

Disrupted Lands and Discursive Shifts: Land in Ukrainian Media After Russia's Full-Scale Invasion

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The media play a central role in conveying the damage caused by war to land and ecosystems, offering insights that can be non-obvious and grounded in technology and scientific expertise to broader audiences, who may have no direct experience of war-induced land damage. We conducted a discourse analysis of Ukrainian media coverage on the destruction and recovery of land since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion. We found that, while much war-related academic debate focuses on strategic aspects of territory, questions of land are actively debated. Land matters as the ground that humans and non-humans live on and from, but which is also turned into a space of lurking dangers; as a medium that transmits war-induced harms and risks into the future, but also holds potential for recovery; and as deeply intertwined with collective identity and national history, while also being described as a non-human war victim in its own right. This confirms calls to take land more seriously in international politics and other fields dealing with armed conflict, and draws attention to the variety of ways in which land matters and is being represented.

Los medios de comunicación desempeñan un papel fundamental en transmitir a un público más amplio, que puede no tener experiencia directa de la degradación de la tierra provocada por la guerra, los daños que la guerra causa a la tierra y a los ecosistemas, al ofrecer perspectivas sustentadas en tecnologías y conocimientos científicos que, de otro modo, podrían no resultar evidentes. Llevamos a cabo un análisis del discurso de la cobertura mediática en Ucrania con respecto a la destrucción y recuperación de tierras desde la invasión a gran escala por parte de Rusia en 2022. Concluimos que, mientras gran parte del debate académico relativo a la guerra se centra en los aspectos estratégicos del territorio, las cuestiones de la tierra se debaten de forma activa. La tierra importa porque es el suelo en el que humanos y no humanos viven y del que dependen, pero también se convierte en un espacio lleno de peligros. Por un lado, puede ser un medio que transmite daños y riesgos causados por la guerra al futuro, pero, por otro lado, también tiene potencial para la recuperación. Además, también representa algo profundamente ligado a la identidad colectiva y a la historia nacional, aunque también se la puede describir como una víctima no humana de la guerra por derecho propio. Todo esto confirma los llamamientos a tomar la tierra más en serio, tanto en la política internacional como en otros campos que tratan con conflictos armados, y pone de manifiesto la variedad de formas en que la tierra importa y está siendo representada.

Les médias jouent un rôle central dans la communication des dommages causés par la guerre aux terres et aux écosystèmes, en donnant des renseignements qui ne sont pas forcément évidents et qui se fondent sur la technologie ou l'expertise scientifique à de larges publics qui peuvent ne pas être directement familiers avec les dommages causés par la guerre à la terre. Nous menons une analyse discursive de la couverture médiatique ukrainienne sur la destruction et la récupération des terres depuis l'invasion à grande échelle de la Russie en 2022. Nous remarquons que, bien qu'une grande partie du débat académique relatif à la guerre se concentre sur les aspects stratégiques du territoire, les questions des terres font l'objet de débats actifs. La terre importe, car c'est sur elle que les humains et non-humains vivent et c'est grâce à elle qu'ils trouvent leurs moyens de subsistance. Or, elle devient aussi un espace de dangers imminents. C'est un support de transmission des dommages et risques induits par la guerre aux générations futures, mais qui détient aussi un potentiel de récupération. Elle s'enchevêtre par ailleurs étroitement avec l'identité collective et l'histoire nationale, tout en étant décrite comme une victime de la guerre non humaine de plein droit. Aussi confirmons-nous les appels à prendre la terre plus au sérieux en politique internationale et dans d'autres domaines traitant des conflits armés, tout en attirant l'attention sur la variété des façons dont la terre importe et dont elle est représentée.

Keywords: land; war; destruction; recovery; media discourse; Ukraine.

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Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is, amongst other things, a battle over territorial control (Dodds et al. 2023). As of early 2026, the russian¹ army has occupied around 20% of Ukrainian territory (Jones and McCabe 2026). Battles are waged over villages, towns and cities, logistical nodes and corridors, and fields and resource deposits.² Besides the occupation of territory, russia's war, and especially the full-scale invasion since 2022, also had profound impacts on Ukrainian land and land relations on both sides of the frontline, damaging agricultural land, ecosystems, and soils. Over the first 2 years of the full-scale invasion, more than 1,000 km² of forest have been burnt due to military action (Vasyliuk, Kolomitsev, and Parkhomenko 2024), and hundreds of protected areas, around one million hectares in size, have been under occupation or in the active combat zone (Hubareva 2024). Regularly updated online maps (<https://ecodozor.org/>; <https://en.ecoaction.org.ua/warmap.html>) provide an overview of damage to Ukrainian land. Physical damage to agricultural fields from military actions in the ten most affected Ukrainian regions alone was reported at around 500,000 hectares in 2023 (Kussul et al. 2023), and war-induced crop-land reduction was reported at 11% nationwide as of 2024 (Kussul et al. 2025). According to Ukrainian government sources, 156,000 km², which is about one-fourth of the country's territory, has been mined (The State Emergency Service of Ukraine 2024). Massive harvest losses are among the immediate consequences in a country where agriculture and food production contributed 16% to the country's GDP and comprised 41% of its exports before 2022 (Cramon-Taubadel and Nivievskiy 2023; FAO 2022).

While it is widely acknowledged that wars reconfigure land relations in complex ways that can and should be studied through different approaches and methods, including close qualitative studies (Baumann and Kuemmerle 2016; Gómez, Sánchez-Ayala, and Vargas 2015; Kušić 2019; Zani 2019), research on land and environmental issues in the context of russia's invasion of Ukraine remains partial to date. Some have investigated the war's impact on food producers and agrarian land relations (Mamonova 2022; Mamonova, Borodina, and Kuns 2023), landscapes (Zamuruieva 2025), ecosystem services (Elbakidze et al. 2025), and the environment more broadly (Tymbalyuk 2025) through critical and qualitative social science approaches. Overall, however, quantitative (e.g. statistical) and remote (e.g. satellite-based) approaches dominate publications on land and environmental impacts in the environmental, land, and agrarian sciences.

In studies of international politics, broad-brush and abstract approaches to territory have earned sharp criticism in the context of russia's war. Influential approaches, above all realism in International Relations (IR), have been criticized for pairing universalistic theories/claims with a poor empirical basis and little regional expertise (Burlyuk and Musliu 2023; Dutkiewicz and Smolenski 2023; Hendl et al. 2024) and feeding into broader academic and public discourses that

deny Ukraine's territorial sovereignty (Howlett 2023). Echoing earlier interventions in other contexts (Parashar 2013; Sylvester 2012), feminist scholars have reemphasized the significance of positionality and contextual expertise in studies of armed conflicts in Ukraine and beyond (Hendl et al. 2024; Oksamytna 2023). Academic responses to the Russian invasion acknowledge such calls to consider situated perspectives (Dodds et al. 2023), but the relative lack of country expertise in relevant disciplines internationally (Burlyuk and Musliu 2023; Vorbrugg and Bluwstein 2022), and difficulties with empirical field access, continue to pose limits to such endeavors. Empirical studies explored, for example, attitudes toward territory and territorial integrity amongst populations in Ukraine (Dill, Howlett, and Müller-Crepon 2023; O'Loughlin, Sasse, and Toal 2024; Onuch and Mateo 2026). These contributions show how state territory and territorial control matter in the context of war. As with most literature in international politics (Anderl 2024), however, they have rarely explored the ways in which *land* matters. Land is understood here as a material basis for human and non-human life, subject to complex and changing social relations and attachments.

