

Exploring environmental governance in armed conflicts: A "Second Chernobyl"?

What happens to environmental governance in armed conflicts is critically important for health and environmental protection but it remains understudied. The present study reveals how amidst an armed conflict new systems of environmental governance emerge in the breakaway regions of eastern Ukraine.

Armed conflicts frequently weaken environmental governance. The consequences of environmental governance collapse are long-term, persistent, and affect larger territories than directly military operations.

In my thesis I explore what is currently known about environmental governance in armed conflicts, discuss challenges as well as opportunities we have at our hands. Finally, I compare the findings and I analyse what has happened to environmental governance in areas of eastern Ukraine where the national government has lost control as the result of the armed conflict.

The armed conflict in eastern Ukraine has been raging since 2014, causing thousands of casualties and leaving millions of people in dire need of humanitarian assistance. However, environmental damage from the conflict might become the longest lasting and difficult consequence to mitigate. Both Ukrainian government and the de-facto authorities of the self-declared "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhansk People's Republic" raise strong concerns of a potential environmental disaster. In fact, Ukrainian experts and politicians refer to Donbas as potential "Second Chernobyl", that risks turning into a contaminated area unsuitable for habitation.

However, most of the information on the environmental situation in eastern Ukraine comes from the Ukrainian government side. Understanding the role of non-state actors, be they armed groups, or new quasi-governmental administrations, is growing ever more important in contemporary armed conflicts. Non-state actors can fill the governance vacuum in breakaway regions but little is known about how effective they are in protecting human health and the environment.

The public governance institutions set up by the de-facto authorities in eastern Ukraine have staff, and an active internet presence. I used it to examine the role that the de-facto authorities are playing in environmental governance in the areas under their control.

Analysis reveals institutional adaptation is taking place in eastern Ukraine. The de-facto authorities in both areas have developed institutional, legal and policy frameworks for environmental protection, and for natural resource management. The region not only has a long history of pollution but also of environmental governance. It is reasonable to assume that it has a fair number of environmental professionals who believe in environmental protection, whatever the politics may be, and for many of them their work is also their source of livelihood. But environment is also intensely politicised. The intense politicisation of the environment in Donbas could be a sign of a trend in contemporary warfare, where environmental information is increasingly becoming weaponised.

Eastern Ukraine demonstrates how the international legal framework remains unfit to protect the population and the environment. But above all, the findings have implications for how environmental issues should be addressed in peacebuilding efforts.