

This War changes everything, Old themes revisited, Black Elephants (again, bigger) and a New View of Risk ¹

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INTRODUCTION

Maybe it's a good thing that I have delayed writing about this terrible war for three months. Every day there are new developments, some progress but more death and destruction in Ukraine, some reasons for hope but escalating threats and dangers, more news about economic and political fallout. And speaking of fallout, the risk of nuclear catastrophe has not been zero for 70 years, but now it's not even close. Russia is threatening and it could really happen this time. And that's not the only big concern. But I am getting ahead of myself...

When the Russian army invaded the independent European country of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, I think few people were very surprised. After all, Russia had been amassing an invasion force of 100,000+ troops on Ukrainian borders for weeks. But in the weeks since then, millions of people around the world have been shocked at the brutality and wanton destruction of Ukrainian cities, infrastructure, apartment buildings, schools, hospitals and lives.



Photo: Bombed apartment blocks in Mariupol, Ukraine on April 5, 2022. Courtesy of YahooNews.com.

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It is now clear to all, at least those with access to western media or the internet, that Russia's goal for this massive illegal invasion is nothing less than complete destruction of the Ukrainian country and society. It is also a brutal 19th century land grab of the worst possible kind. The Russians claim that the Ukrainians are Nazis, but it's just the opposite. The Russians have tried to do to Ukraine exactly what Hitler's Nazis did to Poland in 1939 to start World War II, massive blitzkrieg, invasion and destruction!

Of course, in hindsight, everyone should have anticipated this following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and its annexation of The Crimea, and with Russian President Putin's increasing authoritarianism and interference with Western democracies (through cyberattacks, misinformation, election interferences and support of right-wing political movements.) But now it's a lot more serious. And dangerous!

It seems unbelievable that a sovereign European country could be invaded in the 21st century, but it has happened. By now, we all know the reasons. Ukrainians were working to transform their country into a free society, with free elections, free press, free markets and less corruption, all moving towards becoming a modern European nation. Ukraine was moving rapidly away from Russian influence, and it was succeeding. As a model for social transformation, Ukraine became a threat to President Putin and the corrupt leadership in Moscow.

The big question now is: could the war in Ukraine lead to World War 3? If so, what should we be doing to avoid or prevent total war, or respond? If not world war, how bad will it get and what are the ramifications for us as individuals and as project management leaders and professionals?

I believe the answer is, we're already there!

WORLD WAR

I didn't include this in the title for this editorial, as I did not want to alarm everyone before reading. But it seems to me that we are in a global war from at least five perspectives, all of which have been reinforced by experts in the USA in recent weeks.

Global Geopolitical War – Since the war began, countries around the world have been aligning with either Ukraine or Russia, or choosing to remain neutral. In an emergency session on March 1st, 141 of the 193 member states of the United Nations voted for a resolution to condemn Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, 35 abstained and five voted against.² Every country took a position. Wikipedia now has a good, updated discussion of "Government and intergovernmental reactions to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine"³ Depending on how the war progresses or turns out, these positions will affect global trade, international treaties and relations between countries, industries and organizations (and supply chains) for years to come.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/02/united-nations-russia-ukraine-vote>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Government_and_intergovernmental_reactions_to_the_2022_Russian_invasion_of_Ukraine

On top of that, it appears that the international world order represented by the United Nations is broken. Russia is now a pariah state to half the world, two members of the security council (Russia and China) are ignoring Russia's violation of the UN charter (invasion of other countries), and many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America have basically opted out. Global geopolitical risks have multiplied manyfold, which will affect many programs and projects, and organizations and PM professionals.

Global Economic War – “A global economic cold war is coming” declared Canada's Globe and Mail on March 20th.⁴ According to that article “The sanctions imposed against Russia mark the first time economic weapons have been wielded so extensively... The freezing of oligarchs' assets, cutting Russian firms off from the SWIFT payment system, imposing tariffs on many Russian goods – all are being used, quite rightly, to punish Vladimir Putin in lieu of a direct military confrontation with a nuclear power. They have been imposed in lockstep by countries around the world, notably the massive economies of the United States and the European Union – who remain willing to threaten more. In other words, economic warfare has been embraced as a viable method of dealing with a geopolitical conflict.”

