THE WAR ON FOOD

Illustration: Wynona Mutisi
ALL PROTOCOL OBSERVED
We are well familiar with foreign correspondents coming to Africa and telling our stories. One of the reasons *The Continent* exists is to flip that script, so that African journalists can do the same on the global stage. This special edition on the war in Ukraine – and why it matters for Africa – is a pilot for the kind of journalism we want to do in the future.

We will know we have succeeded when we send our own bureau chiefs to Washington, Beijing and Brussels – to report on the world from our perspective, for a change.

This month, we are taking a major step towards realising this ambition, and others, by setting up our own non-profit publishing company: All Protocol Observed NPC. This will house *The Continent* and allow us to expand into other geographies, languages and publishing formats. We will not publish for the next few weeks, until the set-up is complete.

Watch this space.

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Thank you.
The global food system is at breaking point

Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has heaped unbearable pressure on our fundamental resilience

The global food system is a microcosm of humanity’s genius, greed and fallibility. By shipping food from areas with plenty to those without, grain grown in Canada can feed people in Algeria, for example. It makes a few dominant companies very rich. It also builds resilience. Droughts, fires, floods or societal collapse in one country can be survived.

This is particularly important for African countries. It means Egypt, which can only grow so much on the sliver of life wrapped along the Nile River, can feed its 109-million people.

But this resilience is being tested. July was the hottest month in 100,000 years. Last month, the G20 group of the world’s richest countries again refused to agree on concrete steps to tackle the climate crisis. Brazil, India, China and the United States – all crucial food exporters – are flooding and burning. The taps in countries like Uruguay and Chile are running dry.

And El Niño is back. That weather phenomenon drives drought and heat waves in the southern hemisphere. The last time it bubbled up in the Pacific, in 2015, food production in Southern African countries dropped by two thirds.

Ukraine ought to be providing resilience at this moment. It used to provide 10% of the world’s grains. Now a third of its farmland is occupied by Russian forces, or littered with deadly mines designed to maim and kill.

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Russia is also destroying warehouses, trains, vessels and infrastructure used to export food. It then is dangling offers of grain – some of it stolen from Ukraine – to countries seen as sympathetic, like Burkina Faso, Mali and Zimbabwe. And that grain is worth more, with the war driving up prices – helping to fund Russia’s war.

That resilience is teetering. Another major shock to the global food system – another war, another drought, another flood – could mean that the world no longer grows enough food to feed its people.
Hunger games

Ukraine is the most fertile country on the planet. Without its grain, people across the world will starve. But its farms are now a warzone.

Battlefield: A destroyed Russian howitzer in a field in Krutyj Yar. Photo: Anna Tsygyma/PIJL
The village of Krutyi Yar, 660km south of Ukraine's capital Kyiv, is about as close as one can get to the front line of the war without getting within range of Russian artillery. “If you stay here for a week, we would have a beer and you wouldn’t even flinch when the explosions happen. Humans can get used to anything,” says Sergii Kovtun.

The 50-year-old farmer, speaking through a translator, casually picks his way through the minefields that surround the village, wearing shorts and flip-flops. He is amused by The Continent’s flak jacket and helmet.

Farmers like Kovtun have made Ukraine one of the most important food exporters in the world – the World Economic Forum estimates that 10% of all grain on the world market comes from here. It also grows 15% of the world’s corn and 13% of its barley, alongside sunflower and other staple crops. Or grew, rather: the statistics predate Russia’s invasion last February.

Now Kovtun, and tens of thousands like him, are farming in a warzone. With a third of the country’s farmland occupied by Russian forces, or littered with deadly mines, Ukrainian farmers have planted 40% fewer crops this season, according to the agriculture ministry.

The future of global food security – and that of a number of fragile governments – may depend on the ability of these farmers to harvest and profit from their land.

Kovtun is chief operating officer for Barbet, a mid-size farming company that grows grain for export. In Krutyi Yar, the company grew mostly wheat and barley on its 2,000-hectares. It was a profitable enterprise until the war began. The village and its surrounds were occupied and overrun within the first few weeks of the conflict. Russian soldiers turned the company’s farm buildings into a makeshift base, storing artillery shells in the warehouse. They mined the fields and dug trenches along the treeline.

