

“You need to have nerves of steel to work here for years” – Belgian media focuses on heroism of Zaporizhstal employees and problems of Ukrainian iron and steel industry

Journalists from De Morgen, a leading Belgian national media outlet, visited Metinvest Group’s Zaporizhstal plant. In a lengthy article, they described the challenges faced by the Ukrainian steel industry during the war, the heroism of ordinary steelworkers in the country and the importance of the entire industry for Ukraine’s future.



The giant Zaporizhstal iron and steel plant is working at full capacity. If the heat does not make the work unbearable, the incessant shelling from the Russians does.

Sweat drips down his face. His long refractory robe was silver but has turned grey over the years, the same colour as the steel he works with. The temperature at the production site is higher than 50 degrees Celsius. The closer you get to the furnaces, where the steel melts at about 1,500 degrees, the more unbearable the heat becomes.



Kostiantyn Oleksiiovych (53 years old) has been working at Zaporizhstal for decades. It is one of the largest steel plants in Ukraine after the destroyed Azovstal in Mariupol, named after the city of Zaporizhzhia, where the huge plant is located. His main task is to separate steel from slag after it comes out of the furnace. He lowers the visor of his helmet over his face, goes to the fire and swings the molten metal, which leads to an eruption of fiery splashes.

Because of the war, Zaporizhstal has lost part of its staff. Many employees have joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine, while others have left to seek safer places in the west of Ukraine. Meanwhile, three of the four blast furnaces continue to operate despite Russian shelling. Zaporizhzhia is under fire almost daily, and the front line is less than 50 kilometres from the city.

While the plant itself has been shelled several times by the Russians, so far all but one attack has been repelled. A drone fell on one of the gas pipelines, causing a large explosion. A Russian missile also impacted, but fortunately, it did not explode. When the air raid alert sounds too often, some people work in body armour and protective clothing. Kostiantyn does not wear them. He thinks that it is warm enough even without them. Besides, he knocks on his metal helmet, indicating that his head is already protected.

To cope with the staff shortage, employees work in two 12-hour shifts instead of three 8-hour ones. The night shift lasts from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Kostiantyn shrugs his shoulders: “It’s long and hard. You never get used to the heat. But I still enjoy my job. I’m also proud of it. Not everyone can stand it.” He smiles.

Kostiantyn could have retired at 50, which is the standard age for steel industry workers. But he does not want to retire yet. “I’m healthy, I feel too young to stay at home,” he says. To withstand the heat from the furnace, you “have to be cut from a special wood”. New employees say that they can lose up to 10 kilos in the first month of

work.

Zaporizhstal is currently in the spotlight for producing steel for the giant trident, a symbol of Ukraine, that will be placed on the Motherland Monument in Kyiv. Standing at an impressive 102 metres, the Motherland Monument dates from the Soviet era and has towered high above the capital since 1981. Made of stainless steel and weighing 560 tonnes, the monument is set to undergo a significant change. By 24 August, Ukraine's Independence Day, the Soviet coat of arms on the monument is to be replaced with a new trident. "It will be a difficult challenge, but we will manage," says Mykola Petrekov, technical director of Zaporizhstal.

Walking through the grounds of the immense steel plant in Zaporizhzhia is like stepping into history. Nearly a hundred years old, Zaporizhstal was founded in 1933. With its sprawling network of brown pipes and chimneys, it resembles a gigantic bastion that seems inescapable once you are inside.

COVERING AN AREA EQUIVALENT TO 770 FOOTBALL FIELDS, THE PLANT IS ROUGHLY 2.5 TIMES LARGER THAN THE PRINCIPALITY OF MONACO. IT IS EQUIPPED WITH 16 UNDERGROUND BOMB SHELTERS THAT CAN ACCOMMODATE 7,000 PEOPLE, A TESTAMENT TO ITS FORTRESS-LIKE NATURE. FOR THE WORKERS, THE PLANT HAS BECOME MORE THAN A PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT; IT IS A SYMBOL OF THEIR FIGHT AGAINST THE RUSSIANS

"It all started on February 24th last year, at a quarter past six in the morning," Mykola Petrekov says. "I received a call from an employee. 'It happened,' he said. 'The war has begun. They are bombing the airport near Kyiv.' Immediately, I called the General Director. He picked up the phone and asked what was broken again, because our conversations were usually about broken equipment."

Petrekov rushed to the factory. "All the executives and a large number of other employees were present. During that time, we lived at the plant. We laid mattresses on the floor in the entrance hall, and everyone stayed overnight. It was a strange, tumultuous and unstable period. We heard how the Russians were fighting in Mariupol and understood that we had to stand united to support our plant. We promised to fight back with all our might."

