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Regional Conflicts and Their Consequences on the Environment - Legal, Ecological, Socio-economic, and Ethical Perspectives

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Abstract: *Contemporary wars generate profound and long-lasting effects on the environment, extending beyond the immediate sphere of material and humanitarian destruction. This article examines the consequences of zonal wars on the environment through four complementary perspectives: legal, ecological, socio-economic, and ethical. Modern warfare produces extensive pollution of soil, air, and water, destroys natural habitats, and causes irreversible losses of biodiversity. Although the analysis includes comparative references to conflicts in various regions, particular attention is focused on the war in Ukraine, which is considered especially relevant due to its unfolding within contemporary Europe and its geographical proximity to Romania and other states in the region. The war in Ukraine allows for a concrete assessment of the ways in which modern military actions affect natural ecosystems, through pollution, habitat destruction, and the disruption of biodiversity, generate new legal challenges regarding environmental protection in the context of armed conflict, raise ethical dilemmas concerning the responsibility of the actors involved, and produce economic and social imbalances in neighboring states. In this context, the article also addresses the concept of ecocide, analyzed as a potential new legal category intended to sanction deliberate and severe environmental destruction in situations of armed conflict. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the article seeks to highlight the need to strengthen the international normative framework and regional cooperation in order to prevent and mitigate the environmental effects of wars conducted in areas characterized by high population density and interdependent critical infrastructures.*

Keywords: *war; Ukraine; destruction; ecocide; environment; pollution; military conflict.*

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Introduction

Regional wars in recent decades have far exceeded the boundaries of classical military confrontations, generating systemic effects on the natural environment, on socio-economic equilibria, and on the international normative framework. The destruction of industrial infrastructure, the burning of fuel depots, soil and water contamination, as well as biodiversity loss represent only a portion of the long-term consequences that affect the ecological stability of the regions involved (Antoniuk et al., 2023).

In a geopolitical context in which the military conflict in Ukraine is unfolding in the heart of Europe, in the geographical proximity of Romania, the multidimensional analysis of the consequences produced by wars on the environment becomes not only a scientific necessity, but also an undertaking of immediate relevance for environmental, security, and international law policies (Kyrpychova et al., 2024).

Ecology, law, economics, and ethics offer four essential lenses through which both the immediate degradations of ecosystems and the long-term effects on human life and social structures can be understood (Wirtu & Abdela, 2025). Bombings of industrial infrastructure, large-scale burning of hydrocarbons, soil and water contamination, or the deliberate destruction of natural resources during armed confrontations produce irreversible ecological imbalances, and these realities have already been documented in the case of the conflict in Ukraine (Latysheva et al., 2023).

Numerous researchers emphasize that these destructions can no longer be treated as mere collateral effects, but as actions that demand the legal recognition of the concept of ecocide, increasingly defined as a crime against the environment (Borschevska, 2023; Mîtcu, 2024).

From a legal perspective, the challenges are multiple: from the difficulty of classifying acts of environmental destruction within traditional offenses, to the absence of a clear incrimination of ecocide in international criminal law. Nevertheless, recent developments, such as Directive (EU) 2024/1203 on the protection of the environment through criminal law, indicate a significant evolution in consolidating a specific legal liability (Directive (EU) 2024/1203, 2024).

In the context of this emerging normative framework, recent studies highlight the necessity of addressing the relationship between war and the environment in an integrated manner, combining normative analysis with empirical analysis (Lopes Machado et al., 2025; Bautista-Hernáez, 2024).

The socio-economic dimension of war-related destruction includes the disruption of supply chains, the loss of agricultural land, increased

reconstruction costs, and the degradation of quality of life in affected regions. These effects, documented also in studies dedicated to soil instability and post-conflict risks (Paranjak et al., 2023), involve not only material losses, but also long-term social imbalances.

At the same time, a fundamental ethical question arises: Is it justifiable to instrumentalize nature as a means of military pressure?