Even if the direct economic warfare isn't extended to China and become global, the world's largest economies – China, the U.S., the EU – will surely conclude that they must insulate themselves against economic warfare in the future. In Beijing and Washington, we can expect an acceleration of efforts to “decouple” their economies from each other. That might cleave the global economy into blocs, and slow trade. It will encourage an economic Cold War.”⁵ The potential impact on international trade, supply chains, international programs and projects, and project management should be obvious.

Global Cultural War – There is now a global war underway between liberal western (democratic) cultures and authoritarianism. This can also be related to global human rights. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Vladimir Putin's removal of freedoms and rights in Russia have very clearly demonstrated the horrible consequences of authoritarianism to those who care. The support of Russia's invasion by other authoritarian leaders around the world have brought this global cultural conflict into clear view.

And it's not just authoritarian leaders, but authoritarianism itself that has spread around the world. In the United States, authoritarianism has been promoted by politicians like Donald Trump and right-wing Republicans, but also by religious extremists, white supremacists and neo-Nazi organizations.⁶ This also seems to be the case in many European countries as well. That Russia is supported by American and European neo-Nazi groups proves Putin's claim that Russia is liberating Ukraine from Nazism is a lie. The truth is just the opposite. Russia is following the Nazi playbook! Now in many

⁴ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-a-global-economic-cold-war-is-coming/#:~:text=U.S.%20President%20Joe%20Biden%20has%20left%20a%20threat,has%20been%20set%20for%20an%20economic%20Cold%20War.>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/31/1077064951/global-culture-wars-some-far-right-groups-in-the-u-s-are-taking-a-pro-russia-sta>

countries, the war is on between liberal democracy and right-wing authoritarianism. How does that affect projects and PM? Under which conditions would you rather live and work, and which do you support through your project management decisions?

Global Information/Media War – The concept of information warfare has been around for some time. The World Economic Forum has published a useful description.⁷ Wikipedia actually has a highly useful definition of information warfare: “Information warfare is a concept involving the... use and management of information and communication technology (ICT) in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent. Information warfare is the manipulation of information trusted by a target without the target's awareness so that the target will make decisions against their interest but in the interest of the one conducting information warfare.”⁸ Many will argue that information warfare has been underway for many years, as evidenced by all the cyberattacks on government agencies and industrial organizations worldwide. The war in Ukraine, however, has raised the issue to another level.

This is the first big war that people can tune into on the internet or follow on social media from anywhere in the world, at least any place where access is free or available (which now excludes Russia, China, North Korea and a few other countries). Russian atrocities in Ukraine are visible to all due to the fact that Ukraine has a free press and is allowing media from other countries to cover the war. For this reason, and because Ukrainian President Zelensky and other Ukrainian leaders are very adept with use of media, Ukraine has been winning the information war. Meanwhile, it has been argued that the only way that Russia and Vladimir Putin can continue the war is by keeping the Russian population in the dark, which seems to be happening (for now).

But this is a global information war for another reason – misinformation is being spread within western democracies by right-wing politicians, criminals and Russian sympathizers. Beyond the political and economic implications, information war is a threat to all organizations, projects and project managers. Both cyberattacks and misinformation can be disruptive to operations and can damage or destroy assets. They can cripple organizations and represent a major risk for every program and project.

Now to bring this back to the world war angle, as Umair Haque explained back in March, “If we think about war in modern terms, World War III is what’s called a ‘hybrid war.’ That means it’s not just about guns, but about information. Not even just cyberwar, but propaganda, disinformation, misinformation, about taking societies apart while they’re not even aware of it. The three stages of this World War go like this. One, destabilization. Two, local war. Three, world war. And we’re at the end of stage one, at the beginning of stage two. That is why I say we’re about a third of the way *into* World War III.”⁹

⁷ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/12/what-is-information-warfare>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_warfare

⁹ <https://eand.co/is-this-world-war-iii-eed6d0e2dec1>

Military Conflict –

On April 26th, The Sun in the UK ran the following headline: "APOCALYPSE NOW: Nuclear World War 3 is now a 'REAL DANGER' & British and NATO weapons are 'legitimate' targets, warns Putin chief."¹⁰ In an interview in Moscow, Lavrov stated "Nato, in essence, is engaged in a war with Russia through a proxy and is arming that proxy. War means war." From Russia's perspective, they are already at war with NATO and the United States. It seems just a matter of time until Russia attacks NATO supply lines in or outside of Ukraine, drawing the West into military conflict. Since it is now clear that European and American military capabilities are superior to Russia's, it seems inevitable that Russia might use either tactical or strategic biological, chemical or nuclear weapons.

