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The environmental impact of Russia's war on Ukraine

The environmental impact of Russia's war on Ukraine has been rapidly increasing with every month that Russia's fully fledged invasion continues. The destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in June 2023 further increased the damage inflicted on nature and also brought international attention to the war's environmental dimension.

In this podcast, we will find out more about the heavy toll the conflict has taken on the environment.

Since the 2014 hostilities broke out, and especially since Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the conflict has not only caused thousands of casualties, a refugee crisis and an economic shock, but it has also done severe harm to the environment.

Russia's war has left deep scars on the natural landscape across Ukraine. Damage to industrial facilities has caused heavy air, water and soil pollution, exposing people to toxic chemicals and contaminated water. The war has also had a negative impact on Ukraine's rich biodiversity. Forest fires, deforestation, explosions and the building of fortifications are all harming wildlife and destroying natural habitats, including habitats protected in the biosphere reserves and national parks.

Shelling around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the largest in Europe, has also heightened safety concerns.

According to Ukraine's Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources, from the beginning of the war to mid-July 2023, Russia's invasion caused roughly 53 billion euro in environmental damage.

The United Nations Environment Programme has been assessing the war's environmental impact on the country. UNEP stressed that Ukraine is facing multiple crises associated with chemicals, munitions and military equipment, the presence of a range of pollutants and damage inflicted to key infrastructure, urban areas and natural areas. The war has also compromised agricultural production in Ukraine, which is vital, not only for the country's economy, but also for global food security. Physical degradation, widespread chemical pollution from mines and affected industries, as well as exploded ammunition have had a severe impact on millions of hectares of Ukrainian farmland.

On 6 June 2022, Russian forces, as the evidence suggests, destroyed the Kakhovka Dam, which was the largest dam in Ukraine. Many condemned the destruction of the dam, qualifying it as ecocide and the worst environmental disaster in Europe since Chernobyl. The catastrophic flooding submerged thousands of hectares of land, claiming the lives of dozens of people and displacing thousands. It also prevented normal access to drinking water and led to the breakdown of irrigation systems.

In addition, many tonnes of contaminants were released. These polluting substances drifted down the Dnipro River into the Black Sea, which washes the shores of six countries, including Romania and Bulgaria, and is connected to the Mediterranean Sea. This affected marine ecosystems in the region and in other countries as well. The

destruction of the dam has also led to increased safety concerns for the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, as the dam was the primary source for its supply of cooling water, although alternative sources do exist.

Ukraine wants Russia to pay reparations, including for environmental damage. Together with its international partners, it has been exploring ways to ensure Moscow is held accountable. While ecocide has been listed as a criminal offence in the Criminal Code of Ukraine since 2001, many argue that the case should be pursued at international level to guarantee an adequate level of accountability and compensation. However, none of the avenues to receive reparations is without challenges: the process is complex and is in no way straightforward. There are very few existing precedents for such reparations

In January 2023, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the establishment of a tribunal on the crime of aggression against Ukraine. In addition, the document recognises the link between war and long-term damage to the natural environment and climate. In the resolution, MEPs also supported the UN General Assembly's recommendation on the creation of an international register of damage 'to serve as a record for future reparations for damage... to the natural environment and the climate'. In mid-June 2023, Parliament adopted another resolution on the sustainable reconstruction of Ukraine. MEPs condemned Russia's destruction of the Kakhovka dam, underlining that it caused ecocide and constitutes a war crime.

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