

# Human rights in Eastern Ukraine during the coronavirus pandemic



Results of  
monitoring along  
the Line of Contact  
April

**12-16**

## CROSSING PATHS

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## Introduction

In April 2021, Russian military equipment and personnel began amassing near the Ukrainian border, and tensions sharply increased in eastern Ukraine. The Russia-backed expansion of military forces lasted about a month. At the height of the buildup, almost 100,000 Russian troops were stationed within 40 kilometers of the Ukrainian border in the Russian city of Voronezh. The situation along the Line of Contact (LoC) – the demarcation line between Ukrainian government-controlled territory and separatist-held territory – has become not only tense, but also deadly: 27 Ukrainian servicemen have been killed in Donbas since the beginning of 2021.

Despite the worsening situation, the civilian population still needs to move between the government-controlled and separatist-held areas. People travel to receive their pensions, buy food and medicine, visit family, and conduct other personal business.

At present, the public can use only two of the seven entry-exit checkpoints (EECPs) along the LoC. The other five EECPs are operational, and the Ukrainian government-controlled side is ready to process people. However, the authorities in the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) have blocked the use of checkpoints on their side; authorities have denied people from crossing and have forced them to return to the “gray zone.” Upon return to the Ukrainian government-controlled side, residents must install the *Vdoma* mobile application and self-isolate for two weeks or isolate at a compulsory state quarantine facility. Representatives of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine (SBGS) who work at EECPs have warned people about this situation, and people usually do not attempt to cross those checkpoints.



The infrastructure has been inadequate at some checkpoints. Some have lacked heated areas or shelters, sanitary facilities, restrooms, and internet access. The COVID-19 pandemic started to exacerbate these problems in December 2019. Before the pandemic, locals living in some villages along

the LoC could cross through informal checkpoints – so-called “zero” checkpoints. However, because of COVID-19-related restrictions, these informal checkpoints were closed, which required people to cross the LoC at the official EECs. The closures have made life difficult for the civilian population, as crossing the LoC requires more time and effort. Further, residents have found it difficult to navigate the strict pandemic-related requirements. Statements and actions of the authorities regarding implementation of the restrictions are unclear and often contradictory, which has made crossing the LoC through the EECs a longer and more costly process due to long isolation periods and expensive viral prevalence tests from private laboratories.

The results of the monitoring mission also show that although the Reintegration and Rehabilitation state enterprise is **responsible** for maintaining and repairing the EECs and their adjacent territories, local community maintenance companies have continued to perform the same functions. As a result, the division of responsibility between local entities and the state enterprise is unclear and partially duplicated.

## Results of the Monitoring Mission: April 12-16, 2021

From April 12 to 16, the Ukrainian human rights organization NGO Truth Hounds – a group with many years of experience documenting human rights violations in the war zone – monitored the human rights situation along the LoC. The monitoring group visited all seven EECs in Ukrainian government-controlled territory and documented new reports of civilian households affected by shelling. The group also documented instances of long-range mines **dropped** in residential areas in the Donetsk region close to the LoC in the town of Zaitseve, Bakhmut district, and in the villages of Bakhmutka and Maiorske, which are part of the Zaitseve administrative settlement.

### KEY DOCUMENTED VIOLATIONS AND SHORTCOMINGS:

- Ukraine’s Cabinet of Ministers made the Reintegration and Restoration state enterprise responsible for organizing, maintaining, and servicing the EECs and their adjacent territories from December 28, 2021, onward, but local maintenance bodies have continued to perform the same state functions. As a result, the division of responsibility between the structures is unclear and tasks are somewhat duplicated.
- Some EECs do not have adequate sanitation, including modern restrooms, water supply, and shelters over pedestrian areas. For example, at the Zolote checkpoint, government officials and service members must still use wooden outdoor latrines located in the surrounding area. Modern restrooms were installed, but they have not been connected to a water supply and cannot be used. When officials unblock the checkpoint, people who cross the LoC will also have to use these wooden booths.
- Insufficient medical staff, the poor state of the cabins, and the lack of a stable internet connection at the Stanytsia Luhanska checkpoint have made efficient and free state testing for COVID-19 impossible. When crossing the LoC into Ukrainian government-controlled territory, residents must produce a negative COVID-19 test to avoid a fourteen-day self-isolation or a quarantine in a state facility. However, some people crossing through the EEC lack the financial means to take a test at a private clinic, and in the Luhansk region, there is no state quarantine facility to enable the mandatory isolation process. As a result, people queue for free state testing for up to eight hours, are unable to socially distance in these conditions and have no guarantee of receiving test results on any given day.