The most consistent and sustained efforts to bring together questions of land and the environment with grounded, qualitative, and critical approaches in Ukraine may be emerging in the field of the environmental humanities (Ivakhiv 2025b; Kazarin et al. 2025; Richardson and Tymbalyuk 2024; Ukrainian Environmental Humanities Network N.D.). Darya Tymbalyuk (2025:27) argues that "land lies at the center of experiences of war and occupation" in Ukraine, as war "exposes the life connections of people and other living creatures to land as a shelter, a home, and a living world". Relatedly, Iryna Zamuruieva (2023) reminds us that beyond "the lens of national sovereignty," it is "essential that we pay attention to what war does to the land and our relationship to it."

While we agree that land lies at the centre of experiences of war and occupation in many respects, it seems equally true that the war has disrupted and disabled many ways of directly experiencing land. How warfare affects land and ecosystems is not part of everyday experience for Ukrainians living far from hostilities. Hundreds of thousands who had lived on and from the land have been displaced within the country, deported, or fled abroad (Petryna 2023), or now defend the country's territory as soldiers.³ Where land has been mined or battles occur nearby, it becomes difficult or dangerous to access it for agricultural, recreational, and other purposes (Elbakidze et al. 2025). Finally, not all impacts of war on the land and environment are directly perceptible. While shelling or fires cause relatively obvious forms of damage, more difficult to grasp are chemical pollution, the scale of destruction, the complex impacts on ecosystems and human health, or long-term consequences.

In a situation where war brings new significance and urgency to issues of land and the environment, while at the same time creating obstacles to experiencing them directly, various media come to play an important role, offering insights that can be non-obvious and grounded in technology and scientific expertise to broader audiences, who may have no direct experience of war-induced land damages. This article thus focuses not so much on the complex lived social relations to land (Goldman, Peluso, and Wolford 2024a) but on land as an object of representation and knowledge. It shows how Ukrainian media represent land as simultane-

¹We follow the lowercase spelling of "russia," which has become common in Ukraine since 2022 and was approved by the National Commission on State Language Standards of Ukraine in 2023. Lowering the case is understood as a way of linguistic resistance, denying the aggressor symbolic recognition and legitimacy (Krouglov 2025.).

²This has not escaped public attention. Ukrainian publics follow the occupation and de-occupation through maps such as the popular DeepStateMAP (<https://gwaramedia.com/karti-bojovih-dij-v-ukraini-oglyad-najpopulyarnishih-resursiv/>). The Institute for the Study of War publishes a similar map (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/36a7f6a6f5a9448496de641cf64bd375>) in English for international audiences, which is regularly reproduced by media outlets such as the BBC.

³In Ukraine, as in other countries, rural residents make up a big portion of active fighters.

ously a damaged organism, an archive of violence, an object of economic and legal interest, a potential instrument of war, and a source of recovery.

Environmental consequences have been covered quite extensively in the Ukrainian media (Richardson and Tsybalyuk 2024), especially hazardous events, such as the destruction of the Kakhovka dam (Olenenko 2023). In international media, this war's environmental consequences have been well covered⁴ compared with those of other armed conflicts. Before the full-scale invasion, land in Ukrainian public discourse primarily featured in discussions of agricultural productivity, land reform, and environmental protection. Since 2022, however, the media have increasingly framed land as a direct target of military violence and as a central object of post-war reconstruction. This marks the emergence of a distinct wartime land discourse. To our knowledge, there is no published study on media land representation after the full-scale invasion.⁵

In what follows, we explore the role of (online) media in communicating war-induced land changes to the broader public in Ukraine. How are land damages and changing land relations represented? On which kinds of insights and forms of knowledge do they draw? How does the war affect the symbolic meanings of lands and landscapes, and imaginaries of land futures? How are material damages and landscape changes translated into (media) discourse? What kinds of land and landscape imaginaries do they produce? We first introduce our approach, including concepts, methods, and data gathering, then present findings on damage and recovery discourses, and conclude by discussing these findings in relation to broader debates about land, landscapes, territory, and war.

Approach

Land and Territory

The concepts of land and territory are the subject of a vast and sophisticated literature spanning disciplines, such as political science, geography, and spatial and environmental sciences. All of these concepts remain debated and somewhat fuzzy. This is because they are approached differently across disciplines and theoretical traditions. It is also because most approaches understand these spatial categories as social constructs or the products of contingent and partly context-specific social processes (Paasi 2022). Reviewing these debates lies beyond the scope of this article (for useful overviews, see Elden 2010; Hall 2013; Storey 2025; Usher 2020; Wylie 2007). The following points are significant for our argument.

There is general agreement that land is fundamental to most human activity: in different ways, people live on and from land. However, while some approaches focus on land's economic functions, or how land is turned into and treated as a particular kind of resource (Hall 2013; Li 2014), others emphasize the irreducibility of land to its resource status (Goldman, Peluso, and Wolford 2024b). The former may investigate how, in industrialized societies, land became predominantly understood and approached as a resource, e.g.

for agriculture, or holding resources, e.g. gold, that can be owned, traded and exploited (Fairbairn 2020). The latter may emphasize how land has distinct meanings for different people and across different contexts, through cultural traditions, people's attachments and practices, including reciprocal understandings of interdependency with and care for the land (Kimmerer 2013). In Ukraine, extractivist and exploitative relationships to land as a resource, shaped during imperial periods, Soviet modernity and market capitalism, exist alongside old and new traditions of more reciprocal land relationships (Dorondel and Olenenko 2022; Semenik and Turnbull 2025; Zamuruieva 2025).

The concept of territory is often understood in strategic terms, referring to political and/or military control and authority over a specific area. Such focus is most evident in disciplines such as IR that investigate, amongst other things, how territories are embattled in armed conflict (Toft 2014). In relation to and delimitation of land and other spatial concepts, some define territory as a "political technology" (Elden 2010:81). Others resist such narrowing of the concept of territory to a strategic function. In Latin America, for example, academics and activists "reclaim" the notion of territory, insisting that territory, too, can be understood in terms of complex and rich social relations (Sandoval, Robertsdotter, and Paredes 2017).

