

“The Mining Capital of Ukraine”: Swiss Media Reports From Pokrovsk

Journalists from *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, one of the largest Swiss German-language newspapers, have visited Pokrovsk and described in detail how the mining capital of Ukraine is coping during the war, what problems miners face and the role of Metinvest Group for the city. Below is an adapted version of the report.



Pokrovsk has been the mining capital of Ukraine since 2014. Its strategically important coking coal brings a touch of normality to the city, despite rocket attacks and its proximity to Russian positions.

As miners with faces blackened with soot hurry from the mine to shower, they don't like to be stopped. Only three of them pose for a photographer, and then continue on their way: the fine coal dust on their bodies will disappear after the shower, the bus is waiting. It takes them from their shift to Pokrovsk: from 36-degree heat underground to a more comfortable temperature in their flats, from several hundred metres below the surface to their families.

The activity at Ukraine's largest coal mine is also due to another reason: the war is close. The front line in the Donbas is just over 30 kilometres away, while Avdiivka, where Russia is conducting a new offensive, is only 60 kilometres away. Russian missiles are also causing casualties by hitting Pokrovsk.

Tonnes of coal

Nevertheless, work at the mine continues because the war has given coal a new meaning. The Donbas, the most productive region of the former Soviet Union, used to be known primarily for its economic problems. The consequences of Russian aggression have added to this. Until 2014, Ukraine produced more than 80 million tonnes of coal a year. Then Moscow annexed the country's eastern region, halving that figure. Following the full-scale invasion in 2022, around 80% of the nation's coal reserves are in occupied territory.

Most of the mines remaining in Ukraine produce coal for heating. While this is hardly lucrative, it became vital last winter during Russian attacks on energy infrastructure. The Pokrovske mine division extracts coking coal, which is used mainly for steelmaking, so is also essential for the defence industry.

The division is owned by Metinvest. Before the war, the international group of companies belonging to businessman Rinat Akhmetov controlled the entire production chain. Coal from Pokrovsk and coke from the neighbouring frontline city of Avdiivka were supplied to huge steel mills in Mariupol. Now, this chain has been destroyed: Azovstal in Mariupol is lying in ruins, and Ukrainian defenders have taken up positions around the coke plant in Avdiivka.

The Pokrovske mine is operating at reduced capacity because of the war and inability to export products through traditional routes. In such conditions, mining and transporting coal is a tremendous challenge. Nevertheless, from January to November 2023, employees mined more than 5 million tonnes of coking coal. Some of the output goes

to Ukrainian steel mills, while the rest goes to Eastern European countries.

Responsibility of miners

Alina Vachnova is standing at a conveyor that loads coal into freight railcars. The loading manager processes many wagons every day. She comes from a family of miners. “Without the mines, my hometown of Pokrovsk would not exist,” says the 38-year-old woman. At her workplace, she is more exposed to the dangers of Russian missiles than people at the mines. There is fear, but mostly she copes with it: “Maybe we are already too used to danger?”

The mother of two did not move away in 2014 or eight years later: “I always felt with all my soul that I am needed here.” Financially, she is dependent on her job. Her husband also has a job, but at one of the state-owned mines. At Metinvest’s mines, workers can earn four times as much.

The importance of coal is far more than financial for the Donbas. Coal formed the basis for the industrialisation of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, and strengthened their economic and political power. One priority of Stalin, Hitler and Putin over the last 100 years was to control the Donbas’ raw material resources. As such, the region has often experienced war.

Coal provides material for myths and revolutions. According to state legend, it took Oleksiy Stakhanov, the most famous Soviet labour hero, less than six hours to extract 102 tonnes of coal from a mine in the Donbas. In 1991, a strike by miners made a significant contribution to the independence of Ukraine.

Miners would have worked instead of going on strike

The miners say that they have never been particularly interested in politics. Instead of striking, they worked, says Oleksandr Borodayev. Together with his son Dmytro and childhood friend Valeriy Kotelnikov, he welcomes us into the living room of the well maintained house that he earned by working at the mine. Admiring the garden, the two elderly gentlemen nostalgically recall the privileges that they enjoyed in the old days.

