

Grain Corridor Agreement and Turkey's Role in the Russia- Ukraine War

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ABSTRACT

On the morning of February 24, 2022, when the Russian military entered Ukraine and launched air and missile raids on the targets it detected in the depths of this country, a war started in the east of Europe. As a result of the war between two of the world's largest grain producers, a global grain crisis is taking place. Turkey has long sought to emphasize connectivity and strengthen its strategic position at the intercontinental crossroads between Europe and Asia. Functionally, Turkey serves as a vital transit corridor for key resources such as energy and food supplies, which becomes even more important given the economic and trade disruptions of Russia's war in Ukraine. This study analyzed Turkey's diplomatic efforts and policies during the war and the food deal process.

Keywords: grain corridor deal, food crisis, Ukraine-Russia War, Turkey

1. Introduction

The borderless characteristic of information technologies has affected not only open economies but also closed economies. Access to information easily and cheaply has increased the mobility of capital and people between countries and continents. After the 1980s, globalization and open policies pursued worldwide also started to affect the USSR. As a result of the developing economic and political events, the USSR started to implement the policies of Perestroika, which is called restructuring since the 1980s, and Glasnost, which is characterized as openness in 1985. These policies aimed to put an end to the economic and political problems of the USSR. However, these liberal policies implemented to harmonize with the world could not prevent the collapse of the USSR. On December 26, 1991, 15 states within the union declared their independence, and the USSR officially collapsed

(Ivshina, 2021). The strategic importance of Ukraine has further increased with the transfer of energy resources from the former Soviet geography to the West. With the increasing role of the energy sector in the Russian economy, Ukraine, as an energy corridor country, has become even more important for Russia.

On the other hand, Ukraine, which is not rich in natural gas and oil resources, depends on Russia in this field. Therefore, since Russia has energy resources and Ukraine is a transit country, the two countries have formed a mutual dependency relationship (Sözmez et al., 2015). The protests in Ukraine in November 2013 and the chaos that dominated the country escalated into a major crisis when Russia deployed its troops in Crimea. In March 2014, Crimea and Sevastopol declared their autonomy through a referendum and announced their annexation to Russia (Semercioğlu, 2016). On February 21, 2022,

Russian President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin took a radical decision that would affect the regional and international system and signed a historic document. With this document, Russia recognized Donetsk and Luhans' independence within Ukraine's borders (Soydan, 2022). On the morning of February 24, 2022, Russian troops entered Ukraine and carried out air and missile raids on the targets they detected in the depths of this country, which led to a conventional attack in the east of Europe. The Russian military intervention, which can be described as a war of aggression according to the law of war, means a breach of the United Nations (UN) Charter by a member state of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) tasked with keeping the peace (Aslan, 2022). Today, the food crisis caused by the Russia-Ukraine food war poses a serious food security problem for countries such as

Egypt, Algeria, Bangladesh and Nigeria, which import large quantities of wheat and are heavily dependent on the Russian and Ukrainian markets for imports (Acar, 2022). Turkey has long sought to emphasize the concept of connectivity and strengthen its strategic position at the transcontinental crossroads between Europe and Asia. Functionally, Turkey serves as a vital transit corridor for key resources such as energy and food supplies, which becomes even more important given the economic and trade disruptions of Russia's war in Ukraine. Institutionally, Turkey is a vital member of the NATO security bloc. However, it is a country that acts independently and sometimes in opposition to the position of its American and European partners, including its relations with countries such as Russia and Iran (Chausovsky, 2022).

In this study, firstly, the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine is mentioned. Then, it explains how an agreement was made for the conflict between two major grain-supplying countries, one of the most important causes of the grain crisis that emerged in the world, and how an agreement was made for evacuating these food products from the war zones. Finally, Turkey's diplomatic efforts and policies during

this war and the food agreement process are discussed.

2. The Process of the Russia-Ukraine War

Ukraine means a border country, an edge country. Russia sees Ukraine as a transit zone, a strategic barrier or a buffer zone separating Western countries from the Eastern bloc. Since Russia has rich energy resources and Ukraine is a grain country and a transit country, both countries are mutually dependent on each other (Yıldırım and Seyan, 2022).