Recently it has been revealed that the United States provided intelligence that led to the killing of Russian generals and the sinking of the Moskva, flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet. How could Russia not think this is direct American involvement in the war? I'm not going to spend more time describing the current military conflict; there's too much going on, too much to say and you all can just read the news every day to be much better informed. But it seems to me that yes, it's a global war. Now what? How bad can it get?

Aftermath?

I don't think the information and cultural wars will ever end, nor should they. Lies, misinformation, dishonesty and especially authoritarianism must be defeated for modern civilization to truly prosper and advance to our full potential. The geopolitical and economic wars may end one day (I predict a decade or two, but hopefully sooner), long after Putin is gone and Russian policies and behaviors improve, become more civilized. If the physical military conflict ends without Armageddon, then the aftermath will in fact resemble the end of World War II. Ukraine is being physically destroyed and will need to be rebuilt. The need for traditional project and program management will be enormous, and will last decades. I just hope that Russia can be completely repelled from all Ukrainian territory, including Crimea, so reconstruction can proceed peacefully. That too might take decades.

THIS WAR CHANGES EVERYTHING

Conditions for programs, projects and project management can now be characterized as VUCA on steroids! Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity have all increased and accelerated on a global basis. Economies, politics, social conditions, industries and programs, projects, teams, PM professionals and project stakeholders in many countries have all been affected by this war. Let's consider just a few of the impacts.

From a geographic perspective – Ukraine & Russia, bordering countries, Europe/EU, USA and Canada, other countries. Nearly all industries, programs and projects in Ukraine have been stopped; resources are redirected to survival, defense and emergency services. I would guess that all members of both the Ukrainian PM Association (UPMA) and the PMI Ukraine chapter are now armed and fighting to save

¹⁰ <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/18375080/nuclear-world-war-real-danger-britain-nato-target/>

their country, not working in project management. The PM field in Ukraine has been decimated or completely destroyed; the same is true in Russia.

The Russian PM Association (SOVNET), with which I am very familiar, is a member of the International PM Association (IPMA), a European-based association; PMI chapters in Russia are affiliated with the U.S. based Project Management Institute (PMI). PMI has suspended all activity in Russia, while it is likely that both SOVNET and PMI groups there will be sanctioned by the Russian government. Of course, with the economic impact of the war, programs and projects in Russia are affected, with many changes, reductions or cancellations. In fact, many young professionals are leaving Russia if they can escape. I'm sure that includes many PM professionals in technology fields. I would guess that the modern PM profession in Russia is totally gone or soon will be.

In countries bordering Ukraine, the impact of the war is also dramatic with the influx of refugees and resultant economic pressures and stresses on food supplies, health care, schools, infrastructure and government services. Governments, industries, organizations, programs and projects throughout the region are being directly affected, especially in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. But other European countries are also being impacted by the war, refugees and economic impacts. Programs and projects are being changed or stopped and new ones launched in rapid succession, for example military initiatives, public services, emergency services. Germany has just announced that it has begun building two massive LNG terminals, to be completed by the end of the year (an incredibly compressed schedule!) In every NATO country, soon to include Finland and Sweden, there are many impacts on projects and PM.

Disruptions of food and energy supplies are now affecting millions of people in countries around the world, especially in Africa and the Middle East. The war is affecting food availability everywhere; the impact on energy supplies and costs are affecting everyone.

Economic & financial impacts, due to sanctions and conflict – Supply shortages now include energy, grain, sunflower oil, fertilizer, metals and other products previously supplied by Russia or Ukraine. As already mentioned, supply chains, logistics and costs for many resources and products have been affected by the war in Ukraine and sanctions against Russia. Shortages of oil, gas, wheat, barley, metals and other products are causing higher prices and inflation worldwide, and potentially drastic food crises in some countries. In addition to the impact of inflation and shortages of product supplies, the impact on project stakeholders will be even more significant. Those organizations that increased their outsourcing in recent years must now also worry about these impacts on their remote workers and their local families, and local economic and political environments.

Another important issue is the impact of the war on certain industries. Interestingly, while the sanctions on Russia are causing energy prices and shortages to increase, it has been a boost to both carbon-based industries (coal, oil, gas, etc.) as well as renewable energy suppliers. Both BP and Shell have recently announced record profits and many countries are now trying to increase oil and gas production, public and political support for solar and wind energy is soaring. While the positive impact on oil, gas and petrochemical

industries should be temporary, the growth in renewable energy projects and industries will increase into the foreseeable future. These will be important growth industries for project management.