In our argument here, we follow the notion put forward in this special issue, which emphasizes the physical properties, social meanings, and context-specific political and economic significance of land in everyday practice and experience: "the Earth we walk on, eat from, care for, and fight about" (Anderl and Kušić 2026). While such a focus is established in disciplines like human geography or anthropology, it offers a corrective to the abstract concept of territory in IR and the related preoccupation with questions of territorial control and strategies (Anderl and Kušić 2026). Narrow concepts of territory are also prevalent in studies of armed conflict, in and beyond IR. In wars, much attention is focused on the frontline (Toft 2014), exacerbating the more general bias toward a state's borders and edges over physical space in literature on territory (Usher 2020). A focus on the conflicting parties' territorial strategies (Dodds et al. 2023; Toft 2014), too, directs attention away from lived experiences and relations to land. Our analysis focuses on the complexities of wartime land relations and social meanings as represented in the media, rather than representations of strategic territory.

In this, we follow scholars of Ukraine who have noted how the Russian full-scale invasion has resulted in a situation where "[f]ood, the fragility of the human body, and the condition of the Earth are once again tied in a tight knot" (Ostrovskaya-Liuta 2025:75), and territorial defence goes along with a "responsibility for the Ukrainian land, a land of [...] sunflowers and grain fields, farms and cities, all worthy of protection" (Ivakhiv 2025a:16). This corresponds to the Ukrainian term *zemlia*, which encompasses meanings of "Earth," "land," "soil," "ground," "country," "state," and others (Kovalenko 2025:117).⁶ In a different context, namely that of the climate crisis, others emphasize the blurring of boundaries between aspects of land and territory to redefine territory as "something on which an entity depends for its subsistence, something that can be made explicit or visualized, something that an entity is prepared to defend" (Latour 2017:263). We show in the results how aspects of land and territory appear entan-

⁴See the monthly media coverage reviews published by the Ukraine War Environmental Consequences Work Group (<https://uwecworkgroup.info>), also Pavlichenko and Orlova (2022).

⁵According to research by the Institute of Mass Information in Kyiv, the share of environmental publications in online media dropped by 30 percent between 2021 and 2024 (Mashkova 2024). However, the study says little about the coverage of war-related environmental impacts in particular, or about land relations including agricultural use.

⁶The English term land, too, is sometimes associated with a range of social meanings that do not follow clear differentiations between land, territory, or soil (Goldman, Peluso, and Wolford 2024a:1).

gled and how binaries are blurred in media reporting, and we reflect on this in the discussion.

Not only is land relevant during war, but war also alters the social meanings of land. [Tsybalyuk \(2025:xii\)](#) has coined the concept “episteme of death” to shed light on how witnessing the destruction or harm to creatures, species, ecosystems, or landscapes draws attention to their existence, complexity, beauty and worth, as people connect anew with natural and social environments threatened by war. We will show how the media articles analysed here describe complex ecologies and social lives of land through the lens of their disruption. The separation between life-sustaining land and embattled territory is being deliberately collapsed in scorched Earth strategies and ecocide ([Mammadov et al. 2024](#)), which we address below. These are strategies that “overwhelmingly attack [...] the foundations of livelihood” ([Petryna 2023:14](#)) and come on top of other territorial war strategies, such as occupation and deportation. Where the aggressor turns land into a weapon of war, the destruction of land and ecosystems is an intentional act of “erasure” ([Tsybalyuk 2022](#)) rather than collateral damage. We return to the relationship between land and territory in the discussion.

Methodology

We conducted an environmental discourse analysis to examine how the Russian invasion’s impact on land is discussed in Ukrainian online media. This approach aligns with the media’s significant role in offering insights into land relations, and responds to calls for closer attention to how technologically mediated representations interrelate with territorial and state issues in IR ([Branch 2025](#)) and to the digital mediation of environmental relations ([Turnbull et al. 2024](#)). In a context where land is being damaged, and land relations have lost their taken-for-grantedness, discourse analysis allows us to investigate how land disruptions are problematized, which damages and losses are emphasized over others, what kinds of knowledge are mobilized to make them public, and which recovery pathways and future land options are presented as likely or desirable.

Discourse, the system of practices, truths, institutions, and power that organizes knowledge, in a Foucauldian understanding, is part of what constitutes the individual and collective perception of land, landscapes, and the environment ([Hajer 1997](#); [Wylie 2007](#)). In line with most analyses of environmental discourses, we draw on a relational concept of discourse that includes material objects and processes rather than interpreting a text in isolation or focusing narrowly on semiotics ([Hajer 1997](#)). We ask how material changes are translated into (media) discourse, and how discourses co-produce socio-natures ([Montesano Montessori, Farrelly, and Mulderigg 2019](#)). The assumption here is that, more than simply conveying knowledge, discourses produce truths. “Truths” in discourse analysis refer to the historically specific and changing patterns of meaning and power that shape what appears plausible, thinkable, sayable, or desirable. Any given discourse, including in the media sphere, both mirrors and produces such truths, while truths can become subject to controversy and negotiation. Discourse analysis also directs attention to what remains unsaid and interprets such silence as the effect of a discursive structure that turns the articulation of certain issues and claims easier and more likely than others.

Discourse analysis is a powerful approach to land and environmental issues, as it sheds light on the historical contingency of nature–society relations and, more specifically, the

role of knowledge and power in it ([Hajer 1997](#)). It unpacks the problematizations that establish issues and controversies, the narratives that underlie claims and truths, and relates them to the societal context of such articulations ([Montesano Montessori et al. 2019](#)).

Data Gathering and Analysis

We analysed 149 media articles, articles on governmental websites and blog posts targeting a broad audience, published between the full-scale invasion in February 2022 and September 2024. Even though the Russian military aggression and media coverage of land damages date back to 2014, our exploratory investigation revealed that the full-scale invasion of 2022 has triggered a much more consistent and partly novel discourse on land disruption on which this study focuses. This shift is plausible because, before the full-scale invasion, the active conflict was more confined to parts of the Donbas region. Environmental threats then emerged mainly from mining and industrial sites ([van der Vet 2024](#)), such as water pollution, and reporting was patchy because much of the damage occurred in occupied territories. The extent and type of environmental problems changed with the full-scale invasion, when the fighting spread over far larger areas, including fields, forests, and protected areas. Large areas were mined, occupied and de-occupied, and environmental threats multiplied.

We collected the texts through a systematic Google search, using clusters of keywords including *zemlya* (land), *grunt* (soil), *zabrudnennya* (pollution), *viyna* (war), *ruynuvannya* (destruction), and *vidnovlennya* (recovery). For the analysis, we selected texts that address land, agriculture, and ecosystems in the context of the war in some depth, explaining, illustrating, or reflecting on the implications and/or future outlook of land damage. Most texts are published in Ukrainian; all translations of quotes are ours (see Supplementary material for details). We chose to analyse media targeting Ukrainian audiences as we were interested in the discursive shifts within the country and their entanglement with domestic policies and other domestic discourses. Our sample comprises articles from national and Ukrainian-language international news outlets, specialized agricultural and environmental platforms, investigative and analytical media, NGO publications, expert blogs, and government and international institutional sources (Supplementary material). Many articles feature interviewees, including researchers, NGO representatives and activists, politicians, and state representatives, some of whom are prominent public figures. Some articles feature residents and producers. Many articles address both destruction and recovery. Our analysis focuses on rural land. This is because, while urban residents, too, experience land disruptions and engage in gardening and other land-related activities in the context of the war, rural and urban land are covered in largely separate media discourses.