The cold relationship between Russia and Ukraine came to the brink of war for the first time in 2014. With Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, other states that seceded from Russia also started to worry. On February 21, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that he recognized the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics in Ukraine as independent states, opening the door to war. It was announced that Russian troops had assumed the peacekeeping mission, and the following day, the Russian parliament authorized President Putin to use military force outside the country's borders (Hernandez, 2022; Derek, 2022). Following declaring a state of emergency across Ukraine, Russia launched a military operation in the Donbas region of Ukraine at 05:50 am local time on February 24, 2022 (Spokesperson, 2022). Explosions occurred in many country cities, including the capital Kyiv (Krasnolutska & Choursina, 2022). As Russian troops approached the capital Kyiv, a curfew was declared across the city, and more than half a million Ukrainians fled the country on the fourth day of the occupation (UN, 2022).

According to Sam Cranny-Evans of the Royal United Services Institute: "The key point here is that the Kremlin sees this region as the Russian-speaking part of Ukraine, more Russia than Ukraine". However, although Russian is spoken in these regions, they are no longer overwhelmingly pro-Russian. According to defense expert Konrad Muzyka, head of Rochan Consulting: "Mariupol was the most pro-Russian region in Ukraine" (Kirby, 2022). Although the

NATO threat justified Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the real reason was Russia's desire to regain lost territories (Nye, 2022).

The Russia-Ukraine war is a hot conflict that has changed regional and global balances. Although the war is regional, its economic and political effects spread worldwide. Firstly, the war between Russia and Ukraine led to the largest forced migration in Europe in the last 30 years, and millions of people had to leave their homes (Sacchi, 2022). During the current crisis period, many countries, especially the US and the EU, imposed sanctions against Russia in many areas, especially the economy (Yıldırım & Seyan, 2022).

On March 2, 2022, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the draft resolution condemning Russia with 141 votes against 5. Thirty-five countries abstained. The abstentions included China, India, South Africa, Vietnam, Pakistan and Kazakhstan. Then, on April 7, 2022, the UNSC voted to suspend Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council. In the vote attended by 172 out of 193 UN member states, 93 countries voted in favor and 24 against, while 58 countries abstained (Yücel, 2022).

3. Grain Corridor Agreement

On February 24, 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered a global food crisis because Ukraine is the world's fourth-largest grain

exporter. Russia is also one of the world's largest wheat exporters. Eritrea, Somalia, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Israel, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Yemen and Kenya, which are among the countries that largely meet their grain needs from Ukraine, are the countries most affected by the process (İstikbal, 2022).

According to the European Commission, Ukraine accounts for 10% of the world wheat market (Chart-1), 15% of the corn market and 13% of the barley market. It is also the most important country in the sunflower oil market, accounting for more than 50 percent of the global sunflower trade (Eisele, 2022). According to 2019 data, Ukraine has a total share of 7% in global wheat exports with 3.1 billion USD and ranks 10th in the world ranking. According to 2021 data, Russia's share in global wheat exports is 18%, with \$8.8 billion (Abay, 2022). Ukraine and Russia provide 40 percent of Africa's wheat needs. Before the war, Ukraine exported 95% of its grain through the Black Sea ports. More than 20 million tonnes of grain stocks in Ukrainian warehouses could not be offered to the global food trade due to the war. To eliminate the food supply imbalance caused by the war, the food corridor planned to be built in partnership with Turkey-Russia-Ukraine aims to deliver the grain in the warehouses to the world markets (İstikbal, 2022).

