

Ukrainian pensioners: between misery and pain

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70% of Ukrainian pensioners receive a pension of less than 116 euros, according to the Ukrainian Deputy Minister for Social Policy (2023). One of the most vulnerable populations, Ukrainian pensioners have been living through an ordeal since 24 February 2022. Destitute, they have to face the horrors of a war that is destroying what has taken them a lifetime to build.

At 1er January 2022, there were 10,841,117 pensioners in Ukraine, out of a population of around 44 million. The retirement age is 60 after 30 years of contributions. In addition to the pay-as-you-go system, there is also a funded system (which is not compulsory), but this is still in the minority for the time being. In 2010, there were 102 non-state pension funds operating in Ukraine, with 484,300 contributors. However, despite the war, parliament is actively discussing strengthening the capitalisation system.

Towards capitalisation?

Last April, a group of majority MPs led by the leader of the Servant of the People party, David Arakhamia, registered a bill n° 9212 in parliament "On the accumulated pension". "Accumulated" being a semantic subterfuge to avoid using the repellent term "capitalisation". But the parliamentarians were probably in a hurry to submit this document, because in their presentation note, they didn't even have time to replace the old term with a new one, and left it as it was: "On the compulsory universal funded pension". According to the KVPU trade union confederation, "this, in fact, confirmed once again their true intentions and, to put it simply, to transfer the money of future pensioners into the hands of private funds... this is essentially a deliberate collapse of the solidarity-based pension system and the loss of Ukrainians' already meagre, hard-earned pensions." The two Ukrainian trade union confederations, FPU and KVPU, denounce and oppose this plan. A recent Ukrainian daily blithely explained the advantages of this bill: "Authorised non-state pension funds, thanks to a complex system of relations with the state [appreciate the euphemism PLT], will be able to invest Ukrainians' contributions and earn money. In this way, the accumulated pension account will grow steadily and, on retirement, a person will receive an accumulated allowance in addition to the common allowance. This is the idea. In addition, according to Halyna Tretyakova, First Deputy Chair of the Social Policy Committee in Parliament, the solidarity-based system of compulsory state pension insurance is not "profitable". "This state of affairs must be changed, as it is one of the conditions for our entry into the European Union". As a sign of goodwill towards the European Commission, the Ministry of Finance has already prepared a project for May on the verification of pension payments. This is a draft ordinance "approving the method for verifying pension payments". This will involve checking the personal details (in particular the way in which names are recorded) of each pensioner and calculating the amount of their pension. It is surprising that in the midst of war the Ukrainian government is embarking on such a project, which will mobilise a large number of civil servants and will undoubtedly cost money. What will happen to pensions that are tainted by irregularities? Andriy Pavlovski, a specialist in social policy issues, points out on the Gazeta.ua

website that "Following a check, citizens may be deprived of their pension if there is an error in the full name or if they receive a payment based on invalid documents" and the title of his article leaves no doubt as to the possible consequences: "For what can a pension be revoked?"

Pensioners in the resistance

Since 24 February, people have been organising themselves to defend the country. Pensioners have played a full part in this. From making camouflage netting and Molotov cocktails to distributing food aid, there are many activities in support of the anti-imperialist resistance. Others are less orthodox and riskier. For example, in April 2022, in the town of Iziurm, near Kharkiv, poisoned cakes were distributed to soldiers of the 3e Russian division by Ukrainian grandmothers. The result: 2 dead and 28 soldiers in intensive care. In the occupied territories, peaceful pensioners sitting on benches can become a source of intelligence for the Ukrainian army on Russian troop movements. From the very first days of the full-scale invasion, the 'Babusya' [grandmothers] volunteer battalion was formed in Kryvyi Rih, and the participants prepared and delivered food to Ukrainian fighters. They also collect objects and help displaced persons. The battalion's founder, Nadiya Anisimova, explains: "We organised ourselves via the Internet, and we have several kitchens. We cook, then we gather near the house, load everything, take photos and send everything to our boys". According to Nadiya Anisimova, home-cooked meals for the soldiers are delivered every week. Volunteers transport grandma's food to the Cherkassy, Kherson and Kharkiv regions. Some of these "Babusya" have volunteered to go to the firing ranges where they have learned to shoot Kalashnikovs. Another "grandmother's battalion" exists in Jytomyr, which since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, i.e. since 2014. They have collected clothes, blankets and pillows and are sending them to the defenders of Ukraine. Pensioners are also fighting arms-in-hand in the Ukrainian armed forces. Leonid Onyshchenko, 63, once a nuclear physicist, is now fighting the Russian army near the town of Bakhmut (February 2023). Similarly, a recent post from the Territorial Defence Forces shows two greying 59-year-old men named Mykola and Vasyl. One is a private and the other a sergeant in the 112e Territorial Defence Brigade in Kyiv. The first explains, "As long as my health allows me to stay in shape, I keep a machine gun with me".

Pensioners in exile and in occupied territories

Since last April, Ukrainian pensioners who have taken refuge abroad have been able to receive their pensions via international transfers. The Ukrainian government has extended the possibilities of receiving pensions for Ukrainian citizens who left the country because of Russian aggression. Indeed, among the 8 million Ukrainian refugees abroad, there are many pensioners who could no longer receive their pensions paid into their accounts in Ukraine. For example, since the start of the large-scale war, 76,000 Ukrainian refugees over the age of 60 have registered with the Polish authorities. There is another, more painful problem. The situation of pensioners living in territories under Russian occupation. Pension payments are no longer possible due to the breakdown of Ukrainian banking relations with these territories. They cannot be paid in cash. However, the Ukrainian authorities assure us that all pensioners are entitled to their pensions. Without resources, pensioners are subject to pressure from the occupying forces. "You take a passport from the Russian Federation, you get money", they explain. Paid in roubles, of course. In fact, this is an element of pressure on the most socially vulnerable sections of the population.

According to journalist Olena Kuzmytch, 300 "volunteers" organised into "mobile groups" arrived from Russia in May in the temporarily occupied zones of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions to "visit" pensioners and persuade them to "passportise", the term used for giving up one's Ukrainian identity papers in exchange for a Russian passport.

"Traacherous" pensioners

Some Ukrainians are threatened with losing their pensions. This is how the state wants to punish "traitors". According to the document, citizens convicted of collaborating with the enemy under articles of the Criminal Code will be deprived of their pensions. Pension payments will not be interrupted until the court's decision comes into force. In addition, when they reach retirement age, Ukrainians convicted under these articles of the Criminal Code will not receive a pension. At the same time, after serving their sentence for their crime and being released, their pension will be returned to them. Those who reach the age of 60 during their sentence will not receive a pension until they are released from prison. This bill has not yet been registered with the Verkhovna Rada [parliament] but is due to be discussed.

Maksym, a Ukrainian student from Lviv, recently told us: "Ukrainian pensioners are destitute and have to continue working even after they retire. My grandmother's pension is now 46 euros a month. If she didn't have her garden, it would be impossible for her to survive. Despite the fact that she has worked in education for 30 years. Maksym is one of the students who, on 26 March, gathered in front of the French consulate in support of the movement in France against pension reform. He added "the French can see [with Ukraine] what can become of their pensions if they do not fight to defend them".

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P.S.

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