- Many who cross through EECPs still face problems installing the *Vdoma* mobile application – especially members of economically vulnerable groups, including pensioners. The application is not compatible with some phones, so those without *Vdoma* are unable to self-isolate in their chosen place, and instead must either go to a state-designated quarantine facility or return to separatist-held territory. The state quarantine facilities sometimes fail to meet standards for sanitation and COVID-19 prevention. For example, in the village of Hostre, the rooms allocated for isolation have communal showers and restrooms.
- The stray animal population has grown in and around the Novotroitske checkpoint. There is an increased risk of rabies spreading and endangering the health and lives of people crossing the LoC.

## Recommendations

Given the recognized need for many to cross the LoC and move within communities – especially the elderly who live in separatist-held territory and must visit Ukrainian government-controlled areas for pensions and other personal needs – Freedom House and NGO Truth Hounds recommend the following:

### **TO THE UKRAINIAN GOVERNMENT, THE REINTEGRATION AND RECONSTRUCTION STATE ENTERPRISE, AND THE JOINT FORCES OPERATION COMMAND:**

1. Accelerate the transfer of responsibilities for maintaining EECPs and adjacent territories to the Reintegration and Reconstruction state enterprise and ensure proper financing.
2. Provide all EECPs with a stable water supply, drinking water, waiting areas, and working restrooms. First and foremost, it is essential to connect the Zolote checkpoint's modern restroom to a water supply.
3. Provide sufficient free state COVID-19 testing options at the Stanytsia Luhanska EECP to match the number of people crossing the checkpoint on a daily basis.
4. Provide at least one state quarantine facility in the Ukrainian government-controlled areas of the Luhansk region with suitable sanitary and living conditions, including separate bathrooms, functional heating and air conditioning, and food.
5. Equip quarantine rooms in the Kurakhiv Tuberculosis Sanatorium in the village of Hostre (Donetsk region) with separate restrooms and showers. Currently, it is the only institution on the LoC available as a COVID-19 quarantine center for those who have been unable to install the *Vdoma* mobile application. It is also necessary to clearly define the days on which COVID-19 testing for occupants occurs.
6. Build shelters over pedestrian areas at the Zolote and Shchastia EECPs.
7. Equip the cabins used by state officials and people waiting to cross the LoC with heating for the winter and air conditioning for the summer.
8. Create a humane process for spaying and vaccinating stray animals at the Novotroitske checkpoint.
9. Equip all checkpoints with a stable Wi-Fi connection, so that people can install the *Vdoma* mobile application, given the poor mobile connection at some EECPs.

## Additional observations

Based on conversations with local communities, civilians, and others, the monitors made the following additional observations during visits to the EECPs:

### Hnutove Checkpoint Monitoring Mission: April 12, 2021

The Hnutove checkpoint is located near Mariupol in the south of the Donetsk region. After Kyiv introduced COVID-19 restrictions in spring 2020, citizens were prohibited from using the checkpoint. After the Ukrainian government lifted restrictions, the EECP remained closed because the *de facto* DPR authorities had blocked its use.



Water tank at the EECP "Gnutove"



A canopy over a pedestrian area

The management of the checkpoint is gradually being transferred to the Reintegration and Reconstruction state enterprise, but further developments are not entirely clear.

Between 1,000-1,500 pedestrians and motorists can pass through the Hnutove checkpoint per day. There are three bomb shelters on the premises and two more outside it. The cabins are equipped with air conditioning and heating systems, they have two childcare rooms. The EECP workers' cabins are also equipped with heating and air conditioning, and there are clean working restrooms at the checkpoint as well. Moreover, they include accessible restrooms for people with disabilities.

