

Ukraine: From social collapse to social explosion. What are the obstacles?

Ukrainian journalists

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The May Day holidays, during which this article was being prepared, are traditionally a time of mass exodus of the Ukrainian population to their dachas and garden plots. The shutdown of the formal sector of the economy due to bombing and mobilization has initiated a renewed process of a “return to the countryside,” which already allowed millions of Ukrainians to survive in the harsh 1990s.

If we take official data, the majority of the population of Ukraine should have died of hunger long ago. As of April 1, 2025, the average pension in the country was 6,341 hryvnia (UAH) or \$153. At the same time, according to the Pension Fund of Ukraine, in November 2024, the total number of pensioners in the country was 10.353 million people, which is 105,000 more than a month earlier. The minimum wage in Ukraine this year is UAH 8,000 (around \$193). In our native Kharkov, this may only be enough for two people to buy food for a couple of weeks.

Understanding the situation is further complicated by the difficulty of conducting opinion polls. In informal conversations with us, sociologists and political scientists have indicated that 80 percent of those offered to participate in research refuse to speak in face-to-face groups. In telephone surveys, 9 out of 10 people refuse to be interviewed. What these people think about the economic situation in the country and how they characterize their own financial situation, one can only guess.

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) provides more reliable field calculations than these figures from government statistics. Based on these calculations, almost a third of the population in six frontline regions of Ukraine is experiencing food shortages. The UN’s press release on the third anniversary of the beginning of the full-scale war says:

According to data collected by the WFP, millions of people are resorting to coping mechanisms, sacrificing their own meals so their children can eat. Others are going into debt to buy sufficient food supplies to feed their families... Families in frontline regions are struggling to put food on the table, forcing them to make heartbreaking choices just to get by. As we look forward to sustainable

peace in what is considered to be one of the world’s historical breadbasket regions, we must face the reality that humanitarian aid continues to be a lifeline for millions.... Where supermarkets are accessible and stocked, many families cannot afford nutritious food. The cost of basic food items rose by 25 percent in the last year, with some staple vegetables more than doubling in price.

The Kherson region suffers the most from insufficient access to food, which affects 54 percent of people living there. In the Zaporozhye and the Donetsk regions, two out of five people, i.e., 43 percent and 39 percent, respectively, have insufficient access to food.

In 2024, prices for bakery products such as bread—a staple in Ukraine—increased by more than 20 percent in the government-controlled territory of Ukraine. The same trends continue in 2025. It is expected that prices will increase by another 20 percent this year. In other words, around 1.5-2 percent will be added to the current price every month. The prices for vegetables have increased by about 30 percent over the year.

Under these conditions, a huge shadow economy has emerged. Social researcher Andrey Golovachev explains:

The thing is that there is a huge shadow money-in-kind turnover in the country, in which at least three-quarters of the population is involved. ... Ukrainians survive thanks to the family-clan system. People live in related clans. Mother, father, children, grandfathers, daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, their relatives, etc. Within such small clans, there are always subsidiary farms, cars, garages, mechanisms, summer cottages, vegetable gardens, where work is constantly in full swing. People distribute joint labor and material-financial resources, provide themselves with food, keep livestock, repair something, sell, provide small services, etc. Someone from the clan goes abroad for seasonal earnings, provides the necessary supply of currency. A wage labor job for a Ukrainian is only part of the work. And far from the main one. Well, who will seriously work for 4,000 hryvnia [around \$96]! ... The main thing is to work within the own clan. A woman sits in the office, gets her duff, and runs to the dacha. That’s

where the real work begins! ... That's where money circulates, [in amounts] comparable to the state budget.

In discussing unemployment in Ukraine, Stanislav Kibalnyk drew parallels with the poorest countries of Africa, where the majority of the population lives on subsistence farming, and more than 50 percent of non-agricultural employment is in the shadow economy.

In April, a study by Gradus Research characterized the atmosphere even among hired workers as a “total burnout.” The most disloyal to their work are those employed part-time and workers aged 45-65. In such conditions, even holidays have become episodes of temporary self-deception—a way to pretend, at least for a day, that life goes on. These workers are so devastated that they simply exist in the “survive until the evening” mode. Despite some mass clashes with the police and the enlistment patrols regularly breaking out across the country, the general atmosphere prevailing in the country now is one of fatigue and passivity.

Vyacheslav Azarov has described the social and political situation as follows:

In Ukraine, almost all resources for a normal social life have been exhausted (grabbed or destroyed over time), the ruling class does not create anything but only eats up the remains of natural resources, the Soviet legacy, and condemns future generations to poverty with unbearable foreign debts. Accordingly, a specific ideology is needed to maintain control over the hungry Ukrainian people. Fewer resources for life mean more rigid reactionary attitudes of the crowd-elite model of governance, more nationalism, leaderism, militarism, a stronger role of police agencies, less democracy, rights, and civil liberties for hired labor—the bulk of the population. Willingly or unwillingly, we have slid into the problems and political decisions characteristic of Europe in the 1930s. Of course, it is a propaganda exaggeration to put an equal sign between today's Ukraine and Italy with Germany or Spain of that period. But taking into account the political mistakes and rejecting the insane crimes of those regimes, the kinship of the fundamental approaches and management decisions is quite recognizable.

This state of affairs has been made possible by the systematic suppression of the class struggle by the trade unions, which overwhelmingly support the NATO war against Russia. Our online magazine in Kharkov has not recorded a single strike since the small protest by municipal transport workers in early autumn 2022 over wage arrears. The only example of a labor strike we have recorded in Ukraine since last year took place on April 5 in the western town of Drohobych, where route bus drivers also did not show up for work one morning after their colleague was kidnapped by the enlistment center and sent for a military medical

examination. Before that, the last strikes we know of took place in May and July of last year. Both were not related to wages but to the mobilization law that came into force: on May 18, about 100 truck drivers from different regions of Ukraine partially blocked the Odessa-Kiev highway, one of the busiest in the country, demanding mobilization reservations for their profession. Two months later, 80 percent of the drivers in the Aurora retail chain did not show up for work being afraid of enlistment raids (according to *Forbes*, at that time there were 90 drivers and 130 forwarders serving 1,300 stores, the staff shortage was 8 percent).

Outside of the transport sector, the only labor strike and rally during the full-scale war occurred on May 1, 2024. On the morning of May Day, a plant in Druzhkovka that supplies bread to the northern government-controlled part of the Donetsk region got shut down. The reason was months of unpaid wages; the plant employed about 200 people at the time.

Some workers still hope that Russia will come and open the border for exit, some are waiting for Trump to lose patience and impose sanctions against the Ukrainian leadership, some are not waiting for anything at all and are living day by day.

Thus, while there have been tens of thousands of desertions in both the Ukrainian and Russian armies last year, the prevailing political confusion and suppression of the class struggle mean that no revolutionary situation has emerged. Anger at the government and its authoritarian measures alone is not enough—an idea of ??social change for the better and a willingness to unite for it are also necessary. “You die today, and I will die tomorrow,” “not my own—no pity,” “man is a wolf to man”—these are still the prevailing everyday attitudes in Ukraine, as a result—“two Ukrainians are a guerilla detachment, three are a guerrilla detachment with a traitor.” This explains why under current conditions, different varieties of right-wing populism are enjoying success. It seems that the opportunity to reverse this trend will appear only in the case of a decline in the right-wing wave in more developed countries, if a revolutionary movement emerges there and the working class takes advantage of the opportunities that have opened up.



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