

The Global Impact of the War in Ukraine on Food Prices: Deprivation, Discontent and Unrest

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Introduction

In a globalised world, war impacts not only the conflicting parties but often the entire world in economic, political, and human terms. The current war between Russia and Ukraine is no different. The Russia - Ukraine war has impacted global economic calculations with rising oil and gasoline prices, political attitudes with increased security and defence spending, and people's lives with migration flow. Perhaps most importantly, the war is affecting global economics and politics as well as people by causing a rise in global food prices.

In March 2022, the FAO Food Price Index⁷ averaged 159.3 points and reached an all-time high (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2022, April 8). The Russia - Ukraine war is one of the most important factors contributing to this rise. As a result of the war, oil prices have risen, causing a rise in the cost of the planting, harvest, and transportation of food. Moreover, Ukraine and Russia face production and export difficulties regarding food and food-related products. For example, shipments from Black Sea ports have been interrupted due to some companies ceasing operations, security reasons, and high costs. This cessation of activities has disrupted the trade in such products and leads to shortcomings, therefore contributing to an increase in global food prices.

The recent rise in global food prices has affected, and will continue to affect, people's and governments' budgets by increasing the cost of living and government spending. This issue has significant potential to cause discontent worldwide. Protests around the world are expressions of such discontent. For example, protests revolving around the rise in the cost of living were held in the UK (Devereux-Evans, 2022). Protesters demanded granting help to households to help reduce the rising costs of food (Devereux-Evans, 2022). Similarly, protes-

tors have taken to the streets in Sudan to protest, among other things, rising food prices ("Sudanese Protest Military Coup, Tumbling Economy", 2022). On top of the global discontent that is merely a reaction against rising food prices, the global food price increase will likely cause greater discontent for some states and their citizens at the local level. Such discontent is different from global discontent because it goes beyond that, even if it is also a reaction to prices. Local discontent combines concerns about the dwindling purchase power with more latent fury against structural inequalities, erosion of political rights, and economic instability.

Global discontent is likely to generate low-intensity, widespread and mostly non-violent protests. The states' responses to the war, such as imposing sanctions and measures against rising food prices, including export bans and trade barriers, and the risk of a decrease in economic dependency, will likely generate some disturbance within the international system. On the local level, some countries could experience high-intensity, even violent unrest. This kind of unrest is more likely to occur in countries with high dissatisfaction and ineffective government policies.

This discussion paper will explore how the ripple effects of the Russia - Ukraine war have the potential to cause global unrest directly contributing to the increase in food prices and therefore creating conditions for discontent and deprivation. The first part will explain how the war contributes to the increase in global food prices. The second part will discuss how such an increase will likely create discontent and deprivation on different scales. Lastly, the third part will detail whether the recent global food price increase will likely cause worldwide and local unrest and how such disturbance could unfold globally and locally.

⁷ The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Food Price Index measures the monthly international price change in food commodities that are widely traded.



Ukrainian Servicemen are seen training with a BMP-2 in Donetsk Region, Ukraine on February 10, 2022. (Wolfgang Schwan - Anadolu Agency)

War and Food Price Increases

Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, global food prices were already on the rise. However, the situation has been significantly exacerbated by the ongoing conflict. Table 1 demonstrates the sharp increase in global food prices. This increase occurred for several reasons. One of the most important reasons is that the war accelerated the increase in oil and gasoline prices and resulted in natural gas prices remaining at high levels. Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 show natural gas prices and sharp rises in the price of oil and gasoline following the invasion that started on February 24, 2022. The increase in the price of oil and gasoline used to run agricultural machinery consequently raised the cost of planting and harvesting, in other words, food production. Due to the high prices of natural gas, the increase in N-fertiliser prices, also contributed to the cost of food production. Lastly, the increase in oil and gasoline prices has led to high food transportation costs.

The disruption of Ukrainian production and exportation of food is another reason for the high global food prices. Ukraine is among the main exporters of several food products such as sunflower oil and wheat. For example, in 2020, Ukraine was the top exporter of sunflower oil (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2022a). Similarly, in 2021/2022, Ukraine accounted for 10% of global wheat exports, 14% of global corn exports, and 17% of global barley exports (US Department of Agriculture, 2022). However, due to the war, the plantation and harvest of these products are at risk, largely because hostilities either destroyed farming areas or forced people to leave those areas. Even if this is not always the case, the war has made it difficult to obtain materials such as gasoline and fertilisers necessary for food production. Moreover, due to the war, exporting such food and food-related products has become more difficult, with Ukraine banning exports of some food and

food-related products. In addition, the fighting has either destroyed the transportation network within Ukraine or disrupted it. For example, Russia besieged Ukraine's Black Sea ports, such as the ports in Mariupol, thereby obstructing food exports to the rest of the world. Similarly, worries about the export disruptions in the Black Sea region have negatively impacted sunflower and rapeseed oil markets (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2022, March 25, p. 13).