This article also aims to address the moral perspective on war and deliberate ecological destruction, in an effort to highlight collective responsibility in the face of practices that threaten the long-term sustainability of life (Palczewska, 2022).

Therefore, the paper is structured into five distinct sections: the first is dedicated to the conceptual clarification of the term ecocide, and the following four systematically develop the legal, ecological, socio-economic, and ethical perspectives on zonal wars and their consequences on the environment.

Each section will analyze, from an inter- and transdisciplinary approach, the manner in which zonal wars affect the environment and will propose relevant conclusions for the formulation of coherent public policies in the face of increasingly complex and interconnected threats.

Clarification of the concept of ecocide and European normative anchoring

The process of conceptualizing and legally regulating the term ecocide is currently undergoing accelerated consolidation at the European level, reflecting increasingly urgent concerns regarding environmental protection in the context of systemic destruction.

The protection of the environment during armed conflicts is regulated by international humanitarian law, in particular by the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention. This instrument prohibits attacks that may cause severe, long-term and widespread damage to the natural environment. However, the application of these norms remains difficult, and the concept of "ecocide" – defined as the deliberate destruction of the environment – is still in the process of international legal recognition (Wirtu & Abdela, 2025).

In its emerging understanding, the term defines those actions that cause serious, widespread and long-term or irreversible harm to the environment, whether through pollution or through the destruction of natural ecosystems. Until recently, this concept did not benefit from formal legal recognition at the level of the European Union, but it has been gradually incorporated into the criminal law of several Member States and into international debates concerning the extension of the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (Directive (EU) 2024/1203, 2024).

The adoption of Directive (EU) 2024/1203 on the protection of the environment through criminal law marks a significant stage in this process. The Directive introduces a consolidated regime of criminal protection of the environment, which explicitly includes in its recitals direct references to large-scale destruction of ecosystems - as a form of qualified offence - equivalent to what some states already define as "ecocide". Thus, recital (21) specifies that such offences may generate "catastrophic results" and may include "conduct comparable to ecocide", emphasizing their exceptional nature and the need for the application of more severe sanctions than in the case of other environmental offences (Directive (EU) 2024/1203, 2024).

The regime established by the Directive is applicable not only in situations of peace, but also provides a useful legal framework for the assessment of damage produced in wartime contexts, where environmental destruction is often used as a strategic instrument. Article 3(3) of the Directive defines the constituent elements of qualified offences, expressly referring to the destruction of an ecosystem of considerable size or ecological value, as well as to substantial, widespread, irreversible or long-term damage to air, soil or water quality (Directive (EU) 2024/1203, 2024).

Essentially, the obligations imposed on Member States target not only the criminalization of intentional conduct, but also of acts committed through gross negligence, thus extending the scope of criminal liability. The Directive also enshrines the criminal liability of legal persons, including for the lack of supervision or control that made the commission of the offence possible (Directive (EU) 2024/1203, 2024).

Through this approach, the European Union addresses a structural deficiency in environmental criminal law: the difficulty of effectively sanctioning economic and institutional actors involved in systemic ecological destruction.

In relation to zonal wars, such as the one in Ukraine, the provisions of the Directive may serve as a benchmark for the legal qualification of acts which, although committed in a military context, exceed the threshold of legality imposed by international humanitarian law and constitute serious acts of destruction of natural heritage.

Legal perspective on zonal wars and their consequences on the environment

In the context of contemporary armed conflicts, the legal dimension of environmental protection acquires increased relevance, not only through the lens of existing regulations in international humanitarian and environmental law, but also as a result of the growing pressure to recognize and sanction ecocide as an autonomous international crime (Olechowski, 2020).

Zonal wars, such as the one in Ukraine, have highlighted the vulnerabilities of the current normative framework, in which deliberate or collateral destruction of ecosystems does not benefit from a clear and effective criminal classification (Toma, 2024).

Although international treaties, such as the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols, prohibit methods of warfare that cause widespread, long-lasting and severe damage to the environment, these provisions are rarely applied in practice, and coercive means are lacking. This legal gap has fueled the need for an integrated approach, which would correlate international humanitarian law with international environmental law, in order to ensure real protection of ecosystems affected by conflicts (Lopes Machado et al., 2025).

