



The War In Ukraine Is Also a ‘Food Fight’

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In the 1930s, in a bid to pacify the still-unruly region of Ukraine, the Soviet leadership created a man-made famine on its territory. The consequences were horrific; between 1932 and 1933, an estimated 7 to 10 million Ukrainians died in the tragedy that has come to be known as the Holodomor.

Today, as part of its war against Ukraine, the government in Moscow is wielding the food weapon once again. On Monday, the Kremlin announced that it was suspending its participation in the Black Sea Grain Initiative, and that it was no longer willing to guarantee the security of food exports transiting the Black Sea. The potential effects of this decision are both profound and profoundly destabilizing.

To understand why, it's necessary to appreciate the outsized role that Russia and Ukraine play in global food consumption. In 2021, the two countries provided a combined 34 percent of the world's wheat, 27 percent of its barley, and 55 percent of its sunflower oil. All told, according to European estimates, they jointly accounted for nearly 12 percent of “food calories traded globally” that year.

So when the Ukraine war broke out in early 2022, worries abounded that the result could very well be a global food crisis, as one of the participants in the conflict — and perhaps both — went offline as an international supplier. That did not happen, thanks largely to the Black Sea Grain Initiative. Inked a year ago this month between Russia, Turkey and the United Nations, it created a framework for the resumption of Ukrainian grain exports despite the war, staving off potentially disastrous food shortages and commodity shortfalls in the developing world.

From the start, Moscow's adherence to the deal was tentative at best, with the Kremlin committing only to short extensions and repeatedly threatening to abandon the arrangement altogether. In support of its position, it has woven an elaborate web of falsehoods, accusing the West of (among other things) hoarding food intended for developing nations and creating trade obstacles for Russia's own exports.

The real reasons for Russia's intransigence are geopolitical in nature.

The first is strategic. It didn't take long for the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin to figure out that it could use food as a weapon to pressure the West just as it has long used its energy supplies. Ever since, Moscow has taken pains to manipulate the current global food crisis (in which nearly 350 million people worldwide are facing starvation) to its advantage.

The second reason is economic. As the State Department has noted, Moscow has taken a series of measures to restrict its own exports of foodstuffs and fertilizer, thereby “profiteering” from a crisis it created itself by forcing global prices upward. By doing so, Russia has managed to soften the impact of Western sanctions on its economy, at least somewhat.

The approach has reaped concrete dividends for the Kremlin. Even as they have sought to punish Moscow for its military aggression, Western nations have quietly tried to mollify it. To that end, the European Union recently floated a proposal for the Russian Agricultural Bank, which is currently under international sanctions, to be allowed to reconnect to the SWIFT global financial network as an inducement to keep Russia in the grain deal. (Moscow, however, didn't bite.)

Developing nations, meanwhile, have done even more. Eager for some sort of compromise that would allow “business as usual” to resume, thereby keeping their brittle economies afloat — and their restive populations fed — countries in the Global South have become de facto advocates for Russia. For instance, on the heels of his recent jaunt to Moscow, where he discussed food insecurity in Africa, South African president Cyril Ramaphosa flew to Kyiv and floated a 10-point peace plan extremely favorable to the Kremlin.

Russia's plan, clearly, is to raise the specter of food shortages (and political instability) as a way to turn world opinion against Ukraine, and to force Western nations to scale back their own campaign of pressure. By doing that, Putin believes, it might just be possible to eke out some sort of victory in his protracted and exceedingly troubled campaign against Kyiv. And increasingly, it looks like Russia's president might be willing to foment an international food crisis in order to do so.