Dealing with current and evolving phenomena, we combined conceptual codes with open coding. We identified key themes related to our research questions and patterns across texts. We understand visual representations as part of the discourse ([Jancsary, Höllerer, and Meyer 2016](#); [Rose 2023](#)). In the material, visual elements primarily supplement and illustrate the text. Rather than conducting a full visual analysis, we therefore ask how written content is emphasized through images. As some images can be traced back to their origins, including them in our analysis further allowed us to trace connections between fields of knowledge and representation.

Results

The result section is structured into three parts. We analyse (1) how media articles construct land's specific significance in the context of war, and then the narratives and images of land and environmental, (2) destruction, and (3) recovery. All quotes are translations from the media sources. Quotations indicate the type of source (J: journalistic; NGO: NGO; C: commercial; and O: official), a number that refers to the table of sources in the Supplementary material, plus the year of publication.

While some articles clearly focus on ecological or agricultural impacts, most that address ecological impacts also address implications for agriculture, explaining, for example, how soil damage affects food production in the short and long term. Others emphasize the impact of war-induced chemical pollution on human health through food. In what follows, therefore, we differentiate between agricultural and ecological impacts where the articles clearly do. Echoing the notion of "*zemlia*" and the various aspects it encompasses, we refer to "land issues" when articles merge aspects related to ecology, agriculture, landscape, cultural attachment, or human health.

Land Matters

Attention to land issues in an ongoing war that produces so many catastrophes and societal urgencies cannot be taken for granted. Yet, we found dozens of media articles and online materials explicitly and in detail focusing on the impacts of war on land, some published in prominent outlets and featuring prominent public figures, including scientists, activists, and state representatives from various domains of expertise.

Some media articles explicitly state that "environmental issues are as important today as physical security issues" (J14, 2024) or explain how harms inflicted on land and the environment are intertwined with and add to, multiple other war-induced harms. Pointing out how much land has been mined, forests burned, or unique ecosystems damaged, articles underline the scale of damage within Ukraine and how this already affects millions of people. Health risks are among the repeatedly named stakes: As pollutants accumulate in soils, the risk of their entering groundwater, food chains, and human bodies increases. In the future, articles lay out, toxic chemicals "will reach people through plants, animals, or drinking water" (J22, 2023), and "the soil poisoned by explosions will slowly kill us in the long run" (C1, 2023).

Besides health risks, other implications include domestic food security, declines in agricultural production and exports and their economic impacts, as well as direct social impacts on local populations. Where the land has been heavily mined, "you can't just return to the land and start farming as if nothing had happened" (NGO5, 2023), as one article puts it. Besides the grave consequences for local livelihoods, numerous articles describe the potential threat to populations in countries that rely on Ukrainian food imports. It is repeatedly emphasized that agricultural exports from Ukraine feed millions of people worldwide and that the destruction, persistence, and recovery of agricultural lands and operations have important implications for present and future global food security.

Beyond *collateral* ecological damage and its harmful effects, articles point out how the Russian military *deliberately* targets Ukrainian land. Some suggest that Russia is waging a war against the Ukrainian environment and is guilty of environmental crimes, "using nature as a weapon" to make

Ukraine's territory "uninhabitable" (J2, 2023). Citing NGO and government representatives and scientists, they explain why the intentional destruction of the environment constitutes ecocide and should be prosecuted as such—as a matter of injustice, to claim reparations, and to build transnational solidarity around the issue. Affecting health, the livability of places, and food production in the present and future, environmental crimes are described as deeply entangled with the violation of human rights, and the question of ecocide to that of genocide: "The Russian Federation is destroying Ukrainian nature mercilessly, deliberately, without hesitation. And it violates the right to an environment that is safe for life and health, not only of Ukrainian citizens, but also of all humanity" (J2, 2023). Environmental protection and recovery are presented as both self-defence and a national struggle for having a future, and as an international concern because environmental problems know no borders.

Together with environmental organizations and scientists, the Ukrainian government and state prosecutors campaign to have ecocide recognized as a crime over which the International Criminal Court has jurisdiction. Alleged perpetrators of ecocide could also be prosecuted under Ukrainian law (Lukic and Marineau 2024; Mammadov et al. 2024). These legal dimensions are not merely mentioned in the media discourse; they partly underlie it. Many articles present numbers, maps, and photographs that were produced, systematized, and made publicly available partly in documentation efforts aimed at suing Russian authorities over ecocide. Some of these documentation efforts are co-ordinated by the government and prosecutors' offices. At the same time, they are spread across a broad web of NGOs, scientists, and citizens. As the chances of success on this legal front remain debated, documentation also serves various other aims and interests, including scientific ones and the building of a knowledge base for recovery programs and policies (Vasyluk 2025:312).

In sum, the media articles present land issues as relevant because they are linked to a range of health, economic, and environmental issues and are part of a legal strategy to sue Russia. They build on documentation conducted in direct response to the invasion.

Narrating Destruction

Besides presenting plain facts and reasons why land issues matter during the war, articles also create storylines, compose images from textual and visual elements, translate across knowledge systems, and zoom in and out across scales and times to illuminate different layers of harm.

Metaphors and images

Many articles describe the damage to the land and the environment through figurative language and metaphors, boiling down complex realities of destruction into vivid images. They speak of "devastated lands" (J3, 2024), "ruined land" (C1, 2023), and "scorched and polluted land" (J4, 2022). Many such metaphors, remarkably, describe land as a living being that can be hurt and killed, suffer and die. They speak of "dead lands" (J1, 2024) which have become "lifeless" (J6, 2024). Some articles describe how the war has "mutilated Ukrainian land" (J5, 2023) and created "wounded Earth" (NGO1, 2023), "land wounded by war" (J2, 2023), and "scars" on fields (NGO2, 2022), "with hundreds of such wounds added to the surface of the Earth every day" (NGO8, 2022). "Ukrainian land is literally suffering" (J7, 2023), one article states, and another that "wounds are no less painful for the



Figure 1. Photographs of craters are among the most common visual elements. Source: <https://eco.rayon.in.ua/topics/681756-zranena-zemlya-naslidki-dvokh-rokiv-povnomasshtabnoi-viyni-dlya-prirodi-ukraini> (Date accessed: 21.11.2024).

soil than for humans” (J8, 2022). More than merely a symbol of people’s suffering, embattled territory, or a diminished resource, land is being described as a war victim.

Metaphoric language is also used to describe the inter-relationships among land, society, and ecology. Diverse living beings suffer from the damage inflicted on land because “both people and animals, everyone needs a home” (J9, 2023). Some articles contrast rather romanticized images of pre-war landscapes with the hazardous zones they have become. They describe how the “fertile fields that our land is famous for have turned into battlefields over time” (J10, 2022). Landscapes formerly covered with “fields of blooming rapeseed, sunflowers reaching for the sun, and ears of grain [are now covered] with unexploded ordnance, military equipment, and mines” (J11, 2023). The “once peaceful sunsets have now taken on apocalyptic overtones” (J11, 2023), and the country’s fertile black soils are “soaked with blood” (J12, 2024). While some articles present idealized images of prewar landscapes and land relations, others emphasize the longer histories of land degradation stemming from past wars or industrial agriculture. The idealization of Ukrainian landscapes and the romanticization of Ukrainians’ relationship to their land have a longer history in domestic discourses and foreign projections.