In this regard, Directive (EU) 2024/1203 is assigned a reference value, as it introduces a solid European criminal framework that targets environmental offences with catastrophic results and explicitly refers to the concept of ecocide. According to recital (21) of the Directive, certain acts causing the destruction of an ecosystem of significant ecological value or substantial, irreversible or long-term damage may be considered qualified offences, comparable to ecocide. Article 3 paragraph (3) sets out the classification criteria, among which the deliberate destruction of ecosystems or serious damage to the quality of air, water or soil. Although the normative act applies mainly in a civil context, its principles are useful for the legal interpretation of environmental destruction during wars, especially in the perspective of expanding international criminal law (Directive (EU) 2024/1203, 2024).

In parallel, national legislations such as that of the Republic of Moldova (art. 136 Crim. Code) or Ukraine (art. 441 Crim. Code) explicitly enshrine the offence of ecocide, qualifying it as a direct threat to the ecological security of humanity (Borschevska, 2023).

At the same time, some scholarly works highlight difficulties in the precise legal definition of ecocide. Terms such as "mass destruction", "ecological catastrophe" or "widespread damage" are subject to arbitrary interpretation in the absence of quantification standards. Thus, concepts such as "ecological emergency" are proposed, as well as the extension of criminal liability for gross negligence, not only for direct intent (Mîtcu, 2024).

Doctrinal analysis also supports the idea of collective liability of aggressor states, within an international legal framework that would go beyond the current limitations of individual criminal liability, as enshrined in the Rome Statute. Within this framework, serious crimes against the environment may be classified, even in the absence of explicit incrimination

of ecocide, as war crimes (art. 8), crimes against humanity (art. 7), or even ecological genocide, through the impairment of subsistence conditions for certain communities (Lopes Machado et al., 2025).

Thus, the legal perspective requires a reconceptualization of the relationship between war and environmental law, in which the destruction of ecosystems is no longer tolerated as an inevitable consequence of hostilities, but treated as a form of systemic violence with transgenerational consequences (Antoniuk et al., 2023).

An international harmonization of the definition of ecocide is needed, correlated with effective mechanisms for investigation, sanction and reparation, including compensation and ecological restoration obligations (Bautista-Hernáez, 2024). Only through the strengthening of the international legal regime and the recognition of the environment as a direct victim of war can the current state of impunity accompanying ecological destruction in armed conflicts be overcome.

The ecological dimension of zonal wars and their effects on the environment

Modern war can no longer be analyzed exclusively through the lens of human casualties or infrastructural destruction. It is increasingly evident that it constitutes a form of systemic aggression against the environment, whose consequences are often irreversible (Kyrpychova et al., 2024). In this context, the environment as a vital resource becomes a silent victim of war, with effects that may persist for decades after hostilities have ceased.

From an ecological perspective, zonal wars produce complex degradation, affecting the integrity of ecosystems, basic ecological functions, and the local and regional climatic balance. The deliberate or collateral destruction of habitats, chemical and radioactive contamination of soil and water, as well as the long-term fragmentation of biodiversity are just some of the direct manifestations of this form of widespread violence (Paranjak et al., 2023).

One of the most significant dimensions of ecological degradation is soil and water contamination. Recent studies highlight the persistence in soil of heavy metals and explosives resulting from the use of conventional weaponry, with toxic effects that may last for decades or even centuries (Palczewska, 2022). This type of pollution directly affects food chains and the health of the local population, as well as the agricultural viability of the land.

In the case of the war in Ukraine, soil degradation has been confirmed through laboratory analyses that revealed significant exceedances of the maximum allowable concentrations of toxic metals such as cadmium, lead, and arsenic (Toma, 2024).

