

# Union work in Ukraine

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# Introduction

- What I was doing there in 2023-2024 with **Humanity & Inclusion (Handicap International)** and **Finn Church Aid**
  - **Humanity and Inclusion: Action:** *Mental Health and Psycho-social Support, Explosive Ordnance and Risk Education, Inclusion of people with disabilities, protection and referral, cash schemes, Mine Action, Advocacy, Physical rehabilitation, humanitarian access and security, logistics hubs.* **Set-up:** about 300 staff. Coordination office: HR, Finance, Programme (with teams for actions), Compliance, Humanitarian Law and advocacy, Logistics, management team. Regional offices with almost as large setups for sub-management. Around a dozen donors contributing to around 5 projects. I was head of programme, acting country director. Annual budget in the country around 12 M.
  - **Finn Church Aid: Action:** *Education in Emergencies, Technical and Vocational Education, child protection, psycho-social support, entrepreneurship promotion, micro education related-projects. Shelters, curriculum development, policy influence, supporting reforms.* **Set-up:** about 35 staff. Coordination office: HR, Finance, programme, humanitarian access and security, logistics, management team. Biggest EU humanitarian grant in the country was managed by Finn Church Aid. I was first EU- consortium project lead manager, then country programme manager, acting country director. Annual budget in the country about 10 M.



# Operational context - lessons learnt

- **Staff security** and **duty of care** (sleep but be not safe, travel and take risks, dirty frontline work - who is responsible, life insurance?)
- **Tensions** - expat - national staff, Ukrainian ----- Russian speaking staff
- **VISAs** constant problems
- **Power, heat, water** (how do you live and work)
- **Staff welfare** (stress, fear, frustration, sleeplessness, hectic timelines, long work hours, curfew, limited expatriate communities, stress about relatives, stress about stress back home)
- **Staff recruitment and retention** (lack of local expertise, lack of intl. experts, visa issues, short turnover of both intl and local staff)
- Supplies constraints and price fluctuations due to **high inflation**
- **Military conscription** - evolving situation with implications
- Long and a bit stressful travel in and out of the country
- Readiness to manage multiple donors at the same time - Responsible Accountable Consulted Informed RACI tools for projects and their processes, with staffing gaps and high turnover both in-country and at head office.
- Mix of cultures and work ways - one mission can include a dozen or more nationalities including Asia, Latin America, Africa and Europe, with various experience backgrounds.
- **Mission top management spotlight** - someone needs to make decisions and take responsibility even when there may not be good ones and quickly

# Operational context - lessons learnt

- Broad plans, development of society, sectors while war still ongoing - but plans may need to change when there is ceasefire/peace. Humanitarian funding was diminishing but development money was not taking its place
- **Call for more resources to local civil society actors vs. international NGOs and organizations - criticism**
- Surge of funding, then much less, fears of none
- **Highly regulated context - red tape sometimes/often to the detriment to saving people**
- **Full coordination is next to impossible with hundreds, if not thousands of INGOs, NGOs, IOs etc. on the ground**
- **Governance and corruption legacy as post-Soviet country in transition - must pay attention, corruption is normal**
- **Situations keep changing - what was possible, needed at project planning stage may not be so a few months later - same with government plans naturally**
- Readiness to close and re-open head/area/regional offices at short notice if needed
- **Finnish firms on the lookout for opportunities for example in education, construction etc.**
- **Aim to rebuild Ukraine vs. The New Ukraine**
- Neutrality, Impartiality, Diplomacy (mine action, keeping distance to military, upset a regional head in one topic and you are out with the rest of them, how to maintain neutrality and impartiality when these may be seen as threats to saving the country)