Photographs, aerial photographs, and satellite images often accompany vivid language and metaphors to convey how the war has inscribed itself onto the land (figs 1 and 2). They display craters, unexploded or exploded rockets, burnt and damaged tanks and military machinery, fires and burnt land and forests, and sometimes trenches, mines, and

land overgrown with weeds. Satellite images and aerial photographs are prominent; we found them in thirty-one articles. They show how “craters from artillery shelling are visible even from space” (J16, 2024). The MAXAR image shown in figure 2 has become iconic, reproduced hundreds of times in the media, on social media, in artwork, and elsewhere in Ukraine and beyond. Displaying fields and landscapes dotted with hundreds of craters, such images convey the scale of destruction.

Several articles that reproduce satellite images showing craters state that “the wounded Earth is visible with the naked eye” (J15, 2023). What the eye sees here, it sees through a satellite, however. Where land has become inaccessible, satellites reveal what has become invisible to humans separated from it by displacement, occupation, fighting, or landmines. As a local farmer is quoted on land polluted with explosives, “no one goes there [...], we don’t even understand what’s going on there” (J11, 2023). The frequent reproduction of satellite and aerial images in the media brings this principally obvious but practically non-ubiquitous impression to public audiences. Mostly, these images are sourced from commercial companies (such as MAXAR) and reproduced across social and mass media without much contextualisation.

Humans remain remarkably absent in many of these metaphors and images. Focusing on land as a medium that registers and transmits violence, they create narratives and images that avoid the direct representation of aggressors or human victims. We return to this observation in the discussion.



Figure 2. Satellite images showing fields dotted with craters are among the most common visual elements. Sources: various, original <https://blog.maxar.com/earth-intelligence/2022/maxars-weatherdesk-predicts-a-significant-decline-in-ukrainian-crop-harvests> (Date accessed: 13.07.2023).

Microbes and the planet

Some land damage, such as craters, is direct and obvious and can be conveyed through plain description or photographs. However, media articles also provide insights into less obvious and more complex inter-relations and processes, as well as the underlying knowledge production. Often, metaphors and images are presented as entry points to dig deeper, quite literally in the case of soils, to shed light on the complexity of land relations and ecosystems, and how they are disrupted.

For example, several articles mention the notion of “scorched Earth”, which in its original meaning describes a military strategy to weaken the enemy army by destroying land along with crops, infrastructures, etc., to cut off supplies. One article notes: “Scorched Earth—this is not a metaphor but a literal reality” (NGO4, 2023) insofar as fires and, more so, acids, destroy the soils. To move from the metaphoric image to explanation, many articles feature scientists and other specialists. On the issue of scorched Earth, one ecologist explains that the “millions of organisms that form the soil cover layer, form the ecosystem, burn” (J17, 2022). Another explains that while craters “can be seen with the naked eye,” for understanding the impacts of chemical pollution and damage to soil microbiota, “it is necessary to do an analysis” (J6, 2024).

Mentioned in forty-eight articles, impacts on soils are among the most common themes in our sample. It is frequently emphasized that Ukrainian black soils are “amongst the most fertile soils” (J21, 2023) in the world. This, it is argued, makes them one of the country’s most important resources, a “national wealth” and “treasure” (O2, 2022) now threatened by land mines, chemical contamination, and other war-induced degradation. Such framings idealize pre-war conditions, given earlier soil depletion, e.g., through intensive agriculture. Some articles describe soils as the most

severely affected ecosystem. A few feature residents living on and from the land who describe their experience: “After the shelling, the land dies” (J17, 2022). Most impacts of war on soils, however, are beyond direct human experience. By foregrounding microorganisms and soil microbiomes, media expand the scale at which war damage becomes visible, framing land as a complex living system rather than inert ground. To this end, many articles quote from interviews with scientists or published research. They explain how soil’s oxygen content and water permeability depend on microstructures composed of and maintained by organic and inorganic elements. Soils are inhabited by insects, worms, fungi, bacteria, and other microorganisms that form the microbiome or “living structure.” Warfare damages and partially destroys these sensitive systems: heavy vehicles and tanks compress soils; the pressure and heat caused by rocket impacts transform them; a variety of toxic chemicals pollute them; and the disruption of soil surfaces exacerbates erosion. “Microorganisms and insects that literally work to create new soil simply die” (J16, 2024) due to military impacts. As a microbiologist explains scorched Earth from an ecological perspective, “both the biological component of the soil, and the humus have burned out, and the bacteria that should be there and make the Earth alive are practically destroyed” (J18, 2024).

By explaining systemic interrelations, articles show how damage induced on soils’ microbiomes undermines their longer-term fertility, resilience, and regenerative capacity: As “the natural rate of restoration of the fertile soil layer is one centimetre per hundred years,” (O1, 2023) the explosion of a shell can, in a single moment, “destroy what took millennia to form” (NGO5, 2023). These, then, “were fertile soils” (J19, 2022) (our emphasis). Zooming in to the level of the microbiomes usually hidden underground, the articles add further dimensions to the picture of violence

against the living land and life, as implied by the earlier-described metaphors. While craters have become a symbol of how the war is inscribed on the surface of the Earth, soils are described as recording the war effects in subterranean spheres and somewhat more subtle ways: "The soil is a kind of sponge that absorbs all the chemicals that were brought by shells, military equipment, and the boots of Russian soldiers" (J20, 2022).

If media articles zoom in to the scale of microbiomes and microscopic soil texture, they also zoom out to capture the equally non-obvious large-scale impacts of ecological damage. Articles emphasize Ukraine's natural wealth, including many nature parks, unique biotopes, and rare species. Some steppe areas in the South and East, for example, are described as ecologically unique, in addition to their importance for national identity and collective attachments. Articles also describe how much ecosystems and ecosystem services contribute to social well-being and the economy, and conversely, the social and economic costs of ecosystem degradation. This includes feedback effects that can hit relatively directly, such as the destruction of protective forests, which affects soil erosion and local droughts and, in turn, agriculture. As one journalistic article emphasizes: "It is no exaggeration to say that war is a factor of large-scale, complex and long-term environmental threats, risks and disasters. Military actions disrupt the functioning of all natural life support systems, affecting the integrity of the functioning of the biosphere, the state of natural resources, the rate of their reproduction, etc" (J26, 2023). In such articles, war-induced damage serves as an entry point to address complex ecosystems and the interdependencies between people and the environment at large scales.

Zooming in and out from soil microbiomes to terrestrial ecosystems, media articles describe "land" as a living entity that is being harmed, as well as the basis for human and non-human life that is being eroded. It is also the land's life-giving and life-sustaining capacity which is under attack.