Another major contributing factor in the rise of global food prices is related to disruptions in the production and export of Russian agricultural products. In 2021/22, Russia accounted for 16% of wheat exports and 13% of barley exports (US Department of Agriculture, 2022). Moreover, in 2020, Russia was the top fertiliser exporter (Statista, 2022b). Difficulties in the production and export of such food and food-related products are due to the sanctions imposed on Russia, Russia's countermeasures, the private sector's decisions based on business and moral reasons, and disruptions to the operations in the Black Sea ports due to high insurance costs. For example, some large shipping companies have stopped their services from Russian ports ("Russia Gets Cut Off from World Trade as Shippers Halt Cargoes", 2022). This issue, combined with the payment difficulties created by the sanctions, created export difficulties, thereby contributing to increased prices of food and food-related products. Moreover, there is a risk that Russia may suspend the export of some products. For instance, the Russian Ministry of Industry and Trade recommended the suspension of exporting fertilisers (MacDonald, 2022). Similarly, Russia has already temporarily banned wheat export to the Eurasian Economic Union (Gro Intelligence, 2022) and, if needed, may impose further bans on food exports.

Food Price Increase, Discontent and Deprivation

The global food price increase worsened by the Russia – Ukraine war has generated and will likely further generate discontent in both developed and developing parts of the world. On March 20, people in Spain protested soaring fuel and food prices (“Spain Hit by Yet Another Mass Protest”, 2022). On March 9, Iraqis demonstrated over rising food prices (“Iraqis Protest Rise in Food Prices”, 2022). On March 12, Albanians protested rising fuel and food prices (“Rising Fuel and Food Costs Spark Protests”, 2022). Because the conflict is ongoing and there is no viable solution yet on the horizon, this worldwide discontent is likely to continue. Moreover, even if the conflict ends tomorrow, the world will need a long time for economic and political recovery. In other words, bringing the trade in food and food-related products, oil, gasoline, and natural gas prices to their normal levels will take time, and therefore the global

food prices will not decrease soon. In addition, currently, countries can rely on their food stocks when needed, and this, for now, helps countries prevent food shortages and keep local food prices relatively low. However, as time goes by, it will become more difficult for countries to replenish stocks and import food due to high global food prices and disruptions in food and food-related product trade. Similarly, so far, the subsidies and support provided by governments to farmers and people do not create a large burden on states’ budgets. However, as time goes by, such subsidies and support may become unsustainable. Simply put, people will continue to feel the negative impacts of war on food prices for some time to come, and therefore, the worldwide discontent regarding the global food price increase will endure.



A seller and sacks of legumes are seen at a market area in Taiz, Yemen on March 10, 2022. The food crisis in Yemen, which is among the poorest countries in the world, due to the 7-year civil war between the government forces and the Iranian-backed Houthis, is growing with the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The energy crisis experienced with the war in Ukraine and the increase in fuel prices due to it have a negative impact on food prices. (Abdulnasser Alseddik - Anadolu Agency)

Discontent will be greater in some states than others due to structural inequalities, economic and political weaknesses, import dependency, and weak agricultural profiles. Depending on economic and political capacity levels, the global food price rise would (or not) strongly impact local food prices. If most people within a country can reach food or the state is economically advanced enough to cope with rising local food prices, the population's discontent will not be that much. On the contrary case, the discontent of the population will be greater. In other words, for instance, the EU, which has already introduced measures such as a support package that amounts to €500 million or flexibilities regarding import requirements (European Commission, 2022), is not highly dependent on Ukrainian and Russian imports. Moreover, its economic strength means that it will likely be less impacted by the global food price increases. Accordingly, the discontent within the EU will not be that much. On the other hand, countries such as Egypt, the world's largest wheat importer, import their wheat primarily from Russia and Ukraine (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2022b). Egypt is also economically and politically less stable than the EU, will likely severely struggle with the rise in the global food prices and will more probably have greater discontent than the EU countries.

