Server Mustafayev and two codefendants did not receive timely medical treatment after contracting a respiratory infection in March 2020.

Ongoing Russian-Ukrainian tensions threaten Crimea’s security. In November 2018, Russian forces attacked and seized three Ukrainian naval vessels in the Black Sea near Crimea as they attempted to enter the Sea of Azov through the Kerch Strait. Russia then took the 24 Ukrainian military personnel on board into custody; they were released in September 2019 as part of a prisoner swap. (The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea had ordered their release that May.) Russia continues to conduct large-scale war exercises in Crimea.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4

In addition to official discrimination and harassment against ethnic Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars, women face de facto discrimination in the workplace, and the legal situation for LGBT+ people has worsened under the Russian occupation. After 2014, Crimea became subject to Russia’s 2013 law banning dissemination of information that promotes “nontraditional sexual relationships,” which tightly restricts the activities of LGBT+ people and organizations.

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, 1 / employment, or education? 4

The occupation authorities have sought to compel Crimea’s residents to accept Russian citizenship and surrender their Ukrainian passports. Those who fail to do so face the threat of dismissal from employment, loss of property rights, inability to travel to mainland Ukraine and elsewhere, and eventual deportation as foreigners.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without 1 / undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4

Property rights are poorly protected, and the Russian annexation has resulted in a redistribution of assets in favor of Russian and pro-Russian entities. After the occupation, the properties of many Ukrainian companies were seized by Russian authorities. In May 2018, a court in The Hague ordered Russia to pay \$159 million to Ukrainian companies that had their property confiscated. The properties of Crimean Tatars who returned in the 1990s—after a Soviet-era mass deportation—and built houses without permits are also vulnerable to seizure by Russian authorities.

In March 2020, Putin signed an edict banning foreign individuals from owning coastal land in the territory; the edict also included new restrictions on property rights which do not apply for Crimean residents holding Russian passports.

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 remains a serious problem in Crimea, and Russian laws do not offer strong protections. In 2017, Putin signed legislation that partly decriminalized domestic abuse in Russia, prescribing only small fines and short administrative detention for acts that do not cause serious injuries. Russian law does not recognize same-sex marriage or civil unions.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

Economic opportunity has been limited since the occupation due to international sanctions, restrictions on trade via mainland Ukraine, and reliance on trade with Russia. Pollution problems in Crimea are associated with sulfur dioxide emitted from a chemical factory led to the evacuation of over 4,000 children in the town of Armyansk in 2018. Emissions were recorded again in 2019. Residents’ access to goods and services remains constrained, and vital industries like tourism and agriculture have stagnated.

As in both Ukraine and Russia, migrant workers, women, and children are vulnerable to trafficking for the purposes of forced labor or sexual exploitation.

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