Human rights in Eastern Ukraine during the coronavirus pandemic

Results of monitoring along the Line of Contact

December 7-11

This report is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of PROGRESS and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.
Introduction

At least 135 settlements in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions are located along the Line of Contact (LoC), which separates Ukrainian government-controlled territories and those controlled by Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. This divide has negatively impacted not only business ties and human relationships, but also basic civilian infrastructure, such as electricity and gas pipelines, which are now separated by the LoC in many areas.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, civilians could legally cross the 500-kilometer LoC through one of five Entry-Exit Checkpoints (EECPs), or through informal local “Zero” checkpoints that helped link separated communities. Locals were allowed to cross through “Zero” checkpoints in settlements located along or split by the LoC, such as Lobacheve, Lopaskyne, Novooleksandrivka, and Verhnootoretske. Such informal checkpoints were used regularly to attend school, meet with family, access food and medicine, resolve personal matters, and complete other common tasks.

1 Data according to: Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, “Про внесення змін у додатки 1 і 2 до розпорядження Кабінету Міністрів України від 7 листопада 2014 р. № 1085” (On amendments to Annexes 1 and 2 to the Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine from November 7, 2014 № 1085), № 1125-r from March 16, 2020, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1125-2020-%D1%80#text
COVID-19-related restrictions have dramatically impacted travel in Donetsk and Luhansk regions by banning the use of the “Zero” checkpoints and introducing coronavirus-related quarantine mandates on those crossing the LoC through the formal EECPs. Two more EECPs officially opened in November 2020, but they are not yet fully functional, while the coronavirus-related restrictions enacted by the Ukrainian government and occupying powers have exacerbated the humanitarian situation for settlements located along or split by the LoC.

Decrees introduced in March 2020 prohibit people from crossing the LoC at “Zero” checkpoints, including local residents. On March 27, 2020, the “Luhansk People’s Republic” introduced criminal liability clauses and fines for crossing the LoC outside of the EECPs, including through the “Zero” checkpoints. To reach a neighboring settlement or even a nearby street on the other side of the LoC, locals face detours of potentially hundreds of kilometers in order to reroute through an EECP. As noted in the preceding monitoring report, complications of crossing through EECPs include the need to obtain permits from the Ukrainian Armed Forces command or Russian-backed separatists and the poor infrastructure of the checkpoints themselves.

---


4 All reports prepared under this initiative can be found here: [https://freedomhouse.org/programs/regional-programs/eurasia-programs/human-rights-eastern-ukraine-pandemic](https://freedomhouse.org/programs/regional-programs/eurasia-programs/human-rights-eastern-ukraine-pandemic)
Results of December 7-11, 2020 Monitoring Mission

Ukrainian human rights NGOs Truth Hounds and VostokSOS, which have monitored human rights in Ukraine’s war zone for several years, completed a monitoring mission in settlements located along the LoC from December 7 to 11, 2020. The monitoring mission visited four communities where “Zero” checkpoints had functioned in the past, two EECPs in government-controlled territory, one border crossing point along Ukraine’s state border with Russia, and one quarantine facility for those who could not download the Vdoma mobile application upon return from territories outside of Ukrainian government control. The primary purpose of the monitoring mission was to study and document how the closure of the local “Zero” checkpoints impacted the civilian population. The organizations also investigated the extent of preparation the two EECPs have undergone to function normally once government and occupying powers lift the coronavirus-related restrictions.

The monitoring group also visited a border crossing point with the Russian Federation to observe civilians crossing the Ukraine-Russia border, many seeking to avoid coronavirus-related restrictions at the EECPs. Additionally, monitors visited the compulsory quarantine facility where people entering Ukrainian government-controlled territory must remain under observation until they receive the results of their COVID-19 tests or spend fourteen days in isolation.

At each checkpoint, the monitoring group spoke with representatives of law enforcement, employees of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, and people crossing the LoC. Although the main purpose of the monitoring mission was to document the conditions in government-controlled areas, the organizations also collected some information about non-government-controlled territories, including checkpoints operated by the Russian-backed separatists.

**KEY CHALLENGES AND VIOLATIONS DOCUMENTED:**

At local checkpoints:

- The closure of local “Zero” checkpoints has led to the disruption of social ties and relations between residents living in settlements located on or near the LoC.
- Access to schools, kindergartens, and healthcare facilities is restricted.
- Communication between family members living on opposite sides of the LoC in neighboring communities has become significantly more complicated.