“We travelled across Ukraine and even to Paris for business trips,” says Borodayev. “A miner was a holy word,” emphasises the chairman of the union of veterans of the Pokrovske mine division. “When you came out of the mine with black eyes, girls would smile at you.”

But workdays were tough. The mines still used pre-war technology early in his career. “I worked mostly on my knees,” the 73-year-old man recalls. Borodayev, who is four years younger than him and quite sturdy, also half-jokingly says that once he was 1 metre 90 centimetres tall – before the adit fell on him. They both have health problems: Kotelnikov has knee effusion and Borodayev has pneumoconiosis.

Borodayev’s 38-year-old son Dmytro emphasises that work is now safer thanks to automation and sensors. “But many people still don’t like to wear a protective mask because it’s hard to breathe in the heat.” Borodayev knows what he’s talking about because as a foreman, he checks for compliance with safety regulations daily. “This is not the way to gain popularity for me,” the family man says with a smile.

The smell of the sun

While serving cognac with the cake, the men talk about two very different worlds: in the mine and on the surface. “When my wife hangs out the washing, I tell her: it smells like the sun. She always replies that it’s impossible. But the miners know that it’s true.” The older men are nodding. Above the ground are air and space, while below the surface, it is cramped, dark and dusty.

The profitability of the Pokrovske mine also means that life is almost normal there in the middle of the war. Russian aggression since 2014 has turned this place into “the new capital of mining in the Ukrainian Donbas”. That’s what it says on the entrance to the Metinvest museum in the Palace of Culture. It is as newly renovated a building as the library in the city’s main square, where Stalinist baroque meets the nine-storey panel building of the municipal administration and the new shopping centre.

The relative prosperity here collides with the proximity to the front line in a tiny space. Some Pokrovsk women are celebrating an upcoming wedding of a friend with champagne and balloons. The bride is marrying a miner, and one of the women herself works in a mine. A police bus with refugees from the neighbouring city of Myrnohrad, which is located within range of Russian artillery, is parked next to them.

Pokrovsk is protected from this, but not rocket attacks. The fragility of the security situation was seen in early August, when Russians destroyed a well known restaurant and killed at least 10 people. Despite the danger, well dressed young people drink flat whites on velvet-covered armchairs in the Bulvar shopping centre, between soldiers of the armed forces of Ukraine who have left their offroad vehicles for a quick refreshment.

A great responsibility

The fragile normality in Pokrovsk would be impossible to imagine without Metinvest. The Group is not only the city’s most significant employer, but also the main sponsor of its social life. Metinvest’s logo can be seen on

hospitals, stadiums, kindergartens and playgrounds. In this way, the modern company continues the tradition of caring that has been in place since Soviet times.

The needs of the defence industry have compelled Metinvest to take greater responsibility. For example, the Group has provided heavy machinery for digging trenches. The political leadership in Kyiv expects companies to contribute to this fight.

Tension and routine

Right now, people are suffering most from the war. “The Russians are bombing hospitals and killing civilians indiscriminately; they are worse than Nazis,” says Oleksandr Borodayev, a retired miner who used to be rather indifferent to Ukrainian independence. The Soviet past has left a stronger mark on him. His son has also lost all sympathy for Ukraine’s large neighbour: “Since I had to bury my friends and look into the faces of their relatives.” Dmytro’s brother, Oleksandr, who also worked in the mine, is now serving in the armed forces of Ukraine on the southern front.

Of the Pokrovske mine division’s once 10,000 employees, nearly 2,000 have been mobilised, like Borodayev, or left the city. “It’s hard to work in such tense conditions,” acknowledges Gennady Yakovenko, director of the mine. “We understand all those who left because they couldn’t take it anymore,” he says, “but we have to move on, whether it’s war or not.”

In the long corridors leading into the mine, miners prepare for their next shift. As always, they put on their work uniforms and take dusty helmets, masks and oxygen equipment. Then they pass through the last revolving door. Written above it is a message: “Be careful, people are waiting for you at home!”

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[Neue Zürcher Zeitung](#)

<https://metinvestholding.com/en/media/news/shahtarsjka-stolicya-ukrani-reportazh-shvejcarsjkogo-nzz-z-pokrovsjka-pro-zmnu-poglyadv-shahtarv-opku-metnvestu-ta-blizjktj-vjni>