And not to be forgotten, the military/industrial complex in most countries will see massive new investments, growth and change. Many other industries will be affected, not least of which are shipping, travel, international finance and banking, and even the internet.

Organizational impacts – Most organizations worldwide are being impacted by inflation, increasing energy and other costs, and supply chain disruptions. All organizations with any involvement in projects in multiple countries or non-domestic suppliers are dealing with increasing risks associated with supply chains, geopolitical relations, increased international instability, virtual workforces and other factors. I could go on, but the potential cost and risk increases should be obvious to all. One other lesson learned from all of this is that organizations, like countries, should reduce risks by diversifying supply chains. Putting all of our eggs in one basket has always been risky; the resilience principle needs to be applied to all of our supply chains.

Impacts on programs and projects – The impact, both real and potential, on many projects and programs around the world should also be obvious. As mentioned above, nearly everyone, organizations and projects alike, in countries involved in or near Ukraine (or Russia) are directly affected. Impacts, either positive or negative, will depend on where the projects are located; how and where their stakeholders are located (employees, suppliers, customers, investors, etc.); depth, location and complexity of their supply chains; and other factors. Inflation, supply chain disruptions and other economic factors will affect programs and projects everywhere, one way or the other. I don't think I need to dwell on this much more, but we all need to be considering how our work and organizations are affected.

Impacts on PM profession and professionals – By now, the answer to this question should also be obvious. If you live anywhere in Eastern Europe, or work in industries mentioned above, you and your organization and projects are most likely greatly affected by this war. If you are working in or with an organization with any international activities, partners, resources, customers or suppliers, you have been or will be affected. Everyone will be affected by rising costs, inflation and other factors, either cultural, economic, political or social.

Project management professional bodies should not be silent, as most of their members will now or soon be feeling the affects of the war. But more importantly, professional associations must be on the side of ethics, honesty, human rights, morality, democracy and freedom, the principles that Ukraine is fighting for. Totalitarianism violates these principles. These are principles that modern civilization must be built on and they are at stake.

Admirably, PMI has established a webpage to facilitate and illuminate programs and projects that PMI chapters and members around the world have launched in support of

Ukraine.¹¹ The Association for Project Management (APM) in UK has released a new article that “APM staff show their support for Ukraine” with an associated initiative.¹² Neither IPMA nor AIPM seem to have anything related to the war on their websites. Some independent PM leaders have organized events in support of Ukraine, but otherwise, silence. Even the PMWJ has been affected, as we have suspended cooperation with the Russian PM Association and their PM journal.

This all brings me to another (somewhat sore) subject for me.

OLD THEMES REVISITED

As they say, history repeats. It seems that much of this editorial is an update on themes that I have written about before. Here are the still highly relevant ones.

Impact of Significant Events – I first studied this topic about 25 years ago, presenting a paper on the topic at the PMI’98 annual Seminars/Symposium in California.¹³ In that paper, I explored a number of significant events that had occurred in the previous year around the world, including political, economic, technological and social contexts. I argued that many of these events had an important impact on the project management profession, and, in fact, on many large international organizations. The paper was included in PMI’s first book on “The Future of Project Management” in 1999, the only conference paper included.¹⁴

I followed that up with a second paper and keynote address at the 1999 PMSA project management conference in Johannesburg.¹⁵ I also presented a decision-making model to help organizations plan for and respond to such events, and trends. In the years since then, I’ve return to the topic several times and my conclusions have been proven right. Nevertheless, I’ve seen little evidence that such risks are being adequately assessed and/or prepared for, or that anyone has implemented a useful decision-making framework. At the same time, the need to assess and understand external conditions has been partially recognized as an important topic for project management; for example, assessing the “external environment” is included in section 2.4 under System for Value Creation in PMI’s updated Standard for Project Management (2021). The recent focus on VUCA conditions has also been directly related to this trend.