Several problems remained unresolved at the EECPs since the last visit:

- Installing the Vdoma mobile application remains difficult for some people crossing the EECPs. Notably at the Novotroitskoye EECP, quarantine at a state-run facility, rather than self-isolation, is required for those unable to install Vdoma.
- The lack of adequate sanitation at EECPs increases risks to those crossing, particularly during a pandemic. Some checkpoints lacked modern toilets, water supply, and insufficient heating inside inspection cabins.

In the compulsory quarantine facility located in Hostre village:

- The absence of a separate shower and toilet in the rooms allocated for those in quarantine.

---

1 “Vdoma” is the name given to the updated version of the Diya vdoma mobile application as of December 2, 2020. See Press Service of the Ministry of Healthcare, December 2, 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/moz.ukr/posts/1725273684302396](https://www.facebook.com/moz.ukr/posts/1725273684302396)
Recommendations

Given the well-recognized need for many people to cross at the EECPs or move within their community, especially the elderly who live in non-government-controlled territories and visit government-controlled areas to receive their pension and for other personal needs, Freedom House, Truth Hounds, and Vostok-SOS make the following recommendations:

**GOVERNMENT AND THE UKRAINIAN ARMY COMMAND**
- Local, or “Zero,” checkpoints should re-open, and the members of local communities should be permitted to move freely, subject to self-isolation.

**GOVERNMENT, REGIONAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES**
- Provide all checkpoints with Wi-Fi internet access, canopies to cover pedestrian areas, seats in the waiting areas, toilets, and a sufficient water supply, including drinking water.
- Install cabins and shelters with heating and air conditioner systems for those waiting to cross the LoC.
- Install toilets and showers for the rooms allocated to coronavirus quarantine at the Kurakhiv Anti-Tuberculosis Sanatorium for Adults (KLPZ) in the village of Hostre. Clearly establish when COVID-19 tests from those in quarantine at the state-run facility are to be collected and sent off for analysis.

**ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS**

The monitors made the additional observations described below during their visits to local communities where “Zero” checkpoints previously operated, EECPs, the KLPZ quarantine facility, and thorough communication with civilians and locals.

**LOCAL CHECKPOINTS AND ILLEGAL CROSSING OF THE LINE OF CONTACT**

**Lobacheve – Visited on December 9**

The 160 residents of the Lobacheve village in Ukraine’s Luhansk region face difficulties in leaving the village due to traffic restrictions, lack of public transport, and long distances, according to locals. The nearest medical facilities are nine kilometers away in Staryi Aidar, but the connecting road has been closed for the last four years by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. To go to parts of the community outside of Ukrainian government control, residents must travel at least 85 kilometers.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, when residents were able to cross the LoC at the local “Zero” checkpoints, the journey to non-government-controlled parts of the Luhansk region was eighteen kilometers and involved crossing the Siverskyi Donets River by boat. For more than a year now, locals have been unable to cross the river by boat and travel via the shorter route. Additionally, in fall 2020, the community was severely affected by wildfires, which burned more than 20,000 hectares of forest in the area. The road between Lobacheve and the neighboring village of Lopaskyne has been blocked by a ditch made by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, ostensibly for security reasons.
HUMAN RIGHTS IN EASTERN UKRAINE DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Results of monitoring along the Line of Contact December 7-11

Lopaskyne – Visited on December 9

Of the 22 Lopaskyne village residents, 21 are elderly. According to locals, over 100 people lived in the village before the war. Because Lopaskyne is located on the LoC, landmines affect most of the surrounding area. For a long time, the village was in the “gray zone,” and neither party in the conflict controlled the village. The landmines have prevented locals from fishing in the river and grazing cattle in the fields. There is no community infrastructure: the nearest shop is eight kilometers outside the village, the nearest school is ten, and the nearest hospital is thirty. A “shop on wheels” delivers groceries on Wednesdays from Muratovo, located 30 kilometers away, and on Fridays from Schastya, located 28 kilometers away.

Before the pandemic, the ADRA Ukraine Social Bus project organized a bimonthly bus connecting Lopaskyne and Novoaidar that allowed residents to fulfill social, administrative, and personal needs. The bus would only operate if at least seven passengers expressed interest. Due to a lack of funding, the Social Bus project in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions has been suspended indefinitely since January 1, 2021. Residents could alternatively rent a car to leave the village for 1,000 UAH, but for residents, this is too expensive.

