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Seeds of strife

The grain conflict is undermining Ukrainian-Polish relations. Yet, Poland will continue to support its neighbour — also for its own national security

At the end of May 2022, in response to Russia's aggression and the blockade of Ukrainian maritime trade, the European Union decided to temporarily liberalise trade with Ukraine. The rationale for this decision, besides wanting to help Ukraine, was to secure the supply of agricultural goods to third countries that were traditional importers of Ukrainian grain. As a result, from June of the same year, Ukraine was able to export its grain to Poland unhindered.

At the same time, there was a series of events in Poland that led to Ukrainian imports flooding the domestic market. With the sharp increase in world prices for grain in summer 2022, many Polish farmers decided to temporarily stop selling their agricultural products. This resulted in a temporary deficit in the domestic market and saw Polish companies start to buy grain from Ukraine.

From June 2022 to May 2023, Poland imported a total of 4.5 million tonnes of grain and oilseed from Ukraine, of which around 3.5 million tonnes were not exported to third countries but remained in Poland. Moreover, in 2022, Poland itself had a high yield of 35 million tonnes of grain and oilseed.

A grain scandal

Once wheat prices returned to the levels seen before the Russian invasion, and continued to fall, Polish farmers, who had storehouses full of unsold crops from previous years, began to protest against Ukrainian imports.

The Polish farmers' grievances regarding Ukrainian grain boil down to the fact that Ukrainian producers are not obliged to meet all the environmental and other requirements stipulated by the EU, making their products by definition cheaper and thus putting Polish farmers at a

disadvantage.

The Polish public considers grain shipped from Ukraine to be of inferior quality and even harmful.

Moreover, in April 2023, a scandal broke out in Poland over the import of what was referred to as 'technical grain' (grain that is not intended for consumption but, for instance, for producing heating pellets or biofuels) from Ukraine. Altogether, around 230 000 tonnes of this type of grain and oilseed had been imported into the country (around 6.5 per cent of the total import volume). Yet, inspections revealed that there were cases of this grain continuing to be sold as food or fodder. The release of this information sparked what was dubbed the grain scandal in Poland.

In addition, the media has quoted anonymous sources, allegedly stating that the Polish authorities had found banned contaminants in 35 per cent of grain imported from Ukraine. As a result, the Polish public considers grain shipped from Ukraine to be of inferior quality and even harmful. Subsequently, the Polish government imposed a unilateral ban on exports to Poland, while permitting transit through its territory.

Unfortunately, Ukraine's government agencies and the Ukrainian Embassy in Poland did not respond to the Polish media's accusations regarding the quality of Ukrainian grain, which further strengthened the regime of disinformation.

Campaign fervour

In addition to the direct demands from what are estimated to be 1.3 million Polish farmers, the internal political situation in the country also impacted the Polish government's decision. In October 2023, parliamentary elections were held in Poland, which resulted in the conservative 'Law and Justice' (PiS) party returning to opposition after eight years in power. The party's main election opponents – the 'Civic Coalition' alliance led by Donald Tusk and Szymon Hołownia's 'Poland 2050' – actively commented on the situation regarding the grain market during their election campaigns, employing it as a tool in the battle for farmers' votes. The Civic Coalition also made activist Michał Kołodziejczak – with his calls for the protection of Polish farmers – one of its leading candidates.

The elections resulted in the main political forces becoming partners in the new ruling coalition (together with 'The Left' alliance or 'Lewica')

and Kołodziejczak was named Poland's deputy minister of agriculture and rural development. After Tusk's appointment as prime minister and his first meeting with the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, he announced that Brussels had complete understanding for Poland's position regarding the import of grain and oilseed from Ukraine and the ban imposed by his predecessors would remain in force.

The 2023 parliamentary elections were just the beginning of Poland's election marathon, with local government elections slated for 7 April 2024, followed by the European elections in June. The Civic Platform signalled that the protection of farmers' rights would be one of the main campaign issues.

In response to the radicalisation of the protest actions, after some delay due to a conflict of interest, the Polish government attempted to unblock the border with Ukraine.

Polish law does not expressly ban mass gatherings on or near roads or near border crossings. Moreover, because Poland was in an interim period between governments from November to December 2023, the authorities did not legally seek an end to the border blockade. Polish legislation on freedom of assembly stipulates that a public meeting or protest action *can* be prohibited *if* it poses a significant threat to human life or property or *if* its participants breach the provisions of the Criminal Code. Thus, a precedent had been set for the use of an effective (from a policy point of view) and accessible means of exerting pressure on the authorities, which Poland may well see repeated. And the tense and emotional context around Ukrainian grain imports, fuelled by disinformation, created favourable conditions for provocation incited by external forces.

The farmers' protest was joined by 'Confederation'. This far-right political alliance incited the protestors to continue the border blockade, organised the transport of protestors from various regions across Poland to the places of protest, and even repeatedly spread misinformation about the quality and alleged systematic illegal import of Ukrainian grain.

In addition to the legal protest actions, there was further provocation, first with grain being spilled from Ukrainian trucks and then railcars. The perpetrators of the attacks have not yet been identified, although Polish commentators are of the opinion that they may have been incited by external forces and agents of the Russian Federation.

In response to the radicalisation of the protest actions, after some delay due to a conflict of interest, the Polish government attempted to unblock the border with Ukraine, announcing that checkpoints were to be added to the list of critical infrastructure around which mass gatherings are prohibited. So far, however, no active steps have been taken to disband the border protest. Indeed, it is distinctly possible that these border tensions will continue until the local elections.

Despite the open conflict between the two countries over the supply of agricultural commodities, Polish officials support and will continue to support the provision of Western military assistance to Ukraine.

Ukrainian proposals to hold a meeting at the border to resolve the dispute had no real chance of success, especially given the ongoing election period in Poland and the emotional context around the export of Ukrainian agricultural products, which prevails. Because of the emotional atmosphere created around this issue, it will be difficult to reinstate Ukrainian exports to the country in the near future. However, in the interests of the Ukrainian farmers, it is important to at least make grain transit secure. According to information from Ukraine's Ministry of Agrarian Policy and Food, Ukraine exports 11 per cent of its grain and oilseed by rail and just 2–3 per cent by road. The lion's share of this has to be transported via Poland.

At the same time, the grain crisis, along with the transport operators' protest before it, confirms the general pattern of relations between Ukraine and Poland since 1991: short periods of significant improvement, interrupted by a crisis, followed by a cooling period. This time, however, because of the war in Ukraine, the cooling of relations will not mean a reduction in military support.

The grain crisis also signals that attempts to undermine Ukrainian-Polish relations will continue, capitalising on the problem of historical memory or exploiting the issue of economic competition or Ukrainian migrant workers and refugees in Poland. It also means that in negotiations about Ukraine's accession to the EU, Poland (and other interested countries) will demand transition periods before the full opening of the EU markets to Ukraine, and Ukrainian negotiators should be prepared for this.

The Polish-Ukrainian grain crisis was the result of the Polish authorities being unprepared for the increase in imports from Ukraine, insufficient action on the part of the Ukrainian government to prevent conflict, and Poland's domestic political dynamics. It is a complex situation. However, despite the open conflict between the two countries over the supply of

agricultural commodities, Polish officials support and will continue to support the provision of Western military assistance to Ukraine. This is not least in acknowledgement of the fact that Ukrainian defence capabilities are an important component of Polish national security. Poland will also make efforts to ensure the security of military supplies to Ukraine, although, given the increase in anti-Ukrainian actions, it will need to employ more staff to do so.



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