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Ukraine, conflict

### **Ukraine: The entanglement of conflict and food insecurity**

As we've seen in the media, Ukraine, a country in Eastern Europe, has been invaded with violence by its neighboring country, Russia, for the last two years. Known as the "breadbasket" of the world, Ukraine is located just southwest of Russia with 43 million people living on 233,100 square miles of land, which compares to the size of Texas (The World Factbook, 2023). Ukraine is known for its grain production, which is exported all over the world and especially to underdeveloped countries, particularly through boat trade routes such as the Black Sea ports. This paper will explore the Russian Invasion of Ukraine and how the conflict affects agriculture, food security, and life in Ukraine.

Having broken off from the Soviet Union when it collapsed in 1991, Ukraine has a republic form of government with a president and prime minister at the head of the country (globalEDGE, 2024). Seventy percent of Ukrainians live in urban areas, whereas 30% live in rural areas (The World Factbook, 2023). As of now, 55% of the land is used for agriculture; however, the country has much untapped potential with 70% of the land being tillable (Foreign Agricultural Service, 2022) with rich soil and its temperate climate. Ukraine is well known for all sorts of agricultural and natural resources production, but mainly grains such as wheat and barley, along with natural gas and sunflower oil.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has long had his eye on Ukraine in part due to its vast agricultural potential, but also to create a Russian empire with no democracies surrounding it. Since the breakup of the USSR, Putin has been working to regain what he calls "true Russia" (Dickinson, 2024) by attempting to take over countries that had been part of the Union, starting with Ukraine and in the future potentially Belarus, Poland, and other surrounding nations. None of these countries ever did "belong" to Russia, but that hasn't stopped President Putin. Putin's troops have been invading the Crimean Peninsula of Ukraine for the last 10 years. For the last two years, they've been invading the entire country and initiating violence in every region of the nation.

The violence has affected every aspect of life for Ukrainian citizens. Homes have been destroyed, their food supply and therefore the economy has been hurt, and many have had to flee their homes and sometimes even their own country for their safety. The Russian Invasion has also affected the world beyond Ukraine's borders. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program shows that the world is currently living in the most conflict-affected time since its records began in 1975.

The average Ukrainian farm size is 50-100 hectares (120-250 acres) (Transnational Institute, 2024), and a typical family is comprised of two to three people. In most Ukrainian homes you will see a single main room with an attached kitchen that is partially outdoors and connected to an entryway holding storage for food or linens. The Ukrainian diet consists of many root vegetables. Cabbage, beets, potatoes, and carrots are common in most Ukrainian dishes, especially during the frigid winter months. Honey, dairy, cheese, and meats are also often enjoyed (Davis, 2018). They purchase food from supermarkets and farmer's markets, and they grow produce. They cook dishes by frying or boiling followed by stewing or baking, tending not to use many spices. The national dish of Ukraine is red borscht, a beet soup.

As for employment, the most popular occupations currently are builders, utility workers, and drivers with an average salary of \$6,396 annually. The most popular fields of employment are agriculture, trade and industry, health care, and education. While Ukrainian citizens do have free education for ages 6-15 and free healthcare, there are not always funds to provide it. While healthcare is free, often particular

treatments and medications are not approved and must be paid for by the patient. Since September 2022, 75% of Ukrainian schools have not been able to offer full-time, in-person education (World Factbook, 2024).

Since the war, Russia has been denying Ukrainians the human right to clean water, and an estimated 6 million people are now water insecure as stated by UNICEF. In October 2022, Russia used missiles to attack every single hydro and thermal power plant in Ukraine. Because of this, 50% of their power infrastructure was damaged, and electricity operated for merely a few hours a day according to the World Bank. As reported by the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 40% of people in Ukraine do not have sewer systems, 53% do not have hot water, and 38% do not have running water in the home at all. However, in a more positive light, Ukrainians generally have full access to phones and the internet with 97% of the population utilizing phones and 75% utilizing the internet as reported by Statista. According to the Centre for Economic Strategy, the country's food insecurity rate was at its height of 30.3% in May 2022 and is slowly decreasing — now at 21.1% — but is far from what it had been before the war, 4.3%.

As one can imagine, there are substantial barriers to earning a living and accessing nutritious food during a war. The unemployment rate in Ukraine hit a peak of 30.7% in May 2022 and is slowly declining; however, it is still double what it had been before the invasion, now at 20.9%. The inflation rate was 13% as of October 2023. As reported in an article from National Public Radio, more than 6 million Ukrainians were displaced to surrounding countries, a clear barrier to earning a living (Rott, 2022).

According to the CIA World Factbook, the price of cereal grains, especially wheat, have drastically inflated, and access to these staple crops is now a critical issue. Not only does this lead Ukrainians into food insecurity, but also many underdeveloped countries — mainly in Africa — receive the vast majority of their grains from Ukraine. They are left hungry, too.