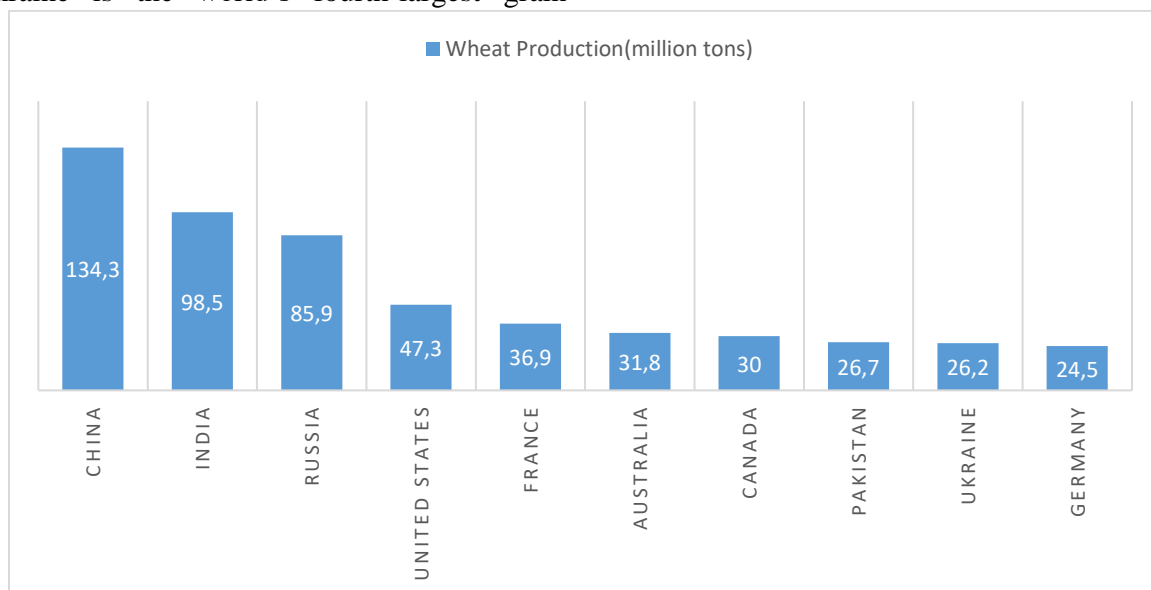


Chart 1: Total wheat production in the top ten countries 2021. (Data source: FAOSTAT.)

As a result of the limitation of ports due to the war, roads and railways were preferred. The European Union tried to support Ukraine's exports through the Baltic Sea and the Port of Constanta in Romania. However, Ukraine's railway wagons are wider than Europe's. It takes up to three weeks at the border to transfer grain from Ukrainian wagons to European wagons and reach Europe and the Baltic ports. This situation has resulted in the inability of the world's two most important grain producers to export their products and increased food prices (Cumhuriyet, 2022). Millions of people, especially in poor African countries, were denied access to food.

For four months, Turkey made intensive efforts to ensure safe passage through the Black Sea, the most important obstacle to exporting Ukrainian grain to the world. As a result of these efforts, on July 22, 2022, the "Agreement on the Safe Shipment of Grain and Foodstuffs through Ukrainian Ports" or the "Grain Corridor Agreement" was signed in Istanbul. The agreement was signed by Ukraine and Russia, as well as Turkey and the UN, in the form of two separate documents with the same content but without Russia and Ukraine coming together in the same document. The agreement was to be valid for four months, after which it was renewed without objections.

The agreement establishes three safe corridors through Black Sea ports. A Joint Coordination Centre will be established in Istanbul. This center will coordinate the safe passage of all merchant ships. It will consist of representatives of all parties and ensure that the cargo of ships using the grain corridor will be inspected at points to be established by Turkey with the participation of Russia. The Moscow administration has also agreed that the sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) will be applied to facilitate trade in wheat, fertilizer and other food products. Thus, the UN and Turkey signed a separate memorandum of understanding with Russia, paving the way for exporting food and fertilizer shipments without being subject to restrictions arising from existing

sanctions. The agreement covers the safe export of Russian food and fertilizers, so it will help prevent global food shortages and reduce food prices.

According to the agreement, food-laden ships will reach the Black Sea through mined ports via pilot ships and will be able to pass through the Black Sea on designated routes. Ukraine can start exports from the ports of Odesa, Pivdennyi and Chornomorsk, which are completely under its control. In the first phase, Ukraine will ship approximately 25 million tonnes of wheat to world markets. Russian President Vladimir Putin has stated that his country will be able to export about 50 million tonnes of wheat by the end of this year. All this has already led to a decline in global grain prices. The most important step to ensure the expected success of the agreement will be its proper implementation by Ukraine and Russia. However, there are some risks to the agreement and the efforts to alleviate the food crisis. At this point, in addition to properly implementing the agreement, Russia must stop its attacks on agricultural facilities and infrastructure. Russia's continued attacks and confiscation of Ukrainian farmers' crops could, first and foremost, lead to a significant decline in Ukrainian production in the coming production period, significantly limiting the agreement's success (Acer, 2022: 3).