A water well was drilled near the checkpoint territory, but due to contractor miscalculations, it does not work. Therefore, the checkpoint needs a stable water supply.

### Novotroitske Checkpoint Monitoring Mission: April 12, 2021

The Novotroitske checkpoint is the only working EECP in the Donetsk region. The checkpoint works only twice a week, on Mondays and Fridays. On the other days, representatives of the so-called DPR block its use.

The management of the checkpoint is being transferred to the Reintegration and Reconstruction state enterprise, but the process is slow. The state-owned enterprise plans to upgrade cabins and to pave and renovate pedestrian areas.

Monitors found that the new EECP restrooms were closed to those crossing the LoC, including on Mondays and Fridays, when the checkpoint is open to civilian use. These restrooms can only be used by those who work at the checkpoint and have duplicate keys. Additionally, representatives of the SBGS noted that in the summer, cabins are not sufficiently air-conditioned. In hot weather, this can lead to health problems. The cabins are also not equipped with enough seats.

The problem of stray animals on the EECP premises remains unresolved. In addition, there is a problem with the lack of lighting in some areas of the checkpoint, which makes it difficult to inspect cars.

### Marinka Checkpoint Monitoring Mission: April 13, 2021

Similar to the Hnutove checkpoint, the Marinka checkpoint is closed to citizen use because of the blockade by so-called DPR authorities. However, from time to time, the *de facto* authorities open the checkpoint for “humanitarian reasons” – usually for cargo with coffins for burial.

The management of the checkpoint is being transferred to the Reintegration and Restoration state enterprise, though maintenance is still provided by “Road Transport Enterprise” (ATP), a community maintenance company.

The Marinka checkpoint is fully equipped and ready for citizen use. Cabins for searches and waiting rooms include air conditioning and heating systems and restrooms are open and in working order. On weekdays, they are serviced daily by staff from ATP. According to the SBGS, the water supply to the EECP is sufficient, and the checkpoint is equipped with a Wi-Fi network so that people can install *Vdoma*. Rapiscan, a radiation monitoring system, is also in operation at the checkpoint.

The border guards mentioned that the checkpoint lacks external lighting, which makes it difficult to adequately inspect cars.

### Maiorske Checkpoint Monitoring Mission: April 14, 2021

The Maiorske checkpoint has not been operational since the government first issued COVID-19-related restrictions. The Ukrainian government-controlled side of the checkpoint is ready for citizen traffic, but the *de facto* authorities of the so-called DPR have continued to block its use.

The management of the checkpoint is being transferred to the Reintegration and Restoration state enterprise, though maintenance is still provided by ATP.

The checkpoint is equipped with waiting rooms and cabins for searches and passport control. While providing both passport and search services in the cabins has helped facilitate the crossing procedure, it has caused crowding in the cabins that has prevented adherence to social distancing guidelines. The units are equipped with childcare rooms, air conditioning, and heating systems. However, these systems are not functional enough to ensure a comfortable temperature inside the metal cabins, as it has been cold in winter and hot in the summer. Also, the cabins for EECP workers are not sufficiently equipped with working air conditioning systems – they only exist in three cabins. Rapiscan, a radiation monitoring system, is also in operation at the checkpoint.

### Stanytsia Luhanska Checkpoint - Monitoring Mission April 15

The Stanytsia Luhanska EECP is the only operational checkpoint in the Luhansk region. It is also the only checkpoint along the entire LoC that allows people to cross daily.

Since the last monitoring mission, the checkpoint has introduced a free COVID-19 testing facility. Testing had previously been available only in private clinics, which cost between 900 and 1200 hryvnias (USD 30 to USD 45). Most people crossing the LoC cannot afford this. The free testing logistics are as follows: there is one cabin in which two paramedics work. Only one person is allowed to enter at a time, and those queued wait outside and are unable to socially distance – the queue can take up to eight hours. People

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have reported rumors that some have sold their position in line. There is an urgent need to increase the number of medical staff and space in the testing facility.



“Stanytsia Luhanska” checkpoint

The management of the checkpoint is being transferred to the Reintegration and Restoration state enterprise, though maintenance is still provided by Vodokanal, a community maintenance company.

