Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 3.11.2022 www.osw.waw.pl

Russia returns to the grain deal

Iwona Wiśniewska

On 2 November, President Vladimir Putin announced that he had ordered Russia to resume its participation in the Black Sea Initiative, an agreement to export Ukrainian grain via a secure corridor through the Black Sea. He justified this by saying Kyiv had, as Moscow had demanded, guaranteed that it would not use the route to attack Russian ships and vessels. At the same time, he warned that Russia could withdraw from the agreement at any time if Ukraine violated these conditions. He maintained that in such a situation, Russia would deliver grain free of charge to those of the poorest countries that would otherwise not be able to receive it from Ukraine. Putin further declared that even if the Russian Federation left the Black Sea Initiative again, it would not interfere with the export of Ukrainian grain to Turkey. However, no document confirming the Ukrainian guarantees has yet been published, and their scope remains unknown. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy commented ironically that the Russian plea for security guarantees from Ukraine – after eight months of aggression against it – is a sure sign of the Kremlin's failure.

Earlier Moscow suspended its participation in the grain agreement on 29 October, claiming that Kyiv had used the sea corridor to attack Russian warships in Sevastopol. The Kremlin demanded an international investigation into the matter, and the removal of all restrictions hindering the sale abroad of food and fertilisers from Russia (see '*Russia: renewed blockade of Ukrainian grain exports by sea*').

Russia's decision to halt its participation in the agreement met international criticism, particularly from Western countries. Turkey and the UN – which have vested interests in Ukrainian exports continuing – have undertaken intensive diplomatic efforts to alleviate the situation. Between 31 October and 1 November, there were talks between the heads of the foreign & defence ministries of Turkey and Russia, a conversation between Presidents Putin and Erdoğan, along with a meeting between the deputy foreign minister of the Russian Federation and the Turkish ambassador. In the meantime, Ankara, the UN and Kyiv decided to continue exporting grain despite Moscow's objections, in line with the schedule which had been approved before Russia suspended its participation in the agreement. During this time, the UN representatives kept insisting that none of the vessels transporting grain could be used to launch attacks on the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, and asserted that at the time of the attack (the night of 29 October) none of them was in the 'security corridor'. In addition, during its talks with Russia, Turkey offered its assistance with exporting agricultural products and mineral fertilisers, products which Moscow claims still face restrictions from foreign businesses. Reportedly, the talks also covered new Russian-Turkish joint investment projects, including the construction of nuclear power plants in

Turkey.

Commentary

- It is unclear why Russia returned to the grain deal so quickly, despite failing to get its demands met. It seems that the Kremlin, when deciding to suspend its participation, once again underestimated how its foreign partners would react. The intense diplomatic action undertaken by Turkey and the UN, and above all their decision to continue exporting Ukrainian grain despite Moscow's objections, were likely the most effective steps. Moscow found itself in a very difficult position: it was unable to block the movement of the ships since attacking them could have triggered a conflict with Ankara, as well as criticism from the countries of the global South. In conditions of tightening Western sanctions, Russia has a vested interest in ensuring that both Turkey and the Global South maintain a benevolent neutrality toward Russia's conflict with Ukraine. The harsh reaction from the West may also have contributed to the change in its position. The Kremlin seems to be interested in political talks with the US, and the upcoming G20 summit (to be held on 15–16 November in Indonesia) could provide an opportunity for this. The escalation of the dispute over Ukrainian agricultural exports must have only deepened Washington's aversion to contacts with Putin.
- The decision to return to the agreement was taken in a narrow circle within the Kremlin, probably including the head of the defence ministry, Sergei Shoigu. No steps were taken to prepare public opinion, which caused chaos in Russian propaganda. Presidential spokesman Dmitri Peskov continued to insist to the press that Russia would not return to the agreement unless all its conditions were met – in contradiction to the communiqué already published by the defence ministry, which was the first to announce the unblocking of Ukrainian grain exports. Regime media criticised Russia's return to the agreement (albeit without any direct references to Putin), mostly suggesting that the move could be seen as a sign of weakness from Russia and a success for Turkey. They were particularly unhappy about Russia having to rely on guarantees from Ukraine.
- The return to the implementation of the grain agreement represents another success for Turkish diplomacy, and demonstrates Turkey's growing importance to Russia. Thanks to its stance, Ankara has not only managed to convince Moscow to return to the agreement, but has also obtained additional concessions, such as the announcement that Russia will not interfere in future deliveries of Ukrainian grain to Turkey; it is also possible that Ankara could act as an intermediary in the trade of Russian agricultural products. In this way, Turkey is taking deft advantage of its partner's difficult position to maximise its own profits.
- However, Russia's return to the agreement might not last long. The agreement was concluded for only 120 days, and will expire on 19 November. The Kremlin's numerous criticisms of its functioning indicate that Russia may not extend it, or will demand further concessions – not only from Turkey, but mainly from the West (such as easing the sanctions) – in exchange for keeping it in force. On the other hand, the crisis in recent days shows that Moscow has limited room for manoeuvre, and even if it does not formally agree to extend the agreement, Ukrainian agricultural products will most likely continue to be exported via Turkey.