The onset of the coronavirus pandemic has made it almost impossible for Lopaskyne residents to travel across the Siverskyi Donets River to the non-government-controlled parts of the Luhansk region, as restrictions increased on both sides of the river. There are also road obstructions that limit entry into Lopakynse: a mound of dirt blocks one road into the village and a barrier for soldiers to check documents and vehicles blocks the other. Ambulances and public transport are not exempt from these checks. Representatives of the Luhansk Regional Center for Emergency Medical Care and Catastrophes shared one example of how restricted access negatively impacts residents: on November 13, 2020, an ambulance responding to an emergency call was held by soldiers at the entrance to the village for two hours.

Details about the incident were reported by the Luhansk Regional Center for Emergency Medical Care and Catastrophes in a letter to VostokSOS. A copy of the report can be found here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1l_BnZG5bL_gyn5JbdayzGWR9OJLd_NT/view
Novooleksandrivka – Visited on December 10

Novooleksandrivka, a village in the Popasna district of the Luhansk region, lies about two kilometers from the LoC. The village is located between Popasna and Pervomaisk—the former is under the control of Ukrainian authorities, and the latter is not.

According to a local resident, 124 people lived in the village before the war, but now there are only eight houses and ten or eleven residents, all of whom are elderly. Since summer 2014, the conflict has disrupted gas, water, and electricity supplies that have still not been restored. Residents instead use private wells to access water.

Novooleksandrivka came under control of the Ukrainian Armed Forces between January and February 2018 and was territorially and administratively integrated into the Troitstka Village Council. The situation in the village, however, has hardly changed.

The Ukrainian Armed Forces hold positions inside the village, making travel between Novooleksandrivka and Popasna nearly impossible for locals. Their freedom of movement and access to basic services is severely restricted, as the towns are connected by a five-kilometer long footpath through forests and swamps that is inaccessible by vehicles, including ambulances. Over the past few years, locals have unsuccessfully requested permission to use another forest road used by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. Creating such a humanitarian corridor for local residents would allow them to travel to nearby towns to sell agricultural products and simplify their access to services and medicine, significantly alleviating their situation.

Until 2018, Novooleksandrivka had one checkpoint for local residents. Locals have not been allowed to travel directly to Pervomaisk, located in the non-government-controlled territories, since January 2018. Since then, the local crossing has been completely closed.

Representatives of the Ukrainian Armed Forces occupy seven or eight houses that had been abandoned by village residents between 2014 and 2016.

Because regular humanitarian aid in Novooleksandrivka ceased in 2018, coronavirus-related quarantine restrictions had little impact on the frequency of aid distribution. Since the coronavirus pandemic began, humanitarian aid has reached the village only three times.

During widespread wildfires in the Luhansk region in fall 2020, nineteen buildings had burned down, including four residential buildings. People who lived in publicly owned houses were not eligible for compensation for damage to their homes.

Verkhnotoretske – Visited on December 8

The community of Verkhnotoretske, in the Donetsk region, is divided by the LoC. Most of the town is controlled by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, but several streets are not under their control. There are 119 people living in the non-government-controlled sections of Verkhnotoretske, and about 3,000 in the government-controlled sections. Until COVID-19 restrictions were introduced on March 15, 2020, people registered in Verkhnotoretske were allowed to cross the LoC through checkpoints located in the village, according to a local government representative. However, once the Ukrainian government and Armed Forces enacted restrictions in response to the pandemic, residents were no longer allowed to cross at the local checkpoint.

Since March 15, 2020, residents have been required to cross the LoC at the only operating EECP in the Donetsk region, located nearly 150 kilometers from Verkhnotoretske. Residents have no way to see relatives or friends living on the non-government-controlled streets of the village, or to receive pensions and other services in the government-controlled part, without traveling through the EECP. The Red Cross and other international humanitarian organizations have also been unable to reach the temporarily occupied part of the village through local checkpoints. Local authorities and residents of the village are unaware of attempts to illegally cross the LoC since the introduction of quarantine restrictions in Verkhnotoretske.
ENTRY-EXIT CHECKPOINTS

**Novotroitskoye EECP – Visited on December 7**

On December 6, the monitoring group learned that the electronic register of permits, used for issuing passes to cross the LoC, was not functioning.