4. Practicality of the Agreement

In line with the decision taken between Turkey, the United Nations, the Russian Federation and Ukraine as a result of the quadrilateral talks hosted by Turkey, the Black Sea Grain Corridor Agreement was extended for 120 days as of November 19, 2022 (BBC, 16.11.2022)

This agreement, which was eagerly awaited by the world, is of great importance in four aspects. First, the agreement has saved over 25 million tonnes of huge grain resources waiting in silos in Ukraine for a long time from rotting or being damaged. Since new crops are also waiting to be harvested in the fields throughout Ukraine, this development has prevented a great waste far

beyond what is visible in human history. Secondly, this development, attributed to the importance of overcoming the problems in the global food supply, paved the way for the transfer of the grains needed by the whole world to international markets securely. In this way, the world avoided a possible food shortage and a temporary solution was found to the supply shortage in global grain markets.

On the other hand, due to the disruptions in the food supply since the start of the war, global food prices increased by 34 percent compared to the same period of the previous year, according to data released by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation in March. For this reason, inflation in the food sector cannot be prevented in many countries worldwide. In this respect, global food inflation was curbed, at least for a while, thanks to the agreement reached by Russia and Ukraine through mediating actors. Finally, for Ukraine, whose economy suffered great damage from the war and entered a bottleneck, this agreement paved the way for some hot money inflow to the country. According to 2021 data, 41 percent of Ukraine's total exports of \$68 billion (\$28 billion) are agricultural products. Therefore, in an environment where exports have declined, and inflation has increased due to the war, this development will be a lifeline for the Ukrainian economy and farmers (Boyras, 2022).

5. Turkey's Diplomatic Policy

The Russia-Ukraine War, which started in February 2022 when Russia recognized the independence of the separatist Luhansk and

Donetsk regions, shook Europe's security and peace order. While the rise in oil and gas prices negatively affected global supply chains, many EU countries dependent on Russian gas, especially Germany, fundamentally changed their energy and economic policies (Bilgin Yıldız, 2022).

Turkey took a clear stance in principle against Russia's invasion of Ukrainian territory and maintained diplomatic relations with Russia to end the war. Turkey's basic approach in crises in which it is affected and cannot remain unresponsive or in which it is involved in some way is to observe principles and international norms even when taking sides. This policy has strengthened Turkey's policies and increased trust in Turkey (Öztop, 2022). The messages issued by some unions and countries showed how important Turkey's diplomatic policy was in overcoming the food crisis¹.

Since the beginning of the crisis, intensive diplomacy has been carried out by Turkey. On March 10, 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba met at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum. Subsequently, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu visited Lavrov and Kuleba in Moscow and Lviv. On March 29, 2022, the negotiating delegations of both sides met in Istanbul and held inter-delegation talks (Euronews, 2022).

Turkey's visit to Lviv was also necessary for Ankara's traditional balance policy in the context of the Ukraine-Russia war. In Sochi, Russia and

¹ European Union: "We commend Turkey for its important role in the grain corridor agreement."

African Union: "We welcome the signing of the agreement for the export of grain and agricultural products through the Black Sea under the auspices of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres."

US: "The United States welcomes this step. We thank UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Turkish President Erdogan for their diplomatic leadership in reaching this agreement."

UK: "It is vital that Ukraine's grain reaches the international food market. We applaud Turkey and the

United Nations Secretary-General for their efforts in securing this agreement."

Italy: "The agreements signed in Istanbul by Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and the UN are excellent news for the entire international community."

France: "We commend the agreement aimed at securing the export of Ukrainian grain via the Black Sea."

Sweden: "We thank United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for your efforts to alleviate the global food crisis."

Ukraine: President Volodymyr Zelensky expressed his gratitude to Erdoğan and Guterres for the agreement in Istanbul (Anadolu Agency, 23.07.2022).

Turkey demonstrated that they could develop their cooperation despite the war within the framework of the compartmentalization strategy. With the last visit, Ankara showed that it would maintain its Ukrainian policy (recognizing Ukraine's territorial integrity) despite its relations with Russia (Korkmaz, 2022).

