Europe and the Western world are in shock: the Ukraine war has crushed our dreams of a peaceful co-existence between the superpowers of the world, and has shown us how vulnerable a civil society is in its wish for freedom and democracy. In fact, nearly daily one can see images of incredible cruelty against the citizens of Ukraine. The fate of Mariupol evokes pictures of Syria’s Aleppo, Chechnya’s Grozny, and even pictures from a distant past like Britain’s Coventry, or Spain’s Guernica. For all well-informed and clear-thinking minds it is plain obvious that Putin and his regime is the aggressor and committing war-crimes as described in international law. Not only my moral and political judgement is therefore straightforward and condemning. The question is how shall the food ethics community react to this shock?

The situation is complicated by the fact that this war is in reality the second global shock the world has to deal with in a relatively short time. The COVID-19 pandemic that started in early 2020 presented us already with socio-economic, political and cultural challenges which we have not quite come out of either. Additionally, this shock of the pandemic came on top of a slowly emerging crisis of climate change impacts like extreme weather events, as recently witnessed in the 2019–20 bushfires, heatwaves and floods in Australia, the June-July 2021 wildfires of Lytton in British Columbia, and in the flash floods in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and other European countries, also in July 2021. And now this war! As it turns out, in our globalized world, these shocks combine in a cascade of risks, in several sectors, and many areas of the world. Food supply and food security is surely one of those risks. And these are themes for the food ethics community.

Impacts of the War on the Global Food System

Here is some of the background for our immediate worry (cf. also Bentley 2022; Harvey 2022): Ukraine and Russia together contribute nearly one-third of all global wheat exports, each providing roughly 6% of global market shares in food calories. Wheat, corn and rice
account for more than 40% of all calories consumed, and are thus essential staples the world over. An estimated 50 countries or more rely on Russia and Ukraine for 30% or more of their wheat supply. Many of these countries are among the poorest countries in the world, in Africa, Asia or the Middle-East. In addition, Russia and Belarus are major producers of fertilizers and its key ingredients. Prices for fertilizers have already been affected by higher energy prices but the current war is amplifying these costs even more. Agricultural production is dependent on fertilizers and countries with poor economies may not be able to compensate for this.

Farmers in Ukraine are expected to face serious problems planting and harvesting their products in the coming months as long as the war continues in their country. With the war going on, their choice is often between the gun and the plough, the latter threatened by the current aggression.

Global food prices are already at an all-time high as a consequence of the pandemic and its impact on disrupted supply chains. The war in Ukraine will undoubtedly accelerate the rise in prices even more. Vegetable oils are major drivers of food prices as they are essential in the production of many goods of our daily diet. Sunflower oil is especially popular because of its high level of unsaturated fatty acids and lack of linolenic acid, with primary uses e.g. in the production of margarine. 57% of the global sunflower oil exports come from Russia and Ukraine, Ukraine being the globally biggest producer of sunflower oil, with something like 35–40% of the EU’s sunflower oil coming from the Ukraine.

Countries in the Global South are hit hard by this increase in prices for globally traded food, grains and fertilizers. A country like Yemen is believed to have more than 17 million people as food insecure, soon approaching 19 million who will be suffering from acute hunger as result of the war in Yemen, which is kept alive by the conflict of Saudi Arabia and Iran. The UN estimates that the war in Yemen has so far (2021) killed 377,000 people directly or indirectly through hunger and disease, with children accounting for 70% of the deaths. Some 40% of Yemen’s grain are imports from Ukraine. But on a global market for ever more expensive food products, a poor country like Yemen cannot compete with stronger buyers. The same will presumably apply to countries like Armenia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, South Sudan, or Eritrea. According to the New York Times, China “facing its worst wheat crop in decades after severe flooding, is planning to buy much more of the world’s dwindling supply” (https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/world/americas/ukraine-war-global-food-crisis.html). With strong bidders like China entering the global trade of food, those poor countries face a dim food future unless international aid programs come to their rescue.

Another fear is that the global food crisis with its rising prices may be a catalyst for social upheaval and political unrest. The last time with a similar dramatic increase in food prices, in 2008, one saw food riots in several countries, from Burkina Faso to Bangladesh. Even the “Tortilla-riots” in Mexico in 2007 or the Italian “Pasta-strike” in 2007 send a dim signal that food is always a strong incentive to vent dissatisfaction with governments.

