Instytut Europy Środkowej

IEŚ Commentaries

No. 731 (243/2022) | 23.11.2022

ISSN 2657-6996

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The Black Sea grain game

The agreement enabling the export of Ukrainian grain from Black Sea ports contributes to reducing the food deficit. This issue is also an element of the political game around the growing importance of the Black Sea, in which the beneficiaries are all parties, i.e. Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and the UN. The international position of Turkey, which plays an increasingly important role in the Black Sea region and in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, is growing in a special way. At the same time, it must be expected that Russia will try to use the agreement to achieve its own goals.

Black Sea Grain Initiative. Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukraine's Black Sea ports have remained blocked. It was not until July 22 at a meeting in Istanbul that representatives of Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and the UN signed agreements – Ukraine and Russia separately – on unblocking the export of food, especially cereals, as well as fertilizers, from three Ukrainian ports (Odessa, Chernomorsk, Pivdennyj) on the Black Sea and the Turkish straits for a period of 120 days (i.e. until November 19). Five days later, the Joint Coordination Center (JCC) was established, consisting of representatives from all four parties to the agreement and responsible for the inspection of ships. Formally, the agreements are based primarily on the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea and the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code.

None of the parties to the agreement, however, treated it as a prelude to other talks that would extend into the political or military sphere. The "grain compromise" was supposed to be a temporary solution, giving all participants measurable benefits. It should be noted that, according to UN data from 17 November, 471 ships left Ukrainian ports, transporting around 11.2 million tons of agricultural products (the grain transported by one ship can feed around 1.5 million people for a month).

Implementation. From the very beginning, the agreements were accompanied by fears as to whether the grain corridor could be established and maintained, and whether Russia would try to manipulate the agreements or even disregard them – especially since less than a day after signing them, it launched a rocket attack on the port of Odessa (which also had a symbolic dimension, just like the April attack on Kyiv during the visit of UN Secretary General António Guterres).

Russia also continued to trade Ukrainian grain stolen in the occupied territories, using the port in Melitopol, Crimean ports, and transshipment on the open sea (in order to hide the origin of the cargo) to deliver grain to Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Libya. Volodymyr Zelenski and Jens von Stoltenberg raised these concerns many times. Russia has repeatedly, under various pretexts, threatened to break the agreements. One of such pretexts was the supply of grain to countries such as Turkey, China, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands – even though it was often re-exported from there, e.g. to Africa. Russia argued that the "grain agreement" did not serve those whom it was intended to serve, although the agreements did not in fact specify where grain from Ukrainian ports was to be sent. Russia's obstruction began to intensify with the military successes of the Ukrainian army. In September, Russia began to sabotage the work of the JCC. As a result, the waiting time for ships in the Sea of Marmara, where inspections were carried out, increased by several days. It also coincided with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit (during which China put pressure on Russia to win the war as soon as possible) and the "partial mobilization" in Russia, which proves that the grain agreement was being used instrumentally as a weapon of war.

Therefore, in October Ukraine estimated that port capacities were being used at only 25-30% capacity, and at the end of October over 100 ships were waiting for inspection (and only then did the JCC increase the number of inspection teams). Russia also threatened to break the agreement in response to a suggestion that the UN could send a mission to investigate whether Russia uses Iranian drones or, as it claims, only Russian-made ones.

Finally, on October 29, Russia announced the suspension of its participation in the agreement (but did not break it), justifying their move with the Ukrainian "terrorist attack" on the ships in the port of Sevastopol. At the same time, Russia accused Ukraine not only of causing a threat to the safety of the transport route, but also of using the "grain corridor" to attack Sevastopol. At the same time, it put forward a number of demands regarding the restoration of Russian exports of agricultural products, a move that may serve as a bargaining chip at the G20 summit.

Extension of the agreement. On November 2, Russia withdrew from their decision, officially due to obtaining additional "written guarantees" from Ukraine that it would not violate the terms of the agreement. According to the Ukrainian side, there are no such additional commitments, which suggests that Russia needed a political justification to return to the agreement for internal purposes, as it coincided with Ukrainian successes on the front and the withdrawal of the Russians from Kherson. This was very badly received in Russia, so the return to the grain agreement needed to be justified in order not to be perceived by the public as another failure.

