



ZBORNÍK PRÍSPEVKOV
Z MEDZINÁRODNEJ ŠTUDENTSKEJ
VEDECKEJ KONFERENCIE

PRO-LEGAL
DEŇ
ŠTUDENTOV PRÁVA
A DOKTORANDOV
2026

2026

Univerzita Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici
Právnická fakulta



**Zborník príspevkov
z medzinárodnej študentskej vedeckej konferencie
PRO-LEGAL Deň študentov práva a doktorandov
2026**

Recenzovaný zborník vedeckých príspevkov

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(eds.)

 BELIANUM
Banská Bystrica
2026

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Zostavovateľ (Editor) : JUDr. Ľubica Saktorová, PhD., LL.M., M.A.

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Príspevky neprešli jazykovou korektúrou.

Za obsahovú a jazykovú stránku textu sú zodpovední autori publikovaných príspevkov.

ISBN 978-80-557-2337-2

EAN 9788055723372

<https://doi.org/10.24040/2026.9788055723372>



Recenzovaný vedecký zborník príspevkov z konferencie konanej dňa 26. marca 2026 na Právnickej fakulte Univerzity Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici „Zborník príspevkov z medzinárodnej študentskej vedeckej konferencie PRO-LEGAL Deň študentov práva a doktorandov 2026“ je publikovaný a šírený ako open access publikácia na základe podmienok Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence CC BY (uviedenie autora).

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THE PROBLEM OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION DUE TO THE CONSEQUENCES OF HOSTILITIES (ASPECT OF CIVIL LIABILITY)

ANNA PAVLIUK *

Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in a short period of time has created a significant amount of environmental risks and real problems. The facts available today and the position of the Ukrainian public make the issue of providing compensation for environmental damage as a result of the Russian Federation's war in Ukraine relevant. However, certain complications may arise in this issue in the future, since the definition of "environmental damage" is still debatable not only among Ukrainian scientists, but is also absent at the level of national legislation. Given the complex and ineffective practice of applying the norms of international humanitarian law (in particular, regarding environmental protection), it is logical to review the above situation. In particular, to bring the conceptual range of national environmental legislation in line with the content of international acts. The actions of the military-political leadership and the armed forces of the Russian Federation, which cause damage to the environment within Ukraine and beyond its borders, constitute a violation of the norms and regulations of international law, and have the characteristics of a number of crimes. They declare that the military-political leadership of the Republic of Belarus also commits and is an accomplice in criminal actions against the Ukrainian environment. The Republic of Belarus contributes to the commission of crimes against the environment, in particular, by providing territory to the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine since 2014. It is noted that the actions of the military-political forces of the Russian Federation during military operations against Ukraine, including those actions that cause irreparable damage to the Ukrainian environment, must be interpreted as a violation of the provisions, in particular: Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions (1949) relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (hereinafter referred to as Protocol I), IV Convention on the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations on the Laws and Customs of War on Land, Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Means of Influence on the Natural Environment, international customary humanitarian law (including principles 9, 13 enshrined by the International Law Commission (ILC) in the codification of customary law "Protection of the Environment in Armed Conflict" (2022)).

Key words: armed conflict, environment, civil liability, aggressor, legislation.

Introduction

In Ukraine, the Russian army is operating according to the "scorched earth" tactic. Everything that their weapons can reach is being destroyed, destroyed: residential buildings and industrial facilities, protected areas, water pipelines, power plants... People are suffering, the natural resources of the Ukrainian land are being destroyed. An analogue of the crime of genocide in relation to the environment is ecocide, the destruction of the environment, which is equal to an ecological catastrophe. The insidious and immoral Russian invasion of Ukraine in a short period of time has created a significant amount of environmental risks and real problems.

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In connection with these environmental crimes, dangers are increasing for the civilian population not only of Ukraine, but also for the European continent in general ¹.