These substances deeply affect the soil's microflora and microfauna, blocking essential processes such as nitrogen fixation and the decomposition of organic matter. Moreover, these effects are not spatially limited: the contamination of rivers or the destruction of hydrotechnical infrastructure generates cascading effects on downstream ecosystems, affecting even third states (Latysheva et al., 2023).

Particularly alarming is the nuclear and radiological risk, resulting from the militarization of nuclear facilities such as the Zaporizhzhia power plant, as well as the occupation of sensitive sites such as Chernobyl. Bombings of nuclear infrastructure have caused localized increases in radioactivity, threatening contamination of soil and water with dangerous isotopes (Borschevska, 2023).

The risk of these effects spreading to neighboring regions raises serious issues regarding international responsibility and the remediation of ecological damage. In addition, the "nuclearization" of the battlefield, through the positioning of troops and military equipment around sensitive objectives, increases the probability of a major accident with irreparable cross-border consequences (Bautista-Hernáez, 2024).

At the same time, the destruction of forest and agricultural ecosystems represents a form of ecocide extensively documented in recent literature. The Russian aggression against Ukraine has led to the massive destruction of forests, the mining of land, and the contamination of crops, which affects not only the local economy, but also the general ecological balance (Mîtcu, 2024).

These acts, although committed in a military context, produce damage comparable to large-scale natural disasters. The degradation of spontaneous vegetation and of local wildlife communities generates imbalances in food chains, while the impact on the atmosphere through toxic emissions from the burning of oil or industrial infrastructure leads to transregional pollution (Palczewska, 2022).

In addition to terrestrial effects, marine ecosystems are also targeted. The mining of waters, fuel spills, toxic waste, and acoustic disturbances caused by underwater military activities endanger marine biodiversity, especially in sensitive areas such as the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov (Borschevska, 2023).

Thus, war contributes to the systemic degradation of aquatic ecosystems, affecting species reproduction, water quality, and the balance of marine food chains. These effects, often invisible to the public eye, require decades of ecological restoration, when, or more dangerously, **IF** such restoration is still possible (Toma, 2024).

Overall, the ecological perspective on zonal wars reveals an alarming reality: the destruction of the natural environment is not a secondary effect, but a direct component of modern military strategy. The concept of ecocide, in this sense, reflects not only the gravity but also the intentionality of these actions, which is why its inclusion in the corpus of major international crimes is imperative. Without legal and institutional recognition of these effects, war continues to produce not only human victims but also irreversible ecological collapses (Wirtu & Abdela, 2025).

Socio-economic consequences of environmental degradation caused by regional wars

Regional wars generate socio-economic effects that far exceed the duration of hostilities and the geographical scope of the conflict, being closely linked to environmental degradation. The destruction of ecosystems directly affects the material conditions of existence of the population, transforming the environment from a foundation of economic development into a permanent source of insecurity (Antoniuk et al., 2023).

A major initial effect is the compromise of food security, due to soil degradation, contamination of water resources, and the impossibility of using agricultural land. The presence of ammunition remnants, unexploded mines, and toxic pollutants renders large areas of land unusable for very long periods, which affects both local agricultural production and the balance of regional and global food markets (Palczewska, 2022). In states with fragile economies, such losses lead to structural underdevelopment, dependence on imports, and an increased risk of famine.

In addition to the effects on agricultural production, environmental degradation generates deep social crises, manifested through forced migration and increased pressure on natural resources in destination regions.

The mass displacement of populations from areas affected by conflict leads to the overexploitation of water, forests, and land in neighboring states, amplifying socio-economic tensions and the risks of instability. In this context, the environment becomes a multiplying factor of social vulnerabilities, and its destruction contributes to the perpetuation of a vicious circle of poverty, insecurity, and conflict (Olechowski, 2020).

Thus, war not only produces direct victims, but also generates structural conditions that hinder economic recovery and the sustainable reconstruction of affected communities.

Another significant socio-economic impact concerns public health, closely linked to environmental pollution. Toxic substances released into soil, water, and air - including heavy metals, dioxins, and chemical residues

from munitions or destroyed industrial facilities - enter the food chain and affect the population's health in the long term.