By then, Kovtun and his family, and most of their staff, had fled to safety in the west of the country. A sole security guard was left on the premises. He did not put up any resistance. “Through him, the Russian commanding officer contacted me and gave me his word that nothing would be taken. And they kept their word – all the big equipment was left intact and not stolen,” says Kovtun.

The World Economic Forum estimates that 10% of all grain on the world market comes from Ukraine.

But everything else was destroyed. Weeds and wild herbs had overrun the crops by last November when, in a major counteroffensive, Ukrainian forces retook the area. Kovtun, without his family, returned shortly afterwards.

His fields were littered with debris from rockets and missiles, and seeded with landmines instead of wheat. The warehouse had been demolished by an American-supplied rocket fired by Ukrainian forces.

In the abandoned Russian foxholes
– shed-sized underground bunkers, reinforced with wooden beams – he found stockpiles of bullets and live grenades. So hasty was the retreat that soldiers had left meals half-eaten, and unwashed clothes bundled in corners.

Before they could farm again, Kovtun and his team spent weeks collecting ordnance from the field. “Everything was kind of dangerous,” he says.

The mines are the hardest to clear out. Automated demining vehicles from the Ukrainian government are in scarce supply. And they clear only two hectares per day. At that rate it would take three full years before the farm is declared safe, and there are thousands of affected farms.

So Kovtun made his own plan. He tracked down an ancient, Soviet-era tractor and got it going again. He designed an armour-plated attachment to roll in front of it, heavy enough to trigger an explosion. And he asked his old classmates from Kyiv Polytechnic to install a remote control system so he can drive it from the safety of his office.

With his homemade demining machine, Kovtun has cleared half the farm – one thousand hectares – and resumed farming on that land. He grins as combine harvesters patrol the fields behind him, delighted to see them in action again.

Nonetheless, Kovtun’s operation is a fraction of what it used to be. “Everything we harvest now is damage control. We can’t profit,” he says.

As The Continent departs Krutyi Yar, heading north-west, away from the front lines, Kovtun sets off in the opposite direction. He lives in nearby Kherson city, close to where Russian forces are massed on the other side of the Dnipro River. The city is shelled constantly. “You sure you don’t want to come for that beer?” he asks as he waves goodbye.

Bitter harvests

From the window of a long-distance train, Ukraine is endless miles of yellow wheat and blue skies. This image is immortalised on the country’s flag, and made possible by the thick layer of chernozem – the “best arable soil in the world,” according to Unesco – that covers two thirds of its
arable land. So valuable is this soil that trade in it is tightly restricted, and the chernozem black market is worth nearly a billion US dollars.

The grain grown in this soil went to ports along the Black Sea and then on to countries like Egypt and Ethiopia, both heavily reliant on imports to feed their people. That route halted abruptly when Russia invaded. Its warships attacked cargo vessels in the deep sea ports of Odesa and Mykolaiv, and mined Ukraine’s Black Sea waters (Russia claims that Ukraine mined their own waters).

“Not a ship left, and not a ship came,” says Dmytro Barinov, deputy head of Ukraine’s Seaport Authority, speaking in the deserted ferry terminal – once Europe’s busiest – in the port of Odesa.

The consequences for global food markets were immediate, and devastating. In Africa, the price of wheat soared by 45%, according to the African Development Bank. The steep increase was exacerbated by American and European commodities traders who profited by speculating on the price of wheat (as reported by The Continent and Lighthouse Reports in Issue 83). Just three companies control 90% of the world’s grain market, giving them barely regulated control over who gets food.

For countries that cannot produce enough food for their people – and this is most African countries – life suddenly became more expensive, and politics more unpredictable.

In July last year, the United Nations and Türkiye brokered an agreement that eased, but did not eliminate, the blockade. The Black Sea Grain Initiative allowed for a limited number of cargo ships to leave
Odesa along a tightly-controlled maritime corridor, subject to Russian inspections.

It helped Ukraine shift 30-million tonnes of grain, and lifted some of the international sanctions against Russian exports of grain and fertiliser. Food prices dropped – until Russia declined to renew the deal late last month, claiming that those sanctions had not been eased far enough.

The price of wheat spiked immediately, and rose further in the wake of intensive Russian air attacks on port facilities in Odesa and Mykolaiv (the bombardment commenced just hours after The Continent left the region – Russia claims that this infrastructure is being used for military purposes).

