

## Feature



# The battle of narratives around the food crisis

From: Josep Borrell

**R**ussia's war against Ukraine threatens to create a global wave of hunger. We must urgently enable Ukraine to export its grains through the Black Sea. We also see a "battle of narratives" around Russian grains and fertilizer exports.

While our sanctions do not target these exports, we are ready to work with the UN and our partners to prevent any unwanted impact on global food security.

For several decades, hunger was declining and the international community committed to end it globally by 2030 with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) adopted in 2015.

However, since then, the number of undernourished people had stopped decreasing and the COVID-19 pandemic had already made things much worse.

The World Food Program (WFP) estimates that this number has risen from 132 million people before the COVID-19 pandemic to 276 million in early 2022 and 323 million today.

The unjustified and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine puts the world in danger of a famine affecting hundreds of millions of people.

Even before Putin's war against Ukraine, we were losing ground in the global fight against hunger.

Now, this unjustified and unprovoked war puts the world in danger of a famine affecting hundreds of millions of people.

According to the UN Global Crisis Response Group, 1.2 billion people - one in six of the world's population - are living in 'perfect-storm' countries

that are severely exposed to the combination of rising food prices, rising energy prices and tightening financial conditions.

Ukraine, one of the most important "breadbaskets" of the planet

For decades, Ukraine has been indeed one of the most important "breadbaskets" of the planet. Today, Putin's troops shell, mine and occupy arable land of Ukraine, attack farm equipment, warehouses, markets, roads, bridges in Ukraine and block Ukraine's ports, preventing the export of millions of tons of grain to global markets.

Russia turned the Black Sea into a war zone, blocking shipments of grain and fertilizer from Ukraine but also affecting Russian merchant shipping.

Russia is also applying quotas and taxes on its grain exports. Russia's conscious political choice is to 'weaponise' these exports and use them as a tool for blackmail against anyone that opposes its aggression.

Food prices, that were already affected by the pandemic and climate change, have never been as high as today in real terms and many experts warn that the worst is yet to come.

As a result, food prices, that were already affected by the pandemic and climate change, have never been as high as today in real terms.

It has major consequences for many low-income countries and for the World Food Program, which has already had to reduce its interventions in several regions.

Many experts warn that the worst is yet to come if Ukrainian exports remain blocked until the next harvest.

Meanwhile, several



**Josep Borrell, Vice-President of the European Commission**

countries have introduced unilateral restrictions on their own agricultural exports, while others are seeking to build up stocks, exacerbating the problems on world markets.

Higher energy costs and a loss of fertilizer supply have led to fertilizer prices rising even faster than food prices.

Because of this, the price for rice, the most consumed staple in the world, which up to now has low prices, could increase significantly and global food production may not be able to meet rising demand.

The UN has warned for "a food catastrophe of global proportions in 2023".

## An absolute urgency to act

There is an absolute urgency to act. With our member states, we are putting together emergency relief.

As Team Europe, we have pledged €1 billion for the Sahel and Lake Chad regions and over €600 million for the Horn of Africa.

We put in place a €225 million food facility to assist our partners in North Africa - the region most de-

pendent of food supplies from Ukraine and Russia.

More structurally, we will also spend €1.5 billion to help develop sustainable food systems in the Eastern and Southern neighborhood, the Western Balkans and Turkey, until 2024.

We are also acting within the G7, the G20, the World Bank and the IMF, to increase their commitment to the countries most in need via emergency financial support, additional debt relief, the emission of new Special Drawing Rights and other instruments.

We fully support the efforts in that direction by the UN Secretary General within the Global Crisis Response Group.

To avoid a global food calamity, the top priority remains to stop the war and get Russian troops out of Ukraine.

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This is the aim of the EU's massive support to Ukraine and of the restrictive measures we are applying with our allies against Putin's regime.

However, we have never targeted Russian agricultural and fertilizer exports. EU sanctions do not prohibit Russia to export any agricultural goods, payment for such Russian exports or the provision of seeds, provided that sanctioned individuals or entities are not involved.

