

Eastern Donbas: Freedom in the World 2020 Country Report | Freedom House

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PR [Political Rights](#) -1 40

CL [Civil Liberties](#) 6 60

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

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



header1 Note

The numerical ratings and status listed above do not reflect conditions in either government-controlled Ukraine or Crimea, which are examined in separate reports. *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](#).

header2 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 roughly 6.5 million people, though the current population cannot be determined with precision. 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.

header3 Key Developments in 2019

- Aleksandr Ananchenko, who was appointed as “prime minister” of the DNR in October 2018, appeared and spoke in public for the first time in November 2019, underscoring the extreme opacity of the two separatist entities’ government structures.
- In June, Moscow began issuing Russian passports to Ukrainian nationals residing in the occupied areas under a simplified procedure. Separatist authorities reportedly conducted a census of the territories in October, though the results were not immediately released.
- An ongoing trade blockade between the occupied areas and the rest of Ukraine, combined with corruption and persistent violence, continued to hamper efforts to revive the local economy.

PR Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	0.000
	4.004

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.

Leadership elections were held in both entities in November 2018, though they were not recognized internationally and were widely regarded as uncompetitive. Evidence of fraud and voter intimidation were reported. In Donetsk, the declared winner was Denis Pushilin, who had served as interim leader since the assassination of his predecessor in August 2018. He was credited with 61 percent of the vote, with the remainder divided among four little-known candidates. More viable competitors were excluded from participating. Leonid Pasechnik, the acting separatist leader in Luhansk since a coup d’état in 2017, was confirmed in his position with 68 percent of the vote, defeating three obscure opponents.

A2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	0.000
	4.004

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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	0.000
	4.004

The separatist electoral authorities implemented their entities’ laws and regulations arbitrarily in 2018, allegedly manipulating the declared election results and using technicalities to exclude the incumbent leaders’ better-known challengers. 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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 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?	0.000
	4.004

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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	0.000
	4.004

The incumbent separatist leaders were first installed as a result of violence and support from Moscow, and the run-up to the 2018 elections showed that meaningful competition even within the pro-Russian separatist movement would not be tolerated. In Donetsk, Gubarev was barred from running on the grounds that he had not collected enough valid signatures, while potential candidate Aleksandr Khodakovsky, a former militia commander, was refused entry to the territory by Russian border guards. Both have championed faster integration with Russia. Gubarev’s wife, prominent Free Donbas member Yekaterina Gubareva, was temporarily detained to prevent her from participating in her movement’s preelection convention in September. Another potential leadership candidate in Donetsk, the Communist-backed Igor Khakimzyanov, failed to submit his application on time after he was injured in a bomb explosion, also in September.

B3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 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? 0.000 4.004

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), and the "people's militias," which have tens of thousands of men under arms and are believed to be commanded by regular Russian military officers.

B4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 0.000 4.004

While the separatist constitutions guarantee equal rights regardless of ethnicity, race, or religious beliefs, ethnic and religious groups that are not affiliated with Russia face restrictions in practice, and no segment of society is able to organize independently to advocate for its interests in the political sphere.

C Functioning of Government

C1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0.000 4.004

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, Aleksandr Ananchenko, the DNR prime minister appointed in October 2018, was rarely glimpsed in public until he appeared at a meeting of the ruling political movement in November 2019. Both entities are internationally isolated and entirely dependent on Russia for military and economic support.

C2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0.000 4.004

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 Aleksandr 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 DNR authorities have arrested at least one Zakharchenko-era official and investigated others, there is no evidence that the change in leadership has significantly reduced corruption.

C3 1.00-4.00 pts 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0.000 4.004

Lack of transparency is an overarching feature of both separatist regimes. While some openness existed in the LNR under Plotnitsky, whose weekly government meetings were broadcast live on YouTube, the entity reverted to higher levels of secrecy after Pasechnik, a career intelligence officer, took power in 2017. It is common practice in both “republics” to communicate the removal of cabinet members simply by presenting their successors without explanation or public discussion.

In 2019, the DNR and LNR both created Public Chambers—government advisory bodies with representatives from civil society, based on the Russian model. However, in June the two chambers chose former separatist officials who had been ousted in previous rounds of infighting to serve as their chairmen. The moves suggested that the bodies were being used to provide patronage positions and mend rifts in the separatist movement.