Waiting areas consist of five benches covered by canopies. These structures do not allow for social distancing and fail to protect people from the elements. The checkpoint has a radiation control system.

The lack of a state COVID-19 quarantine facility in the Luhansk region remains an urgent problem. If someone crossing into Ukrainian government-controlled territory cannot install *Vdoma*, they must return to separatist-held territory.

UBGS officials also reported insufficient lighting at the EECP.



People queuing at a free COVID-19 testing facility



Private COVID-19 testing laboratory

The monitors also witnessed people providing illegal assistance to people with disabilities and the elderly crossing the gray zone. SES employees and the International Committee of the Red Cross transport people

in wheelchairs free of charge, yet civilians provided the same service in exchange for money. Witnesses reported that these individuals were charging 200 hryvnias (USD 7). At the time of the visit, neither the border guards nor the National Police attempted to monitor or resolve this issue.

### Shchastia Checkpoint Monitoring Mission: April 15, 2021

The Shchastia checkpoint is the newest checkpoint on the LoC and was officially opened on November 10, 2020. Currently, the checkpoint is operational, but the *de facto* authorities of the so-called LPR have continued to block its use.



A pedestrian part at the “Shchastia” EECF does not have canopies over it

The cabins for EECF workers are equipped with air conditioning and heating systems. However, searches take place outside and ideally, separate cabins should be built to protect those queued from the elements, or at minimum, outdoor canopies should be constructed. The entire pedestrian part of the checkpoint also needs a canopy.

The management of the checkpoint has been transferred to the Reintegration and Restoration state enterprise.

The restrooms at the checkpoint are open and equipped with everything necessary, and the water supply is stable. At the entrance to the checkpoint, there is a disinfection frame – a structure that disinfects clothing – but there are no further sanitation structures on the checkpoint’s premises.

The checkpoint has one bomb shelter for both civilians and EECF workers.

### Zolote Checkpoint Monitoring Mission: April 16, 2021

The Zolote checkpoint is currently not operational because the *de facto* authorities of the so-called LPR have blocked its use on their side.

There is no direct water supply at the checkpoint – it is sourced from elsewhere. There are also no modern restrooms, and service personnel has to use latrine pits in the area adjacent to the checkpoint, which has not yet been demined.



Wooden toilets at the “Zolote” checkpoint

The management of the checkpoint is being transferred to the Reintegration and Restoration state enterprise, though maintenance is still provided by Vodokanal.