¹¹ <https://www.pmi.org/about/solidarity-with-ukraine>

¹² <https://www.apm.org.uk/news/apm-staff-show-their-support-for-ukraine/>

¹³ Pells, D. L. (1998). Global Tides of Change: Significant Recent Events Affecting Globalization of the Project Management Profession, Paper presented at the PMI’98 Seminars/Symposium in Long Beach, CA, USA, September. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/1998-oct-global-tides-of-change-Pells-pmi98-conference-paper.pdf>

¹⁴ [The Future of Project Management: The First Pmi Forecast and Assessment of the Future of the Project Management Profession and de Project Management Institute \[B-971-717\] - Livre d'occasion \(ammareal.fr\)](#)

¹⁵ Pells, D. L. (1999). Aftershocks! How Significant Global Events can Effect the Project Management Profession. Paper and keynote presentation at PM South African national conference, November. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/1999/11/1999-Pells-PMISA-AFTERSHOCKS-FINAL.pdf>

Global Business Intelligence – Stemming from the earlier research on significant events, I authored a paper in 2009 titled “Global Business Intelligence for Managers of Programs, Projects and Project-oriented Organizations.”¹⁶ In that paper, I argued “We need a new perspective, a new way for thinking about change and the future in order to be better prepared. We also need better decision-making models. This is especially true for project-oriented organizations, but also for managers of large programs and projects with multiple stakeholders located in different places... such related topics as business intelligence, environmental scanning, trend analysis, stakeholder relations and risk management. These can all be directly related to program and project management..”

This topic has been widely embraced in the strategic management field, but very little appears in project management literature to help working project managers deal with the ever rapidly changing external environment. How many program or project risk management plans, for example, include regular scanning and analysis of significant external events and trends. The war in Ukraine brings this issue to the forefront, as we see significant risks coming true with far reaching implications. In 2019 it was the Covid-19 pandemic, now war. And what about all the impacts of recent natural disasters and events linked to climate change? Project management should be leading on how to respond to such risks.

PM for Emergencies and Disasters – This is another topic that I have written about numerous times, more or less beginning in 2007 with “Project Management for Disaster Relief and Recovery – A Call to Arms.”¹⁷ As stated 15 years ago in that paper, “It has become increasingly clear to me that an important area of application for modern project management must be in the fields of emergency response (ER) and disaster recovery (DR). This is true for several obvious reasons. Due to climate changes, population growth and demographic changes around the world, natural disasters are increasing in both frequency and impact (in both human and economic terms). In addition, regional conflicts have continued... Just as more and better project management is needed for economic development, so is it needed to save lives in emergencies and to rebuild homes, cities, infrastructure and regions hit by disasters, be they created by other humans or by the weather...”

Emergency management agencies exist in most countries and states, and at the international level through various UN agencies and NGOs. But the connection between those agencies, the related fields of emergency response, emergency medical services and first responders and the modern project management community has been almost non-existent. For example, during three major storms in the USA, Hurricanes Katrian, Sandy and Harvey during which millions were affected, there was literally no response from PMI or other professional PM organizations, little discussion for their response or recovery projects in the PM literature, and little changed since those events occurred.

¹⁶ Pells, D. L. (2009). Global Business Intelligence for Managers of Programs, Projects and Project-oriented Organizations. *PM World Today*, June. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2009-June-Pells-Global-Business-Intelligence-for-Managers.pdf>

¹⁷ Pells, D. L. (2007). Project Management for Disaster Relief and Recovery – A Call to Arms, *PM World Today*, editorial, September. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PMWL-Pells-PM-for-Disaster-ER-Editorial-Sep2007.pdf>

Even during the covid pandemic, with so many emergency programs and projects launched, there was very little visibility or recognition of project management – even when it was so obviously and critically needed. The exception may have been in the UK where APM has highlighted some projects, but certainly not in the U.S. or most other countries. Now comes this war in Ukraine, where ER project management is so badly needed, and DR expertise and investment will be massively required in the near future. Once again, many lives depend on rapid and successful ER projects, and much of the PM profession seems to be missing in action. Now I refer you to my editorial last March, the culmination of my higher purpose series, in which I describe PM for Emergencies as perhaps the most important aspect of PM that we should even be thinking about.¹⁸

If I'm overlooking some important initiatives by PM bodies or groups, I apologize, but it just still seems to me...

PM Needs a Higher Purpose – I returned to some of these themes last year in my series of editorial on “Project Management Needs a Higher Purpose.” The underlying theme of those editorials was that project management should be about more than helping organizations be more successful in business or professionally to make more money, but rather to achieve something good, something beneficial to society. My February instalment brought this topic into project management by raising the subject of social responsibility.¹⁹ Perhaps more importantly in this current context, in the same editorial I described what I called the Rogue Black Elephant, corruption. The war in Ukraine is a corrupt war; authoritarianism is fundamentally based on the three pillars of corruption – lying, cheating and stealing. That is what Russia is doing in Ukraine, with devastating effects. It is also what right-wing politicians are doing around the world, through misinformation and lies, dismantling freedoms including voting laws and systems, and stealing (money, votes, elections).