ADDITIONAL DISCRETIONARY POLITICAL RIGHTS QUESTION

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? -1.00-1

Professing Ukrainian identity in the separatist-controlled areas of Donbas is considered dangerous, and most residents who identified as Ukrainian have left since 2014. Although both entities nominally granted official-language status to Ukrainian along with Russian, it is rarely used by separatist authorities. In December 2019, Pushilin suggested making Russian the sole official language in the DNR. During the census of October 2019, separatist-controlled media stressed that nearly all respondents claimed Russian ethnicity.

CL Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 1.00-4.00 pts 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0.000 4.004

No free and independent media have operated in the occupied Donbas since 2014, when local newsrooms were raided by armed men and many journalists were forced to flee the separatist-controlled areas. The local media landscape is now dominated by “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 focuses on minor positive events like the opening of new coalfaces.

Some criticism of the separatist regime was occasionally voiced on online outlets controlled by Pavel Gubarev. However, as Gubarev and his wife were attempting to

register as candidates in the November 2018 elections, these outlets went offline for a short time. After they resumed operations, their content was generally less critical.

Independent bloggers and journalists working undercover or anonymously in separatist-held areas risk long prison sentences if their identity is revealed. Luhansk blogger Eduard Nedelyayev was abducted in 2016 and sentenced to 14 years in prison for alleged espionage in 2017; he was then released in a prisoner swap with Ukrainian authorities in December 2017. Donetsk journalist Stanislav Aseyev was detained in 2017, forced to “confess” to espionage on video, and sentenced to 15 years in prison in October 2019; he was freed in a December 2019 prisoner exchange.

Efforts by the Ukrainian government and independent private media to broadcast into the separatist-held areas have been disrupted by signal jamming. Ukrainian journalists generally do not enter the DNR and LNR for safety reasons, and most foreign media have been barred from entering since 2015. Separatist authorities’ accreditation policies remain extremely selective.

D2 1.00-4.00 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	1.001 4.004
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Although both “People’s Republics” guarantee freedom of religion in their constitutions, adherents of faiths that are not affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church are 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 and the Greek Catholic Church, and some Muslim communities. Many members of religious minorities, including Roman Catholics and Jews, have reportedly left the separatist-held areas since 2014.

D3 1.00-4.00 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	0.000 4.004
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Local universities were brought under separatist control in 2014. The largest of them, such as 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 is rampant in the occupied areas; high schools have been given new curriculums with revised history lessons, and Ukrainian-language instruction has been greatly reduced.

D4 1.00-4.00 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	1.001 4.004
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There is strong evidence that private citizens’ social media activity is monitored. Individuals have been arrested and kept in detention for publishing posts or otherwise expressing opinions that are critical of separatist authorities. For example, religious studies scholar Ihor Kozlovsky, who was known for his pro-Ukrainian views, was arrested in January 2016, sentenced to 32 months in prison on fabricated

charges of weapons possession, and released in a December 2017 prisoner exchange. Donetsk-based commentator Roman Manekin, an ardent supporter of union with Russia, was temporarily detained at least twice in 2017 and 2018 after publicly criticizing the DNR leadership. Reports of abuse in custody and the prevalence of political violence in general also serve to deter free expression.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0.000 4.004

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 July 2019, a small unauthorized assembly of hard-line Russian nationalists in Donetsk was quickly dispersed due to rumors of a bomb threat. Participants complained about the presence of plainclothes security agents.

E2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 0.000 4.004

Independent nongovernmental organizations (NGO) are not permitted to operate. The only local independent NGO known to be working in the separatist-held areas, the Responsible Citizens volunteer group, stopped functioning after several of its leaders were forcibly deported to government-controlled Ukraine in 2016. The Czech aid organization People in Need was also expelled that year, and other non-Russian foreign NGOs have generally been excluded, with exceptions for the International Committee of the Red Cross, some UN agencies, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

E3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 0.000 4.004

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.

F Rule of Law

F1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0.000 4.004

There are no signs of judicial independence in the two separatist entities. Their courts regularly hand down heavy 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, as outside

observers are not known to have attended court hearings.

F2 1.00-4.00 pts 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0.000 4.004

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 threats and violence to extract confessions. Those released in prisoner exchanges with the Ukrainian government have included arbitrarily detained civilians and journalists as well as Ukrainian service members. In a December 2019 exchange, separatist forces turned over 76 people—69 civilians and 12 service members.

