

Opinion – The Unholy Alliance: Fossil Fuels and War

Written by Svitlana Romanko

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SVITLANA ROMANKO, JUN 25 2024

In the global chessboard of energy, fossil fuels have long been powerful pieces, driving economies and, unfortunately, fuelling conflicts. Wars have long been fought over resources, but fossil fuels have become a primary driver of conflict in the modern era. This relationship has profound implications for international stability, economic security, and environmental sustainability. The ongoing war in Ukraine exemplifies in perfect clarity the dire consequences of fossil fuel dependency, serving as a wake-up call for the global community.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the world has witnessed a stark example of how fossil fuel revenues can finance war and aggression. Russia has earned an astounding €693 billion from fossil fuel exports since the war began. European Union countries alone have purchased more than €196 billion worth of these exports, directly fueling Russia's war chest.

The revenue from fossil fuels has allowed Russia to sustain its military efforts, perpetuating immense human suffering and devastating Ukraine's energy infrastructure. 50% of Ukraine's energy infrastructure has been destroyed due to Russian attacks, leading to electricity shortages in at least five regions since March 2024. The largest private energy company in Ukraine, DTEK, has reported an 85% loss of its coal-fired generation capacity and significant casualties among its staff. This destruction underscores the vulnerability of energy infrastructures in conflict zones and the severe humanitarian crises that can result.

Despite the outcry against Russia's aggression in Ukraine, European and G7 countries' policies remain contradictory. While publicly condemning Russia's actions, these nations continue to provide financial support through fossil fuel purchases. During the week of June 10 to 16, 2024, Russia exported an estimated €5.06 billion worth of fossil fuel exports, including €2.04 billion in oil, €1.84 billion in oil products and chemicals, €0.66 billion in gas, and €0.52 billion in coal.

Furthermore, since the start of the full-scale invasion, European countries have been freely facilitating ship-to-ship (STS) transfers in their coastal waters, allowing Russia to obscure the origin of its oil and evade price cap policies. Only after prolonged public campaigns, especially by Ukrainian organisations, have the EU finally included a ban on transshipments in the 14th round of sanctions, although scandalously, they have included a 9-month 'transition period' before this comes into effect. This practice not only undermines sanctions but also helps Russia maintain its revenue streams, perpetuating the conflict. For instance, Russia has overtaken the US as the largest gas supplier to Europe as of May 2024, a revelation that starkly highlights the hypocrisy of European leaders who claim to seek an end to Russia's war atrocities.

The dependency on fossil fuels extends beyond the immediate geopolitical conflicts; it has far-reaching implications for global stability and environmental sustainability. Fossil fuels are not just a source of revenue for aggressor states; they are also significant contributors to the costly global climate crisis. Russia's major Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) 'carbon bombs' exacerbate climate disruption, costing the EU over €650 billion since 1980. These large-scale fossil fuel projects hold at least 1 billion metric tons of CO₂ emissions, a staggering figure that dwarfs the annual emissions of entire nations.

The economic ramifications of this dependency are equally severe. Europe's reliance on Russian LNG gas, despite

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efforts to reduce it, continues to funnel European blood money into Russia's pockets, resulting in tens of thousands of Ukrainian casualties. From May 2023 to May 2024, Germany alone imported an estimated €182.4 million of oil products made from Russian crude oil. Even as Europe works to diversify its energy sources, imports via the port of Zeebrugge in Belgium increased by 41% to 4 billion cubic meters in 2023 compared to 2022. European companies have supplied over USD 630 million worth of equipment to Russia's Arctic LNG 2 project, further entrenching fossil fuel dependencies.

Despite these challenges, there is hope. The war in Ukraine has galvanised global efforts towards energy independence and sustainability. Europe ended the winter season with record-high levels of fossil gas in storage, a testament to the increasing success of cheaper renewable energy production. This shift is critical for reducing dependency on Russian fossil fuels and moving towards a clean energy future.

Renewable energy sources have proven to be not only cheaper but also more reliable than fossil fuels. They provide a path away from the myriad problems caused by fossil fuels, including funding petro-dictatorships, contributing to desertification and famine, causing negative impacts on health and driving inflation. The progress made by Ukraine and other countries in adopting resilient renewable energy sources is commendable and offers a blueprint for others to follow.

Building more clean energy plants and investing in renewable energy like wind and solar will boost Ukraine's energy security, even helping to keep the lights on as Russia continues to bombard the country's energy infrastructure. To do this, however, Ukraine will need direct help from the European Union by investing in Ukraine's clean energy infrastructure of the future.

The relationship between wars and fossil fuels is a complex and profoundly entrenched issue that requires immediate and decisive action. The war in Ukraine has highlighted the dire consequences of fossil fuel dependency and the urgent need to speed up the current global shift towards renewable energy; which is clearly the energy of the future. By severing the financial lifelines provided to Russia's petro-dictator by fossil fuels, supporting Ukraine's transition to resilient clean energy, and enforcing comprehensive sanctions, the international community can take a significant step towards ending Russia's horrific cycle of violence.

As we look to the future, the progress made by Ukraine and other nations in embracing renewable energy offers a beacon of hope. The transition to clean, renewable energy is an economic and strategic necessity for Ukraine struggling for energy security and a critical component of ensuring global peace and security. It is time for the world to act, to end the hypocrisy, and to support a future free from the chains of fossil fuel dependency. Only then can we hope to build a world where energy does not fuel war, but rather, fosters peace and prosperity for all.

About the author:

Svitlana Romanko is the founder and director of Razom We Stand, a Ukrainian grassroots organization calling for an embargo on Russian fossil fuels and an end to all investment into Russia's oil and gas industries. Romanko holds a Ph.D. in environmental, natural resources, land, and agrarian law and a doctorate in climate change law, climate governance, and climate policy.