

Seeds of Discord or Lanes of Solidarity?

*Understanding farmers' protests in Central
and Eastern Europe within the context of
increasing Ukrainian grain flows*

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Abstract

The 2023-2025 farmers' protests in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which were sparked by the influx of Ukrainian grain following the re-routing of Ukrainian grain shipments after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, attracted considerable political and social attention at both national and EU level. Most interpretations of these protests can be narrowed down to three somewhat competing assumptions: (i) the farmers' protests were economically unfounded, as Ukrainian agricultural exports did not damage the CEE markets; (ii) the farmers' protests were aligned with, or orchestrated by, a specific political force; (iii) these protests jeopardised the EU's solidarity and support for Ukraine. This article analyses farmers' protests in Poland, Romania and Hungary in light of the aforementioned assumptions. It reveals the complex socio-economic and political problems faced by farmers in CEE. It concludes that the farmers' protests are indicative of a systemic crisis of the dominant agri-food regime in which the influx of Ukrainian grain was a trigger rather than a root cause of the crisis.

1. Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent blockade of Black Sea ports, through which 90% of Ukraine's grain had previously been shipped abroad, severely disrupted international food trade, raising global food prices and exacerbating food insecurity in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. To solve the food crisis and help Ukraine export its growing mountains of unshipped grain, the EU and the Ukrainian government launched the "Solidarity Lanes"¹ in the late spring of 2022, offering land and river routes to transport Ukrainian grain to Europe for onward shipment to countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

However, much of the Ukrainian grain destined for export to Asia, Africa and the Middle East ended up on the markets of neighbouring EU countries. The flow of (relatively cheap) Ukrainian grain to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has become one of the main triggers for large-scale farmers protests in CEE countries. The protests started in spring 2023 and continued until the beginning of 2025. Mobilisations ranged from local sporadic protests to more organised rallies in capital cities and transnational protests on the border with Ukraine. The protesters claimed that the influx of Ukrainian grain was depressing local prices and left local farmers unable to sell their crops.

In response to the farmers' unrest, the governments of Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Hungary introduced temporary bans on Ukrainian grain in April 2023, which the EU was forced to adopt at European level and keep in force until September 2023. The Ukrainian government filed a complaint with the World Trade Organisation against Hungary, Poland and Slovakia after they banned grain imports from Ukraine for a second time after the EU restrictions were lifted in September 2023. In August 2023, Ukraine launched a new Black Sea corridor for trade vessels heading to and from Ukrainian sea ports despite Russia's withdrawal from the previous agreement. This allowed Ukrainian grain and oilseeds to be exported via the Black Sea routes. The "Solidarity Lanes", however, continued to operate. At the time of writing (autumn 2025), about 40% of Ukrainian exports of grain, oilseeds and related products were shipped through the "Solidarity Lanes" and about 60% through the Black Sea.²

The 2023-2025 farmers' protests in CEE came amid wider discontent by farmers in the EU, who were calling for an end to free trade agreements between the EU and third countries and for more flexible and simplified agricultural and environmental regulations. Although farmers in CEE have also raised similar concerns, their protests became strongly associated with the influx of Ukrainian grain. The protests in CEE have sparked a variety of political and media debates about their nature and consequences. Most of these debates can be linked to one (or more) of the following interpretations: (i) the farmers' protests were economically unfounded, as Ukrainian agricultural exports did not damage the CEE markets; (ii) the farmers' protests were aligned with, or orchestrated by, a specific political force; (iii) these protests jeopardised the EU's solidarity and support for Ukraine.

In this paper we analyse the farmers' protests in Poland, Romania and Hungary in light of the above criticisms. Agriculture is an important sector of the economy in all three countries. The countries joined the EU in the early 2000s (Poland and Hungary in 2004, Romania in 2007) and since then their economies have benefited significantly from EU membership, including through agricultural subsidies under the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). However, subsequent years revealed structural injustices with the distribution of CAP support.³ Although Polish and Romanian agriculture is still dominated by small-scale farms, an intensive process of land accumulation and concentration is underway. Hungarian agriculture meanwhile is characterised by large, industrial monoculture farms backed by oligarchic capital. All three countries are marked by the disappearance of smaller farms, land grabbing, rural depopulation and environmental degradation (see Appendix 1 for further details on the state of agriculture in Poland, Romania and Hungary).

The 2023-2025 farmers' protests in these three countries differ in terms of intensity, mobilisation, political environment and actors. However, we believe that they all highlight a similar underlying issue - a systemic crisis of the dominant agri-food regime, in which the influx of Ukrainian grain is a trigger rather than a root cause of the crisis.