## SETTLEMENTS ON THE CONTACT LINE

### Zaitseve Township Monitoring Visit: April 14, 2021

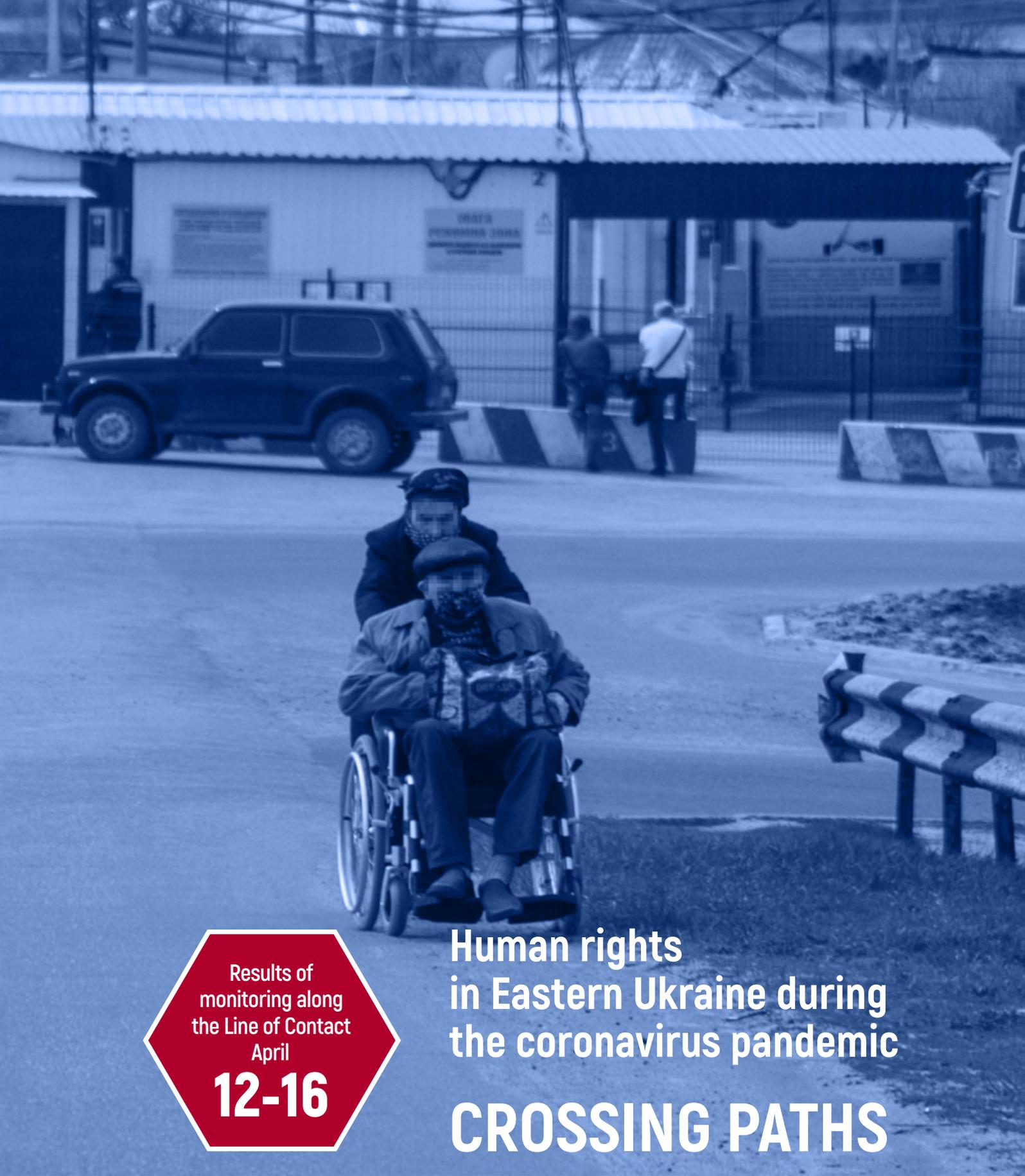
On April 12, the monitoring mission [reviewed](#) a report from the head of the NGO Proliska on long-range mines in residential areas in the village of Zhovanka. This settlement is part of the Zaitseve administrative area – a suburb of the temporarily-occupied Horlivka. The LoC divides the township; the northern part is controlled by the Ukrainian government and the southern part by *de facto* DPR authorities.

On April 14, before their planned visit to the Maiorske checkpoint, the monitoring mission also [reviewed](#) a report from the Kramatorsk Border Detachment about long-range mines being deployed by the Russia-backed separatists on the road corridor to the Maiorske checkpoint on the morning of April 13.

After visiting the Maiorske checkpoint, the monitors spoke with the head of the Zaitseve Military-Civil Administration and with local residents. Through these conversations, the monitors discovered that on April 12, 2021, at about 2:00 pm, a mine hit a non-residential building on Poperechna Street. It broke a slate on the roof and fell into a room. Fortunately, no local residents in the neighboring houses were injured.

The monitors also learned that on April 13, at about 5:00 am, militants of the so-called DPR executed another long-range mining operation on Stanytsia Maiorska Street, located in the Ukrainian government-controlled part of Zaitseve. As a result, one Ukrainian serviceman was killed, and two others were wounded in a residential area. By 9:00 am, demining of the area was finished and locals were allowed to move up and down the street. The long-range mining operation used POM-2 antipersonnel mines, which are prohibited under international humanitarian law. One of the mines fell in the immediate vicinity of the Maiorske checkpoint near the cabin used for searches. According to the military personnel serving at a block post near the checkpoint, the mine was dropped from a quadcopter – an unmanned aerial vehicle.





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