Russia Is Manipulating the Global South with Food

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Today’s global food security crisis is not only about the millions of innocent people around the world whose food security has deteriorated due to Russia’s invasion but also about attempts by Russia to manipulate these countries through its own exports.

Wars, wherever they happen, worsen food insecurity, and the impact of conflicts on hunger is usually local or regional. The conflict in Gaza, for example, has led to a collapse of food supply chains there, with the entire population requiring emergency food assistance and many at risk of famine.1 Elsewhere, bad actors—whether repressive regimes, terrorist organizations, or violent gangs—may withhold food in exchange for a population’s support.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, food insecurity has increased not only within Ukraine but also worldwide.2 The population Russia seeks to manipulate is not local but global—particularly, the Global South. The United States has responded with muscular diplomacy and funding for global food security. While U.S. global food security leadership is exemplary, the extent to which the United States is factoring Russia’s manipulation through food into its global food security efforts is unclear. To better blunt the impacts of Russia’s rising influence in the Global South, the United States should target more assistance to the countries whose reliance on Russian food imports is growing. And the United States should strengthen support for Ukraine’s agriculture sector, thereby increasing Ukraine’s food exports and giving countries in the Global South an alternative to Russia’s grains.

Ukraine’s agriculture sector remains a primary front in Russia’s war as Russia realizes numerous benefits in undercutting Ukraine’s production. Agriculture is a top source of revenue for Ukraine, providing 10 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) and 41 percent of its export revenue before the war.3 Damages and losses for Ukraine’s agriculture sector were estimated at $40.2 billion in early 2023; both almost certainly increased throughout the year as Russia terminated the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2023 and immediately intensified attacks on Ukraine’s agricultural infrastructure. Unsafe conditions in the Black Sea have forced Ukraine to route more exports overland through neighboring EU countries, leading to trade disputes that threaten unified European support for Ukraine and drain EU resources.4
By the end of 2023, Ukraine is expected to have exported approximately 37.6 million tons of grains, a nearly 25.5 percent decline from 2020–21, the last harvest unaffected by the war. As Ukraine exports less food to the world, good growing conditions have helped Russia’s exports surge. In the 2023–24 growing season, Russia is expected to export a world-record-setting 50 million metric tons of wheat, 28 percent more than Russia had exported before the war and over four times as much wheat as Ukraine is predicted to export in 2023–24.

While Ukraine’s agricultural market share has contracted, Russia’s has expanded, including in the Global South. Prior to Russia’s invasion, 33 countries, including many in the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa, imported 30 percent or more of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine. According to unofficial estimates, Russia’s exports to the Middle East, North Africa, and East Africa have increased since Russia invaded Ukraine.

With increasing conspicuousness, Moscow is aiming to exchange its food for influence. In early 2022, former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev noted that food was Russia’s “silent . . . but menacing” weapon. In mid-2023, Russian president Vladimir Putin did not mince words when he declared Russia “has the capacity to replace Ukrainian grain” since Russia’s “harvest is again expected to be perfect this year.”

Russia’s attempts to exert influence through food have been met with some success. In 2022 and 2023, several of the countries that voted against UN resolutions condemning Russian aggression were those most reliant on Russia for wheat imports. Even more countries reliant on Russian wheat were infamous “fence sitters,” abstaining from voting altogether. Leaders in many of these countries have echoed Russia’s false narrative that Western countries had sanctioned Russia’s food and fertilizer exports and that these purported sanctions, and not Russia’s war, had caused global food insecurity to soar. A country may rely on imports for various needs, like energy or arms, but disruptions in food supplies can immediately ignite public discontent, sometimes threatening a leader’s hold on power. Recent history has reinforced this lesson, making leaders eager to secure sources of imports, even (or especially) from countries like Russia.

Despite Russia’s attempts to buy influence through food, other countries in the Global South have publicly criticized Russia’s disruptions to global agriculture markets, particularly Moscow’s July 2023 decision to terminate the Black Sea Grain Initiative. A top Kenyan official called the decision a “stab in the back,” while leaders of numerous other countries, including Egypt, South Africa, India, China, and Turkey, as well as African Union chairman Azali Assoumani, entreated President Putin to reopen Ukraine’s grain trade. Instead of rejoining the Black Sea Grain Initiative, Russia has taken advantage of food-insecure nations’ reliance on Russia’s supplies to increase its own exports. In September 2023, Putin announced an agreement among Russia, Turkey, and Qatar to move one million tons of Russian grain to “the neediest countries” in Africa.

In November 2023, according to Russia’s Ministry of Agriculture, Russia began shipping free grain to six African countries, as Putin had promised at the Russia-Africa summit in July. Except for Somalia, each of the recipients of Russia’s free grain—Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Eritrea, Mali, Somalia, and Zimbabwe—abstained from UN votes condemning Russia’s war in Ukraine or voted against the resolutions.

Global food prices reached an all-time high when Russia invaded Ukraine, and since this time, the United States has led the public diplomacy campaign to pin blame for the crisis rightfully on Moscow. From the G7 to the UN General Assembly to the African Union to countless other high-level engagements, the United States has decried Russia’s attacks on Ukraine’s agriculture sector, its blockade of Ukraine’s grain exports, and the malnutrition that has ensued worldwide. Washington has matched its rhetoric with new funding and programming to address rising food insecurity, including an expansion of Feed the Future to include eight new countries; increased donations to the UN World Food Programme (WFP), cementing the United States as the top donor (Russia is 44 on the list of top donors to the WFP); and the U.S. State Department’s announcement of a new initiative.
to improve production of nutritious crops in African countries, the Vision for Adapted Crops and Soils (VACS), for which $160 million has been pledged to date.16

The goal of these initiatives is to increase food security and nutrition among the world’s most vulnerable people and improve their countries’ agriculture systems, reducing their reliance on imports for their food security—with the additional benefit of diminishing the potential of countries like Russia to manipulate them through free and low-cost food. The extent to which the United States is aiming to counter Russian tactics through U.S. food security assistance is unclear. For example, no Feed the Future countries are located in North Africa or the Middle East, where Russia’s market share is growing fastest, though some VACS programming will target this region.17

Today’s global food security crisis is not only about the millions of innocent people around the world whose food security has deteriorated due to Russia’s invasion but also about attempts by Russia to manipulate these countries through its own exports. Further, diminishing countries’ vulnerability to Russian influence is not only about helping these countries through U.S. food security assistance but also about continuing to support the recovery of Ukraine’s agriculture sector from the effects of Russia’s war. The United States announced the Agriculture Resilience Initiative (AGRI) for Ukraine in mid-2022 and to date has pledged $350 million in support of the initiative.18 The United States is a top bilateral supporter of Ukraine’s demining efforts, and demining is a prerequisite to recommencing agricultural activity across thousands of acres of Ukraine’s farmland.19

While noteworthy, this assistance is a small fraction of the funding needed to rebuild Ukraine’s agriculture sector from Russia’s attacks and an even smaller fraction of total U.S. funding for Ukraine’s war efforts. Beyond continuing to support Ukraine’s defense capabilities through robust military assistance, Congress should direct more U.S. funding to Ukraine’s agriculture sector. Ukraine’s economic recovery hangs in the balance—along with food security for millions that rely on Ukrainian exports for food. Moreover, in the struggle to secure international opposition to Russia and support for Ukraine—particularly in the Global South—funding Ukraine’s agriculture sector increases Ukraine’s exports, weakening the potency of the “silent weapon” of Russia’s food.

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