# Operational context - lessons learnt

- Donor relations – often reach out to EU, Finnish and other embassies, visiting foreign ministry delegations
- **People with disabilities** (acquired during war vs. longer and born-with disability, fraudulent certification, shelters access, pwds in education, opds not listened to, unusual statistics to begin with, positive laws on must employ pwds)
- Missile attacks on energy facilities, industrial plants and residential areas due to debris **have made work very dangerous for most if not everyone** compared to a non-war situation, most of all for the rescuers, emergency medics, police officers, frontline humanitarian responders.
- Present **danger also for construction workers who clear away rubble (asbestos and other risks/hazards)** and **workers in agriculture**, who are constantly at risk of unexploded ordnances.
- **Trade unions** have been kind of forced to **focus on these new realities and role**: e.g. equipping workplace bomb shelters and conducting mine safety training.
- The largest trade union association, the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FPU), estimates that the movement **has lost around one million members** – a quarter of the pre-war number. **Large trade union organizations that were in enterprises located in the occupied territories have been lost.**
- To stop the catastrophic outflow of members, Ukrainian **unions have tried to support displaced people with humanitarian aid.**
- **War became a pretext for attacking unions?**

# Ukraine's Labour Market Comparison to Regional & EU Averages (Pre-War)

- Ukraine's **human development index** was close to Central Asian countries, Belarus, Moldova and Georgia. **Average monthly income** was similar to Uzbekistan and the Philippines.
- Significant **income inequality**, with a relatively **high Gini coefficient**
- Wealthy oligarch elite, small middle class, flat income tax like some of its neighbors, but struggles with higher levels of **tax evasion**, a **large informal sector**, and **corruption**, which contribute to **lower tax compliance**
- Relatively stable economic growth prior to the war, but struggled with challenges like high inflation and economic disruptions from political instability and the annexation of Crimea.
- Ukraine's unemployment rate was a bit higher than the European Union (EU) average, reaching 9.8% in 2021, compared to the EU average of around 6.9%. Youth unemployment was significantly above the EU average.
- Ukraine **had a trade union density of 37%**, notably higher than many Eastern European countries and the global average.
- In 2021 **Ukraine's social protection system** reached a majority of the population, but struggled with coverage gaps, inadequate benefit levels, and sustainability concerns, necessitating comprehensive reforms to better serve its most vulnerable citizens. During war gaps widened.
- Ukraine **generally complied with international labour standards**, ranking higher than Russia and many other Eastern European countries but was behind many EU members in terms of worker protections.

# Ukraine Context at the time of war - labour market - DTDA report 2025/2026

- Russia's invasion in 2022 severely affected Ukraine's economy, contracting GDP, rising unemployment (up to 21% in 2022), and increased poverty. Over 8 million people left Ukraine, and the workforce shrank dramatically.
- Trade union density is 37%, but a significant decline from past decades due to privatization, migration, and war.
- National social dialogue mechanisms are weak, with dormant tripartite institutions.
- War-induced migration and personnel mobilizations led to a reduction in skilled workers, exacerbating the unemployment rate, particularly in the private sector.



# Ukraine Context at the time of war - labour market - DTDA

- Martial Law: Restrictions on workers' rights, including limitations on strikes and protests, and liberalisation of the labour market.
- Several labour law reforms aimed at deregulation and modernisation, but controversial due to concerns about workers' rights.
- Ukraine aims to phase out coal by 2035, with potential job displacement for 40,000 workers in the coal industry. Energy reforms are challenged by the war's impacts.
- Ukraine's social protection system is underfunded, with limited coverage for unemployment, especially for those displaced by the war.