2. Analysing farmers protests in Poland, Romania and Hungary

This research is a collective initiative that emerged from the authors' other research projects. Therefore, there is no unified methodology across the case studies. Instead, farmers' protests are analysed in each country using different methods and data sources.

The three main assumptions about farmers' protests in CEE were developed based on discourse analysis of the prevailing media narratives, as well as statements by policymakers, public figures, and representatives of large farmers/agribusiness unions in both the EU and Ukraine.

The Polish farmers' protests were observed in action during the largest protest in Warsaw in March 2024. A total of 57 farmers were surveyed on the spot. Later, in June 2024, an online survey of 220 farmers was conducted, alongside an additional six online in-depth interviews with farmers. The questions asked covered the motives, attitudes and demands of the protesters (see Appendix 2 for the complete questionnaire).

The Romanian study was based on an analysis of the national media coverage of the farmers' protests between January and April 2024. A total of 137 news items were analysed. The media sources were selected based on the criterion of national visibility⁴ and included: Digi24, Europa Liberă, G4Media, Libertatea, Știrile ProTv, Antena3cn. This analysis is supported by the authors' long-term research in rural Romania, including recent fieldwork conducted in 2023-2024.

The farmers' protests in Hungary were studied using media publications (from pro-regime sources: Index, Magyar Nemzet, Ripost, Borsonline, magro.hu; and oppositional sources: Telex, Atlatszó and 444), alongside policy analysis. Additionally, ten in-depth interviews with farmers, experts, and other relevant actors were conducted between October 2023 and October 2024. Many Hungarian farmers were reluctant to speak out for fear of repression, and official representatives of government organisations did not want to be interviewed by researchers not affiliated with pro-regime institutions. Consequently, our data on Hungary is limited and may not be representative. Nevertheless, we believe it has the potential to illustrate trends and dominant discourses in Hungary, and to speak to the other cases we discuss in this paper.

3. The main assumptions about the farmers' protests in CEE

A wide range of opinions and interpretations emerged regarding the farmers' protests in CEE. We narrowed these down to three main narrative assumptions that dominated political and media discourse in the EU and Ukraine.

First assumption: Ukrainian agricultural exports did not damage the CEE markets

While protesting farmers in CEE argued that the arrival of Ukrainian grain had undercut domestic prices and hurt local producers, a strong voice emerged to challenge the farmers' arguments. The European Commission organised the monitoring of the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine on selected EU agricultural sectors.⁵ The Commission acknowledged that there had been market distortions in Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia due to the arrival of Ukrainian grain. The Coordination Platform was set up, bringing together Ukraine and the affected countries to solve the problems related to the "Solidarity Lanes". As early as September 2023, the European Commission issued a statement claiming that "market distortions in the five member states bordering Ukraine have disappeared".⁶ Nevertheless, farmer protests had only intensified since then, and the governments of Poland, Hungary and Slovakia imposed unilateral restrictions on Ukrainian grain imports for a second time.

The spokesperson for Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oleh Nikolenko, argued that "Ukrainian products are not responsible for destabilised markets in Europe and that farmers in neighbouring countries are still facing problems despite the ban being in place for several months". He claimed that "restrictions on Ukraine's exports benefit Russia's efforts to blockade Ukrainian food products, and that the further limitation of Ukrainian grain exports allows Russia to further profit from its own grain sales in Europe".⁷ In February 2024, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky argued that only 5% of Ukraine's grain exports crossed the Polish border and were therefore too small to have a significant economic impact.⁸ Similarly, Klaus Iohannis, then President of Romania, declared in the context of the January 2024 protests that "the corridors of solidarity with Ukraine do not affect agriculture in Romania".⁹

Second assumption: Farmers' protests were aligned with, or orchestrated by, a specific political force

Most of the statements by Ukrainian and pro-EU leaders suggested that the farmers' protests had Eurosceptic roots.¹⁰ Euroscepticism is an increasingly common phenomenon in Europe today and is one of the political doctrines promoted by populist anti-establishment movements and parties. Eurosceptic ideas have found fertile ground in rural areas, as recent studies have indicated.¹¹ In CEE countries, Euroscepticism is a relatively new phenomenon, linked to the rise of nationalist tendencies and dissatisfaction with the unequal distribution of power, authority and privileges within the EU.¹² Farmers' protests in CEE fall into this category. Several media outlets have labelled them as "Eurosceptic" and "populist", because they are led by "frustrated farmers rebelling against EU rules".¹³ On the other side of the blocked border between Poland and Ukraine, Ukrainian agricultural producers were protesting as well. They claimed that farmers' protests against Ukrainian grain were a "political provocation" and that the "the blockade of Ukraine is a betrayal of European values".¹⁴