This means that, once again, millions of tonnes of Ukrainian grain is trapped in a vast network of silos along major rivers and ports.

Food for thought
In the novel Supernova Era by Liu Cixin, an astronomical event kills all adults, leaving the world to be run by children. Knowing he is about to die, the president of China must teach his teenage successors to govern. He tells them: “Above all, ensure that the country is fed. Every day we need to provide the people with a trainful of MSG, 10 trains of salt, a lake of oil, and several hills of rice and flour. One day without, and the country will plunge into chaos. Ten days without, and there’s no country any more.”

This is governance at its most fundamental. Feed the people. Or else.

Not all countries are created equal in this respect. Take Niger. The landscape of this landlocked West African country, arid and mostly-desert, cannot grow enough food for its 25-million people. It must import about a fifth of what it needs.

When prices rise on international food markets, they rise in the markets of Niamey and Zinder too. And then families go hungry. People die. Governments are toppled – most recently, last month, that of President Mohamed Bazoum. He was overthrown in a military coup that was a response, in part, to a steep increase in the cost of living.

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This is a weakness that Russia is already exploiting. At last month’s Russia-Africa summit in St Petersburg, attended by 17 African heads of state, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin said: “Our country can replace Ukrainian grain, both on a commercial basis and as grant aid to the neediest African countries, more so since we expect another record harvest this year.”

Putin promised free food aid to six African countries, including Niger’s neighbours Mali and Burkina Faso – both of whom are similarly vulnerable to food price shocks, and have recently experienced military coups. Putin did not mention that this “record harvest” was only possible thanks to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its occupation of Ukrainian farmlands, whose yields have
been included in Russia’s statistics.

Russia is offering potential allies a solution to a food security crisis that it caused by invading Ukraine. But the longer the invasion continues, the worse the food security crisis is likely to get. And its impact will be felt far beyond the fields and the battlefields of Ukraine.

Russia sees things differently.

“The Ukrainian conflict per se has no significant impact on the global food security situation,” said a spokesperson for the Russian Embassy in South Africa. “There’s clearly a certain interest to blame current economic hardships on Russia, pointing to the Ukraine conflict as the reason, but the truth is that these problems originate from Western countries’ ill-advised actions in erroneous economic policy, consequences of Covid-19 pandemic and anti-Russian sanctions.”

A new reality

Andrii Vadaturskyy is the chief executive of Ukraine’s largest grain exporter, Nibulon. He thinks that politicians, including President Volodymyr Zelensky, are focusing on the wrong problem. Yes, he says, securing an export route for Ukrainian grain is important. But unless something changes, and soon, Ukraine won’t grow enough grain to export at all.

His father, Oleksiy Vadaturskyy, founded the company and became one of the country’s richest men. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he made billions of dollars by modernising the country’s agricultural supply chain: building silos to store grain, a fleet of barges and trucks to transport it, and port facilities to export it to the world.

When the war broke out, Nibulon had to adapt, and quickly. Nearly half of the company’s staff either fled or joined the army. Mykolaiv port – through which the company usually exports five million tonnes of grain every year – was blockaded, and several Nibulon ships were lost to Russian shelling. Russian forces occupied 75,000 hectares of Nibulon farmland.

In desperation, Vadaturskyy senior invested $22-million to build a new terminal on the banks of the Danube River, from where grain can go by barge along the river and into the European Union.

The day after construction began, he
was killed, alongside his wife. A Russian missile slammed through the wall of their home in Mykolaiv. “The missile exploded 3.5 metres away from my father and mother. It was very hard to believe it was an accident,” his son tells *The Continent*, although he has been unable to prove that his father was deliberately targeted.

Vadaturskyy junior, who took over as chief executive, speaks from a company boardroom in the port of Mykolaiv, Nibulon’s main export hub. It is quiet. There is no movement of trains or trucks or barges, and skeleton crews maintain ships that have not sailed in months. The enormous silos overflow with grain that has nowhere to go.

Nibulon has been heavily affected by Russia’s Black Sea blockade (in 2022, the company’s revenues were down by two thirds). But, as Vadaturskyy sees it, this is a short-term difficulty that distracts from a much more fundamental problem.