Past and future

Articles also look into the past and the future to contextualize current events and underline their significance. They point to the lasting impacts of previous wars, in Ukraine, with traces left by many invasions and wars still visible, or abroad, such as in France's Zone rouge, devastated during WWI and still contaminated with chemicals and ordnance. Some articles note that climate change exacerbates the irreversibility of war-induced damage because the past climatic conditions under which specific ecosystems formed no longer exist. As a result, forests destroyed may no longer mature in certain zones. Conversely, the war exacerbates predicted climate-related environmental problems, including the impacts of heat and drought and further stresses on soils, ecosystems, and biodiversity.

Seventeen articles mention that soil degradation has posed serious problems even before the Russo–Ukrainian war. Historical soil degradation is associated with the Soviet period, when agriculture was heavily industrialized and, hence, with Moscow-directed imperialism. But also after Soviet rule and before the full-scale invasion, decades of intensive industrial agriculture and neglect of soil protection have resulted in soil erosion and compaction, loss of humus and nutrients, and chemical pollution, to the extent that soil and land degradation in Ukraine have been amongst the most severe in the world. As one article states: "The myth of fertility blinded farmers to the point that they did not think about the future, depleting the land. Military actions further ex-

acerbate this problem and can accelerate the processes of degradation" (NGO3, 2022). Such a critique of domestic actors and modes of production that degrade land is rather rare in our sample. Focusing on Russian aggression and ecocide, articles rarely mention domestic controversies about land use and recovery, and conflicts between industrial agricultural and environmental interests. This is understandable in the context of the war, but feeds into the discursive pattern of idealising Ukrainian and pre-war land relations. Even less common is sharp criticism of unsustainable farming practices: "We are not enemies of our land, are we? Are we? Not occupiers who destroy it, without considering either current or future generations" (J8, 2022). Formulated as an outcry and contrasting the destructiveness of enemy forces with that of domestic actors, this quote addresses the established issue of long-lasting environmental damage and soil depletion, but reframes responsibility to include domestic actors.

Looking ahead, media articles note that the long duration of land damage makes it even more significant. "Scorched Earth forever?" (J23, 2023) asks one article. "The wounds on the body of the Earth will have to heal for years, and sometimes even centuries" (NGO6, 2023), states another. Some texts claim that it is due to such long-term consequences that environmental concerns matter alongside other urgent problems: "Against the backdrop of the unimaginable human suffering that the war has brought to Ukraine, environmental concerns may seem secondary. But [...] the [ecological] legacy of the war will threaten long after the guns have fallen silent" (J3, 2024). "The real ecological danger is even more terrible than war, because it kills gradually, with an eye [...] on many generations" (NGO7). One article states that the accumulation of toxic substances is "like a time bomb, [...] the damage is not visible visually, and then it will be reflected in generations of people" (J18, 2024). This is due to the persistence of certain chemicals and the long time required to clear the land of mines and explosives. As with soils, some articles point to the slow pace of ecosystem formation to explain the lasting damage ecosystems sustain. Articles describe how the "threat of destruction" (J26, 2023) may be irreversible in protected areas and certain ecosystems, which "can never be restored" (J24, 2022) as they build and recover very slowly.

In writing about land, therefore, some articles also tell stories about complex timescapes: About the long history of soil degradation exacerbated by the Russian invasion, about the slowness of natural soil and ecosystem formation, and its implications for the future of damaged lands. These narratives position land as a medium through which war extends into the future, and a carrier of future risk. This way, they frame environmental damage not as a short-term consequence but as a multigenerational condition.

Imagining Recovery

Themes of damage dominate in our sample—we coded more than twice as many segments with damage-related codes as with recovery-related ones. Yet 97 out of 149 articles address land and ecosystem recovery and discuss "how to heal the wounds of the Ukrainian land mutilated by the war" (J8, 2022), to "save wounded lands" (J27, 2022), or to "save black soils" (J15, 2023). As with land destruction, ecological, agricultural, and health aspects of recovery are often intertwined. As one article puts it, the "health of the land" (NGO6, 2023) determines the health of harvests and of the people who consume them, and therefore it "is worth taking care of [the land] in the same way we take care of ourselves". Or, in more dra-

matic terms: “the war destroys the environment, but we must survive for future generations” (J30, 2024). Articles emphasize that “land restoration is becoming one of the most important components of Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction” (J28, 2024), with needs ranging from restoring “the agricultural landscape” (NGO2, 2022) to addressing the “hidden danger” (C2, 2023) of soil contamination.

Mirroring the diagnosis of long-term land and environmental damages, articles lay out how recovery, too, is especially significant concerning the mid and longer-term future: restoring soil resilience and fertility for the future of the agricultural sector and food security in Ukraine and beyond, soil and ecosystem restoration for climate resilience and biodiversity, and coping with problems of pollution for the health of the Ukrainian people. Some articles emphasize that success in tackling future challenges depends on taking the right steps now and should not be postponed.

The recovery options presented range from nature-based to high-tech solutions. Interviewed proponents of nature-based solutions present them as low- or no-cost possibilities to utilize nature’s self-regenerating capacities. Approaches include bioremediation—absorbing or neutralizing pollutants using plants or microorganisms—and agroecological landscapes, where forest patches within fields cover contaminated land. Planting trees on craters and contaminated land would benefit biodiversity, protect against soil erosion, and improve the microclimate while withdrawing heavily contaminated land from production. Visually, this is frequently symbolized through trees growing on damaged land. Young vegetation in a burnt forest or on the dried bed of the Kakhovka reservoir is presented as a symbol of recovery. These recovery narratives portray land as self-regenerative and transformable, positioning ecological restoration as part of national reconstruction.

On the tech side, articles paint a picture of how satellites, drones, algorithms, and big data analysis can help with assessment and monitoring. Magnetometric imaging and robots can be utilized for demining, and AI can be used to develop solutions for complex problems. The representation of technical solutions often reflects praise for technologies and their rapid development, implying a sense of mastery, despite the overwhelming scale of the problems. Ukraine has become a real-world laboratory for the development and testing of such technologies. While acknowledging the tragic circumstances, media articles also present the respective technological advances as achievements.

Around half of the articles addressing recovery also mention its limitations. Certain challenges, such as high costs and a lack of technologies, can, in principle, be overcome. However, several articles also mention more fundamental limitations to recovery; for example, land that is disrupted and contaminated to such an extent that a return to anything close to pre-war conditions is unrealistic. As this is the case across large areas, some articles point out that future landscapes will be distinctly different from pre-war conditions and advocate a fundamental rethinking of approaches to such land. Natural regeneration, that is, the recovery of land without targeted human intervention, is proposed for areas that have been mined or polluted so heavily that restoring them for agricultural production appears too expensive and lengthy. Proposed options respond to the given constraints while also highlighting potential. Not only would “leave the area alone and let nature recover” (NGO8, 2022) be the most realistic approach to dealing with millions of hectares of heavily contaminated areas, as proponents argue, but it also enables biodiversity restoration and carbon sequestration and could al-

low Ukraine to meet targets to significantly expand regenerated and protected areas in accordance with the EU’s “Nature Restoration Law” and the UN’s Agenda 2030. Some argue that land damaged by war could be turned into “carbon absorption factories” (J5, 2023) by restoring forests, swamps, and steppes.