# Economic Restructuring and Labour Relations in Ukraine:

- In March 2022, the Ukrainian Parliament passed the Law on the **Organisation of Labour Relations under Martial Law**, severely restricting workers' rights and weakening labour relations. Subsequent laws further deregulated industrial relations, **undermining protections for workers and eroding social dialogue**, crucial during the war. These changes, including the introduction of a "contractual regime" for small and medium-sized enterprises (employees-employers as "equal"), shift the focus from labour law to individual contracts, **leaving workers with minimal legal safeguards**.
- Ruling political party proposed that the government set up a brand new 'Council of Trade Union Leaders' in July 2023 - in an explicit attempt **to sidestep** the government's existing institution for dialogue with employers and trade unions. Passed in August 2023.
- The war with Russia has **devastated key industries** (mining, metallurgy, manufacturing), reducing trade union influence.
- "Trade unions are **obsolete** in new Ukraine" - high level Government rep. in news
- Wartime policies deregulate labor protections and **weaken unions' bargaining power**.
- **Reconstruction may** attract foreign investment, with conditions **limiting union power**.
- **Pro-business reforms** reduce unions' roles in labour disputes and collective bargaining.
- **Weak historical roots** in Soviet-style unions and **declining union density**.
- Unions face repression, with **attacks on activists and legal challenges**.
- **EU membership requires compliance with ILO and EU labor standards** - EU has put pressure and urged Ukraine e.g. in 2022/2023 to work on its labour code reform in social dialogue model, and recommended to conduct the reform in line with ILO standards

# Economic Restructuring on Labour Relations in Ukraine- what is unknown:

- Will foreign investments prioritize labour rights, or purely focus on flexibility and deregulation?
- What influence will unions have on reconstruction policies?
- Will labor protections be restored post-war, or will deregulation continue?
- How will Ukraine balance EU labour requirements with pro-business policies?
- Can independent trade unions strengthen, or will they remain fragmented?
- Will international solidarity help revitalize the Ukrainian labour movement?
- Will military-driven policies permanently weaken worker protections further if the war continues?
- Will peace negotiations lead to reconstruction programs with what level labour rights conditions?

# Possibilities for trade union activities during the war- examples:

- Public sector unions often focus on **humanitarian support** (shelters, food, financial aid for injured/fallen workers), also **defend workers' rights through dialogue and lobbying (despite restrictions)**.
- Industrial unions have emphasized wage protection, worker safety, and maintaining jobs during wartime, are dealing with mass job losses, but still **advocating for fair wages and working conditions**.
- Energy sector unions prioritize keeping essential services running, **repair crews' safety**, and infrastructure resilience and focus on national security and **infrastructure recovery** is unique to the wartime context.
- Key concern is **workers' safety** in dangerous working conditions with most unions
- Unions demand proper **compensation and legal protections** during the crisis.

# Funding situation

- Domestic funding for unions has **significantly decreased due to membership loss and wartime disruptions.**
- International solidarity funding, mainly from European and global trade organizations, is **vital for union survival.**
- Public sector unions receive some government support, but **international unions provide the majority of funding.**
- Industrial unions rely also on donations and **in-kind contributions** (e.g., food, safety equipment).
- State-owned enterprises continue to **collect dues**, but private sector unions face severe financial strain.
- **International movement plays a crucial role** in supporting unions.
- **Local donations and solidarity actions** help maintain union activities.

# Unions' positioning during martial law in Ukraine

## Key Constraints:

- Ban on strikes and protests.
- Limited social dialogue and reduced influence over labour reforms.
- Legal and political restrictions on typical union activities.

## Adaptations:

- Legal Action & Advocacy: Unions use **legal channels** to protect rights and lobby internationally.
- Alternative Industrial Action: **Symbolic protests, work-to-rule actions, and solidarity support for other unions.**
- Focus on Safety & Humanitarian Support: Prioritize **worker safety, provide aid for displaced workers, and ensure compensation for the injured.**
- Informal Social Dialogue: Continued **behind-the-scenes negotiations** with employers and the government.
- International Support: **Funding and advocacy by global unions help sustain operations.**

***Unions remain essential in defending workers' rights, ensuring safety, and supporting Ukraine's war effort.***

# Suggested agenda for unions if/when space exists

- Influence to align Ukraine's labour law reforms with EU directives.
- Advocate for collective bargaining rights in EU accession talks.
- Require EU investors to comply with international labour standards.
- Lessons learnt from Baltic states' and EU integration models
- Strive for fair wages, working conditions, and union recognition.
- Demand protections against anti-union discrimination.
- Organize workers before major investments arrive.
- Train local union leaders and ensure transparency and accountability - gain trust
- Use EU regulations to ensure companies respect workers' rights.
- Demand social clauses in EU reconstruction aid for Ukraine.