Some countries will more deeply struggle with the rise in global food prices and have to deal with rapidly growing discontent and even deprivation and hunger. These countries have structural inequalities, political and economic instability, weak agricultural profiles, and high import dependency. For example, Egypt suffers from structural problems such as a high youth unemployment rate (International Labor Organization, 2020) and unsustainable subsidy programmes. Moreover, while the country strives to implement economic and political reforms, it also struggles with the negative impacts of terrorism and climate change. Egypt is also highly dependent on imports of food, especially wheat from Russia and Ukraine. For example, in 2020, 4.45 B\$ out of a total of 5.2 B\$ of wheat imports were from Ukraine and Russia (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2022b). Lebanon is another important example. The country is already dealing with historically high inflation rates. In January 2022, the annual inflation rate was 239.69% (Trading Economics, 2022e). Moreover, the country is highly dependent on grain imports, especially since the Beirut port explosion destroyed a large amount of the country's wheat stocks, and the country is short on wheat reserves (Diaz, 2022). In addition to Egypt and Lebanon, countries such as Madagascar, Tunisia, Burkina Faso, and Mali (Berlinger, 2022), Iraq, and Sudan will be among

other countries that are likely to seriously struggle with global food price rise and a consequently rapidly growing discontent.

Somalia and Yemen are set to experience much greater discontent and deprivation than countries like Egypt and Lebanon. Ongoing political instability and the severe drought in Somalia have already put thousands in a vulnerable situation regarding access to food and have made hundreds dependent on humanitarian food aid. Even worse, humanitarian aid is provided thanks to mainly cash donations from donors. Global food price increase means that humanitarian organisations spend more but purchase less and provide less food aid. Due to the impacts of the Russia - Ukraine war, more people will be deprived of food and even will go hungry in Somalia. Similarly, Yemen is dealing with an ongoing humanitarian crisis due to the civil war. Moreover, famine conditions are being experienced in the country. 31,000 people live in famine-like conditions, whereas 14.4 million people are food insecure (World Food Programme, 2022). In addition to these, the budget of the World Food Program, which seeks to provide general food assistance to 13.3 million people in Yemen (World Food Programme, 2022), is under stress due to high global food prices partly resulting from the Russia - Ukraine war. This situation, unfortunately, means that more people in Yemen will suffer from food insecurity.



A view from a bakery in Beirut on April 06, 2022. Decreased flour stocks throughout the country due to the problems in importing wheat supply in the country adversely affected many bakeries. Some bakeries, which had difficulties in purchasing flour, had to stop their operations. Those working in the bakeries that can continue their work are trying to keep up with demand. (Hussam Shbaro - Anadolu Agency)



Hundreds of people gather to stage a protest against rising energy and living costs in London, United Kingdom on February 12, 2022. (Raşid Necati Aslım - Anadolu Agency)

Discontent, Deprivation and Unrest

An increase in global food prices has led to low intensity and non-violent protests worldwide, including the countries with different economic capacities, such as Spain, Albania, and Iraq. Considering the impact that the global food price rise creates, the global unrest of the people is likely to continue. However, since such unrest is mainly a reaction against rising food prices and not a reaction against structural inequalities as well as economic and political instability within each state, unrest will probably be moderate and at a low intensity. In other words, widespread, massive, and high-intensity protests and civil riots are not likely to occur on a global scale.

The imposition of sanctions on Russia and measures being taken by some governments to secure domestic wheat supplies in the face of rising prices by banning exports run counter to the logic that informs the international system. Thus, the disruptions caused by these measures have significant potential to generate further unrest in said system. The lingering economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic are a case in point. For example, Hungary has instituted controls over grain exports (Schroeder, 2022), and several other countries, such as Bulgaria, are considering imposing export bans (Reuters, 2022). Moreover, the conflict in Ukraine risks

undermining global interconnectedness, one of the driving forces of the international system. For example, European Union countries are trying to slash their oil, gasoline, and natural gas imports from Russia (Bokat-Lindell, 2022, March 30). Similarly, Finland has opened its first nuclear power plant in 15 years in a effort to reduce dependency on energy imports from Russia. (Mulligan, E., 2022, March 12). Likewise, China aims for self-sufficiency in wheat production (Bokat-Lindell, 2022, March 30). These measures, ranging from imposing import and export bans to pursuing self-sufficiency, are likely to disturb the international system and, therefore, cause unrest.

General global disruption will be accompanied by various local instantiations of unrest, with rising food prices set to play a catalyzing role in countries where high discontent and ineffective government policies prevail. In these countries, the level of discontent and people's expectations from the government and government action or inaction will determine whether there will be unrest. Consequently, sparked by the global high food prices worsened by the Russia - Ukraine war, the countries with a high level of discontent due to structural inequalities, political and economic instability, and ineffective government policies face the highest risk of unrest.

