Policy responses to the Ukraine crisis threaten European biodiversity

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine is first and foremost a human tragedy. This crisis has also abruptly changed the geopolitical landscape and views on globalization as a pathway to increased wealth and security. War has always compromised incentives for collaboration, and in the case of Ukraine it could jeopardize hard won gains in the efforts to combating global climate change and biodiversity decline. We argue that rash changes to land-use policy currently being made in Europe in response to the invasion are ill-advised, and we call for the establishment of an independent European Biodiversity Council to help safeguard biodiversity in the region.

The invasion of Ukraine and resulting international sanctions on Russia and Belarusia have sparked a renewed European focus on energy and food security. European political leaders are aiming to make Europe independent from Russian energy (oil and gas) and food resources (mainly grain and oil seeds) within a decade, and in some countries much faster than this. This has massive implications both in Europe and worldwide.

Russia and Ukraine are responsible for around 30% of the world’s wheat production, and the world market has faced an 80% increase in wheat prices following the invasion with high risk of disrupting the food system causing famine and manourishment. The policy movement away from Russian gas has increased energy prices and the demand for biomass from wood and crops for heating and electricity purposes. Further, the UK faces rationing of cooking oil and Indonesia has banned export of palm oil, to secure domestic supply and mitigate rising food prices.

These forces will create a market pull that increase pressure on forest and open land, risking leaving biodiversity as the loser. The ramifications of this market pressure are currently unfolding in Europe. On March 22 2022 almost all Member states in the European Union (except Denmark, Germany and Italy) voted that farmers should be allowed to use fallow land to grow subsidized proteins and other crops, to avert the scarcity of feed and food. As fallow land often is less productive, farmers would, under the new EU decision, also be allowed to apply more pesticides and fertilizers. This decision is bad news for biodiversity. Semi-natural vegetation types, such as fallow land, are a crucial part of the European landscape and losses of such land are a key driver of farmland bird decline (Fig. 1). Likewise, fertilizers and pesticides are some of the main drivers of biodiversity loss in Europe.
Past crises have slowed the speed of green transitions, and also the last Great Recession of 2008 saw environmental ambitions fall when increased unemployment negatively impacted public support for environmental protections. Now, as a result of the current crisis, the long-awaited EU Restoration Law proposal was planned to be published on March 23 but has been postponed (currently to June 22 2022). Indeed, the Restoration Law has been championed as key legislative architecture for reversing current severe declines of nature across the EU (as evident by the most recent state of nature report). In addition, there are fears that this delay could be interpreted as a potential softening of the otherwise laudable ambitions of the European Commission and Parliament through the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the European Green Deal.

We recognize the importance of improving both food and energy security, but we argue that it is imperative that the EU Commission and Member States retain an ambitious and long-term perspective on restoring biodiversity. This will require biodiversity and land-use policies that are robust in times of crisis and shifting political priorities – the current crisis is not the first, and will not be the last. The ambitious targets of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 lay an impressive foundation for conserving and restoring Europe’s decimated nature. However, how these targets will be realized will be critical. We believe this will require land-use reforms that acknowledge the great biodiversity values of private lands. This should include strategies for designating private protected areas and reforms to minimize harmful subsidies linked to production and increase conservation finance, such as through payments for ecosystem services.

The European Union has this year designated members of the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change: according to European Climate Law, this Advisory Board will provide independent scientific advice comment on the EU’s international commitments under the Paris Agreement. We suggest that a similar institution is needed to assess and advise on EU biodiversity commitments; an independent EU Biodiversity Council should be introduced to serve as watchdog and provide advice on how to meet legally binding targets to the benefits of the EU citizens and the global community. There is currently no overview of existing fallow land in EU countries and a first task of such an advisory council could be to investigate the extent of fallow lands and their potential to help fulfil the ambitions of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the European Green Deal.

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Figure 1: A fallow field in Denmark before (right) and after (left) it was converted to a crop field. (photo: P. Størup).

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