David M. Beasley, executive director of the World Food Program (a United Nations Agency) tells the New York Times of March 20, 2022: “Ukraine has only compounded a catastrophe on top of a catastrophe” and “There is no precedent even close to this since World War II” (ibid).
Precaution and Resilience

In systems thinking, resp. complex adaptive systems theory, one distinguishes between point-disruptors (acute shocks) with immediate short-term consequences, and slowly emerging risks (chronic slow-burns) that can reach a tipping-point. Both types of events can lead to a radical transformation of the whole system, in the worst case to the collapse of the system, affecting hard infrastructure (as e.g. the transport system, production of goods) as well as soft infrastructure (as e.g. the economy, attitudes and behavior). Complex systems involve a high degree of uncertainty, and thus major obstacles to the predictability of the behavior of the system under stress. This is the reason for applying the Precautionary Principle. In essence it says:

“When human activities may lead to morally unacceptable harm that is scientifically plausible but uncertain, actions shall be taken to avoid or diminish that harm” (UNESCO / COMEST 2005).

One especially important precautionary measure is to increase the resilience of the system to future shocks. Obviously, one wants to avoid the catastrophic collapse of the system. But this still opens for diverse goals of resilience measures. One goal would be to strengthen the robustness of the existing system, i.e. to look for structural provisions which could resist stress and limit potential losses. One tries to move the system back to its pre-shock level. But many times this may be hard to achieve unless the system as a whole changes. Therefore, one may try to strengthen the adaptivity of the system which basically comprises the system’s capability to cope with perturbations and seize opportunities in new system designs. Shocks, like a war, can be opportunities to move the system to new levels of functionality. Observed vulnerabilities will be the driving force to design new structures of the system, including new interactions with other systems.

Most complex systems affecting our lives interact with our socio-cultural system of social identities and values. The flash floods in 2021 have shown how the shock triggered solidarity among people, both those directly affected and those on the periphery. Similarly, the pandemic gave rise to new social identities weaved around specific values and ethics. The response to refugees of the war in Ukraine shows likewise how social values get mobilized. It is therefore not too far-fetched to claim that values and ethics play a major role in building up resilience to future shocks, whatever the systemic roots of the shock may be. We believe that our food systems in particular are highly receptive to socio-cultural developments, and that the explicit societal debate of values and ethics can help to re-design these food systems. After all, it is our shared values that can give us perspectives where we want to be in the future.

In sum, the food ethics community is arguably in a good position to help build up resilience of our food systems and re-design new functionalities of these systems.

Systemic Change and Engagement

The academic community has typically enjoyed many privileges of being able to analyze, dissect, and theorize about social and natural phenomena. Those that would go under the name of “ethicists” have often constructed “thought-experiments” to show the problematics and dilemmas of ethical principles and theory. What academics perceived as “scientific objectivity” has typically reinforced the analyst’s distance to, and non-involvement with the analysandum,
i.e. the phenomena under study. For many academic researchers the demarcation from being an activist has been, and assumedly still is, an important trademark of their professional role.

Yet, the dividing line between pure academic and activist appears to become blurrier in recent years, – maybe it always has been blurry – and arguably this is how it should be. For one, many studies have shown that the separation of facts from values cannot be as strict as many believed. It is also shown that social values do enter science, not only as epistemic values but also as background parameters (Douglas 2009). Risk analysis is just one example of this; standards of proof another. Furthermore, there has been a recognition of the social context and embedding of science in society (Lubchenco 1998; Brunner & Ascher 1992; Sarewitz 2006). Calls for more social responsibility and ethics in science are indicators of this. We now tend to see the scientific community as actively interacting with other societal actors, some of them very powerful, like politics and industry. Such interaction will always be guided by values.

**Implications for the Food Ethics Community**

Where does that all leave us, the food ethics community? And what can the shock of war contribute to our predicament?

I would argue that the food ethics community needs to increase its engagement with other stakeholders and civil society in a common effort to re-design our food systems in order to strengthen local and global resilience. Since we by now have learned the hard way how vulnerable these systems are to shocks and stressors of various kinds, and since we have all the data we need to understand the extreme harm and human suffering caused by these shocks, we need to bring forward our visions of ethically acceptable system changes. We need good long-term visions, combined with an ethics of immediate and necessary short-term abatement measures. There are examples of grassroot policy-papers which we should actively engage with, as e.g. one published by the IPES-Food and ETC Group (“A Long Food Movement – Transforming Food Systems by 2045”; Mooney et al. 2021). How do these fare in terms of ethics, social justice, and environmental integrity? We should ask more critical questions how e.g. international governmental / political bodies like the FAO, WHO, or the EU, are or are not responsive to ethical views and values in diverse societies and cultures, thus perhaps even challenging trust in these bodies. All this would imply that we free ourselves of the – perhaps implicitly felt—need to play along with the powers there are, that we avoid the fallacy of a top-down designed silver-bullet, and that we strengthen our intellectual freedom and integrity. We should, however, be humble enough to not overplay our role as experts, but engage in a mutual and respectful dialogue with all stakeholders about our food systems. In other words, we should become active partners in societal deliberations of our food systems. Yes, this would perhaps imply leaving behind the sheltered environment of a purely academic life, and it would bring us closer to becoming activists. As long as we do this with openness, transparency, reflectivity and integrity, I see no problems with this.