Countries with populations who hold existing grievances and ineffective government policies will struggle more with food price increases. They are likely to experience greater discontent, deprivation, and even hunger and are at risk of high-intensity local unrest. Egypt is one of the countries that may be most at risk. As explained above, the discontent in the country is high. Existing grievances due to past and present political and economic conditions persist. Moreover, as history shows, the country is prone to uprisings catalysed by high food prices. In 1977, violent demonstrations erupted upon the Egyptian government's announcement about a price increase in several subsidised consumer goods (Frerichs, 2015, p4). In 2017, Egyptians took to the streets after the government cut the bread subsidies ("Egypt Bread Riots", 2017). However, even if these increase the risk of unrest, the likelihood of massive unrest and even civil riots is low. As the government is well aware that bread is important for the public, it is determined to maintain the bread subsidies even though the food subsidy program's cost for 2021/2022 is expected to be LE51 million (around \$3 million, converted on 2022, April 14) (Salem et al., 2021). For the same reason, the government has introduced a price cap for non-subsidised bread prices ("Egypt: Soaring Food Prices", 2022). Moreover, the government is seeking an IMF loan and trying to diversify its wheat imports sources. Therefore, the jury is still out whether these measures could mitigate the risk of widespread riots in Egypt.

Lebanon is another country that could potentially face widespread local unrest. Facing what the World Bank has referred to as one of the worst economic collapses globally in the past 150 years, the country is in a dire situation politically and economically. Whether there could be unrest or not will be determined by the government's actions in dealing with high food prices. The government has already taken several measures to combat rising food prices. For example, they are working on deals with both IMF and World Bank ("Lebanon Facing Wheat Crisis", 2022, April 7). Moreover, they announced that they would seek to import products from other countries such as India (Gibon, 2022). However, the country's economic capacity is limited. Therefore, the country's measures to combat high food prices will be limited. As a result of possibly ineffective government policies, the likelihood of widespread local unrest in Lebanon is high.

Sudan might be another country that may experience local unrest. In Sudan, the rise in food prices and cuts in bread subsidies were among the factors that led to Omar Al-Bashir's removal from power ("Sudan Coup", 2019). Today, protests have already taken place in several cities

with protestors denouncing military rule, high inflation rates, and high commodity prices ("Sudanese demonstrate high commodity prices", 2022, March 14). Considering the political and economic instability in the country, grievances due to the instability, ongoing protests, and the government's inability to employ measures to combat rising food prices, there is a risk of widespread local unrest in Sudan.

The likelihood of unrest in Tunisia depends on the effectiveness of the government's policies. The country is going through a political crisis that includes an illegitimate power grab, including the parliament's dissolution by the country's president (Qazi, 2022). Public grievances with the economic and political situation as well as the president's actions are high. Moreover, there is a high discontent among Tunisians, and an increase in the prices of basic goods (Qazi, 2022) adds to that discontent. As a means of dealing with rising prices, the country has sought to secure a loan agreement with the IMF. However, given the ongoing political crisis the effectiveness of the government response may prove ineffective.

Countries such as Yemen, Somalia, and Ethiopia where there are ongoing violent conflicts, necessitate a different approach. Food insecurity and conflict are already intertwined in these countries, and the intensities of both food insecurity and conflicts are high. Since food insecurity and conflicts are widespread issues, the chances of separate unrest solely due to current global food price increases are low. In other words, current global food price increases may only intensify existing food insecurity, and accordingly, unrest may be related to ongoing conflicts. Therefore, for these countries, the right question is whether the current rise in global food prices and consequently high discontent is likely to increase the intensity of those conflicts. In Ethiopia, Yemen and Somalia, the effects of the Russia-Ukraine war and global food price increases are severely felt. Recently, the inflation rate has been around 35% in Ethiopia, and food prices have dramatically increased ("War in Ukraine Exacerbating Food Crisis", 2022). In Somalia, the prices have increased by around 30% since the start of the war in Ukraine, and children's malnutrition is becoming more prevalent ("War in Ukraine Exacerbating Food Crisis", 2022). This factor adds to food insecurity and contributes to the discontent resulting from political tumult, economic instability, and structural inequalities. Moreover, due to the ongoing conflicts and their effects, these countries' governments are less able to deploy effective measures to deal with rising food prices. Therefore, an increase in the intensity of existing conflicts seems likely.

Conclusion

The Russia – Ukraine war has had and will continue to have far-reaching consequences, including a significant contribution to the rise in global food prices. The Russia – Ukraine war has contributed to rising global food prices in numerous ways. First, increased the prices of oil and gasoline and kept natural gas prices at high levels. As a result, since those are used in agricultural machinery, vehicles, and some fertilisers, the cost of production, harvest, and transportation of food and food-related products is increased. Second, the war disrupted Ukrainian food production and export. Because of the war, Ukraine, a country that exports wheat, corn, and sunflower oil, cannot produce or harvest such products normally. Moreover, the country cannot export these products due to either export bans or disruptions in the transportation network. Third, Russia-related difficulties such as sanctions and export bans disrupted the trade and increased the cost of food and food-related products — all these developments increased global food prices.