Now two and a half years after the beginning of the Russian Invasion, Ukraine is still the victim of an active nationwide war and trends have not changed. Russia's motivation to overtake Ukraine has only become stronger, contributing to the longevity of the war thus far and creating an end that is unforeseeable as of now.

Many urban areas are being torn apart and bombed while rural areas are littered with landmines and war debris. Due to the debris, the environment is now left with non-decomposable trash and equipment that often cannot be safely removed due to the frightening risk of setting off landmines.

Though Ukraine accounts for less than half a percent of the global population, its people usually work to feed 5% of the world. The production of Ukrainian wheat has dropped by 29% since the war's start in February 2022, of course hurting Ukraine but also hurting developing countries. Before the Russian Invasion, Ukrainian wheat fed 116 million people by exporting it to more than 120 developing nations. From 2016-2021, African countries received 95% of their wheat from Ukraine. If the Russian Invasion continues, countries that have relied on Ukrainian grains and were already on the brink of famine, such as Yemen and Somalia, could face starvation and skyrocketed deaths. Food insecurity isn't just an issue of quantity, but also an issue of accessibility and affordability. With the decrease of Ukraine's food production, food prices have increased everywhere due to simple supply and demand.

Our world is incredibly interconnected. There is no issue far enough away on the map that it does not affect us. Not only should the United States and other nations act on the conflict in Ukraine because it is morally right, but because when entire countries are starving, they start wars. The Father of the Green Revolution, Norman Borlaug, said in a 1979 lecture at Kansas State University, "When stomachs go empty, patience wears out and anger flares. If we're going to achieve world stability, it won't be done, I assure you, on empty stomachs."

The first solution is ending the violence by keeping Russia out — obviously, a tall order. As we are seeing, Ukraine cannot defend itself alone and Russia is not backing down, so the United Nations along with the rest of the world need to continue to provide military assistance and escalate military protection of Ukrainians. As the U.S. Congress along with other world government bodies consider appropriations, they should increase military spending and spending on food aid and agricultural assistance. Currently, 41 countries such as New Zealand, Norway, Turkey are providing military aid to Ukraine (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2024). Often countries fear involvement with Russia due to harsh repercussions and because Putin has stated that “An interference in the invasion could lead to consequences you've never seen,” which appears to be a threat of nuclear war. This leads to important questions: If we do not stop Russia, will it ever stop overtaking countries? Will Russia attempt to rule the world in its entirety one day? That is up to us to determine, and it all depends on the actions of the free world toward the situation.

But what does this have to do with us? The war in Ukraine is hurting the food supply, starving people in developing countries, disrupting world security, and raising prices for food and farm inputs right here in the United States.

Next, food assistance must continue to be prioritized for the citizens of Ukraine. The World Food Programme is providing direct food assistance to Ukrainians and helping to clear landmines from small farms. Restoring Ukraine’s agricultural production to its pre-war levels will allow Ukraine to better feed themselves. USAID is working alongside Ukrainians to improve agricultural commodity production. USAID has also helped to repair Ukraine’s energy and heating systems, which helps to defend Ukrainians from harsh winters that Putin has been using to his benefit. USAID has also been supporting Ukraine’s government in the continuation of critical public services, to pay its civil servants, and provide emergency care to those in the most need. The World Food Programme, the United Nations and USAID are successful in their efforts as they work with locals to learn how to best provide assistance and by providing shelter, water, and food for them. Other small efforts like World Central Kitchen and Global Empowerment Mission are working on the ground to feed Ukrainians and to provide access to plane and train tickets to leave the country (Jeffrey, 2022).

For Ukrainians to have access to food, they must have access to money. To improve its economy, the first step is to open Ukraine’s trade routes and restore the flow of trade, which will help farmers to earn money and help consumers find affordable food. The Black Sea ports, which are critical to Ukrainian trade, had been closed completely by Russia until late 2023 when they were opened due to influence from the United Nations (European Council, 2023). This has improved trade for Ukraine in just that time frame; however, trade could move faster because Russia is intentionally slowing trade by holding up the inspection of cargo. At any moment Russia could shut the ports back down. The United Nations needs to continue to hold Russia accountable and hold them off from halting trade.

Once these steps have been completed, we need to ensure that Russia will not come right back by implementing preventative measures to keep its military out of Ukraine.

In conclusion, Ukraine has the rich agricultural potential it needs to solve its food insecurity challenges, but it needs dedicated support from the United States, the United Nations, and other developed nations and organizations to access existing resources affordably and to break free from the hold of Russia. To do this, the rest of the world must provide military assistance, continue direct food aid and agriculture support, work to open trade routes that boost economies, and finally, implement defense systems to keep Russia out for good.

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