Black Elephants and maybe, PM – The mention of black elephants in the previous paragraph brings me to that broad topic that I discovered and brought to light two years ago in this journal.²⁰ A black elephant “...is a cross between “a black swan” (an unlikely, unexpected event with enormous ramifications) and the “elephant in the room” (a problem that is visible to everyone, yet no one wants to address even though we know that one day it will have vast, black-swan-like consequences...”²¹ Following my editorial, Bob

¹⁸ Pells, D.L. (2021). Project Management needs a Higher Purpose! Part 4: The Future of Project Management, Some Questions, Some Suggestions, First Things First and What's it to be? Editorial, *PM World Journal*, Vol. X, Issue IV, April. Available online at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/pmwj104-Apr2021-Pells-project-management-needs-a-higher-purpose-editorial-part-4.pdf>

¹⁹ Pells, D. L. (2021). Project Management needs a Higher Purpose! Part 2: Mission Statements, Social Responsibility and the Rogue Black Elephant, editorial; *PM World Journal*, Vol. X, Issue II, January. Available online at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/pmwj102-Feb2021-Pells-project-management-needs-a-higher-purpose-editorial-part-2.pdf>

²⁰ Pells, D.L. (2020). Black Elephants and... maybe Project Management; *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue VI, June. Available online at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/pmwj94-Jun2020-Pells-black-elephants-and-maybe-project-management-editorial3.pdf>

²¹ Ibid

Prieto responded with a great letter to the editor²² and a more thoughtful featured paper²³ also in 2020. Please take a look at these earlier works if you are new to this topic, but rather than talk more generalities here, let's discuss a few of the actual black elephants.

BLACK ELEPHANTS (AGAIN, BIGGER)

The big black elephants haunting the modern world have actually gotten larger with the war in Ukraine. These are issues threatening our world now more than ever. What should or can we as project management professionals and leaders do about them?

Nuclear War – Both the threat and risk of nuclear war have increased. Russia, the country with perhaps the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world, started this war with its illegal invasion of Ukraine in February. From the beginning, Russia has reminded Western countries of its nuclear status; in recent weeks it has increased its rhetoric about the possible use of nuclear weapons if Russia itself is threatened. As NATO and the Western world's leading democracies (and economies) have rallied to Ukraine's defense, supplying weapons and other assistance, Russia has continued to raise this scenario. Russia has nuclear weapons, so the risk is real.



Russian Yars RS-24 intercontinental ballistic missile system

Even use of limited nuclear weapons would quickly escalate, as would Russia's use of biological or chemical weapons, both outlawed by international law. What projects or programs could be launched to reduce this risk? What PM knowledge could help such projects succeed? What should PM societies be saying on this topic, if anything? How

²² Prieto, R. (2020). On the Subject of Black Elephants, Letter to the Editor, PM World Journal, Vol. IX, Issue VII, July. Available online at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/pmwj95-Jun2020-Prieto-Letter-to-Editor-on-black-elephants.pdf>

²³ Prieto, R. (2020). On the Subject of Black Elephants, Letter to the Editor, PM World Journal, Vol. IX, Issue VII, July. Available online at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/pmwj95-Jun2020-Prieto-Letter-to-Editor-on-black-elephants.pdf>

can projects or PM help save the world from such a doomsday scenario? Do we as a professional field of knowledge have a moral obligation to do something?

Climate Change and Global Warming – The war in Ukraine has had a huge terrible impact on the fight against global warming and climate change. With the sanctions against Russia and its oil and gas industries, other countries are rushing to secure other sources of energy. Oil and gas production around the world is increasing again; India is reopening multiple coal-fired power plants and importing more Russian oil, gas and coal; China is doing the same; previously suspended oil licenses are being renewed in the USA; Canada and other oil producing countries are increasing production. Meanwhile, drought continues in the southwestern USA with water shortages, massive fires and other climate-related emergencies.

