



NEWS

Russia's eastern Ukraine reconstruction work relies on sketchy job recruitment and exploitative labor practices

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Фото: Dmitry Yagodkin / TASS / Profimedia. Restoration work on February 13, 2024, at the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theater in Mariupol, where a Russian airstrike killed 300–600 people two years earlier.

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Russian companies have been setting up shop in the occupied Donbas for roughly two years, opening branches in Ukrainian cities after Russian troops plow through. Most of these businesses find work in construction — building and especially rebuilding local housing and roads. At the same time, Russian travel agencies, retail call centers, and even breweries have also started exploring this “new” market. Journalists in St. Petersburg at Bumaga Media studied public databases and spoke to workers who have traveled to Ukraine to work in the occupied regions. The news outlet learned that employers often don’t warn employees about the risks of artillery fire and landmines. Bumaga also reports that wages paid in occupied eastern Ukraine are significantly lower than in Russia.

Vita Chiknaeva’s report for Bumaga Media features a mix of anecdotal accounts from contractors who have worked in occupied Ukraine and an analysis of available employment data. For example, a construction worker identified only as Igor described Mariupol as something like a ghost town: “They really fucked up Mariupol with artillery... There are few people left and a lot of abandoned homes and apartments. Loads of drunk people on the streets. Everybody’s turned to the bottle because of the war. The factories are all rubble. The

only jobs are in small shops and construction.” Igor also told Bumaga that his construction work in the city was limited to restoring facades without any interior work. “At best, they prepare the interiors for repairs,” he explained. “They’re building houses, but the utility connections are still from the Soviet era, just like in Russia. The work there will take years.”

In June 2022, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights assessed that 90 percent of Mariupol’s residential housing was damaged or destroyed during Russia’s capture of the city.

Russia’s promise to rebuild

The Russian authorities promised to rebuild Mariupol quickly, and the officials who award government contracts and oversee this reconstruction claimed in March 2023 that Moscow had restored more than 1,000 homes. In the past year, however, Russia has stopped updating these numbers and instead refers to “hundreds” of completed construction projects. The companies responsible for this work are registered in regions across the country (including St. Petersburg, where Bumaga’s story is focused), but Russian businesses generally have been slow to expand into occupied Ukrainian territories, fearing Western sanctions and local infrastructural problems.

Bumaga found 22 companies registered in St. Petersburg that have posted jobs based in Russia’s “new regions” on the employment website hh.ru. Since early August, these

businesses have listed 121 positions — roughly 6 percent of all job offers on the website based in occupied eastern Ukraine.

Tracking these vacancies offers some insights into projects apparently underway now in the occupied territories. For example, the company that posted the biggest share of these listings is ODK-Klimov, a Rostec subsidiary that manufactures engines for aviation, rockets, naval vessels, and power plants. Most of the company's vacancies shared on hh.ru have been in Snizhne, corroborating unofficial reports that the firm is building a production facility in Ukraine's Donetsk region.

Bumaga also learned that another group of enterprises controlled by SPK Zeleny Gorod is hiring workers in eastern Ukraine for construction, land development, and landscaping. Last year, when this network of businesses expanded from road work in St. Petersburg to projects in occupied Ukraine, its revenue jumped by 56 percent. Records available at Rusprofile show that one of Zeleny Gorod's founders is Grigory Baevsky, a longtime business partner of billionaire Arkady Rotenberg and a participant in real estate schemes that involved the transfer of properties to Vladimir Putin's family members. (In Baevsky's case, he signed over apartments to Putin's second daughter, Katerina Tikhonova, and the sister of Alina Kabaeva, Putin's rumored partner.)

Horrible bosses

The job descriptions Bumaga reviewed said nothing about working conditions in occupied Ukraine and ignored the risk of enemy shelling and landmines. In the first few months after Moscow annexed four more regions from Kyiv, 23 workers from companies based in St. Petersburg were killed in eastern Ukraine. Bumaga previously reported on a dozen road workers who posthumously received presidential decorations for courage.

Igor, Vita Chiknaeva's source, told Bumaga that some occupied cities are more dangerous than others: "In Mariupol, it's safe, although not all streetlights work. In Donetsk, it's a total shitshow — constant explosions," he explained, adding that he witnessed fewer blasts when he worked for four months in the Zaporizhzhia region. Despite these perils, salaries in occupied Ukraine are often too low to retain skilled workers. For example, Igor told Bumaga that he's now earning 115,000 rubles (\$1,260) a month at a job in Russia — more than he ever made in Ukraine and still barely half of what he says he'd accept to return to the war zone.

Bumaga Media could not determine how many local job seekers applied for these jobs in occupied Ukraine.

Spokespeople for hh.ru said the region's labor market is too volatile to gather analytics, and the St. Petersburg companies did not respond to the outlet's inquiries.

On social media, rotation workers express concerns about being scammed and share stories of employers refusing to pay for labor in the occupied territories. Even remote workers who agree to recruit laborers for projects in eastern Ukraine complain that they've been cheated out of promised wages.

Some of the businesses listing vacancies in occupied Ukraine (like R-Vakhta) are intermediaries that specialize in outsourcing personnel (particularly migrants) whom firms don't want to hire directly. In other words, the people applying for these jobs don't know who their real employer would be. For example, the Leader Group company staffs its Ukraine projects under a similar scheme and has lost four road workers in occupied Luhansk. The widow of one of these men told Bumaga Media that the company never contacted her family or offered any condolences.

Story by **Vita Chiknaeva** for Bumaga Media

Adapted for Meduza in English by **Kevin Rothrock**

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