# Suggested agenda for unions if/when space exists

- Modernize
- Push for international pressure on Ukraine's government and employers
- Report labour violations to ILO supervisory bodies
- Partner with worker-driven social responsibility models
- Ensure Ukraine's exports to the EU/US comply with ILO standards
- Build coalitions with civil society groups (e.g., anti-corruption, women's rights)
- Ensure coal and heavy industry workers have alternative options
- Demand retraining programs funded by EU and international donors
- Ensure unions have a voice in Ukraine's energy transition
- Try to secure fair wages and union representation in renewable energy sectors
- Engage with multinational companies planning to invest in Ukraine



# The Trade Union Solidarity Centre of Finland SASK plans for work in Ukraine - concept notes received

- **400,000 EUR total for 2026-2029 applied for from MFA of Finland**
- Skills for Ukraine: **Building a Skilled Workforce for Reconstruction (BWI)**
- Who: BWI & PROFBUD (Building and Construction Workers Union of Ukraine).
- What & Where: This initiative focuses on training workers for Ukraine's reconstruction (Kyiv, Kharkiv, Poltava, Chernivtsi, Khmelnytsky, and more).
- Partners: Local trade unions, international solidarity organizations (e.g., Union to Union, Sweden).
- Aim: Address Ukraine's construction workforce shortage and ensure quality training in construction skills, asbestos management, and workers' rights protection to support the nation's recovery.



# The Trade Union Solidarity Centre of Finland SASK plans for work in Ukraine - concept notes received

- **A Worker-Centred Industrial Policy for Ukraine's Reconstruction (IndustriALL)**
- Who: IndustriALL Global Union & 13 Ukrainian trade unions.
- What & Where: Focused on sustainable industrial policy for Ukraine, aiming to involve unions in the policy-making process for reconstruction (Ukraine-wide).
- Partners: Ukrainian affiliates, global unions with industrial policy experience.
- Aim: Strengthen unions' roles in shaping industrial policy, ensuring workers' rights and equality, and promoting sustainable economic development

# The Trade Union Solidarity Centre of Finland SASK plans for work in Ukraine - concept notes received

- **DigitalUp Ukraine: Strengthening Unions' Digital Skills (UNI Global Union)**
- Who: UNI Global Union, COZZ, Solidarity Center, and Ukrainian unions.
- What & Where: Digital skills development for Ukrainian trade unions to enhance organizing and strategic planning (Across Ukraine, initially focusing on Lviv region).
- Partners: COZZ, Solidarity Center, digital experts.
- Aim: Bridge the digital skills gap in unions, improve recruitment, communication, and strategic planning, and boost union growth and participation



# The Trade Union Solidarity Centre of Finland SASK plans for work in Ukraine – concept notes received

- **Modernisation of Ukraine's Trade Union Movement in the Social Sector (PSI)**
- Who: PSI, EPSU, Public Sector Unions in Ukraine (e.g., municipal workers, health workers).
- What & Where: Modernize trade unions in Ukraine's social sector, with a focus on membership expansion, participation increase, and use of AI for efficiency (across Ukraine) - data analysis, automation, chatbots, online training, personalised communication.
- The objective is to revitalize unions and ensure stronger worker representation through enhanced training, advocacy, and modernized operations—advancing labour rights aligned with EU standards, promoting gender equality and non-discrimination, supporting Just Transition with integrated psychosocial care, embracing digitalization, and addressing the needs of displaced and traumatized populations in post-conflict recovery contexts.
- Budget 180,000 EUR over three years (2026-2029)
- Managed by PSI Geneva, EPSU Bruxelles.



**Thank you!**