

In the shadow of war

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has wreaked death and destruction in the country, with impacts that reverberate worldwide. This Focus highlights the voices of Ukrainian scientists — at home and abroad — and provides insights into the many effects of the war.

This year started with unresolved ongoing conflicts — in Yemen, Ethiopia, Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere. The war in Ukraine was a dreaded, unwelcome addition. Four months into the war, the country has experienced untold death and devastation. And the trauma experienced by those who have survived the war is [likely to last for generations](#), point out Jawaid et al.

Reports of horrific atrocities have shaken the world and raised the question of bringing perpetrators to justice. But this isn't straightforward, as Sergey Sayapin [explains](#), and this war has brought into sharp relief systemic deficiencies in the structure of the UN Security Council, which has been unable to act under Russian veto.

The war has seen an extraordinary outpouring of solidarity for refugees across Europe, providing material and [psychological support](#) for those fleeing the country. This support has been most visible in Poland, which had received [more than 3.5 million refugees](#) by the end of May. [Refugee support in Poland](#) has relied mainly on voluntarism and grassroots initiatives, which have allowed much-needed immediate mobilization. [Spontaneous humanitarian impulses](#) have taken over the role that states and a politicized, bureaucratic international humanitarian system have been unable to play.

Not all those fleeing the war have been treated equally, however. News stories of Black, Arab and Asian students experiencing racism at the border when trying to flee Ukraine showed that humanitarianism is not blind to ethnic and racial divides. Korinne Sky, a British Zimbabwean student, [recounts her experiences of racism](#) within Ukraine when trying to flee the country. Unlike white Ukrainians, she and other Black, Asian and Arab refugees were segregated in a separate queue and had to wait for 10 hours in extreme temperatures before being allowed to cross into Romania.

When a nuclear power is the aggressor, the threat of international escalation is

substantial. Instead of directly engaging in the war, several countries have provided military support to Ukraine and more than 30 nations have imposed unprecedented economic sanctions on Russia, in an effort to end the aggression. Are sanctions likely to have their intended effect? [This is unclear](#), explains Susan Allen, and there is reason to doubt that sanctions will bring about political change in Russia, while ordinary Russian citizens and citizens worldwide are paying the price for the aggression of Vladimir Putin's regime in Ukraine.

The economic impacts of the war are being felt acutely worldwide, most pressingly in creating a [global food security crisis](#). In a world already reeling from the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war has disrupted wheat exports from Ukraine and Russia (the two breadbaskets for many African and other nations) and rising inflation has skyrocketed food prices. Although the past decade saw food insecurity decrease worldwide, gains are being lost and global hunger is again on the rise. Immediate coordinated action is needed to support food-insecure populations while the conflict is ongoing, urge Behnassi and El Haiba.

Despite the extraordinary cost of sanctions, opinion polls suggest that [Russian citizens largely support](#) what the regime has presented as a 'special military operation' in Ukraine. Although polls in authoritarian regimes are difficult to interpret, this ostensible support for aggression against a sovereign nation raises the question: how did Vladimir Putin's regime manage to persuade ordinary Russians to support the war? Propaganda, disinformation, state control of the media, flooding of non-state media with state-sanctioned information, and an appeal to national identity have shaped the Russian public's response, [explains](#) Maxim Alyukov.

Disinformation is not only targeted to ordinary Russians, however. Although not alone, Russia has a long history in using disinformation (and [cyberwarfare](#)) as a

tool of destabilization abroad, and the war in Ukraine is as much an information war as it is a war on the ground. [Russian disinformation](#) poses challenges that are difficult but not impossible to overcome in democratic nations, argues Ilya Yablokov. But this requires addressing the political polarization and social inequality on which conspiracy theories and disinformation feed.

The war has had a tremendous effect on Ukrainian scientists at home and abroad. Although there has been an [outpouring of support](#) for refugee scientists from the international scientific community, this support is unlikely to cover the needs of all those affected by the war, and very little support exists for the large number of Ukrainian scientists who have not left the country. Maciej Maryl et al. argue that coordinated efforts are needed to support Ukrainian scientists at home and abroad, both immediately and in the long term.

Central to this Focus are the voices of Ukrainian scientists. We hear from three scientists — Svitlana Krakovska, who stayed in Ukraine; Tamara Martenyuk, who fled to Germany; and Darya Tsybalyuk, who has been experiencing the war from the UK where she already lived. The trauma these scientists have experienced is counterpointed by their hopes for the future — that the war will help to end reliance on fossil fuels; that Ukrainian studies and identity will become more visible; and that educational institutions will become more welcoming and inclusive of those living through war and oppression.

War — wherever it happens — is cruel, deadly, divisive, impoverishing and destabilizing. Even if the war in Ukraine ended today, its impacts on Ukrainians and vulnerable people worldwide have been extraordinary. We cannot wait for the end of the war to address the economic and humanitarian crises that the war has given rise to, exacerbated or overshadowed. □

Published online: 23 June 2022
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01407-6>