This journal offers many kinds of outlets for communicating our ethical concerns and visions, from discussion papers and brief communications to policy briefs and letters to the editor. My hope is that the food ethics community will respond to the ongoing war by mobilizing creative forces that can enrich our public and political deliberations, and open the paths for systemic changes in the long run.
Journal Policy with Regard to the War on Ukraine

Above I addressed the audience of this journal and called for responses to the tragedy of the current war. How about journal policies in response to the war?

First and foremost, I would like to invite all scholars from Ukraine – wherever they are at this moment – to submit papers to Food Ethics and/or react with an essay on this editorial! This is the least of support we can give.

In addition, we are facing a complicated situation with scholars from Russia and Belarus. I am acutely aware of many calls to boycott all academic cooperation with, and contributions from Russian academics. Understandably, many Ukrainian academics see total boycott of Russian and Belarus scientists as an adequate response (https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-00695-2). However, earlier experiences with dictatorships and political repression have also taught us that often it is the national academic elite which is one of the strongholds of internal opposition against oppression. Cutting off the possibility of dialogue may increase conflicts rather than de-escalate tensions. Furthermore, scientific bodies like the International Science Council (ISC) have long argued for the importance of academic freedom and against the temptation to discriminate against authors based on their nationality or political views. This principle was honored during the Cold War period and proved largely beneficial for science and indirectly secured international dialogue across political boundaries. The Statute 7 of the ISC includes the following:

“In advocating the free and responsible practice of science, the Council promotes equitable opportunities for access to science and its benefits, and opposes discrimination based on such factors as ethnic origin, religion, citizenship, language, political or other opinion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability or age.” (https://council.science/publications/statutes-and-rules-of-procedure/)

Food Ethics endorses this principle and will not exclude individual scientists from Russia or Belarus from publishing in the journal. However, this will be different for publications with institutional backing from Russian / Belarus’ universities or research organizations. This is why:

The situation has complicated since the Russian Union of Rectors, representing more than 700 university presidents and rectors in Russia, together with the Presidium of the Russian Academy of Sciences, in an open letter have explicitly backed the war against Ukraine and adhered to the government’s version of events (a “special operation” to achieve the “denazification of Ukraine” and protecting Russia from “growing military threats”). The letter includes plain political rhetoric like:

“It is very important in these days to support our country, our army, which defends our security, to support our president, who, perhaps, made the most difficult, hard-won but necessary decision in his life.” (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/russian-rectors-union-echoes-kremlin-propaganda-ukraine)

Pressure to political conformity is thus not only exerted by the Russian / Belarus police or other governmental agencies, but also by higher education institutions. We see this as an obvious suppression of academic freedom. This needs to be seen on the background of claims from individual Russian scientists that they fear to openly express their condemnation of the war against Ukraine (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/russian-academics-risk-arrest-oppose-ukraine-war). As a consequence, the European University Association (https://www.eua.eu/news/842:eua-suspends-membership-of-12-russian-universities-following-statement-by-university-leaders.html?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=Springer)
social-twitter-07-03-2022), several countries and the EU have terminated or stalled further collaboration with Russian academic institutions. While most scientific journals so far have not heeded the call to boycott all Russian papers (https://www.science.org/content/article/few-journals-heed-calls-boycott-russian-papers), one journal, *The Journal of Molecular Structure*, has devised a policy to target papers from scientists at Russian institutions. The editor Rui Fausto explains this decision: “The decision is a matter of conscience of the editors, an expression of their solidarity for all people affected by the conflict, and it has not been influenced by any political judgment of the situation but only by its humanitarian consequences” (ibid.).

I would add that any journal which prides itself to be about ethics cannot condone any institutional backing of policies which lead to humanitarian disasters, including wide spread food insecurity. A commitment to ethics means also to be ready to act on a normative basis when basic human rights and academic freedom of expression are trampled upon. The attempt to depoliticize science is no excuse for turning a blind eye to violations of human rights and freedom.

I admit that so far, the food ethics community has not made the acquaintance of many Russian / Belarus scholars, nor has this journal been overloaded with submission from these countries. In fact, I do not find a single one in our records, not from Ukraine either. In this sense, any action on our side might appear more symbolic than implying real and hard consequences. However, sometimes even symbolic actions are important, and they signal a moral stance. In this case I think it is appropriate to do just this.

With this background, *Food Ethics* will continue to accept papers also from Russian and Belarus individuals as long as they are submitted privately or from other countries’ institutions. For the above-mentioned reasons, submissions stemming from Russian or Belarus universities or other research organizations in these countries (i.e. having them as corresponding address) cannot be accepted for the duration of the war.

I hope our policy and reaction to the war against Ukraine will find support among our audience.

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