*There is no movement of trains or trucks or barges. The silos overflow with grain that has nowhere to go.*

At the moment, he explains, there is plenty of Ukrainian grain to export, either through the Black Sea corridor or other, more expensive routes. This is because 2021 was a bumper harvest, and although 2022 was poor, there was still a surplus. “So politicians looked for a way to export the crop we have. But no politician is thinking what is after the corridor..."
You can have the corridor, but if there’s no goods to export through the corridor? How do we solve that?”

Ukrainian farmers planted 40% fewer crops this season than in 2021 because many have fled their farms for safety, or joined the army. Others can no longer make the finances add up. Still others cannot access their land at all: Last year, the agriculture ministry said that 30% of the country’s farmland was either occupied by Russian forces or had been mined by Russia.

Vadaturskyy predicts that by 2024 or 2025 “Ukraine could be out of the export business”. That means a global shortfall of more than 50-million tonnes of grain. To put this in perspective, that is more than the entirety of North Africa’s grain consumption. “We can’t replace it… It would take every region elsewhere producing perfectly, and perfect weather, to make up the shortfall,” he says.

In a rapidly warming world, the chances of perfect weather and perfect production are slim to nonexistent. Droughts in the United States, alongside extreme weather in Brazil, India and China, mean Ukraine is not the only place struggling to grow to vital crops.

Those shortages are adding up. At the moment, even if prices are rising, the world is able to grow enough food to feed everyone. But what happens when there is simply not enough food to go around? “It will be a new reality,” says Vadaturskyy. He does not want to contemplate what that new reality might look like.
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The Presidential Office Building, in the heart of Kyiv’s elegant government district, is among the most heavily-guarded buildings on the planet: its primary occupant is Russia’s enemy number one, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky.

The interview takes place in a grandiose, gilded boardroom inside the building: a decor choice made by a previous administration. Zelensky’s government has not had the time nor the money to spare for interior design.

His rise to power was precipitous. An actor and comedian, he created and starred in a television series about a high school teacher who accidentally became president. The series was called Servant of the People. Then Zelensky started a political party of the same name, and won the 2019 presidential election in a run-off with a resounding majority.

He had been president for less than a year when the Covid pandemic began. And then, just as Ukraine and the world were beginning to recover from that, Russia invaded.

While his troops pushed the Russian
soldiers back, Zelensky put himself on the front line of the information war, using his charisma and celebrity to unite the country against the invasion, counter Russian disinformation, and mobilise international support – which is partly why The Continent is here.

Looking for common ground
Zelensky is worried that Ukraine is not winning the information war in Africa. He addresses seven African journalists, including The Continent: “We are so far from Africa. Africa is so far from Ukraine informationally, unfortunately, diplomatically, and unfortunately, historically.”

It is his first interview with journalists from African publications since the war began, and a belated response to a foreign policy problem that has confused the Ukrainian government since the war began: why African countries, with some notable exceptions, have been so reluctant to take Ukraine’s side. Given that Africa makes up a quarter of the United Nations’ member states, and its countries sit across many geopolitical lines, this matters.

The interview was arranged, and travel to it funded, by international partners sympathetic to Ukraine’s position (in The Continent’s case by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, a German political foundation).

This is always delicate territory for journalists. Without that support, we would not be able to do any first-hand reporting from the conflict zone – one European correspondent in Kyiv estimates that it costs 10,000 euros per week to work in Ukraine. Yet by accepting that support, we risk becoming a prop in that information war.

Sure enough, a day after the interview, Zelensky – or his social media manager – posted photographs from it on Twitter.

In the meantime, however, we had asked our questions of a man who is currently among the world’s most influential leaders. No matter how far away Ukraine may seem, his actions will have consequences for our people and our politics, and they require journalistic scrutiny.

The team at The Continent determined that it was a trade-off worth making. Our strict proviso that no funder will ever get to dictate what and how we cover a story, or to read our copy in advance, was respected. (Do you agree or disagree with this decision? Let us know at letters@thecontinent.org).