Agrolandscapes, carbon sequestration, and ecosystem restoration are presented as options that may become politically and economically viable once Ukraine aligns with the EU Acquis and the EU Green Deal. Several articles depict nature protection and recovery as a priority in the Green Economy they envision as Ukraine’s future. Some argue that by tackling unprecedented challenges through creative, coordinated, and high-tech approaches, Ukraine could become a global center of innovative solutions for land and environmental challenges, from the large-scale application of nature-based solutions, such as microbial remediation, to strategies based on big data and AI.

Many recovery-related photographs show machines and demining operations, and some show agroforestry landscapes and natural forest regrowth. Overall, however, illustrations of recovery options are fewer and paler compared to those of destruction, and we found no iconic images that would symbolize recovery. Yet, a range of partially conflicting imaginaries, broadly understood, are reflected in the media coverage, from high-tech recovery to rewilding. They represent and signal very different ways of acting on damaged land and visions for future landscapes and land use. Tensions and conflicts between these options are rarely addressed, however.

Discussion

Land, War, and Expertise

Ukrainian media articles we analysed reflect how land matters to people as the place where they live and which they call home, as the ground from which they grow food for subsistence or profit, a shared place in the world associated with collective identity, culture, legacy, and the foregoing generations, and a place of cohabitation of humans and non-humans. However, media articles also reflect how land relations come under attack, are altered and threatened through war. They describe land at risk of losing its fertility and being turned into a hazardous space of lurking dangers, storing mines, unexploded ordnances, and chemical pollution. They also describe land being weaponized by the invading military, land being framed and consulted as a witness and archivist of violence and war crimes, and land itself appearing as a victim of war when understood as a living entity or system. Land is further associated with life-sustaining and regenerative capacities that take on specific meaning and importance in the context of annihilation.

Aspects in the first of these clusters relate to lived experience and cultural meanings of land, and echo prominent themes in the broader social–scientific literature on land and land relations. The second cluster reflects how war exposes the fragility of land relations that may be taken for granted in peacetime. When armies fight over territory, residents may lose access to their land and be separated from it in manifold and complex ways. Further, as reflected in our findings, wars collapse the separation between life-sustaining land and embattled territory, deliberately in scorched Earth strategies and ecocide, or as collateral damage. All these aspects remind us that land, in its materiality and complexity, deserves a place in studies of international politics and other fields en-

gaged with armed conflict (Anderl and Kušić 2026). An interdisciplinary literature directly relevant to this endeavor examines the impact of wars on land relations (Ballvé 2020; Baumann and Kuemmerle 2016; Henig 2019; Tsymbalyuk 2025).

We focused on how the media convey images, narratives, and explanations around land-related damage, and on the role of scientific insights and expertise within this discourse. Media articles reflect new knowledge needs created by war: to understand the impacts of rockets and the heat, pressure, and substances they emit on soil biomes, to gain a better understanding of the complex long-term impacts on the health of organisms and ecosystems, to develop ideas on what can be done about this situation, and more. Our analysis reflects on the role of scientific expert knowledge in understanding the impacts of war at scales too small or too large for direct perception, unfolding slowly, or graspable only through instruments and analytical procedures for other reasons. Many media articles feature interviews with environmental experts who document damage, analyse non-obvious impacts, and develop scenarios. Such expertise has become relevant in the context of state-coordinated efforts to document environmental damages to sue Russia over ecocide, and beyond. If the war creates new knowledge needs, the media plays an important role in communicating some of the knowledge created to broad audiences.

A Multimodal Discourse

The discourse we identified weaves different forms of knowledge and of representation. This way it constructs, *inter alia*, novel links between ecology, technology, and intimate everyday realities. For example, satellite images, frequently reproduced in Ukrainian wartime media, have become “boundary objects” (Star and Griesemer 1989) that travel between science, the media, social media, the arts, and other spheres. While digital sensing technologies are increasingly interwoven into warfare (Branch 2025), and satellite imagery can be criticized for creating false impressions of objective knowledge from a “god’s eye” perspective (Bennett et al. 2022), the meaning of satellite images is highly contextual within the media we analysed. Here, images displaying fields dotted with craters have become symbols encapsulating “this war’s violence against Ukrainian land” (Zamuruieva 2023), and audiences know that “there are thousands of such images and thousands of such fields in Ukraine now” (Zamuruieva 2023). In this sense, they represent not so much an allegedly objective revelation of scientific facts as a symbol of socially established truths. Still, satellite imagery is intertwined with military use and power politics. For example, MAXAR Technologies, the company behind the iconic image discussed in 3.2 (fig. 2), stopped providing satellite imagery to Ukrainian users in 2025 at the request of the Trump administration, as part of its temporary halt in intelligence sharing with Ukraine.

Satellite images are woven into media narratives alongside photographs, metaphors, field reports, expert interviews, numbers, and scientific results in stories that often combine hard-nosed “facts” with metaphoric sense-making and a search for a language to express the horrors of war, such as how it threatens life by degrading the land’s life-giving and sustaining capacities. Articles also combine journalistic language and formats with elements reminiscent of the environmental humanities and arts. This is how they respond to the representational challenges the war poses concerning its hidden, scattered, and temporally drawn-out consequences and forms of violence (Nixon 2011). We may be reminded

of Tsymbalyk’s (2025:44) description of land as “the ultimate container of pain, the most thorough archivist of this war”, or of contemporary Ukrainian artists who work with satellite images or soil⁷. Katya Buchatska, for example, has used soil from the front lines “that witnessed” the crimes of the war to reflect on “nullification, which [...] occurs through the destruction of territories, memory, and environments” (Buchatska 2023a). In another work, she uses satellite images to reflect on the “injuries to the Earth” and how they could be turned into a memorial (Buchatska 2023b).

These artworks, as well as some of the media articles in our sample, tell vivid stories of violence, harm, and recovery, without centring human victims or perpetrators who rarely appear directly but shine through in stories of land. Land here figures as an agent that links people across places and times indirectly and yet intimately, by transmitting violence and bodily harm through mines or pollutants, and by storing such harms as risks to which even future generations will be exposed. Land binds people together through collective exposure to harm, but also appears as an object of shared concern and care that connects people. This way of narrating through land makes it possible to address impacts at the level of collectives and populations, rather than individuals. It allows for the telling of stories of damage that will remain long after soldiers have left, thereby shedding light on important war effects that would elude event- or actor-focused narratives. If there is a risk of “loss of trust in land itself, which will have been so thoroughly mined by explosives as to create the conditions of ongoing eco-trauma for years to come” (Ivakhiv 2025a:18), then specifying existing risks and popularizing knowledge about them may help overcome the general loss of trust in land and develop targeted coping strategies.