There are three main reasons why Turkey has been a vital part of defense diplomacy in the Russia-Ukraine War. First and foremost, Turkey and Russia are cooperating and working together more than ever in the past in the field of defense, at the level of ministries and military institutions (including intelligence), with a special focus on Syria. The second important point in this regard is the rise of Turkey's defense industry in recent years. The drone support provided by Turkey to Ukraine before and during the war is one of the most important factors that prevented Russia from achieving a quick victory in the first phase of the war. The third issue is Turkey's geographical position, which has become strategically prominent again in the Russian-Ukrainian War. Turkey's clear implementation of Montreux, its role as a mediator in the war, and the occasional meeting of Russian and Ukrainian military officials through Turkey have made defense diplomacy even more important. In other words, not only diplomats came together in Istanbul, but also military officials came together frequently due to the war situation. The fact that Istanbul hosted negotiations, especially on the exchange of prisoners of war, and that the issues related to the safety of the grain corridor's navigation at sea were of military concern showed that defense diplomacy was a critical element (Yeşiltaş, 2022).

Turkey, under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has utilized both forms of engagement to strengthen its position as a regional power that does not fit neatly into either the pro-Western or the pro-Russian camp. Turkey supplies Ukraine with powerful weapons, including Bayraktar TB2 drones, which have been proven to help Ukrainian forces attack Russian positions. At the same time, Ankara did not join the Western sanctions

against Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Erdogan discussed expanding Turkish-Russian energy cooperation with Russian President Vladimir Putin during their meeting in Sochi, Russia, on August 5. Turkey serves as a conduit for non-Russian energy supplies to Europe through the Southern Gas Corridor, which the European Union seeks to expand to diversify away from Russian natural gas (Chausovsky, 2022).

6. Conclusion and Evaluation

Apart from the warring parties, Turkey has perhaps the largest share of the damage caused by the war between its two Black Sea neighbors because both belligerents are among the countries with which Turkey has significant economic relations and are also the first and third most important client countries for the tourism sector. On the other hand, the price increase in energy raw materials, which has risen considerably due to the war, is another negative for Turkey due to its external dependence in this field.

During the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Turkey has given a special position to its foreign policy within the framework of principles, national interests and international balances, thus reinforcing its role as the center of peace and diplomacy. Thanks to this special position, Turkey is expected to continue its rise in the coming period. The fact that a coordination center will be established in Istanbul to secure grain shipments within the agreement's scope reveals Russia and Ukraine's confidence in Turkey.

The international conjuncture has brought Turkey's long-standing strategy of becoming a center of international transit gas trade by taking advantage of its geographical location to Ankara's doorstep. With this project, Turkey could become an important gas hub (Gelen, 2022). The initiative to open a grain corridor in the Black Sea reveals that Turkey is critical in solving the global energy and food crisis. In this respect, it can be said that Turkey is one of the few actors in a geopolitical and geoeconomic

position to find solutions to the problems faced by both the rich industrialized countries and the poor underdeveloped countries. The fact that the final declaration of the G20 Summit expressed satisfaction with the grain corridor agreement brokered by Turkey and the UN reinforced Turkey's constructive role in global politics in the international community (Aksoy, 2022).

The most critical issue for Turkey is to be a facilitator and, if possible, a mediator by creating a basis for a compromise in the war and being among the guarantor countries. For now, we can say that Turkey's facilitation qualities have worked and created a ground that can be used for reconciliation. However, beyond mediation, Turkey's name is mentioned as a guarantor country in such a war, which is extremely different from others in scale. It reveals a situation that boldly underlines its strategic subjectivity.

Keeping the channels of dialogue open with the two warring countries, Russia and Ukraine, Turkey has been diplomatically striving to restore peace since the beginning of the conflict. Due to the sanctions and isolation policy against Russia, the number of countries that can set the diplomatic table to solve the problems caused by the war is limited. Turkey's pursuing a balanced foreign policy since the first days of the war and emphasizing that it could undertake the mission of being a mediator between the parties brought success in the grain corridor. It is expected that grain ships accompanied by the Turkish navy will be offered to the world markets through Turkey. It will have a positive impact on food prices both in the world and in Turkey. The possibility of increasing the supply, one of the solutions to the global food crisis, has been realized thanks to Turkey's diplomatic success. As a result, as a reflection of Turkey's diplomatic initiatives, the Ukrainian grain corridor could reduce global food inflation. While African and West Asian countries stand out as the countries most positively affected by the process, Turkey can contribute more to the peace negotiations between the parties. Turkey's strategic interconnectedness approach has yielded

significant benefits, allowing Ankara to unlock vital food supplies and increase its diplomatic prestige.

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