Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 12.08.2015 www.osw.waw.pl

The Kremlin steps up the fight against contraband foodstuffs

Maria Domańska, Katarzyna Chawryło

On 29 July, Vladimir Putin signed a decree ordering the destruction of foods subject to Russian 'countersanctions' which have been illegally imported into Russia. On 6 August, the first day of the decree, nearly 320 tons of food confiscated at the border were destroyed as a demonstration. It was announced at the same time that this procedure will be repeated daily. According to official statements, previously part of the smuggled food had been destroyed without publicity, and other transports had been turned back from the border.

Formally, the authorities' goal is to deal with contraband, in order to show consistent compliance with the embargo on food imports from a number of countries; and also to defend the economic interests of the state, as well as out of concern for the health of Russian citizens. Official propaganda has highlighted the danger from smuggled food (including its contamination with African swine fever viruses prevalent in Europe, and excess pesticides).

Representatives of the Orthodox Church and the Presidential Council for Human Rights criticised the move, appealing for the food to be distributed to the needy. The CIMES survey centre, researching the mood among Internet users, stated that 87% of respondents opposed the waste of food. An online petition to the President to revoke the decree has been signed by 340,000 people.

Commentary

- Although smuggling has been taking place on a large scale since the embargo on food imports was introduced in August 2014, it is doubtful that sealing the border was the government's real or ultimate objective. It seems more likely that the initiative is primarily political in nature: a demonstration of Russia's determination in its 'sanctions war' with the West, and at the same time an instrument of pressure on Western food exporters, who have so far managed to circumvent the embargo (thanks to the falsification of documents relating to the goods' origins), in the hope that they will lobby more intensively for the abolition of anti-Russian sanctions.
- It is also likely that in conditions of economic crisis the presidential decree will serve as a convenient tool in the growing conflict for sources of corrupt income among the supervisory bodies competent in the field of exploiting contraband: the Veterinary and Phytosanitary Supervision Service (*Rossielkhoznadzor*), the Consumer Protection Service (*Rospotriebnadzor*) and the Customs Service. The roots of this conflict could include the

lack of a precise delimitation of each body's competences in implementing the government's regulations. The showy destruction of the food may be a propaganda action which *de facto* aims to narrow the group of beneficiaries from the illegal trade which means higher costs for smuggling, both for exporters and Russian consumers (the food products will likely continue to find their way onto the Russian market under the control of government agencies, just at higher prices).

- Initial reactions from the Russian public show that the Kremlin has failed to win the social approval it expected. The destruction of the food has met with incomprehension and opposition from the general public. More and more Russians are unable to afford basic food items, and the revenue of over 15% of the population is below the subsistence level. Moreover, the destruction of food is seen as immoral in the Russian cultural context, which is largely due to traumatic experiences of Soviet times, including the memory of the camps.