1. Statistics

It should be noted that since the beginning of the large-scale Russian aggression, the Operational Headquarters of the State Ecological Inspectorate of Ukraine recorded 245 crimes against the environment during the first month of the aggression alone. Unfortunately, the list of Russian crimes is currently open - it will be possible to talk about the overall indicators of the damage caused to Ukraine by the war only after its completion. However, the data available today already prove the criminal nature of Russia's actions².

The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine primarily draws attention to:

- 1) damage to nuclear installations, threats to nuclear and radiation safety;
- 2) attacks by the invading Russian army on infrastructure and industrial facilities (oil depots, industrial enterprises, transport infrastructure nodes) and, as a result, toxic pollution of the environment;
- 3) environmental pollution during direct hostilities (fuel spills, pollution from destroyed military equipment and weapons, unexploded missiles and air bombs);
- 4) destruction of Ukrainian ecosystems (including protected ones) during hostilities;
- 5) damage to water supply, drainage and communications systems, as well as destruction of marine ecosystems ³.

Ukrainian society is mostly aware of the environmental problems that arise as a result of the actions of the Russian invaders. In particular, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology has established that over 60% of Ukrainians are interested in and know what environmental damage the war is causing to Ukraine. The sociological data provided further indicate the need for the state to develop mechanisms for obtaining appropriate compensation from the aggressor state, because this is obviously what the Ukrainian people would prefer. The environmental damage from the aggressive actions of the Russian occupiers has both environmental (damage

¹ Russian Crimes Against the Environment: From War to Ecocide: Yurydychna Gazeta, Crimes, Environment, Ecocide, Borys Indykchenko, Nataliya Hendel URL: <https://yur-gazeta.com/interview/rotskyi-zlochyni-proti-dovkillya-vid-voennih-do-ekocidu.html>

² Digest of Key Consequences of Russian Aggression for the Ukrainian Environment for May 11-18, 2022. Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine. URL: <https://mepr.gov.ua/news/39218.html> (accessed 03/15/2026)

³ Key Consequences for the Environment of Russian Aggression in Ukraine Feb. 24 - Mar. 31, 2022. Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine. URL: <https://mepr.gov.ua/news/39097.html> (accessed 15.03.2026).

to the environment) and economic (damage to resources) components. In view of the above, the issue of ensuring compensation for environmental damage resulting from the Russian Federation's war in Ukraine is becoming more relevant ⁴.

2. Violation of international law

It is a well-known fact that the actions of the military-political leadership and the armed forces of the Russian Federation, which cause damage to the environment within Ukraine and beyond its borders, constitute violations of the norms and regulations of international law and have the characteristics of a number of crimes. The military-political leadership of the Republic of Belarus also commits and is an accomplice in criminal actions against the Ukrainian environment. The Republic of Belarus has been facilitating the commission of crimes against the environment, in particular, by providing territory to the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine since 2014. The actions of the military-political forces of the Russian Federation during the military operations against Ukraine, including those actions that cause irreparable damage to the Ukrainian environment, must be interpreted as a violation of the provisions, in particular: Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions (1949), relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (hereinafter referred to as Protocol I) ⁵, IV Convention on the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations on the Laws and Customs of War on Land⁶, Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Means of Influence on the Natural Environment, customary international humanitarian law (including principles 9, 13 enshrined by the International Law Commission (ILC) in the codification of customary law "Protection of the Environment in Armed Conflict" (2022)⁷).

3. Ukrainian legal regulation

Unfortunately, the Law of Ukraine "On Environmental Protection" does not disclose the meaning of the concept of "environmental damage". Even Articles 68-70 of Section XV

⁴ Barsukova O. Radiation and mines: what environmental problems caused by war concern Ukrainians? Poll. Ukrainian Pravda. URL: <https://mepr.gov.ua/news/39218.html> (accessed 15.03.2026).

⁵ Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) as amended on 30.11.93: Protocol of the United Nations Organization of 30.11.1993. URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_911#Text (accessed 15.03.2026).

⁶ IV Convention on the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its Annex: Regulations on the Laws and Customs of War on Land: Convention Ukraine of 18.10.1907. URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_222#Text (access date: 15.03.2026).

