PLANTING A BILLION TREES

Inside Ukraine's 'Green Country' initiative



Varvara Vasylchenko explores how Ukrainians and their government are restoring forests and bringing nature back into cities

A young sapling prior to being planted in Ukraine

In 2021, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy launched an ambitious nationwide forestation programme called "Green Country". The initiative set out to plant one billion trees within five years and expand Ukraine's forested area by one million hectares over the next decade.

"We are starting the 'Green Country' project. Let me say right away – this is not a political project, but a purely ecological one for nature and the environment," president Zelenskyy announced.

Tree-planting campaigns take place every spring and autumn, drawing enthusiastic participation from civil society right across the country. Anyone can join by registering for the public initiative 'Creating Forests Together', which is completely free. Results are published on an online platform, allowing everyone to follow the project's progress in real time.

Citizen engagement

Student participation is the beating heart of the 'Green Country' programme. State forest enterprises have been closely co-operating with schools, engaging children in reforestation efforts. In Rivne Oblast, for instance, schoolchildren collected acorns that were later sown in forestry nurseries. Two years afterwards, the same students were given the opportunity to plant young oaks grown from these very acorns. Such hands-on experience helps cultivate the love for nature in youth, fostering responsibility for the environment.

The campaign extends beyond forests into urban and suburban landscapes, integrating greenery into populated areas. Trees have been planted near playgrounds, parking zones, hospitals, councils and memorial sites. School principals have also been organising planting events on school grounds, creating green alleys and eco-corners.

The movement is hugely supported by locals who propose and join initiatives in their cities. "Planting trees is not only about caring for the environment, it is an opportunity to be an example for others, it is joint work that unites us to achieve a common goal," explained Oksana Viytyk, acting director of the Department of Ecology and Natural Resources of the Lviv Regional State Administration.

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Two warriors taking time out to help with the 'green country' initiative

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The largest initiative took place on 30 October 2021, when 3.7 million trees were planted in a single day. Over one million Ukrainians joined the international campaign 'Planting Trees by One Million People in One Day', part of the global project 'Greening of the Planet'. This became a nationwide environmental record, highlighting the power of collective action and the growing environmental awareness among Ukrainians.

From monocultures to biodiversity

The 'Green Country' introduced a modern approach to reforestation. When Ukraine was a member of the Soviet Union, its forests were massively logged and replanted with fast-growing pines for industrial use. However, resin-soaked twigs and needles are highly flammable, making coniferous forests susceptible to wildfires. Supporting a smaller range of wildlife, monocultural pine plantations are also less resilient to pests compared to mixed forests because all trees risk falling prey to a single disease outbreak. In contrast, forests made up of both deciduous and coniferous trees are more climate-resilient ecosystems inhabited by a rich diversity of species. This is why the 'Green Country' initiative focused on creating mixed forests, growing different varieties of trees and shrubs.

One of the common combinations consists of pine, birch, rowan and viburnum. Pines are undemanding of soil conditions, but birch grows faster and creates natural shade, helping young pines take root more successfully. Meanwhile, rowan and viburnum produce nectar-rich flowers, attracting natural pollinators and serving as host plants for butterflies and moths. During summer and autumn, they offer berries to foxes, squirrels and birds, who naturally spread their seeds around the forest. Viburnum are shrubs so their low canopy provides shade to the forest's floor, reducing soil exposure to the sun and preventing it from drying. Such a mix promotes diverse ecosystems, where different species contribute to the overall health of the forests.

Tree nurseries also cultivate other species native to Ukrainian landscapes, such as European spruce, white fir, European larch, common oak, common ash, beech and linden. The ultimate selection depends on the varieties' suitability for a particular region, taking into account climate-change tendencies and projections. Within the framework, one- and two-year-old saplings were supplied by nine forest seed centres. These centres were equipped with automated sowing lines, cone dryers and climate-adjustable rooms for winter storage. This approach ensured effective large-scale production of healthy trees.

The war and its toll

The Russian invasion not only made the afforestation campaign unsafe in eastern regions but has also caused multiple additional problems. One of the most serious issues is the mining of forests in combat areas. A high proportion of the forests in Russian-occupied areas have been mined, turning them into hazardous zones for both humans and animals.

The UN has estimated that Ukraine is the most mined country in the world. Around 30% of its territory – equivalent to the size of Florida – is contaminated with mines. These areas will require years, if not decades, to be fully cleared. In the meantime, explosions will continue to ignite fires and endanger wildlife. This overhanging danger has limited the scope of the forest planting campaigns, delaying the afforestation of eastern and southern regions.









Clockwise from left: acorns growing in a nursery; a group of students doing their bit to help plant a billion trees in Ukraine; a policewoman tends to a sapling; and young students planting their future

Military actions have also become a leading cause of wildfires. In 2024, combat operations and shelling were responsible for 45% of all forest fires in Ukraine. Unfortunately, extinguishing these fires is virtually impossible when forests are turned into war zones. In the areas under active conflict, firefighters are often unable to reach burning zones, which leads to the uncontrolled spread of fires. In Kharkiv Oblast, nearly 400 hectares of forests were lost to fires in a single year. However, the problem is not restricted to the front line. Drone debris and missile strikes also ignite fires in other parts of the country, particularly in the Kyiv Oblast, where over 60 incidents were recorded in 2024.

In addition to this, missile attacks became one of the primary sources of pollution. Rocket fragments contain heavy metals, while projectile and rocket explosions release toxic chemicals, contaminating air, water and soil. "The damage to biodiversity and ecosystem processes is difficult to quantify," said ecologist Cazzolla Gatti after conducting research on post-invasion forest loss in Ukraine.

Despite the fact that 1.8 million hectares of forests ended up under occupation in 2022, environmental efforts were not stopped there. The programme altered its framework, directing more resources into restoring forests damaged by military actions. After liberation, previously occupied areas were demined and reforestation began in safe zones.

Current priorities and progress

As of autumn 2025, the 'Green Country' initiative has achieved 95.3% of its original plan, with 47 million trees remaining to be planted. At the final stage, particular attention is dedicated to afforestation (planting trees in the areas previously unwooded) and the restoration of forests damaged by war, fires, storms and illegal logging.

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This autumn, the first tree planting initiative occurred in Kyiv Oblast, where almost a hectare of young forest was burned after a Russian missile strike. Most of the new saplings were planted by university students and foresters' children, reflecting the commitment of Ukrainian youth to healing their land.

The Ukrainian experience proves that when society comes together, ambitions turn into achievements. The success of the 'Green Country' stems from broad civic engagement – from students to veterans, everyone helped plant the roots of a greener and more resilient future. Such collective action is a powerful catalyst for a large-scale impact and the key to solving climate change.

"Everyone should do as much as they possibly can in their current position," as prominent Ukrainian climatologist Svitlana Krakovska reminds us.

Kyiv native Varvara Vasylchenko studied journalism and social communication at Taras Shevchenko National University. She is now studying business, economics and social studies at Trinity College. Varvara is a budding journalist with a passion for nature and sustainable development.