Another reason for Russia returning to the agreement and extending it for another 120 days (starting November 19) is their awareness that withdrawing from the grain agreement would lead to a further reduction in exports of Russian agricultural products and fertilizers to world markets. Even today, although these exports are not sanctioned, they remain quite limited. Banks, insurance companies, shipping companies and shipowners are reluctant to cooperate with Russia. In the case of chemical fertilizers, the situation is even more difficult ¬– 1/3 of Russian exports went through the Baltic ports, currently closed to Russians, which is used, for example, by Asian recipients and intermediaries, who demand significant discounts. In addition, after Russia suspended its participation in the grain agreement, inspections and ship traffic continued (without the participation of Russia and Ukraine), which meant not only image losses for Russia, but also the loss of the transport supervision instrument.

Russia is also interested in developing relations with Erdoğan, who treats the cereals initiative personally and ambitiously, being aware of his current strong position with both Moscow (which allows him, for example, to decide to limit the transit of Russian oil through the Bosphorus) and Kiev (which, in turn, results in Turkish pressure on the transit of Russian products). There are many indications that it was Erdoğan who persuaded Vladimir Putin to return to participate in the agreement.

Turkish gambit. The grain initiative is very important for Erdoğan. That is a consequence of his political ambitions and internal conditions. The Turkish president emphasizes that the agreement saves the world from hunger, and he also repeatedly insists, despite the lack of similar enthusiasm among other actors, that the agreement is the beginning of talks that will lead to the end of the war. Erdoğan, however, needed success on the international arena to improve his own ratings at home. He used the fact that Turkey is the only NATO member that has not imposed sanctions on Russia, and at the same time remains on good terms with both Russia and Ukraine. Another asset is Turkey's location (control over the Black Sea straits) and the participation of the UN, which legitimized the idea of a grain agreement internationally. Moreover, Turkey became the de facto military guarantor of the agreement, closing the straits (in line with international law) to warships.

Thus, the international position of Turkey and Erdoğan has increased, and he allows himself, while consistently caring for the mediator's image, to be assertive both vis-à-vis the West (e.g. during the G20 summit in Bali, he had a conversation with Joe Biden, but at the same time he stated that "the West is attacking Russia") and towards Russia, because the balance of power has changed in Turkish-Russian relations in favour of Turkey. In 2021, Turkey was the eleventh trading partner of Russia, in 2022 it will be the third. Russia still declares it is not isolated internationally, while in reality it must take Turkey and its interests into account – as well as with China and India, with which trade has also increased sharply.

Conclusions. All signatories of the agreement benefited from it politically and, in terms of image, became its beneficiaries. Russia was able to show the world good will and readiness to talk and also obtained permission to sell food and fertilisers, meaning that the sanctions regime was actually mitigated.

Russia also took care to consistently present the usual narrative – it is Ukraine and the West to be blamed for the global food crisis. For Ukraine, the agreements were beneficial as they allowed for the resumption of grain exports. It should be remembered that the agricultural sector is responsible for about 40% of Ukraine's exports, with about 90% of agricultural products transported by sea. There remains about 20 million tons of grain from the previous harvest still in silos.

For Turkey, the agreement was a diplomatic victory, especially for president Erdoğan, who has been positioning himself as the main mediator between Ukraine and Russia since the beginning of the war. Turkey's international position has increased, and in the face of growing economic problems (inflation was over 85% in the third quarter of 2022) and the upcoming presidential election, it is a significant success for Erdoğan. Further, the UN, criticized for indolence in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, could prove that it was active by legitimizing the agreement – António Guterres was personally involved in the negotiations.

Breaking the grain deal is unprofitable for Russia, both politically and economically. Russia will use it as an instrument of influence and manipulation as it prepares for a long war. This will also be part of Russia's broader strategy, aimed at seeking allies in, for example, Africa, and among the countries that are recipients of Ukrainian grain by convincing them that Ukraine is to blame for this crisis.

Russia's goal will also be to ease sanctions and take advantage of its position as a food and fertilizer producer. It will also be possible to manipulate food exports to Europe ¬– its reduction/slowdown will affect the increase in prices and inflation, and consequently, in Moscow's calculations, the public mood and opinions in the West will be affected. Russia has also not changed its goals for Ukraine, so in the context of the Black Sea and its raising geostrategic importance, it is not a question of grain, but of war (e.g. because Ukraine wants to extend the agreement and expand both the range of goods and the number of ports). However, in the Black Sea region, Russia's position is clearly weakening and Turkey's position is strengthening.