⁷ Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Hostile Use of Means of Environmental Impact: Convention Org. United Nations of 18.05.1977: as of 5 Oct. 1978 URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_258#Text (access date: 15.03.2026).

“Liability for Violation of Environmental Protection Legislation” of the said Law refer to violations of environmental legislation, define the grounds for liability for such violations and do not say a word about environmental damage, in particular as a result of military actions⁸.

In turn, it is worth paying attention to the need for comprehensive use of international and national law. In particular, the application of relevant provisions of the Criminal Code of Ukraine in the process of bringing to justice persons guilty of causing environmental damage. At the same time, justice at the national level must be carried out in compliance with high standards of the rule of law and legality and international standards of justice. One of the key elements of effective bringing to justice those guilty of causing environmental damage in conditions of armed conflict is documentation, collection of evidence and calculation of the amount of damage. This process requires significant financial and human resources, must be carried out in a timely, complete and in accordance with the standards of evidence under international law. As of now, the damage caused to the Ukrainian environment is not fully and properly recorded, which must be immediately corrected, primarily through the activation and coordination of the efforts of responsible state bodies and the involvement of international assistance.

No effective international mechanism has yet been created to stop or minimize damage caused to the environment during the war. At the national level, measures are also not being taken to minimize or prevent damage caused to the environment during the war in Ukraine.

4. International legal regulation

Directive 2004/35/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 April 2004 on environmental liability for the prevention and remedying of environmental damage defines the term “environmental damage”. In particular, Article 2 of Directive 2004/35/EC defines environmental damage as damage to protected species and natural areas, in particular any damage that significantly affects the establishment or maintenance of a favourable conservation status of such natural areas or species. It is specifically stated that environmental damage may affect water resources and soils. In addition, damage is understood as a negative measurable change in a natural resource or a disruption of a service associated with natural resources, which may occur directly or indirectly. Directive 2004/35/EC, in a separate annex, specifies that when

⁸ On Environmental Protection: Law of Ukraine of 25 June. 1991 No. 1264-XII (as amended and supplemented). URL: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1264-12#n714> (access date 15.03.2026).

determining environmental damage, significant damage in the initial state should be determined by using measurable data⁹.

To understand the phenomenon of environmental damage, it is appropriate to refer to the text of the Convention on Civil Liability for Damage Caused by Activities Dangerous to the Environment of 21 June 1993 (Lugano, Switzerland). In particular, Article 2, paragraph 7 of this Convention determines that damage can have four interpretations, namely:

- 1) as loss of life or personal injury;
- 2) loss of or damage to property;
- 3) loss or damage resulting from environmental deterioration other than those specified in paragraphs 1 and 2, provided that compensation for environmental deterioration shall be limited to the cost of restoration measures that have been or should be applied (excluding lost profits resulting from this deterioration);
- 4) costs of preventive measures and any loss or damage caused by preventive measures¹⁰.

By resolution A/76/L.75, adopted on 28 July 2022, the UN General Assembly:

- 1) recognized the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right,
- 2) noted that this right is interrelated with other rights and existing international law,
- 3) reaffirmed that the promotion of this right requires the full implementation of multilateral environmental agreements based on the principles of international environmental law,
- 4) called on States, international organizations, businesses and other stakeholders to take political decisions, enhance international cooperation, strengthen capacities and continue to share best practices with a view to increasing efforts to ensure a clean, healthy and sustainable environment for all¹¹.

Responsibility for criminal acts against the environment should be a requirement of the international community as a whole, due to the transboundary nature of the consequences of the destructive impact on the environment, in order to avoid repeated destructive impact on the environment in the course of military operations. It is especially unacceptable to commit such acts repeatedly, during armed conflicts or in peacetime, in light of the increasingly intense climate change and global natural disasters. It is worth noting that due to the difficulties in

⁹ On environmental liability for the prevention and remedying of environmental damage: Directive 2004/35/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 April 2004 (as amended and supplemented). URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/994_965#Text (access date 15.03.2026).

