Ukraine's depopulation crisis

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As fascist far-right nationalist groups regularly parade through the country demanding "Ukraine for Ukrainians," Ukraine faces a massive depopulation crisis. Millions of people of all ethnicities are leaving the country, fleeing poverty and war.

Since the restoration of capitalism in 1991, the overall population of Ukraine has declined from just over 52 million to approximately 42 million today, a decrease of nearly 20 percent. If the separatist-controlled provinces of the Donbass region and Crimea are excluded, it is estimated that just 35 million people now live in the area controlled by the government of Petro Porosehnko.

Ukrainian governments, including the current one, have been loath to carry out an official census, as it is widely believed that the population estimates reported by the country's State Statistics Service (SSS) are inflated by including deceased individuals. One aim of this is to rig elections. An official country-wide census has not been held since 2001. In late 2015, the Poroshenko government postponed the 2016 census until 2020.

Despite the lack of reliable official numbers, all independent reports point to a sharp reduction in the population. According to Ukraine's Institute of Demography at the Academy of Sciences, by 2050 only 32 million people will live in the country. The World Health Organization has estimated that the population of the country will drop even further, to just 30 million people.

Ukraine's SSS has acknowledged that so far this year, the population has already decreased by 122,000.

Such data are a testament to the monumental failure of capitalism to provide a standard of living that matches, much less exceeds, that which existed during the Soviet period over 25 years ago.

While the country's low birth rate of approximately 1 birth for 1.5 deaths is a contributing factor to the country's depopulation, emigration is by far the biggest factor.

Between 2002 and 2017, an estimated 6.3 million Ukrainians emigrated with no plans to return.

Facing poor employment prospects, deteriorating social and medical services, marauding far-right gangs, and the ever-present prospect of a full-scale war with Russia, Ukrainian workers are fleeing the country in great numbers, either permanently or as temporary labor migrants.

According to a report from the Center for Economic Strategy (CES), almost 4 million people, or up to 16% of the working-age population, are labor migrants. Despite having Ukrainian citizenship and still technically living in Ukraine, they actually reside and work elsewhere. Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has put the number of Ukrainian migrant workers even higher, at 5 million.

Through 2015 and 2017, as a result of the ongoing war in the Donbass region and the plunging value of the Ukrainian hryvnia, migration increased notably: 507,000 people went to Poland; 147,000 to Italy; 122,000 to the Czech Republic; 23,000 to the United States; and 365,000 to Russia or Belarus.

The easing of visa-free travel by the European Union (EU) in September 2017 only increased the flow of Ukrainians to countries such as Poland, which is facing its own demographic crisis and in need of workers. In 2018 alone, more than 3 million Ukrainians applied for passports that would allow them to work in Poland. Poland is the only EU country that allows Ukrainians to obtain seasonal work visas with just a passport. Ukrainians have received 81.7% of all work visas issued in Poland this year.

Between 1 and 2 million Ukrainian workers now reside in Poland, where they are often forced to take jobs "under the table," are easily exploited by employers, and work in dangerous conditions. Many

Ukrainian laborers are recruited to Poland by scam offers of employment, only to then find themselves stranded and forced to work for whatever wage they can get.

While migrant workers in Poland are constantly subjected to anti-immigrant rhetoric from the right-wing PiS government in Warsaw, the Polish state classifies Ukrainian laborers as "refugees" in order to comply with EU quotas and reject refugees from Syria and elsewhere.

According to polls of Ukrainian migrants in Poland, over half are planning to move to Germany if the labor market there is ever open to them.

While Russia is constantly demonized in the Ukrainian and Western press as the eternal enemy of Ukraine, 2 million Ukrainian citizens now live or work in Russia. According to Olga Kirilova, between 2014 and 2017, 312,000 Ukrainians were granted Russian citizenship and Ukrainians make up the vast majority of immigrants to Russia.

The dearth of a working-age population in Ukraine is putting further strain on an already struggling pension system. According to Ukraine's SSS, as a result of widespread labor migration, only 17.8 million out of 42 million Ukrainians are economically active and paying into the pension system.

The migration of Ukrainian workers abroad has reached such a level that remittances from migrants now constitute 3 to 4 percent of the country's GDP. They exceed the amount of foreign investment in Ukraine. Nonetheless, such transfers are not nearly enough to make up for the negative impact of the currency's falling value, inflation, and the disappearance of skilled workers.

The Ukrainian ruling class acknowledges that the country is in serious trouble. "One of the main risks of the current scenario is the continuation of the outflow of labor from Ukraine, which will create a further increase in the imbalance between demand and supply in the labor market," noted a report from the country's national bank.

However, the government can do nothing to slow the mass emigration, as it is thoroughly under the control of international finance capital and committed to implementing the austerity programs demanded by Western states and banks.

Despite assurances from the Poroshenko regime that the economy will improve, the emigration and emptying of the country shows no signs of slowing.

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