Narratives for Africans
Zelensky arrives late to the interview, delayed by Russia’s announcement that it will not renew the Black Sea Grain Initiative. The agreement had allowed more than 30-million tonnes of Ukrainian grain to pass through Russia’s naval blockade. He was instructing his foreign
Executive role: Prior to 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky was an actor playing a teacher who accidentally became president.

ministry to prepare an official response, which is that Ukraine will do whatever it takes to keep the sea corridor open.

For the waiting African journalists, the Ukrainian president comes armed with two main talking points (this is something he has learned, according to one official close to him; he has a propensity to ramble).

He wants to challenge the idea that Russia is the sole heir to the legacy of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union supported several African liberation movements, which often included training for African leaders. Russian diplomats have pushed hard to leverage this history and it has had enormous political resonance on the continent.

But Zelensky emphasises that Ukraine too was part of the Soviet Union – and that many African leaders and students actually studied in Ukrainian universities.

Zelensky also wants to frame Ukraine’s war against Russia in a way that might evoke sympathy from African audiences: as a fight for independence against a
Tough crowd: For African leaders, the framing of Russia's invasion of Ukraine as colonialism sits awkwardly alongside Zelensky’s preference for European ‘civility’.

brutal empire. “This is indeed a colonial war of Russia against Ukraine … Many of your ancestors went through this.”

In many ways, it is his background on stage that makes Zelensky so well suited for his current role. As other profiles have noted, he is giving the performance of a lifetime, and it is a performance that has been crucial in ensuring western support for Ukraine. He is a masterful communicator but in person it is clear that his emotions are very close to the surface; that this is not an act.

But when it comes to communicating with Africa, the Ukrainian president has not been not quite as adept as with audiences in the rest of the world.

Zelenksy’s political career has been built on an appeal to European values of democracy, free speech and human rights, and it is a message that he repeats here. “Why do countries like us strive for the European Union, for Europe? Why? Because there is a difference, simply a civilised difference,” he says.

But African leaders are all too familiar with European “civilisation” – which was, after all, the ideological justification for colonialism on the continent. And even today, Africa’s experience of Europe is
very different to that of Ukraine. Take, for example, Europe’s welcome of Ukrainian refugees. Those same borders that are shut so hard, and with such violence, against Africans fleeing war and persecution, suddenly opened when Ukrainian civilians needed refuge. This is not Zelensky’s fault, of course, but it does require some sensitivity.

On a similar topic, The Continent questions Zelensky about the multiple examples of African students in Ukraine being denied access to evacuation routes in the early days of the war, or receiving racist treatment during the rush to safety. Fairly or not, these stories weakened public sympathy for Ukraine on the African continent.

Zelensky seems surprised by the question, and says that these were isolated cases that happened in the chaos of war. He says that his government did everything it could to protect everyone, regardless of race or nationality. “But please understand me, I feel sorry for them equally, whether it’s a Ukrainian student or an African student, we keep fighting.”

But his broader point is that whatever hardships were experienced by African students is nothing compared to what Ukrainians are going through. “I have already talked today about mass graves – when you take any grave, do you find African students there?”

Interview over, Zelensky shakes everyone’s hand and poses for photographs. Although he started the interview with plenty of energy, by its close his exhaustion is evident. This is a man who does not get much sleep. And no wonder. Every word he says is scrutinised for weakness. Every public appearance is loaded with symbolism. Every decision he makes is life or death. And those decisions matter beyond Ukraine’s borders.

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For now, Zelensky enjoys broad public and political support, even from opposition parties.

“Now is not the time for public political battles,” one opposition member of Parliament tells The Continent.

This is despite moves to centralise governing authority under the presidency, and restrictions imposed on media freedoms (outlets deemed to be pro-Russia have been suspended). Elections, originally scheduled for this year, have been delayed indefinitely. “First we have to win, then we will have elections,” says the same MP.

Despite Ukraine’s successes on the battlefield, victory is not yet in sight. There will be no rest yet for the president. And, for all the adulation (and abuse) that Zelensky has received so far, it is only then that his legacy will be defined. As African journalists know only too well, it is that greatness is defined not by how power is wielded, but by how it is relinquished.
Dry run: A truck carrying food for people and livestock crosses the Sahara desert at Djado in Niger, near salt pans once at the heart of a thriving economy in the Nigerien Sahara, later sidelined by regional trading routes and now further disrupted by the recent military coup.

Photo: Souleymane AG Anara/AFP