¹⁰ Convention on Civil Liability for Damage Resulting from Activities Dangerous to the Environment, 21.06.1993. URL: <https://rm.coe.int/168007c079> (accessed 15.03.2026)

¹¹ Resolution A/76/L.75, adopted 28 July 2022: UN General Assembly URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3982508?ln=en&v=pdf> (accessed 15.03.2026)

bringing those responsible to justice for the destruction of the environment during the unprovoked aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, the process of providing full compensation for the damage caused both directly to the environment and to specific individuals is complicated, the right to a safe and clean environment has been violated. The Russian Federation must bear international legal responsibility for the destruction of the environment of Ukraine, as well as compensate for the damage caused to the environment, which will allow such damage to be minimized, damaged elements of the environment to be restored and environmental safety for the citizens of Ukraine to be ensured through the inclusion of such damage in compensation mechanisms at the international level.

According to Recommendation 2245 (2023) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, it is proposed to ensure the comprehensive responsibility of the Russian Federation for aggression against Ukraine by supporting and leading the initiative to establish a special international criminal tribunal to investigate and prosecute the crime of aggression committed by the political and military leadership of the Russian Federation, and ensuring the leading role of the Council of Europe in its establishment and providing it with specific expert and technical assistance; to support the work of international courts competent to investigate and punish crimes of genocide, violations of international humanitarian law and crimes against humanity; to create a comprehensive international compensation mechanism, including a register of damages caused by the aggressor ¹².

Also, Resolution 2482(2023) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which calls on the members of the UN Security Council to consider putting to a vote and not to obstruct the adoption of a Security Council resolution on referring the situation in Ukraine to the ICC Prosecutor under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, and for the UN General Assembly to support and approve the establishment of an ad hoc international criminal tribunal and an international compensation mechanism ¹³.

Differentiation of environmental damage

Environmental damage is divided into two types – ecological and economic. The material object of the encroachment is the quality of the environment, the state of ecological systems, those exchange processes that occur in the biosphere, constantly and invariably

¹² Recommendation 2245 (2023) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe URL: <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/31592/html> (accessed 15.03.2026)

¹³ Resolution 2482(2023) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe URL: <https://pace.coe.int/pdf/c7fbc351cabf5b7a5ddfaa8a1b21f06841e9128cd2da8bd1bc2211277e4e666a/resolution%202482.pdf> (accessed 15.03.2026)

reproduce life in all forms of manifestation. In turn, economic damage is caused to the property rights and interests of nature users. Damage can be expressed in causing property damage (death, damage, destruction of material values) or in not receiving the expected income”¹⁴.

In the context of Russian aggression, there is a definition of ten indicators of environmental damage. In the first place is the most tragic indicator of such damage: “death and deterioration of the health of the population associated with environmental pollution”, and in the tenth position is “any damage to the environment or health of the population that will occur after a certain period of time, provided that a causal relationship between it and military actions is proven”¹⁵.

It is obvious that the numerous facts of causing environmental damage cannot but raise the issue of bringing to justice and compensation for this damage. Meanwhile, from a legal point of view, the practical implementation of compensatory mechanisms for environmental damage resulting from the aggression of the Russian Federation is complicated by the fact that Ukrainian legislation does not contain direct definitions of environmental damage, in particular damage resulting from military actions and military aggression. The Law of Ukraine “On Environmental Protection” has, so to speak, a “peaceful” interpretation of the concept of “environmental damage” and the grounds for liability for its infliction through various variants of violations of environmental legislation⁸.

In this regard, an important step of the Ukrainian authorities regarding future compensation for environmental damage as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war in Ukraine should be considered the approval of a special methodology, on the basis of which our state will calculate the damage caused to the lands and soils of Ukraine as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war¹⁶. It is worth noting here that in the “General Provisions” of the approved methodology, the authors did not specify that the procedure for calculating the amount of damage caused to the lands of Ukraine applies specifically to the criminal activities of the Russian military. The document notes that it is about the procedure for calculating the amount of damage - soil contamination, littering of lands, caused as a result of emergency situations

¹⁴ Sirant M.M. Doctrinal approach to determining environmental damage in the European Union and Ukraine. Legal Bulletin. 2020. No. 14. P. 76–84.