But it's not just the war; authoritarianism exacerbates the problem. Some of the world's largest oil-producing countries are run by autocrats, authoritarian or corrupt leaders. Even in western democracies, many right-wing and anti-democratic politicians are climate change deniers and full throated supporters of fossil fuel industries. During Donald Trump's presidency, climate scientists were fired, government agencies were directed to delete mentions of climate change, climate research was defunded or canceled, and decisions made to support oil and gas companies. In the UK, APM has actively supported initiatives to address climate change, but I think little has been done in other countries. Only in the last year has PMI begun to actively support the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.²⁴

What more could we be doing to help save the planet? (Note, A PMI initiative was launched 30 years ago to try, but the PM world lost interest.²⁵)

World Hunger – According to the UN's World Food Programme, "As 811 million people go to bed hungry every night, the number of those facing acute food insecurity has more than doubled - from 135 million to 276 million - since 2019. A total of 44 million people in 38 countries are teetering on the edge of famine. This seismic hunger crisis has been caused by a deadly combination of four factors. Conflict is still the biggest driver of hunger, with 60 percent of the world's hungry living in areas afflicted by war and violence. Events unfolding in Ukraine are further proof of how conflict feeds hunger, forcing people out of their homes and wiping out their sources of income; Climate shocks destroy lives, crops and livelihoods, undermine people's ability to feed themselves, and have displaced 30 million from their homes globally in 2020; The economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are driving hunger to unprecedented levels; and, last but not least, the cost of reaching people in need is rising: the price WFP is paying for food is up 30 percent compared to 2019, an additional US\$42 million a month."²⁶

On May 6th, the WFP reported "The ripple effect of the Ukraine crisis has the potential to worsen the food insecurity situation in East Africa, too – Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan

²⁴ <https://www.pmi.org/about/press-media/press-releases/strategic-partnership-between-pmi-and-gpm>

²⁵ <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/pmwj66-Jan2018-Pells-solving-global-problems-editorial-welcome.pdf>

²⁶ <https://www.wfp.org/hunger-catastrophe>

and South Sudan and Sudan are likely to be hardest hit due to their reliance on imports from Russia and Ukraine. The war in Ukraine is a catastrophe on top of catastrophe... By the beginning of this month, WFP had reached more than 3.4 million people in Ukraine through food assistance and cash transfers. The organization remains intent on building its Ukraine operation from the ground up as it scales up to reach 6 million people.”²⁷

According to the New York Times on 20 March, “The war in Ukraine has delivered a shock to global energy markets. Now the planet is facing a deeper crisis: a shortage of food. A crucial portion of the world’s wheat, corn and barley is trapped in Russia and Ukraine because of the war, while an even larger portion of the world’s fertilizers is stuck in Russia and Belarus.



The result is that global food and fertilizer prices are soaring. Since the invasion last month, wheat prices have increased by 21 percent, barley by 33 percent and some fertilizers by 40 percent. The upheaval is compounded by major challenges that were already increasing prices and squeezing supplies, including the pandemic, shipping constraints, high energy costs and recent droughts, floods and fires. Now economists, aid organizations and government officials are warning of the repercussions: an increase in world hunger.”²⁸

I think you get the picture. The global food and hunger situation was already dire due to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The war in Ukraine has made the situation dramatically worse around the world, even in Europe and North America where prices are rising.

Other Black Elephants – Other global problems are also worsening now, including migrations and refugee crises (especially in Eastern Europe with millions of Ukrainians forced to flee their country); health and medical care, including in the U.S. now as women’s healthcare is under political attack by conservatives; inequality, as the world’s rich get richer and the poor multiply in numbers; and let’s not forget climate change, global warming and related droughts, storms and disasters. So much at risk now, which is also what I’ve been thinking a lot about.

A NEW VIEW OF RISK

Perhaps not surprisingly, after two+ years of the covid pandemic and with the start of the War in Ukraine, I started thinking about risk again – both how important risk management

²⁷ <https://www.wfp.org/stories/war-ukraine-wfp-calls-ports-reopen-world-faces-hunger-crisis>

²⁸ [Ukraine War Threatens to Cause a Global Food Crisis - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/world/europe/ukraine-war-threatens-to-cause-a-global-food-crisis.html)

can be and how inadequate traditional project risk management concepts seem to be, especially for dealing with rapidly changing emergency conditions such as those in Ukraine.

The overlooked prevalence of risk in project management – I now think risk management is the single most important aspect of project management. Since it was added to PMI's PM Body of Knowledge so many years ago, it has been treated like a separate topic. Risk management has been a separate chapter in the PMBOK Guide for over twenty years, and in other PM standards. Organizations prepare project risk management plans, establish risk officers or risk managers, and sometimes even risk departments (for example, to manage insurance-related issues). But there are risks associated with every aspect of a project – scope risks, schedule risks, cost risks, risks associated with resources, personnel, stakeholders, strategies, supply chains, and every management process and phase of a project.

