



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Russia sets grain deal conditions - a strategy of pressure with no prospect of success



Russia, with its old diplomatic tactic of escalation followed by de-escalation, has agreed to extend the Black Sea grain deal beyond March 18. But on its terms.

This agreement has been extended for another two months instead of four, thus halving the original agreement from July last year, reached under the auspices of the UN, that the arrangement be renewed every 120 days.

Ukraine has noted this change in the grain deal, the only successful compromise reached after more than a year of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

However, due to the survival of this important agreement, objections were left aside.

Moscow could be satisfied with that, because the export of Ukrainian grain through Black Sea ports has been one of the few, if not the only area where Russia could play a negotiating role on the international stage. But at the same time, it could be a blackmailing role.

Russia's tightening conditions will continue

Last July, with the mediation of the UN and Turkey, the Black Sea grain deal resolved the global crisis in grain supply, shortages in underdeveloped areas of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and calmed the rampant food prices on the world market.

Since the beginning of the agreement, an estimated 24 million tons of Ukrainian products, mostly grain, have been transported from Black Sea ports.

This greatly eased the global food crisis, given that the warring countries are among the world's largest producers. Together, they make up about 30% of the world wheat market and even 75% of the sunflower oil market.

Tensions over the extension of the grain deal is not a surprise, nor is it happening for the first time. There is every chance it will continue in mid-May, when the two-month deadline for the implementation of the agreement expires.

At the time of the expiry of the first 120-day deadline for the implementation of the Black Sea Agreement last November, Russia also set the conditions for its extension.

Russia threatened to pull out of the agreement over a drone attack on the port city of Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia annexed in 2014. However, under the persuasion of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Moscow remained part of the deal.

The latest tensions and shortening of the validity of the deal from 120 to 60 days indicate that Russia will continue to use the grain deal as a weapon for its policy.

Russia's previous opposition was caused by military events on the front, so it would not be surprising if Moscow abused the food export agreement for some military or political concessions.

New conditions for a truce

It is typical that at the same time as the tensions surrounding the Black Sea grain deal, Russia also conditions the ceasefire in Ukraine by removing economic sanctions against it.

Without fanfare; more like a trial balloon, the Kremlin launched a new condition for a ceasefire in Ukraine through its Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin - the lifting of all sanctions imposed against its leaders and companies, as well as "withdrawal of lawsuits and suspension of prosecution against Russia, its individuals and companies".

The latter certainly refers to the recent indictment against Vladimir Putin before the International Criminal Court and a warrant for his arrest.

In combination with the tensions over the Black Sea grain deal, these new Russian conditions for reaching a ceasefire in Ukraine outline the direction of Moscow's new possible strategy for getting out of the Ukrainian crisis that it activated.

It would not be a surprise, nor the first time, that Russia would try to use the food export arrangement for its political and military goals in Ukraine.

Earlier, at the beginning of the aggression, Russia tried to achieve this by blackmailing the European market with supplies and the price of energy, but that plan failed due to the rapid release of European consumers from dependence on Russian gas and oil.

Who needs a grain deal?

The Black Sea grain deal remains the only desirable, but also possible ground, on which Moscow could still condition international factors.

This conditioning, in addition to the military and political, is also important for Russia as a form of pressure to relax the sanctions on grain and fertiliser exports, regardless of the

fact that its exports have even increased in the past year. Grain exports have risen by as much as 12%.

However, Russia's expectations that it would have room to increase pressure have not been particularly realistic. When Russia accepted the deal last summer, its positions on the front were much stronger than they are today, therefore its negotiating (blackmailing) capacity was greater.

The introduction of new conditions for a truce, such as those on sanctions and the withdrawal of charges before the ICC, presented by a senior Russian diplomat, speaks only of a willingness to bargain, not of real bargaining power.

"Moscow needs its grain deal partners far more than they need it, which makes it hard for the Kremlin to put pressure on anyone", assessed Alexandra Prokopenko from the German Council on Foreign Relations.

Russia has become a purely technical party to the agreement. Its partners could extend the deal even without Russia's consent, making Moscow look even more feeble on the international stage," Prokopenko wrote for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.