

# War in Ukraine and Food Security

## Background

Ukraine, known as the “breadbasket of Europe,” is one of the world’s largest producers and exporters of agricultural goods. With 55% of its territory being arable land, Ukraine has 30% of the world’s black soil. Before Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine produced enough food to feed 400 million people annually. It is the fifth-largest wheat exporter, fourth-largest exporter of corn, third-largest barley exporter, and the top exporter of sunflower oil and sunflower meal. Ukrainian wheat has been exported to many countries in Asia, the Middle East, and North America. Many countries rely heavily on Ukraine for their grain imports. For example, Lebanon imports 60% of its grains from Ukraine, Djibouti imports 55%, and Ukrainian grain comprises 50% of imports in Somalia and 45% in Mauritius and Eritrea. The World Food Programme sources 40% of the wheat for its emergency food-relief programs from Ukraine.

## Ukraine’s Agriculture under Russia’s Attack

Russia’s invasion disrupted the production and export of Ukrainian grain and other agricultural products. This happened for several reasons. Before the war, Ukraine exported over 90% of its agricultural products, or around 6 million tons per month, via the Black Sea. Since the full-scale invasion, Russia has blocked safe passage to and from Ukraine by closing the Kerch Strait, tightening control of the Sea of Azov, and stationing warships off Ukrainian ports. It also has set sea mines in the Black Sea and repeatedly bombed ports’ infrastructure. In June, Russia destroyed one of Ukraine’s biggest grain terminals, Nika-Tera in Mykolaiv, which could store up to 500,000 tonnes of grain at a time. Grain fields and farms are also being targeted by the Russian attacks, including shelling and mining of farmland. Ukraine’s Ministry of Agriculture reported that 30% of the country’s farmland is occupied by Russian forces or is unsafe due to shelling or mining.

In addition to the blockade of ports and attacks on Ukrainian farmland, one in every six Ukrainian crop storage facilities has been damaged, destroyed, or captured by Russia. At least 3 million tons have been damaged, and over 6 million tons of storage were controlled by Russia. Russia has also been smuggling vast quantities of grain from occupied Ukrainian regions and moving them to ports of Russia and Crimea by train and truck. Such trading of looted commodities could constitute a war crime.

The situation has been further exacerbated by Russia’s missile and drone attacks on the Ukrainian power grid, which disrupts the work of wheat terminals and endangers the lives of civilians.

# Spillover Effects on Global Food Security

The damage from Russia's invasion has been done not only to Ukraine's agriculture alone. Russia's war has sparked a historic global food crisis, including devastating impacts on food security and prices, which the pandemic and the climate crisis had already strained. In 2022, the number of people grappling with acute food insecurity increased to 349 million across 79 countries from 287 million in 2021, and the Food Price Index, which measures the global cost of food, rose by over 14% compared to 2021. Global fertilizer prices have increased rapidly, threatening to turn the food affordability crisis into a food availability crisis. The most vulnerable countries have been hit the hardest; many rely heavily on Ukraine's agricultural exports. Countries such as Lebanon, Tunisia, Somalia, and Libya all relied on Ukraine for at least half of their wheat imports, and Eritrea sourced 47% of its wheat imports from Ukraine.

Through direct attacks on Ukraine's farmlands, agricultural facilities, civil infrastructure, and blockade of grain exports, Russia is weaponizing food supplies in its war against Ukraine. "There is no question that food is being used as a weapon of war in many different ways," says World Food Program chief David Beasley. Unable to defeat Ukraine militarily, Russia has been blockading Ukraine's foreign trade and threatening global food security.

## Black Sea Grain Initiative

After lengthy negotiations and months of "silent diplomacy" by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, an agreement to establish the Black Sea Grain Initiative was signed in July 2022. The United Nations and Türkiye facilitated the deal to allow the export of 22 million tons of Ukrainian wheat, corn, and other cereals that have accumulated in three Ukrainian ports, which in turn, should help avoid food shortages and reduce food prices. Under the agreement, Ukrainian vessels guide the cargo ships to international waters in the Black Sea, with vessels then traveling down a designated, protected transit corridor through the Black Sea. Notably, Russia fired at least four missiles at the Black Sea port city of Odesa 24 hours after the deal was signed.

