



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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THE UKRAINE WAR IS A FIGHT OVER FOOD

As the war in Ukraine drags on, global worries are growing about the potentially catastrophic consequences that a protracted conflict could have on world food security. Already, vulnerable countries in the Middle East and Africa – including Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia – are feeling the destabilizing domestic effects as Ukraine (a major source of grain stuffs for numerous countries) has gone offline as a supplier. In Europe, the specter of food shortages have grown as well, in light of the deep dependence on Ukrainian grain shared by many countries on the continent. And the longer the war continues, Western governments fear, the more acute the shortages will become – and the more pronounced the effects on both domestic politics and global security.

As a remedy, the Lithuanian government has proposed a naval "coalition of the willing" designed to lift Russia's blockade on Ukrainian grain exports. "Time is very very short. We are closing in on a new harvest and there is no other practical way of exporting the grain except through the Black Sea port of Odesa," Lithuanian foreign minister Gabrielius Landsbergis has told England's *Guardian* newspaper. "There is no way of storing this grain and no other adequate alternative route. It is imperative that we show vulnerable countries we are prepared to take the steps that are needed to feed the world." The Lithuanian plan involves a non-NATO "escort" operation, in which ships from supporting countries would assist Ukrainian commercial vessels in running the *de facto* blockade created by Russia around ports such as Odessa. The British government has now backed the Lithuanian plan in principle.

The stakes are potentially enormous. "What we have seen now is just the beginning. The worst is yet to come in the next five to seven weeks when the first harvest arrives and there is no place to put it, so that means people in northern Africa, the Middle East and south-east Asia will be paying exorbitant prices for wheat, corn and the other commodities they need to put food on their table," Landbergis says. If that happens, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has warned, the world could face "a hurricane of hunger." (*Guardian*, May 23, 2022)

THINKING BEYOND PUTIN

Russian president Vladimir Putin will leave the political scene in a matter of months, Britain's former top spy has predicted. In an interview with the *One Decision* podcast, Sir Richard Dearlove, the past director of the British Secret Intelligence Service, placed his bets on a soft political transition in Russia that removes Putin from power. "I think he'll be gone by 2023, but probably into the sanatorium," Dearlove said. "That's a way to sort of move things on without a coup."

An ouster of Putin is not the only possible future for Russia, however. Dearlove, in his comments, also suggested that the Russian regime "might break apart" over the next year to year-and-a-half as a result of Putin's invasion of Ukraine and resulting Western sanctions, which have severely impacted the country's economy. (*Newsweek*, May 22, 2022)

DOMESTIC BACKLASH DEEPENS

Popular discontent over – and opposition to – the Ukraine war continues to deepen in Russia, and has begun spilling over into the public sphere in unexpected ways. Thus, at a recent pop music concert in St. Petersburg, thousands of attendees chanted "F**k the war" in a display of opposition termed by the media as "defiant." Meanwhile, Russian military journalist Mikhail Khodaryonok recently broke with official messaging on state television when, in an interview on *Russia One*, he gave a grim assessment of the conflict and the country's geopolitical position. "The situation for us will clearly get worse," Khodaryonok said. "The biggest problem with our military and political situation is that we are in total geopolitical isolation and the whole world is against us, even if we don't want to admit it." (*Express*, May 23, 2022)

WHAT UKRAINIANS WANT

As the Ukraine conflict has lingered, a growing number of Western officials and observers have taken to counseling Ukraine that it should give in to at least some of Russian President Vladimir Putin's territorial demands as a way of providing him an "off ramp" for a conflict that has clearly not gone to plan for the Kremlin. Ukrainians themselves see the situation very differently, however. A recent poll of Ukrainian opinion conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in mid-May found that the majority of those polled opposed any sort of territorial concessions to Moscow, even if that meant extending the duration of the current war. In all, only 10% of the roughly 2,000 respondents polled answered in the affirmative to the statement that "Ukraine can give up some of its territories in order to achieve peace as soon as possible and preserve its independence." At the same time, the overwhelming majority (82%) agreed with the idea that "Under no circumstances should Ukraine relinquish any of its territories, even if this prolongs the war and threatens to preserve its independence [sic]." (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, May 24, 2022)