¹⁵ Medvedev M.O. On the question of the legal consequences of the Russian Federation's aggression for the environment of Ukraine. Current problems of international relations. 2015. No. 126 (Part I). P. 79–92.

⁸ On Environmental Protection: Law of Ukraine of 25 June. 1991 No. 1264-XII (as amended and supplemented). URL: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1264-12#n714> (access date 15.03.2026).

¹⁶ On approval of the Methodology for determining the amount of damage caused to land and soil as a result of emergency situations and/or armed aggression and hostilities during martial law: Order of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine dated April 4, 2022 No. 167. URL: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0406-22#Text> (access date: March 15, 2026).

and/or armed aggression and hostilities during martial law. The subjects of causing environmental damage to the lands of Ukraine in the Methodology are defined as states, executive authorities, local governments, business entities and individuals.

Criminal liability

We consider it appropriate to emphasize that causing damage to land and soil as a result of emergency situations and/or armed aggression and hostilities during martial law entails legal liability (criminal, civil and administrative). In addition, in accordance with Part 1 of Article 69, damage caused as a result of violation of legislation on environmental protection is subject to compensation in full⁸.

In the criminal law of Ukraine, the disposition of Article 441 "Crime of ecocide" provides for liability for the mass destruction of flora or fauna, poisoning of the atmosphere or water resources, as well as for committing other actions that may lead to an ecological disaster.

The qualification of the crime of ecocide under Article 441 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, in contrast to ordinary crimes against the environment, is related to the scale and consequences – either the causing or the possibility of causing an ecological disaster.

This norm is applicable both during armed conflict and in peacetime. In the first case – during armed conflict – the qualification of ecocide is possible in the case of a serious violation of international humanitarian law simultaneously with the qualification of a war crime in aggregate. In criminal law this is the so-called "ideal aggregate"¹⁷.

Performance indicators

As of today, the Specialized Environmental Prosecutor's Office of Ukraine is investigating 10 criminal proceedings on the facts of ecocide as a result of Russian aggression, one of which has been sent to court - regarding the Russian shelling of the subcritical nuclear installation "Source of Neutrons" in Kharkiv. According to the Prosecutor General's Office (as of July 2024), prosecutors of specialized environmental prosecutor's offices carried out procedural management in 209 criminal proceedings (as specified by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine - regarding 367 episodes) on crimes in the field of environmental protection related to the armed aggression of the Russian

⁸ On Environmental Protection: Law of Ukraine of 25 June. 1991 No. 1264-XII (as amended and supplemented). URL: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1264-12#n714> (access date 15.03.2026).

¹⁷ Criminal Code of Ukraine: Code of Ukraine dated April 5, 2001 No. 2341-III: as of July 17, 2025 URL: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2341-14#Text> (access date: March 15, 2026).

Federation. The estimated amount of damage in these proceedings is over 250 billion hryvnias. That is, the crime of ecocide, in comparison with war crimes, covers cases when an environmental disaster occurred or could have occurred as a result of the actions of the aggressor. And such an example is the undermining of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station dam¹⁸.

Conclusion

Thus, Ukraine is a pioneer in investigating such offenses and is taking all possible measures aimed at bringing to justice those guilty of war crimes against the environment, including ecocide. At the international level, discussions are underway at the initiative of Ukraine on the separate recognition of "ecocide" as a crime and its inclusion in the Rome Statute. Appropriate decisions would demonstrate the determination of the Ukrainian state to seek justice and compensation for the damage caused to the environment (in particular, to our lands)¹⁹.

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¹⁸ Information from the Prosecutor General's Office as of July 2024: Office, Prosecutor General's Office.

¹⁹ War and environmental damage: can Russia be held accountable Pavlo Chernyshuk Yurydychna Gazeta, responsibility, Russia, court, war, environmental damage, climate, Kakhovka HPP

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