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Russian invasion of Ukraine / UKRAINE

With help of part of international community, Ukraine is already starting to rebuild

Brussels/Kyiv/Chernihiv, 31/05/2023 (Agence Europe) – While some members of the international community are organising to help rebuild Ukraine - notably at the *Ukraine Recovery Conference* to be held in London on 21 and 22 June - reconstruction on the ground has already begun.

Although it is still regularly subjected to missile attacks, which have intensified over the last 3 weeks, the Chernihiv region, which shares 450 km of borders with Russia and Belarus, is gradually being rebuilt, thanks to international aid.

In March, the World Bank estimated the cost of rebuilding Ukraine at €411 billion, which does not include Bakhmut. For 2023, €14 billion should be used for reconstruction, of which €3 billion will be covered by the Ukrainian budget - to which the EU contributes €18 billion a year - and €1 billion by the European Commission.

"The Chernihiv oblast is one of the regions that had the most damage and suffering in the first days of the war", the governor of the Chernihiv region, Vyacheslav Chaus, reminded a group of journalists, including *EUROPE*, during a press trip to Ukraine organised by the Ukrainian NGO *Platform for the Release of Political Prisoners*.

In February and March 2022, two thirds of the country came under Russian occupation and was the scene of major military action. Since April 2022 and the expulsion of Russian troops from the region, *"I can't count 10 days when the territory hasn't come under fire"*, said Mr Chaus, adding that there had been further damage in April and May 2023. Attacks continue every day at the border. According to the governor, 45 villages are under fire every day and 10,000 people are still living there.

In this oblast, which had just under a million inhabitants before the invasion, 664 people have lost their lives, more than 1,100 have been injured and 12,276 'objects' have been destroyed or damaged, according to figures from the regional military administration. 99% of the damage has been done to civilian infrastructure, mainly housing: 9,117 houses and 1,058 high-rise buildings have been destroyed.

The region is licking its wounds

And reconstruction work is progressing: 3,300 residential buildings have already been completely repaired. According to Mr Chaus, the funds come from the State, the region and the city of Chernihiv. Poland has funded temporary shelters to rehouse people who have lost their homes.

Of the 71 buildings linked to the social system that were destroyed or damaged, 43 have been completely rebuilt. The same applies to education buildings: of the 143 destroyed or damaged, 71 have already been completely rebuilt, with shelters. *"We have received a lot of support, focusing on renovation, for schools and health institutions"*, the governor recognised.

The international community has also helped to provide school buses for the region, which has lost 90 of them. Chernihiv has regained 45, but according to Mr Chaus,

more are still needed. The region has benefited from the European Commission's 'School Buses for Ukraine' initiative.

The international community - including the EU - has also provided laptops, which are essential, particularly in the 20 km border area, where children are unable to go to school because of the fighting, and have to do lessons online. "*Both buses and laptops are channelled via the EU Civil Protection Mechanism*", the Commission told EUROPE, without giving precise numbers.

While the region has received a large number of generators, in particular from a private Danish company which supplied 500, Mr Chaus called for equipment to be supplied to repair the 1,472 damaged critical infrastructures (water, electricity, gas). Aid for the reconstruction of critical infrastructure is an EU priority for 2023.

While there is already significant international support, Ukraine is hoping for more. On Thursday 25 May, in a recorded speech broadcast to the Committee of the Regions, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced the creation of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, a platform for improving interaction between central and local government, which he said would "*also play a fundamental role in reconstruction efforts*" (see EUROPE B13188A21). Among the challenges of reconstruction are the fair distribution of resources and avoiding the risks of corruption.

Some would also like Russia to finance this reconstruction. One of the heads of the border guards in the Chernihiv region, Colonel Yuriy Petrovych Kovalchuk, says Russia will rebuild "*our towns, under our control*".

This reconstruction should be carried out with Russian funds. "*Once we win the war, it will take a huge toll on the Ukrainian budget and the Ukrainian people to repair it. This money shouldn't come from our partners who have already committed a lot*", said Tetiana Shevchuk, from the International Centre for Ukrainian Victory, whom we met in Kyiv. "*Only Russia should pay*", she added.

Making the area safe

Another major challenge is demining the region. While more than 61,500 explosive objects have been recovered, numerous mines have been laid throughout the country and bombs and missiles are still active. 18 people have been killed and 28 injured by mines, with the last incidents happening on 23 May 2023.

"*It's a huge piece of work, we need to clear all the mines. An already amazing number (of mines) have been removed, but this is a tiny amount of what we have in the region*", explained Mr Chaus. Of the 31,900 km² of the oblast, only 40,700 hectares have been inspected, i.e. 400 km².

"*Even after victory, we will need a few years, and maybe more than a decade, to demine*", warned the region's governor.

The oblast is cooperating with four international organisations. So far, 98% of the demining has been carried out by Ukrainian State institutions, but the region needs help with more extensive humanitarian demining. "*Total demining is under international support, so we are very interested to have more of these specialists coming because we have cases of people who have died in territories that were already checked*", explained Mr Chaus.

For 2022 and 2023, the European Union has set aside €38 million for mine clearance in Ukraine.

Psychological reconstruction

But the longest task will be the psychological reconstruction of civilians, whether those imprisoned in Russia and their relatives awaiting their return, or those who have lived under occupation.

"I don't call them the Russian army, but Russian terrorists, they have nothing in common with the military. They are criminals. They killed, tortured and stole", warned the governor.

In front of a group of journalists, Olena, aged 40, head of the Yahidne district community, tells how, when the Russians arrived, they shot at official buildings and those who tried to escape and how they threatened villagers to find out the names of the authorities. Her sons - aged 14 and 16 - were threatened and made to line up against a wall, with soldiers shooting at their legs. *"At the time, I thought it was over",* she admitted.

"The world should know what's happening", added Ludmila, 51. Along with 366 other people, including her young daughter Paulina, who was one year old at the time, she spent a month in the basement of Yahidne's village school on the orders of Russian soldiers.

The detention conditions were terrible. In the small, windowless and very damp room of around 8 m² where Ludmila tells her story, with Paulina in her arms, 19 people were crammed together from 3 to 30 March 2022. It's impossible to lie down to sleep, and a sheet was laid out for the children to sleep high up to reduce the dampness. In another room, the walls were painted by the children. 74 children - aged between one month and 17 years - were detained in this basement.

At the bottom of the stairs leading down to the shelter, a toilet pot had been installed, as the Russians rarely allowed locals to go to the toilet outside, under threat of being shot at. During their detention, 10 people died due to a lack of medical care. Burying them was a challenge for the villagers, who were not always allowed to do so and who, if they were, risked being shot at by the Russians at any moment. To protect themselves, they had to jump into the holes dug in the ground to hold the dead.

When they came out of the basement, out of fear of the Russian soldiers returning, Ludmila slept in her clothes for a month and Paulina was afraid of the light. They have both received psychological support since their release, as has Valentina, aged 61, who was also held in the basement and left the village a month after her release, before returning. She says, *"some people have not yet returned to see the shelter".*

Hoping that it will become a memorial, Valentina disagrees some of her 'fellow detainees' who want to clean it up in case the situation gets worse and they have to hole up there again. But for the sexagenarian, who shows us a wall of the shelter on which the names of those who didn't survive have been written, *"it would be better to escape than to go through all that again".* (Original version in French by Camille-Cerise Gessant)

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