

End the addiction to fossil fuel – support the Ukrainian resistance

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Alan Thornett offers a detailed discussion of the situation in Ukraine and the need for a rapid global transition away from fossil fuels.

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End the addiction to fossil fuel.

For a rapid (and global) transition to renewable energy.

Support the Ukrainian resistance.

Putin's merciless invasion of Ukraine - which is his next step in the restoration of the Russian empire - has been stalled by the remarkable popular resistance that has been mounted against it. The southern port city of Mariupol is being flattened by Russian artillery and is facing a humanitarian catastrophe but has refused to surrender. On the other hand, the invaders have been pushed back on several fronts.

The Ukrainian resistance has relied heavily on both Western economic sanctions and Western military aid including hand-launched anti-tank and surface to air missiles without which Putin's blitzkrieg might have been unstoppable. The economic sanctions have not just put Putin under pressure at home, but they have given the population the confidence to resist such an overwhelming force.

As the Russians have met much stronger resistance than they expected they have resorted to ever more indiscriminate, long-range bombardment of the civilian population with missiles launched from ships in the Black Sea and from Russia itself. The result of which has been a rapid escalation of civilian casualties. Putin has thousands of planes and missiles, of course, and could wipe Ukraine off the map. But whether that would be politically sustainable (or survivable for him at home) is another matter.

Russia is now a brutal **kleptocracy**, with Putin as the new Stalin. Anti-war demonstrators facing up to 16 years in jail and opposition politicians, who oppose war, driven into exile. Ten million people, a quarter of the population, are internally displaced and with almost five million already refugees abroad. Many thousands, mostly civilians, are dead. EU countries, to their credit, have opened their borders, suspended visa requirements, and taken in millions of people. This is in sharp contrast to Boris Johnson's miserable Little Englander government that has been running around in circles in a (very successful) attempt to give refuge to as few people as possible.

A gaping loop-hole

Important as the sanctions have been, however, they have contained a gaping loop-hole. This has been the failure to include within them a ban Russian oil and gas exports - which represent 60 per cent of total Russian exports. As a result of this the rapidly rising price of oil and gas (and therefore profits) has seen money pouring into Putin's coffers at an ever-increasing rate and therefore straight into his war machine - which has become the backbone of his whole operation.

Last year Russia exported \$173 billion dollars' worth of oil and gas. Since the invasion the value of these fuels have risen sharply, with oil currently at \$110 a barrel. Russia is the world's third largest oil producer, behind the USA and Saudi Arabia - and the world's biggest exporter of crude oil. It also has by far the biggest natural gas reserves in the world. It currently supplies 40 per cent of Europe's needs for natural gas and 41 percent of global needs.

This loophole, however, is in the process of being closed. After appeals by the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and the refusal of dockers in Ellesmere Port and Kent in the UK, and also in the Netherlands, to unload Russian oil Biden has announced that US sanctions will now cover all Russian oil gas and coal imports - after a 45-day adjustment period and he urged European countries, in particular, to follow suit. This is a crucial tightening of the sanctions, that hit Putin at his most vulnerable point, and should be strongly supported.

Support for Biden's move amongst European governments, however, has been less than enthusiastic. The EU has agreed to reduce its dependence on Russian oil and gas by two thirds by the end of this year and to zero by 2030. Germany, which is the biggest user of Russian oil and gas, has said that it will accelerate its plans to find alternative energy sources including renewables. Boris Johnson has said something similar, though whether it means anything is another matter...

Such a tightening up remains important and could be crucial. With a no-fly zone ruled out, the economic boycott, including oil and gas in this way, alongside the supply of arms, could well be the decisive factor in the outcome of the war.

Ukrainian climate campaigners appeal

The importance of boycotting Russian oil and gas exports is spelled out loud and clear in the recent (and remarkable) statement on the war by 12 Ukrainian climate campaigns titled "End fossil fuel addiction that feeds Putin's war machine". It is a direct appeal to all users of Russian oil and gas to stop funding Putin's war machine:

"The regime of Vladimir Putin (it says) is the clear and sole aggressor in this illegal war, and bears full responsibility for the atrocities committed by its war machine. It is equally clear that this war machine has been funded, fed, and fueled by the coal, oil and gas industries that are driving both the invasion that threatens Ukraine and the climate crisis that threatens humanity's future. And the

world's fossil fuel addiction, in turn, is funding Putin's warmongering — putting not only Ukraine but Europe itself at risk. Putin has deliberately weaponised fossil gas to increase his existing energy dominance over the European Union and to threaten European nations that would come to Ukraine's aid. This needs to stop!...