Soon, it became clear that keeping the four blast furnaces running while Zaporizhstal was at risk of being bombed posed a significant danger. "In early March, we made the decision to stop all the furnaces. It was the first time since World War II."

Mission-critical staff stayed on-site and worked 24 hours a day. Cooling the furnaces and machinery was crucial because any mishap could lead to a fire. "We had a massive emergency generator in case of power outages," Petrekov continues. "The shutdown lasted over a month. After 33 days, we decided to resume production because the Russian offensive had stopped, and they could not move forward. Moreover, we had to continue paying salaries to thousands of our employees; they needed this income more than ever. We also understood how important it was to keep the economy running."

Like many other companies affected by the hostilities, Zaporizhstal has seen a significant reduction in its output. In 2021, the plant produced 4.4 million tonnes of pig iron and 3.7 million tonnes of steel; in 2022, these volumes fell by half. Much of Zaporizhstal's production is destined for Europe, a shift necessitated by the weakened state of the Ukrainian economy due to the war. In 2022, economic indicators decreased by 30%. Although these figures have not declined further this year, the outlook for a return to better financial times remains uncertain.

Exporting to Europe has grown increasingly challenging. With all ports in the south of Ukraine blocked, sea transport is no longer an option. While rail serves as an alternative, it is not only more costly, it also takes much longer than before. In addition, passengers and military equipment take priority over goods shipments for rail transport. Petrekov sighs: "We would very much like to export more to Europe."

MEANWHILE, THE MAJORITY OF EUROPEAN STEEL IMPORTS STILL COME FROM RUSSIA, AS REPORTED BY THE GERMAN NEWS MAGAZINE WIRTSCHAFTSWOCHE. HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE DESPITE THE BAN ON IMPORTS OF STEEL AND IRON PRODUCTS FROM THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION? THE ANSWER LIES IN VARIOUS LOOPHOLES IN THE LEGISLATION AND EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULES. EUROPEAN COUNTRIES CONTINUE TO BUY STEEL, BOTH AS FINISHED PRODUCTS AND AS SEMI-FINISHED PRODUCTS. THESE MAY RECEIVE A NEW LABEL FROM SELLERS IN OTHER COUNTRIES OR BE SUBJECT TO PROCESSES THAT HIDE THEIR TRUE ORIGIN

Experts confirm that certain Russian steel products can still be legally imported into the EU, including Russian semi-finished products that are rerolled in Belgium before the finished steel is resold. According to Eurostat figures, early this year, the EU reduced imports of Russian iron and steel products by almost 60% compared with 2022. Belgium follows this trend: early in the year, the country imported semi-finished products worth

EUR179.28 million, almost 40% less than the previous year. Yet, these imports continue despite sanctions. In fact, according to the Ukrainian GMK Centre, Belgium is the largest importer of Russian steel in Europe. The Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to our request for comment.

“President Zelenskyy’s emphasis on further sanctions is not without reason,” Petrekov said. “We hope that in the future, despite logistical problems, Europe will import more of our steel than from Russia.” Meanwhile, Zaporizhstal is facing significant losses. “If one of the furnaces is shut down for 24 hours, we will lose approximately EUR900,000.”

In addition to steel and pig iron, the steel giant also manufactures products for the Ukrainian army. Though initially reluctant to discuss this, Petrekov eventually explained that the plant, in collaboration with other Metinvest enterprises, produces bulletproof vests for the army. It also supplies ready-made steel shelters that can be installed on the front line in the trenches.

Kostiantyn emphasises the importance of his work, sharing: “Tonight, when I get home, I’ll have time to cool down. I’ll be with my wife, have a beer and relax. Very normal, just like everyone else who works here. On weekends, I see my children and grandchildren. My son, who is 23 years old, also works here. The work often passes from generation to generation.” The hard work at the iron and steel plant is well paid, and steelworkers’ pensions, along with those of miners, rank among the highest in the country.

As we reach the area where the 30-centimetre red-hot steel slabs are being transformed into thin plates, we find ourselves dripping with sweat. It is easy to believe that new employees might lose ten kilos working here. Our supervisor cautions us not to touch anything, warning that some areas are so hot one could easily burn oneself. She also insists that we follow her without delay, explaining that if we stand still for too long in certain spots, our soles could stick to the floor.

Amid the loud hissing, creaking and cracking of steel plates, we walk through the giant plant’s workshops. We can see sprinklers cooling the hot steel and feel the searing heat of the plates from tens of metres away. You need to have nerves of steel to work here for years. Or, as Anton, an engineer in the steel processing department, quips when asked if he goes to the sauna: “Yes. To cool down.”

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[De Morgen](#)

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