

# THE GRAIN DEAL AS A RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY INSTRUMENT

Russia's primary objective with the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI) was to achieve international recognition, including from the United Nations, for its control over Ukraine's grain exports. Russia aimed to free itself from the direct and indirect impact of sanctions while gaining an effective tool for leveraging hunger as a threat and exerting influence over the global South.

By spring 2023, it became clear that, in Russia's view, the agreement no longer served its purpose, and it was only a matter of time before Russia would withdraw from it.

On 17 July 2023, Russia refused to extend the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI), which had allowed Ukraine to export 33 million tons of agricultural products and fertilisers to the world market from its ports within a year.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine understandably caused deep uncertainty and price fluctuations in the global food market. Less developed and emerging economies are the most vulnerable to such fluctuations. Russia cynically and unhesitatingly exploited the resulting threat to global food security. On 22 July 2022, an agreement to continue exports from Ukrainian ports was reached, mediated by the United Nations and Turkey. The UN also committed to facilitating the access of Russian goods to target markets.

Russia achieved two goals with this agreement. First, it gained international recognition for its authority to control how Ukraine could sell its agricultural products to the world market or whether it could do so at all; this increased Russia's role as a major wheat supplier. Second, Russia presented itself as a caring party to countries suffering from food shortages, urging that international organisations should support its positions in the given circumstances.

Immediately after reaching the agreement, Russia ruthlessly exploited the leverage it had gained. It pressured UN institutions and member states to persuade Western countries to ease sanctions against Russia. Russia also uses its false image as the saviour of the world food market to blame Western countries and Ukraine for Russia's war of aggression and its consequences.

### **For Russia, the UN continues to be a platform to advance its false narratives, influence and objectives, particularly towards the global South**

For Russia, the UN continues to be a platform to advance its false narratives, influence and objectives, particularly towards the global South, in which Russia seeks to engage in its anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian foreign policy. In addition, Russia's rhetoric and actions are designed to deliberately mislead the UN as an organisation that promotes global sustainable development goals, including food security and hunger eradication. UN high officials have made efforts to satisfy at least some of Russia's demands in a realistic manner. They have repeatedly offered technical and logistical solutions to address Russia's alleged concerns. However, most of the proposed solutions have failed to meet Russia's approval, and Russia attempts to portray the UN as not actively seeking resolutions.

On three occasions, Russia agreed to extend the grain deal but expanded its demands before the extension deadlines. These demands included reintegrating the Russian Agricultural Bank into the SWIFT system, resuming ammonia exports through the Togliatti-Odessa pipeline, restoring agricultural machinery and spare parts supplies to Russia, reducing insurance costs for Russian grain exports, and easing restrictions in the logistics sector. Some of these demands, such as the resumption of ammonia pumping through the Togliatti-Odessa pipeline, are deliberately unrealistic because such activities in a war zone pose a significant environmental risk. Russia aims to normalise the continuation of its aggression by making it appear that it is "business as usual".

By spring 2023, it was clear that, in Russia's view, the agreement no longer served its intended purpose. Russia had not managed to mitigate the direct and indirect impacts and scope of sanctions, partially due to a general attitude of avoiding or limiting business relations with Russia, even in areas not directly subject to sanctions. In contrast, Ukraine had successfully avoided an economic collapse and found alternative export routes.

Starting in early 2023, Russia, as part of the BSGI Joint Coordination Centre, increasingly obstructed the arrival of vessels at Ukrainian ports. Ukraine's grain and fertiliser export infrastructure became one of the primary targets of Russia's ruthless attacks. Since the discontinuation of the grain deal, the Russian Armed Forces have relentlessly bombarded Ukrainian ports, harbours and infrastructure in Odesa, Chornomorsk, Reni, Izmail and Mykolayiv with drones and rockets. By the end of August 2023, hundreds of thousands of tons of grain had been destroyed as a result. This alone demonstrates Russia's lack of concern for food security and its use of hunger as a weapon.

In the latter half of 2023, Ukraine established an alternative maritime route between its ports and the Bosphorus Strait. Despite ongoing Russian attacks, this route, which runs through the territorial waters of Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria, has been used to transport an increasing amount of Ukrainian export products. In 2024, Ukraine may transport 50% of its agricultural exports via this maritime route.



A grain depot at a river port on the Danube, Odesa Oblast, was destroyed on 16 August 2023.

Source: Armed Forces of Ukraine.