Six months into the deal, which the Secretary-General called a "beacon of hope," nearly 800 voyages under the Black Sea Grain Initiative exported over 21 million tonnes of food. About 20% of the shipments go to low- and lower-middle-income countries, including humanitarian food assistance to the Horn of Africa and Yemen, where millions face acute food insecurity. 65% of wheat exported reached developing countries. So far, the Black Sea Grain Initiative has successfully helped bring down the cost of food and fertilizer across the globe.

The agreement has been in contention, as Russia has been critical of the deal since its inception. At the end of October, Russia announced that it would suspend its participation in the deal. Despite the announcement, Türkiye and the UN proceeded with the initiative, continuing the inspection of dozens of grain ships already in Istanbul and managing the safe travel of

vessels through the maritime humanitarian corridor set up in the Black Sea. At the beginning of November, Russia re-entered the deal, and it was extended for another 120 days.

The deliberate delays by Russia in the inspections that allow vessels to head to and leave Ukraine have been another challenge of the Black Sea Grain Initiative. While Ukraine exported around 6 million tonnes of agricultural products in November, shipments fell sharply to less than 4 million in December. Ukraine and the UN have been since calling on speeding up the inspections and removing the backlog. As of February, 145 vessels have been waiting in the waters of Türkiye, with the waiting time of vessels between application and inspection averaging 21 days.

## Grain from Ukraine

In November 2022, on the 90th anniversary of the beginning of the Holodomor, a man-made famine that starved to death millions of Ukrainians in 1932-1933, Ukraine launched the "Grain from Ukraine" initiative. This humanitarian program aims to supply at least 60 vessels of Ukrainian grain to over 1 million people in countries most vulnerable to famine and drought. The initiative was presented at Kyiv's first International Food Security Summit. Under the program, participating countries will buy agricultural products from Ukrainian producers, with priority given to small and medium-sized enterprises, and ship them to vulnerable countries, including Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Congo, Kenya, Nigeria, and Yemen. So far, Ukraine has raised \$200 million from 30 countries, including the European Union, Qatar, Türkiye, Japan, Norway, Korea, Canada, and the United States, and donated at least 125,000 tonnes of grain to vulnerable people in Africa and Asia. In January 2023, the first ambassadors of Grain from Ukraine on the African continent joined the initiative.

Ensuring food security is also a critical part of President Zelenskyy's 10-point peace plan that he presented to the G20 Summit in November 2022, stressing that food security was a "fundamental right of every person in the world." The President of Ukraine has since been presenting the peace formula at multiple global platforms and to world leaders, including G7.

## Food Security Disinformation

In addition to attacks on Ukrainian farmland and blockade of ports, Russia has been spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories around the causes of global food insecurity to deflect its responsibility for disrupting the world food supply through its invasion of Ukraine.

Russian disinformation focuses on several key narratives.

1. Global food insecurity and the spike in global food prices were caused by the EU sanctions on Russian food and fertilizer exports.
2. Only a small amount of grain exported from Ukraine under the grain deal had been sent to developing countries, and the majority had been delivered to the EU.

3. Western nations are trying to impose mass hunger and withhold food to gain control over developing countries and vulnerable populations.

Russia has been primarily focusing its disinformation efforts in the Middle East and Africa, where the dependence on agricultural imports is high, and many households have been pushed to the brink of starvation. By exploiting the food insecurity and global instability that follows, Russia aims to undermine the West and democracy and position itself as a better partner for African nations. Such disinformation, in combination with Russia's attacks on Ukrainian farmland, smuggling of grain, blockade of agricultural export routes, and existing economic and social crises, further fuels global food insecurity and can potentially lead to further social and political unrest around the globe, which would have far-reaching consequences beyond just the food security challenges.

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