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The green horizon of victory

Building a sustainable and secure future for the next generation of Ukrainians does not have to wait until the end of the war

Military operations affect the environment and have a direct impact on the health and safety of ordinary people. Crops cannot be grown in soil that have been contaminated by heavy metals and it is extremely dangerous to use water that comes from polluted rivers.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, environmental organisations along with the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine have been monitoring the impacts of the war on the environment. The Ministry has publicly disclosed more than 2,300 cases of environmental damage caused by the war, it should be noted that this data is not reliable as the full list has never been published. One publicly available source of information about potential cases of environmental harm is the map produced by the Centre for Environmental Initiates Ecodiya (Ecoaction) which already depicts 841 such cases. Among the many examples are forests burning down, the damage caused by exploding shells, rocket fuel contaminating the soil and groundwater and more. Another organisation gathering information on environmental offences is the NGO SaveDnipro through its SaveEcoBot, thanks to which data has already been collected on about 285 environmental hazards across Ukraine. This information is not only being collected for statistical purposes but is also being passed on to the operational headquarters of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine. Based on the information, it has been possible to prepare a lawsuit against Russia at the UN International Court of Justice for compensation for the damage caused by an aggressor state.

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But it is not just the environment that suffers due to military operations. At the UN Climate Change Conference (COP27), for the first time in many years, the pressing issue of the impact of the arms industry and military operations on the climate was raised. In particular, research

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was presented according to which the Russian Federation's seven-months of military operations in Ukraine had already produced 49 million tonnes of CO2 emissions. This is comparable with the annual emissions of an entire country the size of Bulgaria or Portgual.

On the one hand, the destruction and thus standstill of large-scale industry and the population decline as a result of the occupation has obviously led to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. On the other hand, studies have estimated that the recovery of Ukraine after the war will require another 50 million tons of CO2. It would therefore be a mistake to think that the problems the war has caused to the environment and the climate will disappear as soon as Ukraine wins the war. We have a long road to reconstruction ahead of us.

Support can also be green

International climate policy has already felt the effects of the Russian invasion. At COP27, the participating countries were slow to announce new climate targets. Instead, they emphasised the importance of energy security and international cooperation. The embargo on importing fossil fuels from Russia, although not full, has played a role here. European Union member states have felt the painful consequences of dependence on Russian coal, oil and gas. At a time of crisis, the countries were not ready to make the transition to renewables. At the same time, the multiple benefits of energy efficiency measures, storage systems, and decentralisation have at last become obvious to everyone. And Ukraine is no exception.

Over the course of 2022, in parallel with the negotiations on the embargo on Russian fossil fuels, other talks were ongoing on what Ukraine's post-war reconstruction would look like. Some municipalities in the Kyiv, Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts have already begun actively working on their own plans for post-war recovery. Considering the damage the military campaign has inflicted on the environment and the climate, a green post-war reconstruction for Ukraine is particularly important.

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The European Union recently invested 114 million euros into providing Ukraine with 1,000 generators to add to the 1,400 and millions of units of power equipment they had already received via the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. And although emergency assistance for the country's critical infrastructure,

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For example, thanks to the initiative of the NGO Ecoclub, solar power plants complete with batteries have already been installed in several Ukrainian hospitals. The plants each have 32.4 kW of PV installed capacity which is enough to ensure the operation of 11 ventilators to keep patients in intensive care units alive. Moreover, a recent EU initiative for free exchange of old incandescent light bulbs for energy-saving LED lamps has already helped Ukrainian citizens to become more energy efficient. These are just a couple of examples of measures that have been taken towards greening Ukraine's energy structures, from the personal to the systemic level.

Change begins today

Ukraine already has candidate status for accession to the EU and cannot afford any setbacks when it comes to recovery. Yes, we are facing unprecedented challenges related to environmental pollution, the destruction of critical energy infrastructures and of entire towns and cities, but we also have a massive amount of support from international partners, the local authorities and our citizens. This means that every new step we take towards recovery will be crucial.

However, the message that this path is the right one must come from our government, our territorial communities and the public. A number of non-governmental organisations have published several documents outlining a vision for a green post-war reconstruction of the country and the principles underpinning this process. In particular, this must include the decentralisation of the country's energy system, an increased share of renewables, the reconstruction of the infrastructure taking energy efficiency into account and more.

Ukraine has every opportunity to become not only an example of courage and invincibility on the battlefield but also to show how after major destruction, it is possible to rebuild the country and make it even better than it was before. The key to the success of these processes will be ambitious but clear recovery plans on the municipal and national level, the work of the relevant local authorities and an active public as well as sustained financial assistance from international partners.

The path to an environmentally compatible future for Ukraine begins today. We do not need to wait for victory in order to build a sustainable

and secure future for the next generation of Ukrainians. Energy efficiency measures, renewable energy sources, advocacy for a 'greening' of the EU's financial assistance — these are all instruments that we already have access to and that will deliver benefits here and now.



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