F3 1.00-4.00 pts 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0.000 4.004

Combat between Russian-backed separatist forces and the Ukrainian military continued in 2019, frequently endangering civilians. 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 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 1.00-4.00 pts 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0.000 4.004

In addition to the prevailing hostility toward 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. 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 January 2018, two Russian transgender activists traveled to Donetsk with the aim of carrying out an art performance in support of such rights. They were arrested, held in detention for two weeks, and expelled.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 1.00-4.00 pts 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 1.001 4.004

Travel between the separatist-held areas and government-controlled Ukraine is restricted, and civilians face long waits and multiple security checks before they can traverse the few designated crossing points. While travel to and from Russia is less impeded, senior separatist officials must inform their leaders before leaving the territories.

At least 1.5 million of the Donbas's 6.6 million prewar residents are believed to have left their homes since 2014. The Russian government began distributing Russian passports to residents of the occupied territories in June 2019, leading to concerns that separatist authorities would discriminate against those who retained their Ukrainian passports.

G2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	0.000 4.004
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Property rights are widely abused. In separatist-controlled areas, the de facto authorities have placed major privately held enterprises under “external administration,” effectively nationalizing them. The main external administrator 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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	2.002 4.004
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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, and cases of sexual violence in separatist detention facilities have been reported. Neither separatist entity recognizes same-sex marriage.

G4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

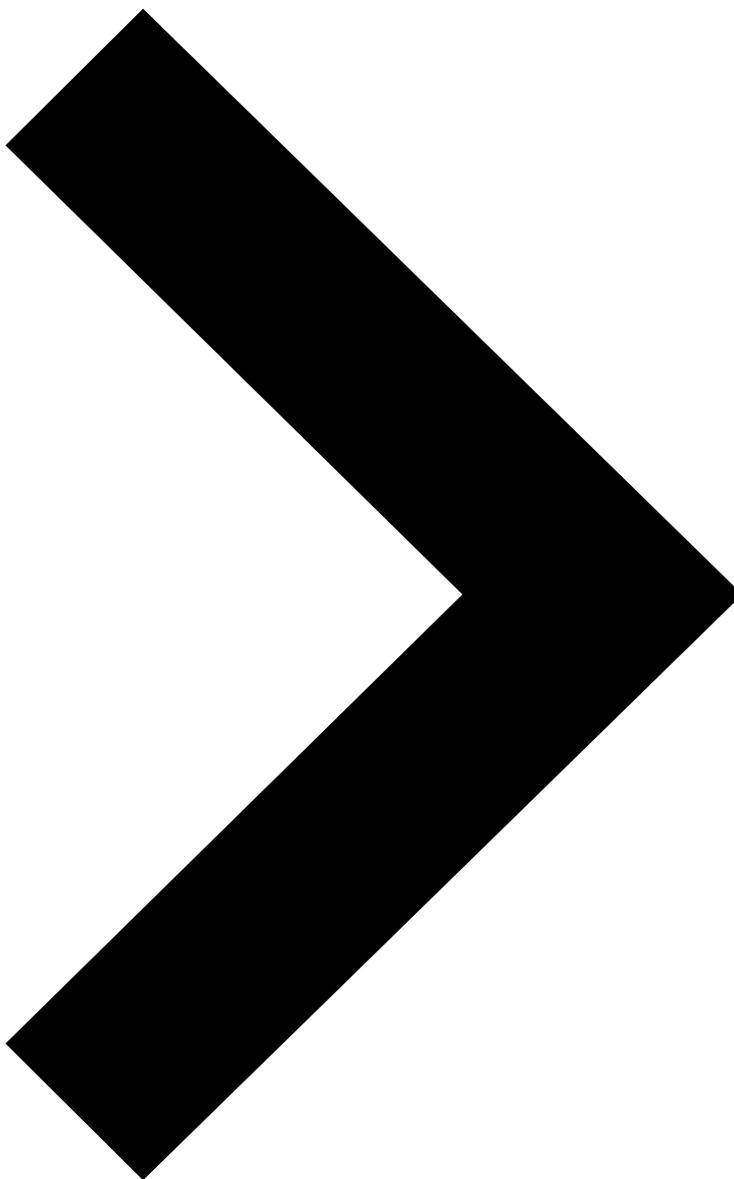
Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	1.001 4.004
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Economic opportunity is impaired by the ongoing conflict, trade barriers with government-controlled Ukraine, international sanctions, and the concentration 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.

On Eastern Donbas

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Country Facts

- **Population**
3,000,000
- **Global Freedom Score**

Other Years

- [2022](#)
- [2021](#)

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