Damaged Lands

This study reflects how, during armed conflict, the stability and intimacy of land relations come under attack (Baumann and Kuemmerle 2016; Ivakhiv 2025b). While the attachments between rural populations and the land should generally not be essentialized (Vorbrugg 2025), attending to the specific ways in which people are separated from and (re)connect to land becomes even more crucial in conflict settings. This includes separations and connections mediated through various technologies, media, and knowledge, which studies of land in conflict settings should attend to.

In Ukraine and elsewhere, land and landscapes are traditionally associated with continuity, as landscapes evolve and change over centuries, and attachments to land and its relationship with collective identity span generations (Kovalenko 2025:119). Such framings can romanticize pre-war land relations, and generalize and idealize the relationship between Ukrainians and their land (Bazdyrieva 2025:46–47). Wars and other crises that disrupt such continuity can alter landscape perceptions (Dorondel 2016; Turnbull 2020; Zani 2019). Many of the media articles we analysed emphasize the longer histories and continuities of land degradation in Ukraine stemming from earlier wars and industrialized agriculture, more than the continuity of landscapes. They echo the various ways in which land and violence have been historically intertwined. Ukraine has found itself between imperial powers and ambitions to its East and West for centuries, powers that have variously attempted to exploit its people and natural resources. Asia Bazdyrieva speaks of “Ukraine-as-territory” (Bazdyrieva 2022) to emphasize how denying

⁷Some examples are reproduced in Ivakhiv 2025b.

and attacking national territorial sovereignty, and exploiting and depleting land-bound resources, are historically related strategies that persist into the present. This twofold reduction to a status of someone else's territory instead of a sovereign state, and a resource pool instead of a node within ecological and social relations, is intertwined with a history of violence against people and the land they inhabit. Indeed, the idea of Ukraine as part of the historical "bloodlands" (Snyder 2010) has gained prominence since the full-scale invasion. Therefore, when media articles spell out land's life-sustaining functions and the concrete entanglements and lived relationships that give meaning to land, this can be interpreted as a way of writing against the violent reduction of complex land relations to embattled territory and exploited resource.

Previous analyses of Ukrainian wartime social media discourse found that the narrative of a "community connected to their land" (Poberezhna, Burlyuk, and van Heelsom 2023:83), rooted in tradition, art, and literature, has been amplified since the full-scale invasion. Similar to our study, they find that the war is described as an "experience shared by the land itself" (Poberezhna et al. 2023:84), carrying the scars of the war yet also being described as a symbol and medium of resilience. Such studies emphasize how the full-scale invasion stands within a longer history of weaponizing food in Ukraine, most notoriously during the Holodomor⁸ (Andrianova 2024; Poberezhna et al. 2023). We found only passing mentions of such historical references, as the media articles we analysed emphasize the long-term impacts on soils, land, and organisms, rather than cultural memory. However, the media's focus on documenting ecological damage invites other kinds of parallels and forms of contextualization. Articles situate war-torn landscapes in Ukraine within a wider geography of such landscapes elsewhere, relating them to other contemporary or historical war zones. This resonates with suggestions that war zones produce specific geographic formations that warrant theorization beyond individual case studies (Zani 2019:8). The media analysed here describe how embattled territories will not suddenly become peaceful landscapes once the war has ended, so the collapse of the binary between land and territory will live on as well. The war's long ecological aftermath, a prominent theme in the media, has also emerged as a central theme in the Ukrainian environmental humanities (Ivakhiv 2025b; Matviyenko 2024).

The framing of violence against the land conducted by the invading army can strengthen certain binaries and produce absences. Only a relatively small number of the articles we analysed mention domestic land competition and degradation, or note that some conflicts over land use and land futures have been amplified since the full-scale invasion. For example, it is reported that agricultural producers who lost access to fields try to compensate by expanding into protected areas, that others exploit war-induced uncertainties and weakened regulation to "grab" agricultural land, or that energy companies similarly exploit the situation for realizing big infrastructure projects (Mamonova et al. 2023). Also, an ongoing reform to liberalize the Ukrainian land market has attracted wide media attention, and land competition and prices have risen sharply in certain regions. Still, these topics remain largely absent from the war-focused media articles in our sample. While the Russian army is, accurately, described as the major threat to the land, there is a cer-

tain risk of sidelining domestic contradictions and conflicts. Relatedly, many articles reproduce idealized images of pre-war landscapes and of the connectedness between Ukrainians and their land rather uncritically.

Conclusion

This study shows how media articles reflect different and distinct ways in which land matters during war: as the ground that humans and non-humans live on and from, but which is also turned into a space of lurking dangers; as a medium that transmits harms and risks into the future, but also holds potential for recovery; and as deeply intertwined with national history while also described as a non-human war victim in its own right. This confirms calls to take land seriously in international politics and other fields dealing with armed conflicts. Land's diverse social, cultural, ecological, health, economic, and other dimensions require diverse approaches to land.

Our study focused on how narratives and knowledge of war-induced land damage are conveyed in the media. Media coverage only partly reflects how this knowledge is produced. Other methodological approaches, including e.g. expert interviews, a systematic review of reports and scientific sources, or participant observation, and concepts, e.g. drawing on Science and Technology Studies, would be required to link the analysis of the production and communication of respective knowledge more systematically.

Because the study focuses on wartime media coverage, it cannot systematically reconstruct pre-invasion media discourses on land. Future research comparing pre- and post-2014/2022 media representations could clarify continuities and shifts in land discourses in Ukraine.

In many media articles, the fate of the land is framed as determined by the fight over territory against the Russian invaders who, accurately, are described as the major threat. While accurate and understandable in an ongoing war, such framings still may contribute to sidelining domestic and/or economic conflicts over land use and land futures, and to romanticizing Ukrainians' relationship to their land—which can veil extraction, degradation, and dispossession by Ukrainian or non-Russian foreign actors. More research is needed to unpack and criticize such tendencies and risks.

We analysed a discourse that explicitly addresses war-induced land damage and sampled media articles accordingly. These are informed mainly by a relatively narrow set of mainly specialist and expert voices and, as such, are not representative of land discourses or perceptions in present-day Ukraine overall. To compare media discourses with changing land relations and perceptions on the ground, the results of discourse analysis can be complemented and contrasted with surveys, participatory, and fieldwork-based methods to consider and engage insights from rural residents and other actors who are not well represented in media coverage but are very much affected by land damages, policies, and recovery efforts.

Acknowledgments

This article benefited from discussion and feedback from participants of the marvellous workshop "Grounding IR: The Land Question in International Politics" in Cres in June 2024. Special thanks to Felix Anderl, Katarina Kušić, Vera Smirnova, and Iryna Zamuruieva for their in-depth feedback, and to Ihor Teslenko for contributing to the media search. We thank two anonymous reviewers for substantive feedback.

⁸The Holodomor was a man-made famine in Soviet Ukraine that killed millions, widely regarded as a result of policies implemented under Joseph Stalin's regime.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Global Studies Quarterly* online.

Funding

Alexander Vorbrugg gratefully acknowledges funding by the Swiss National Science Foundation (grant number PZ00P1201761).

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