On December 7, the monitoring group visited the Novotroitskoye EECP. A representative of the Security Service of Ukraine (SSU) told monitors that the site is now operational. In response to the monitors’ probe, he said that SSU representatives serving at the EECP could promptly resolve the permit issue for people who could not use the site.

Due to the construction underway at the Administrative Services Center near the EECP, the heaters in the “exit” inspection cabin (used by those leaving government-controlled areas) were not functional, and this part of the facility was cold. Similarly, in the “entry” cabin, the heaters were functional but did not produce enough heat for the large cabin. People who crossed the LoC line were therefore required to undergo all administrative processing and COVID-19-related procedures in cold rooms. Only those crossing into government-controlled territory were able to warm up in a separate heated tent, located near the inspection cabin, operated by the State Emergency Service.

The “entry” inspection cabin was also being used by people crossing through the EECP from non-government-controlled territories who were unable to install the Vdoma mobile application. During the monitoring mission’s visit, two men and one woman of retirement age could not install the application on their phones. In such cases, people must either rent or buy a compatible phone or wait for relatives to bring them a smartphone. If none of these options are feasible, restrictions require subjects to quarantine at the KLPZ facility in the Hostre village, located 52 kilometers from the Novotroitskoye checkpoint.

A State Border Guard Service senior shift manager told monitors that checkpoint staff in non-government-controlled territory allowed people to cross the checkpoint at 16:30 the previous day — half an hour after the Ukrainian-controlled checkpoint closed. The EECP on the government side cannot extend its hours, so EECP employees had set up tents for those arriving from the “gray zone.” Additionally, the employee told the monitoring mission that the facility lacks adequate staffing.

**Kurakhiv Anti-Tuberculosis Sanatorium for Adults – Visited on December 7**

The monitoring mission visited the KLPZ, in the village of Hostre, which operates as a government-run observation facility for those crossing the LoC who are unable or unwilling to self-isolate using the Vdoma mobile phone app. While there are separate rooms for those under observation, they must share showers and bathrooms with other residents, which increases the chance of disease transmission. International humanitarian assistance groups provide food for those in quarantine since the regional budget does not allocate money for this purpose. Once a week, a government-run laboratory collects COVID-19 tests completed by quarantined individuals. Depending on the test results, subjects are either permitted to leave or transferred to a specialized medical institution. The KLPZ medical staff claims that they have yet to detect any COVID-19 cases.

At the time of the visit, one person was in quarantine at KLPZ. Later that day, people from the Novotroitskoye checkpoint were transferred to the facility because they were unable to download the Vdoma application. Members of the monitoring mission spoke with a man sent to the facility to ask him about the conditions of his stay. He shared his impressions:

> The conditions are very good, there is nothing to complain about. The rooms are clean, warm, each person has a separate room, there are three meals a day. There is Wi-Fi, it’s a bit weak but it works. If I had to rate it out of five stars, I would give it five. Everything is very good. We move around freely here, but we have to wear masks in the corridor. Nobody is monitoring us.
He also noted that people under observation can freely use the shower and bathroom and that there are no wake-up calls or bedtimes. However, people going into quarantine are unaware of when they will be tested for COVID-19. The man explained that he was tested a few days into his quarantine and that the procedure went well.

**Milove Border Checkpoint – Visited on December 11**

The only checkpoint between the Luhansk region and the Russian Federation is located in the town of Milove. In the Donetsk region, all checkpoints bordering the Russian Federation are located in occupied territory. Because the Russian Federation was considered a “Green Zone” country due to relatively low COVID-19 rates at the time of the monitoring mission, there was no requirement to self-isolate after crossing the Russian-Ukrainian border. COVID-19-related restrictions have made crossing the LoC through EECPs so difficult that residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions often enter non-government controlled areas of Ukraine through the Russian Federation, and vice versa. Officially speaking, it is illegal to cross the Russian-Ukrainian border at Milove to access the non-government-controlled territory. Ukrainian border guards working at the checkpoint record these violations and fine individuals UAH 1,700. About a thousand people cross the checkpoint in both directions every day, most of whom receive fines for illegal crossing. This indicates that for some, paying a fine at the interstate border is more convenient than crossing the LoC through EECPs, which requires a fourteen-day isolation for anyone crossing the EECPs into Ukrainian government-controlled territory.
Human rights in Eastern Ukraine during the coronavirus pandemic

Results of monitoring along the Line of Contact December 7-11

This report is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of PROGRESS and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.