

Kremlin disinformation on food shortages



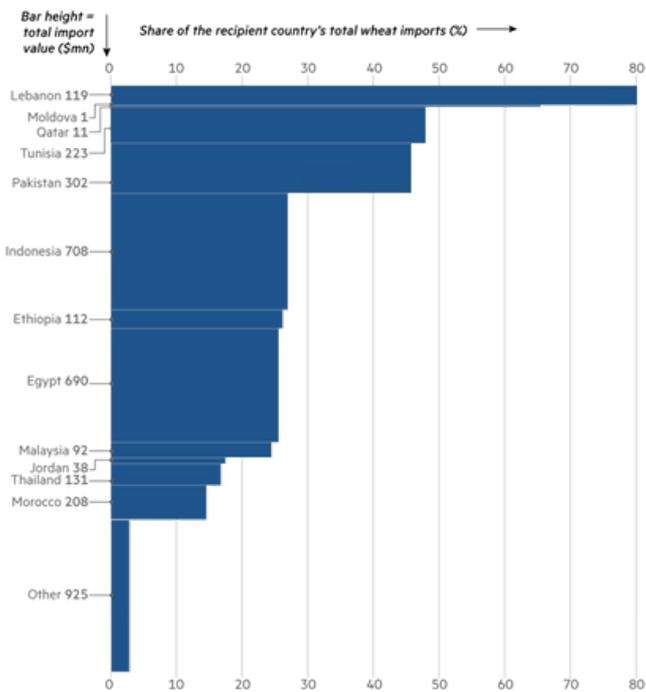
THE UKRAINE WAR AND FOOD INSECURITY

- War is usually accompanied by food insecurity; general destruction, the inability of farmers to properly plant and harvest crops due to threat to life and service in the conflict impacts the availability of food.
- Ukraine and Russia's positions as major global agricultural powers (see right) means that the food insecurity accompanying the Ukraine War is being felt on a global scale.
- The Kremlin has relied on several African and Middle-Eastern states for diplomatic support during its invasion, many of which are dependent on food imports from Ukraine and Russia (see right). In order to prevent damaging its relations (and diplomatic protection) with these states, the Kremlin has engaged in a targeted disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the food insecurity onto the West.

STATISTICS

- Ukraine exports 4.5 million tones of agricultural produce per month through its ports.
- 20 million tones of grain are currently stuck in Ukraine.
- 50 countries depend on Russia and Ukraine for at least 30% of their wheat import and, of these, 36 countries source over 50% of their wheat from the two countries.

Countries most dependent on Ukrainian wheat exports



Source: Comtrade © FT Data from 2020 except for Tunisia which are from 2019

Countries dependent on Ukrainian wheat exports. Source: Financial Times

FACT CHECK ON FOOD SHORTAGES

- Multiple Russian officials have argued that Western Sanctions have prevented Russia from exporting wheat, fueling shortages.
 - The current sanctions designed to curb Russia's aggressive and illegal behavior in Ukraine have not been applied to agricultural exports.
 - Evidence suggests that, as part of its campaign to conquer Ukraine, Russia has been actively targeting food storages, stealing harvest and farm equipment, destroying food processing and transport capacities and blocking the Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea to prevent the export of Ukrainian grain in order to weaken food supplies within Ukraine and degrade Ukraine's economy.
- The Kremlin has also asserted that the West's contribution of weapons to Ukraine are prolonging the conflict and leading to further devastation so that the West (and particularly the US) can make a profit (a narrative backed by the Chinese Communist Party).
 - This narrative is designed to shift blame for current food insecurity and undermine opinion of the US's commitment to Ukraine. But the US has instituted a lend-lease program (essentially making weapons free of charge) and increased its aid to Ukraine. Suggesting it still firmly supports Ukraine.
- Vasyl Nebenzya, Russia's envoy to the UN, has accused the Ukrainian government of selling grain to the West for weapons, allowing its people and countries dependent on Ukrainian wheat to risk hunger.
 - No evidence has been presented to corroborate this claim, but evidence has been presented that the Kremlin has been stealing exports and transporting them to its own allies like Syria.

TRACTION

- So far, the Kremlin's disinformation has gained limited traction in Africa. The EU and the African Union agreed on a united message on food security which places the blame for disruptions to food supply squarely on the Kremlin's invasion.
- However, some experts believe some pro-Russia disinformation narratives about the war in Ukraine have found resonance in Southeast Asia; successfully tapping into existing anti-US and anti-West sentiments.
- The Kremlin will likely continue to build on the food crisis it has engineered to strengthen relations in Asia, Africa and Latin America (with the aid of the CCP). Among other things, Moscow pushes the message to developing countries in need of grain that "Russia's friends will not be left behind".