An increase in global food prices has generated discontent in several countries. Such discontent will likely continue, and its effects have not been fully felt yet. Moreover, its consequences are likely to endure for the foreseeable future. Contingent upon a state's dependence on imports from Russia and Ukraine, agricultural profile, political and economic situation, and existing inequalities, the discontent will intensely present in some countries and their people. Egypt, with its high dependence on wheat imports from Ukraine and Russia, and Lebanon, with its import dependence especially after the Beirut port explosion, as well as countries such as Tunisia, Sudan, and Iraq are among those countries. Besides that, some countries will be in much greater discontent due to ongoing wars or civil wars and droughts and the number of people that live under the poverty line. Yemen, Ethiopia, and Somalia, with the ongoing conflicts and instability as well as food insecurity and dependence on humanitarian food aid, are among these countries.

Increasing global food prices will cause global and local unrest in different ways and capacities. Globally, the discontent created by the food price rise will present itself as mostly non-violent demonstrations that have already started. Again, globally, states' responses to war and measures against rising food prices and a possible decrease in economic dependency will generate unrest within the international system. In addition to the global unrest, local unrest will occur in countries with high discontent and ineffective government policies.

It is believed that countries such as Lebanon, Sudan, and Tunisia will possibly face unrest with their ineffective government policies. On the other hand, countries such as Yemen, Ethiopia, and Somalia with high levels of discontent, as well as deprivation, and hunger already have unrest. Rising food prices are likely to intensify the current unrest in those countries.

Tables

Table 1

Global Food Prices Surge



Note. Adapted from <https://www.statista.com/chart/20165/un-global-food-price-index/> Copyright 2022a by Statista.

Table 2

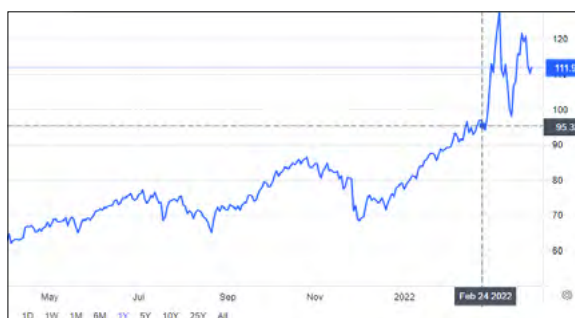
Crude Oil WTI (USD/Bbl)



Note. Adapted from <https://tradingeconomics.com/commodity/crude-oil> Copyright 2022a Trading Economics

Table 3

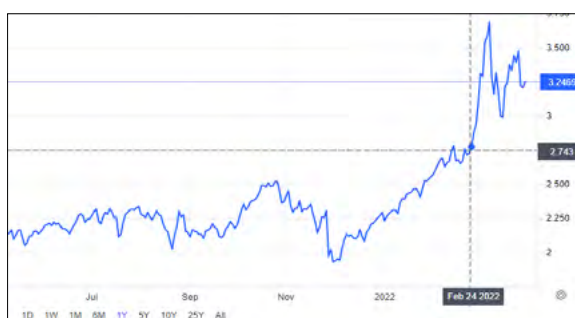
Crude Oil Brent (USD/Bbl)



Note. Adapted from <https://tradingeconomics.com/commodity/crude-oil> Copyright 2022b Trading Economics

Table 4

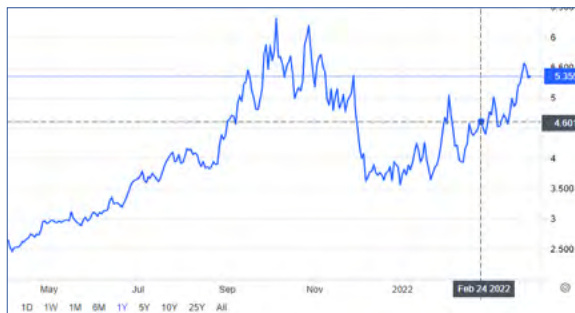
Gasoline (USD/Gal)



Note. Adapted from <https://tradingeconomics.com/commodity/crude-oil> Copyright 2022c Trading Economics

Table 5

Natural gas (USD/MMBtu)



Note. Adapted from <https://tradingeconomics.com/commodity/natural-gas> Copyright 2022d Trading Economics

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