Risk management plans can still be highly useful, as well as emergency response plans, disaster recovery plans, succession plans, etc. But I think risk (and opportunity) analyses and discussions should be a fundamental element of project startup, cost estimating, schedule planning, quality management, reporting, progress meetings, stage gate reviews, procurement, stakeholder engagement, staffing and most other project (and portfolio and program) decision-making. Risks have been considered in some of these project activities for many years, for example in cost and schedule planning (i.e. PERT), but not in the more holistic manner that I am suggesting.

I think many organizations, project teams and managers are unprepared when bad things happen, even though those events or changes were always possible. And as Bob Prieto has pointed out, "one of the most under considered elements of cost and schedule risk is the correlation that exists within various WBS elements of a project or across projects comprising a program..."²⁹ Correlation also applies to other aspects of project management as well, for example, procurement, supply chain or resource risks often affect cost, schedule or scope risks. It's highly probable that a project risk register has very limited utility.

Overwhelming Risks during emergencies – Risk management for an emergency response project is whole other matter. There's normally no time to prepare a risk management plan or risk register. If there was no useful risk management plan prepared ahead of time, there will be little or no traditional project risk management. Obviously, those in the emergency response field (FEMA staff in the USA, for example) do prepare for emergencies and related risks, and often do have project templates and plans to work with. The problem is that those responding first to emergencies may be local employees, managers, officials or citizens with little ER planning knowledge or experience. In those and all cases really, the number one issue would seem to be – what are the risks of doing or not doing something? And those questions often need to be answered fast.

²⁹ Prieto, R. (2020). The Impact of Correlation on Risks in Programs and Projects, PM World Journal, Vol. IX, Issue XII, December. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/pmwj100-Dec2020-Prieto-impact-of-correlation-on-risks-in-programs-and-projects.pdf>

This led me to remember Malcolm Gladwell's 2005 book titled "Blink" that became a business best seller in the USA. The main idea outlined in the book was that spontaneous decisions are often as good as—or even better than—carefully planned and considered ones. While some of the book's core ideas have been disputed, many agree that intuition can be powerful and often correct.³⁰ These thoughts then turned to the well-known condition during crises or sudden emergencies that adrenaline levels peak and senses become more acute. This suggests to me that intuition during a crises would seem to be highly useful, at least as a starting point for risk assessment and decision-making. First choices and quick decisions can often be corrected, but perhaps...

A new view might be needed – Agile risk management – Why not consider improving our risk management with less formal, more rapid and more agile risk-based decision making, even in non-emergency situations? I think a lot of project risk management is already subjective, based on personal knowledge and opinions rather than disciplined risk analysis. Yes, we should remain cognizant of behavioral biases in project planning, per Bent Flyvbjerg's seminal 2021 paper³¹, but I think we need to increase and accelerate our risk management on more projects. And isn't that also what the Ukrainians are teaching us, how to be more agile, responding to emergencies, rapidly embracing innovation in any useful form, launching new projects with near-instant planning, and even counter attacking in their fight for survival and freedom?

Summary

Perhaps I bit off more than I can chew with this editorial. But I thought someone should speak out on these topics. Where are the professional organizations and leaders? Where do we stand on the war, its impacts and what we should be thinking and doing about it? I hope this article stimulates more thinking and discussion. Because this war and its aftermath will impact us all and will lead to many changes. And we need to be better prepared than we currently are.

And what if the Black Elephants win? If the Earth or modern civilization are destroyed, what good are PM certifications or the PM profession? Maybe project management knowledge will still be needed in a dystopian future of survival of the fittest, but that's a very bleak and frightening scenario.

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³⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blink:_The_Power_of_Thinking_Without_Thinking

³¹ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3979164

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David Pells has been an active professional leader in the United States since the 1980s, serving on the board of directors of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) twice. He was founder and chair of the Global Project Management Forum (1995-2000), an annual meeting of leaders of PM associations from around the world. David was awarded PMI's Person of the Year award in 1998 and Fellow Award, PMI's highest honor, in 1999. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM) in the UK; Project Management Associates (PMA - India); the Istituto Italiano di Project Management (ISIPM); and the Russian Project Management Association (SOVNET). Since 2010 he is an honorary member of the Project Management Association of Nepal.

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