We also call upon the governments of the countries outside Europe to reject and ban any import of fossil fuels from Russia and rapidly phase out all fossil fuels... Putin's income streams must be dried out as soon as possible - this also includes tackling direct and indirect investment into fossil fuel infrastructure in Russia."

Also at the crossroads: human life on Earth

Putin's war comes at a pivotal moment in another (parallel) crisis - which is the climate emergency. This is also threatening to push human life on the planet over the edge via global warming and climate change.

This was made very clear in the IPCC's Sixth Assessment on Climate Change published in January this year. In other words, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the need to save the planet from catastrophic climate change, are now indivisible. They are united by Putin's weaponisation of the hydrocarbon industry as the material basis for his war-drive.

His war not only threatens to derail the fragile progress in carbon emissions reduction made at the Paris and Glasgow COP conferences but to disrupt COP27 to be held in Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt in November this year before it even starts - and with potentially disastrous consequences for the planet.

A mega crossroads

This leaves us - and our species - at a mega turning point in terms of the future of life on the planet, and at the beginning of what is already the crucial decade if we are to avoid climate chaos and ecological destruction. There are two counterposed options.

The first - which the right-wing has seized on with great relish - is to ignore the climate crisis, dump the carbon reduction targets set in Paris and Glasgow, and go cap-in-hand to OPEC and the Saudi Arabia and plead with them to increase production. Boris Johnson, who presented himself as an environmentalist in Glasgow, has already been there, groveling to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia - who has just broken a record by publicly executing 81 people in a single day.

In fact hard right Tory MPs have launched a ferocious attack on renewable energy and in favour of a grotesque scramble for ever-more blood-drenched sources of fossil fuel. They want coal and nuclear energy to be destigmatised. They want multiple new nuclear power plants alongside new oil, gas, and coal fields. They want new and increasing investment in extreme energy such as hydraulic fracking and tar sand extraction. Nigel Farage has been holding rallies around the world banging the drum for this 'solution'. A more grotesque proposition could hardly be devised.

According to the Guardian of Feb 26th the American Petroleum Institute, which represents oil and gas giants including Exxon, Chevron and Shell, has called on Biden to allow a major expansion of drilling for these fuels and to abolish regulations that impede new gas and oil pipelines in order to reduce fuel costs for Americans and support European countries that have seen gas costs spiral due

to concerns over supply from Russia, which provides Europe with around a third of its gas. In fact Shell Oil has already announced that it is reviewing its decision, taken in the wake of COP26, to withdraw from the Cambo new oilfield project to the west of the Shetlands.

Such a reversion into fossil fuels could set the struggle against climate change back 10 years - which is 10 years we don't have.

Massive change quickly

The other alternative - that we should also seize on with great relish - is a rapid compete, and global, break with fossil fuels alongside the rapid introduction of renewables globally. This is being called for by the UN, the climate movement, and by the left. It would not only address climate change but it would also break the grip of the gangsters and the cartels that control the industry and reduce the chances of wars and conflicts that the fossil fuel industry generates.

Today 50 per cent of oil reserves are in the hands of reactionary and unstable right-wing regimes with the potential to hold the world to ransom in the way that Putin is now doing - i.e. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, the UAE, Libya and of course Russia.

Russian oil and gas exports to Europe are delivered via one of the world's biggest networks of oil and gas pipelines. These include the Yamal-Europe pipeline, which crosses Belarus and Poland into Germany, and the Nord Stream 1 gas pipeline which goes directly to Germany via Ukraine. The under construction Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which Germany has currently suspended, would double the total capacity of the Nord Stream system from 55bn cubic meters to 110bn cubic metres per year. It is owned by the Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom.

The country to enmesh enmeshed itself most disastrously into this nightmare is Germany, under the legacy of Angela Merkel. She took Germany into a level of dependency on Russian oil and gas, that has now collapsed.

The Ukrainian climate organisations quoted above put it this way: *"It is imperative that the world not simply replace Russian-produced fossil fuels (in particular fossil gas) with fossil fuels from other countries (in particular liquefied natural gas). With an emerging priority of boycotting Russian oil and gas, fossil fuel expansion must be immediately halted, and nations worldwide must commit to the rapid and just transition away from all fossil fuels. Reliance on coal, oil and gas is the intentional embrace of death, misery, and collapse at a global scale. It is our duty to finally get real about that if we want to have a liveable future!"*

Yes, it would indeed require massive change quickly not least since we now have only eight years in which to stop global temperatures breaching 1.5°C. It can be done, however, given the determination, the mindset, and the political will to carry it through. A good example is the way that the British and American economies were changed from peace-time to wartime economies at the start of WW2. Whole industries were transformed in a matter of months.