Studies highlight increases in the incidence of cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and congenital malformations in areas affected by armed conflicts, which generate additional costs for healthcare systems and reduce workforce productivity (Palczewska, 2022). In this sense, environmental degradation becomes a public health and socio-economic development issue, not merely an ecological one.

From an economic perspective, regional wars cause massive financial losses associated with environmental degradation, which translate into reduced tax revenues, job losses, and extremely high costs for reconstruction and rehabilitation.

In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, estimates indicate environmental damage amounting to approximately 1.9 trillion hryvnias, equivalent to over 47 billion euros, of which more than 21 billion euros are attributed exclusively to pollution and soil degradation (Antoniuk et al., 2023).

Remediation costs vary considerably, from relatively affordable agrotechnical interventions to extremely expensive measures for isolating toxic soils, which can reach millions of dollars. These expenses often exceed the financial capacity of affected states, transferring the economic burden to future generations.

Moreover, environmental destruction in the context of armed conflicts has direct implications for energy and climate security. The bombing of energy infrastructure, oil fires, and the intensive use of military equipment generate significant greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to the acceleration of climate change (Lopes Machado et al., 2025).

This degradation, in turn, fuels new forms of insecurity, as resource shortages - such as water or energy - become triggering factors of geopolitical tensions. Within this framework, the environment and the economy can no longer be analyzed separately, but as interdependent elements of human and regional security.

Overall, the socio-economic consequences of regional wars on the environment highlight the fact that ecological degradation is a determining factor of social and economic instability. Environmental destruction affects individuals' fundamental rights, compromises development prospects, and transforms post-conflict reconstruction into an extremely complex and costly process.

Therefore, environmental protection must be understood as an essential element of socio-economic security and sustainable peace, and

ignoring this dimension risks perpetuating the destructive effects of war beyond the formal cessation of hostilities.

Ethical considerations on regional wars and human responsibility toward the environment

War is, by its very nature, an extreme expression of the rupture between the human being and humanity itself. But when its consequences extend to the environment, conflict acquires a much deeper ethical dimension: it is no longer only about violence exercised between individuals or communities, but about violence directed against the very condition of life on Earth.

From this perspective, regional wars do not merely destroy infrastructures, cities, and human destinies, but directly endanger the balance of ecosystems and the biological future of generations to come. The environment thus becomes not merely the backdrop of the confrontation, but a silent and unrepresented victim in post-conflict negotiations. This reality demands a profound ethical reflection on the status of nature and on the moral responsibility of humankind toward the world it inhabits.

The etymology of the term *ecocide* - from the Greek oikos (*οἶκος* - meaning "house," "dwelling," "household," or "heritage," and in Ancient Greece representing the basic unit of society, including the family, slaves, and property; also the root of the word "economy" – *oikos* + *nomos* = *the management of the household*) and the Latin *caedere* (a verb meaning to *cut*, to *fell*, to *strike down*, or to *kill* - the root of the suffix "- *cide*," as in "*fungicide*" or "*bactericide*," but also of words like "decision" – *to cut/eliminate options*) - precisely reveals the moral gravity of the act: the deliberate destruction of the environment ultimately means the destruction of our planetary home (Mîtcu, 2024).

In this sense, war is no longer merely an aggression between political entities, but an assault on life itself - a form of "slow suicide" of humanity, disguised under immediate strategic and military interests.

At the heart of the ethics of ecocide lies the recognition of the intrinsic value of nature - not merely as a resource provider, but as a silent partner in human existence. To view the environment as nothing more than a "theater of operations" or "tactical tool" amounts to denying a fundamental bond that ensures the continuity of life. Therefore, a post-anthropocentric ethics requires respect for the environment not for what it produces, but for what it is - a condition of our collective being (Lopes Machado et al., 2025).

In the same vein, the idea of intergenerational equity holds a central place in the ethical analysis of war and ecocide. To destroy ecosystems today is to steal from the resources and rights of future generations. Air, water, soil - the fundamental elements of life - are irreparably damaged by pollution generated through conflict, mining, bombings, or the destruction of industrial infrastructure (Borschevska, 2023).