EU sanctions have also no extraterritorial application, i.e. they do not create obligations for non-EU operators, unless their business is conducted at least partly within the EU.

We are fully aware that there is a "battle of narratives" around this issue. Senegal's President Macky Sall, who chairs the African Union, has talked in partic-

ular about difficulties that African countries encounter on this subject following his recent meeting with Vladimir Putin in Sochi and at the OECD ministerial meeting.

Last Saturday, I spoke about this issue with Aissata Tall Sall, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Senegal.

On Tuesday, I met also UNCTAD Secretary General Rebeca Grynspan and talked with UN Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths, both in charge of the UN-sponsored negotiations about facilitating grain and fertilizer exports out of Russia and reopening export routes for Ukrainian grains.

And, on Thursday, I met with the ambassadors to the UN from the African group following my address to the UN Security Council.

We are ready to work with the UN and partners to prevent any unwanted impacts of our sanctions on global food security.

I assured all my interlocutors that we are ready to work with the UN and partners in preventing any unwanted impacts of our sanctions on global food security.

We are in close contact with the UN to look into issues such as market avoidance and over compliance which could affect purchases of Russian grain or fertilisers.

We are ready to discuss these matters through experts in order to identify concrete obstacles including possible difficulties in payments, and to work towards solutions.

I have also instructed EU ambassadors in our African partner countries to discuss with the authorities all relevant aspect of the present situation on payments.

Differentiate between concrete problems and the Kremlin's disinformation

I urged my African interlocutors to differentiate be-

tween concrete problems and the Kremlin's disinformation.

When the Russian propaganda machine claims that we are responsible for the food crisis, this is nothing but cynical lies, like many others that this machine has been spreading for many years.

The cynicism of that posture was obvious when Russia bombed Ukraine's second largest grain silo in Mykolaiv, just a couple of days after President Sall spoke with President Putin in Sochi.

All those who want to limit the global food crisis should above all help us to increase the pressure on Russia to stop its war of aggression.

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In the meantime, we continue to help Ukraine to export agricultural products by other routes than the Black Sea through our "Solidarity Lanes Action Plan".

We are working with market players to make additional freight rolling stock, vessels and lorries available.

We are facilitating border checks of agri-food products, and we will make storage facilities of member states available for Ukrainian grains.

As we did last March for the electricity network, we must accelerate the integration of the Ukrainian railway network into the European system, although this certainly poses difficulties because of the differences in rail gauge.

The imperative to allow Ukrainian exports by ship to resume

However, we must face the facts: none of these alternatives can provide a sufficient flow of exports in the short term.

It is therefore imperative to allow Ukrainian exports by ship to resume.

We are working closely with the UN on this issue and the EU and its member states are ready to do their part of the necessary actions to achieve this.

We hope that a solution can be found in the coming days. Not doing this threatens to cause a global food catastrophe.

The writer is the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission

**"The war of aggression against Ukraine puts the world in danger of a famine affecting hundreds of millions of people. We must urgently enable Ukraine to export its grains. We are also ready to work to prevent any unwanted impact of our sanctions on global food security."**

**JOSEP BORRELL**

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of people. According to the UN Global Crisis Response Group, 1.2 billion people – one in six of the world's population – are living in 'perfect-storm' countries that are severely exposed to the combination of rising food prices, rising energy prices and tightening financial conditions.

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As a result, food prices, that were already affected by the pandemic and climate change, have never been as high as today in real terms. It has major consequences for many low-income countries and for the Horn of Africa. We put in place a €225 million food facility to assist our partners in North Africa – the region most dependent of food supplies from Ukraine and Russia. More structurally, we will also spend €1.5 billion to help develop sustainable food systems in the Eastern and Southern neighborhood, the Western Balkans and Turkey, until 2024.

We are also acting within the G7, the G20, the World Bank and the IMF, to increase their commitment to the countries most in need via emergency financial support, additional debt relief, the emission of new Special Drawing Rights and other instruments. We fully support the efforts in that direction by the UN Secretary General within the Global Crisis

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