When the USA mobilised for WW2 17 million new jobs were created and industrial production rose by 96 per cent. During the four years that the USA was in the war it built 150 Aircraft Carriers, 8 Battleships, dozens of Cruisers, hundreds of destroyers, hundreds of submarines, thousands of landing craft, and over 4000 cargo ships. Just think about it.

That was a response to an existential threat - which is exactly the kind of threat we are facing today with climate change. **It is far better to do this now rather than after a 10-year diversion**

where we end up back in the same place with an even bigger problem in front of us.

The Tories denounce this as impossible. Renewable energy, they say, would be incapable of delivering the energy needed at the speed it would be required, and that oil gas and coal backed up by a big expansion of nuclear – ever after the experiences in Ukraine with nuclear plants caught up in military actions – are indispensable. This is rubbish and should be rejected.

As Caroline Lucas has argued very effectively, the opposite is the case. That renewables not only offer a long-term solution but that they are far cheaper and much quicker to install than either nuclear power stations or the development of new oil or gas fields. It takes, she argues around ten years to develop a new oil or gas field or build a nuclear power station and both would be much more expensive to build and infinitely more destructive to the environment. It does mean massive changes – but it means massive change whenever we do it.

Using energy more efficiently

Any transition to renewables, of course, must be accompanied by a major reduction energy usage by both governments and individuals. Our collective impact on the planet is unsustainable. This means ending the throwaway society and economies based on growth. Today vast amounts of commodities are churned out, driven by the advertising industry, that go from factory to landfill in very short periods of time. The fashion industry, for example, is the second most polluting industry on Earth. The industry produces 150 billion garments a year, enough to provide twenty new articles of clothing for every person on the planet. Eighty per cent of all clothing is discarded very quickly into landfill.

We also have to take personal responsibility for our own carbon and ecological footprints: i.e. paying more attention what we eat, particularly meat, the means of transport we choose, and the amount of energy we waste, and the amount of waste we generate. This was called for by the IPCC Report which recognised that whilst the main responsibility for such change is institutional and governmental, there is also an important personal responsibility involved – in the rich countries in particular.

Food production and distribution will also have to be transformed. Industrialised farming will have to go and far less meat eaten. In Britain, food miles have a huge impact on the environment. 95 per cent of our fruit comes from abroad, and half of our vegetables are also imported. Whilst only 1 per cent of food is transported by air, it accounts for 11 per cent of carbon emissions. Since 1992, the amount of food transported by air has risen by 140 per cent. More than 200,000 acres of rainforest is being destroyed every day, to make room for export-based beef and leather production.

Agriculture is also a massive contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, including methane from livestock, nitrous oxide from the soil, GHG from fuel for machinery, the production of vast quantities of artificial fertiliser, and the transportation of food to the market place. It is also responsible for a massive runoff from the use of mineral fertilisers to produce arable crops, for both human consumption and animal feed, therefore increasing damage to the wider environment.

Renewables are getting cheaper fast

We do not face this change-over from a standing start, however. According to the Rapid Transition Alliance renewables are getting cheaper, while fossil fuels are getting more expensive. Last year they say was another record-breaking year for renewable energy – even in the face of the global

Covid pandemic.

The Guardian's environment editor Damian Carrington makes a similar point in an article on October 31st. The climate emergency, he (rightly) argues, is the biggest threat to civilisation we have ever faced. But there is good news he says: "we already have every tool we need to beat it". The challenge, he says, is not identifying the solutions, but rolling them out with great speed.

Some key sectors, he says, are already racing ahead, such as electric cars. They are already cheaper to own and run in many places - and when the purchase prices equal those of fossil-fueled vehicles in the next few years, a runaway tipping point will be reached. Electricity from renewable sources, he says, is now the cheapest form of power in most places, sometimes even cheaper than continuing to run existing coal plants. The plummeting cost of batteries and other storage technologies, he says, also bodes well.

Meanwhile we have to combine solidarity with the Ukrainian struggle with the struggle against climate change - which means, amongst many other things, mobilising for COP27 at the end of the year in order to make sure that it survives the right-wing onslaught.

Alan Thornett

P.S.

• Red Green Labour. March 24, 2022:
<https://redgreenlabour.org/2022/03/24/end-the-addiction-to-fossil-fuel-support-the-ukrainian-resistance/>