As recent studies show, the toxic substances released during war persist in the environment long after the end of hostilities, affecting health, biodiversity, and quality of life in ways that cannot be easily remedied through technological means. For this reason, truly ethical post-conflict reconstruction cannot ignore the ecological dimension, but must integrate it as an act of restorative justice toward nature and toward those who will inherit the planet (Palczewska, 2022).

At the same time, from an ethical perspective, the suspension of fundamental moral values in the name of military exception must be denounced. The fact that environmental destruction is tolerated or even strategically planned during war[1] - as in the burning of oil wells during the Gulf conflicts or the occupation of nuclear facilities in Ukraine - reflects a severe ethical deficit at the level of the international community (Bautista-Hernáez, 2024).

To assume that the right to a healthy environment can be suspended in the name of political or security interests is to accept a hierarchy of rights that degrades the very idea of humanity. Peace is not only the silence of weapons, but also reconciliation with nature, the recognition of its vital role in our existence, and the refusal to make it a collateral victim.

Ultimately, an ethics of environmental responsibility requires a profound transformation of our relationship with the planet - one that transcends utilitarian paradigms and reclaims nature as a moral subject. In this view, war is not only a political crisis, but a civilizational one.

The ethical response cannot consist solely of norms and sanctions, but must entail a rethinking of how we live, decide, and intervene in the world. In the face of the danger of ecocide, human responsibility can no longer be fragmented or delegated.

What is needed is a global ethics of conservation, a transgenerational and transnational moral solidarity, which clearly affirms that environmental protection is not a luxury of peace, but a condition of peace. Only in this way can we hope for a humanity reconciled not only with itself, but also with the ecosystem that sustains it.

[1] Romanian history abounds in such examples: the Romanian rulers, retreating in the face of invaders, would often burn the fields and poison the wells, so that they could not be used by the enemy.

Conclusions

The development of the international legal framework regarding environmental protection during armed conflicts highlights the need for the legal recognition of ecocide as a crime under international law. The destruction of ecosystems, whether deliberate or resulting from gross negligence, far exceeds the realm of collateral effects and falls into a pattern of systematic violence that demands collective criminal liability.

The introduction of rules that severely sanction ecological aggression, along with the harmonization of legal definitions of ecocide at the global level, are essential steps toward eliminating impunity and strengthening an international order based on responsibility and sustainability.

Environmental degradation associated with modern warfare is characterized by a systemic and, in most cases, irreversible impact. The contamination of soil, water, and air with toxic substances, the destruction of industrial infrastructure, and the persistent nuclear risks transform the environment into a victim of conflict, with consequences that may extend across multiple generations.

The imbalances produced in food chains, the loss of biodiversity, and the irreversible alteration of natural landscapes require acknowledgment that the effects of war extend beyond human boundaries, affecting the biological foundations of life on the planet.

The socio-economic dimension of the environmental consequences of war reflects a deep interdependence between ecological stability, food security, public health, and economic sustainability.

The pollution of natural resources, the compromise of agriculture, and the emergence of chronic or infectious disease outbreaks increase the vulnerabilities of communities already affected by conflict.

The financial costs of reconstruction and decontamination become a transgenerational burden, and the absence of compensatory mechanisms risks perpetuating inequality and undermining post-conflict sustainable development processes.

From an ethical standpoint, the deliberate or negligent destruction of the environment in the context of war constitutes a serious breach of humanity's duty toward itself and toward future generations.

In this context, a reconceptualization of the relationship between humans and nature is necessary, one grounded in the recognition of the intrinsic value of ecosystems and the adoption of an ethic of ecological responsibility. War against nature is ultimately a war against the fundamental conditions of human existence, and post-war reconstruction must include

not only the rebuilding of infrastructure but also the restoration of the environment and of the balance between humanity and nature as the foundation of lasting peace.

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