

Ukraine's Environment Faces a Long Road to Recovery

Article by Yevheniia Zasiadko

October 20, 2022

The invasion of Ukraine is causing serious environmental degradation which will have profound long-term effects on the country's natural resources, ecosystems, and biodiversity. These effects will not be restricted to Ukraine, as the pollution and other damaging impacts are likely to spread well beyond national borders. Yevheniia Zasiadko is among those working to document and monitor the effects of the war on the environment, even as the fighting continues. She explains why this process is so vital, how reconstruction efforts could provide opportunities for greater sustainability, and why the only solution is decisive action in solidarity with Ukraine to bring the war to an end.

Green European Journal: What was the role of your organisation prior to the Russian invasion, and how did it change following the outbreak of war?

Yevheniia Zasiadko: Before the Russian invasion, Ecoaction mainly worked on climate policy advocacy in the fields of energy policy, the transition away from nuclear power, renewable energies, industrial pollution, and agriculture. The team I lead was working on mitigation and adaptation policies, for instance in the transport sector.

When the conflict began, the Ukrainian government asked for our assistance in monitoring the environmental impacts of the war. We now work in cooperation with the Ukrainian regional authorities. Their presence on the ground gives them direct access to information from the field, while we monitor external data in collaboration with Dutch NGO PAX, which has access to satellite images. By combining these different resources, we can maintain an overview of the situation across the country.

*The environmental damage caused by the war
will affect us all in the long term.*

Information gathering remains very difficult, however. Those documenting environmental damage – and anyone working as a journalist or an environmental activist in general – can be easily arrested by the Russian forces and imprisoned, tortured, or deported. During the occupation of Kherson, for example, a number of activists were arrested and sent to Russia. And this isn't just limited to Kherson – there have been reports of similar occurrences in many of the regions of Ukraine occupied by Russian forces.

How do you measure and quantify the environmental impact of the war through your work and what have been some of your key findings?

We identified 377 cases of conflict-related environmental damage between February and

July this year. We continue to receive reports of new cases almost every day – mainly from the east of Ukraine. The Luhansk and Donetsk regions are most heavily affected. As one of the first Russian targets at the start of the war, Kyiv was also hard hit environmentally.

The fact that certain Ukrainian regions – mainly in the east of the country and around Kyiv – are heavily industrialised has shaped the pollution “profile” of the conflict. During the Soviet era, Ukraine had the highest number of industrial facilities in the USSR. After independence in the 1990s, many of these industries closed, but a significant number remained in business. We have documented dozens of Russian strikes on industrial installations that led to major pollution incidents. In April, for example, a Russian attack on a chemical depot in Rubizhne, near Luhansk, led to a large-scale leak of toxic nitric acid. Local inhabitants were urged not to leave bomb shelters and to close windows and doors.

*It will take at least 50 years for our environment
to recover from the conflict.*

Ukraine’s coal mines – both operational and disused – have also suffered under the conflict, presenting a particular threat to rivers and groundwater. According to our records, almost 40 mines in the Donbas region have been flooded as a result of Russian military operations. Russian strikes have also hit electricity lines, as well as the pipelines that extract groundwater from these mining facilities. The flooding caused by these attacks has spread high levels of toxic substances throughout the region – and further afield. A major challenge of water pollution is that its consequences can be felt far away from the initial impact site. Water knows no borders, so pollution in eastern Ukraine can easily spread to Russia. Ordinary Russians will, unwittingly, be using water polluted with heavy metals or chemicals, and the Russian authorities seem not to care. So it’s important to talk about and raise awareness of this issue.

We have a good understanding of the immediate environmental impact of the conflict in Ukraine. But what about the medium- to long-term consequences? And how might that affect Ukraine’s future?

The environmental damage caused by the war will affect us all in the long term. Soil and water pollution won’t disappear overnight; a sizeable portion of Ukraine’s territory will remain seriously affected for many years to come. People can’t live decently without access to clean drinking water. This is why Ukrainian civil society is working to ensure that our government understands the importance of monitoring. When we begin rebuilding Ukraine, we will need to do so in a more sustainable manner to avoid causing further environmental damage. But in the long term, the effects of the conflict on our country’s environment will nevertheless continue to be felt.

Clearly, diverse types of pollution should not be lumped together; they have different characteristics and require different approaches. While measures to tackle air pollution – if well implemented – can take effect quickly, tackling water and soil pollution is more complicated. History demonstrates that the effects of particularly intense conflicts continue to be felt for decades – if not centuries – after the hostilities have ended. In France, for example, the consequences of the First World War, with its intensive use of artillery in

trench warfare, endure to this day in terms of soil quality. Some areas are still inaccessible a century after the conflict. In Ukraine, around 20 per cent of the country's territory has now been affected by the current war, and around a fifth of our important natural areas – including forests and nature reserves – have suffered conflict-related environmental degradation. This will have a lasting effect on our country's ecosystems and biodiversity.

Before the war, Ukraine's goal was to strengthen the protection of its natural areas. But now a significant proportion of them – and their flora and fauna – have been lost as a result of the conflict. Environmental regeneration won't happen overnight. While infrastructure can be rebuilt relatively quickly, in my opinion it will take at least 50 years for our environment to recover from the conflict. Some experts state that forested areas can be restored over a 12-year period, but I find that hard to believe. This figure represents the replanting of trees, but not the restoration of biodiversity. For wildlife to return to natural areas, we need to think in terms of decades. We're therefore clearly talking about policies that will stretch into the long term.

What do you expect from the European Union? What should be done?

First of all, the conflict must be brought to an end. As long as the war continues and the fighting intensifies, its consequences will only increase in severity. We receive new reports of environmental devastation every day. Attacks on industrial facilities are of particular concern. Official figures released by the Ukrainian authorities showed that, by July, Russia had already struck more than 200 industrial sites. This number is growing by the day.

We need the EU's financial and economic help to end the conflict. This must be a matter of priority. In order to finance its attack on Ukraine, Russia is using its enormous (and growing) fossil fuel export incomes – and Europe is its prime customer. Put succinctly, Europe is bankrolling the war. The EU has, of course, introduced and implemented a range of sanctions against Russia. But from a Ukrainian point of view, Europe only seems to react when Russia commits major violations on Ukrainian territory. We have also noticed that while the EU is quick to make announcements, it is slow to take concrete action. Look at the embargo on Russian oil: we've now been waiting four months. And for the sixth package of sanctions to be brought in, we had to wait almost two months.

*Russia can simply decide to turn off the tap to
Europe whenever the mood takes it.*

During a recent trip to Brussels, I had the impression that, in some ways, Europe still believes that Russia will continue to supply EU countries with gas in spite of the war. But in reality, you are all at the mercy of Moscow. Russia can simply decide to turn off the tap to Europe whenever the mood takes it.

The EU and Ukraine must stand united in the face of this conflict that affects us all. Russia must be prevented from accessing the resources it needs for its military, economic, and propaganda operations – all of which are helping prolong the war.

This interview is published in cooperation with [Etopia](#).

Yevheniia Zasiadko heads the Climate Department at Kyiv-based environmental NGO
Ecoaction

Published October 20, 2022

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/ukraines-environment-faces-a-long-road-to-recovery/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.