Eurosceptic parties were quick to spot an opportunity for political gain in the farmers' protests. This led some to believe that the farmers' protests were partisan i.e. that they were directly aligned with, or orchestrated by, a specific political party. For example, Denys Marchuk, deputy chairman of the Ukrainian Agrarian Council, linked the farmers' protests to Poland's 2023 parliamentary elections. He said: "The political nature of the European farmers' strikes is obvious. Ukraine sells some grain to Poland, and this is not a massive amount (...) However, certain forces need to demonstrate that this is due to an oversupply of Ukrainian grain (...) noting that the country faces elections later this year".¹⁵

Third assumption: Protests jeopardised the EU's solidarity with Ukraine

There was much discussion about the collapse of EU solidarity with war-torn Ukraine. When Polish farmers blocked the Ukrainian border in a grain dispute in February 2024, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said the protests showed the “daily erosion of solidarity” with Ukraine.¹⁶ On the same day Ukraine’s ambassador to Poland, Vasyl Zvarych, wrote on X: “It is a lack of respect for the work of Ukrainian farmers in conditions of Russian aggression towards themselves and others. Shame and disgrace, gentlemen!”. Many Ukrainian sources blamed Russian propaganda for creating the split between the EU and Ukraine and limiting EU support for Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression. Volodymyr Zelensky referred to the situation during his speech at the Sustainable Development Goals Summit 2024: “It is alarming to see how some in Europe... play out solidarity in a political theatre... They may seem to be playing their own role, but in fact they are helping to set the stage for a Moscow actor”.¹⁷

4. Timing, scale and organisation of farmers’ protests in Poland, Romania and Hungary

Protests by farmers began in Poland on 9 February 2024 in response to the European Green Deal¹⁸ and the influx of Ukrainian grain into Poland and other EU countries. It is difficult to specify the exact number of protests as they took place at different times and in different places. In March 2024, sixteen farmer protests were registered in the Podlasie region alone. The protests evolved from local-scale mobilisation to farmers blocking national roads and city bypasses with their tractors and cars. Between February and March 2024, 500 farmer protests were registered in different regions across the country. On 27 February, the largest protest took place in Warsaw with more than 10,000 farmers from all over Poland (some sources put the figure at 20,000). Much of the protests took place on the border with Ukraine. On 21 February, protesters blocked the border and tipped Ukrainian grain onto the ground from railway wagons. In February and March, Polish tractors blocked motorways and major junctions at nearly 200 locations at border crossings with Ukraine.

According to Poland’s Supreme Audit Office (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli)¹⁹, the protests were organised by the various farmers’ unions, e.g. the Solidarity of Individual Farmers (NSZZ Rolników Indywidualnych „Solidarność”) and its local branches, as well as other more grassroots organisations such as Deceived Village (Oszukana wieś), the National Union of Farmers, along with other agricultural organisations. Farmers we spoke to at the largest protest in Warsaw stressed that they organised themselves because they do not trust any other organisations. Farmers gathered mostly in informal groups and paid their own transport costs to come to Warsaw and other locations. Similarly, almost all respondents who took part in the survey about the March 2024 protest in Warsaw confirmed the grassroots nature of their protest.

In Romania, the exact or even approximate number of demonstrators is not known. In Bucharest, for example, several requests for demonstration (some for 50,000 participants) were submitted to authorities for authorisation in January 2024. In the end, the authorities approved the participation of 5,000 people and 200 agricultural machines and vehicles (according to a statement by Nicușor Dan, Mayor General of Bucharest). Meanwhile, the Romanian national press (Europa liberă) spoke of dozens of machines and “hundreds of farmers and transporters from Romania” taking part in the protests.²⁰

Participants included independent farmers, as well as members of farming associations, alongside organisations and alliances of farmers and transporters. The key organisers of the protests in Romania were the Union of Patriotic Farmers and the Alliance for Agriculture and Cooperation (AAC). It is worth mentioning that most of these unions represent relatively large commercial farmers (many of whom practice industrial agriculture with heavy dependency on chemical inputs). In contrast, Eco Ruralis — a grassroots association of small-scale agroecological peasant farmers in Romania and a member of La Via Campesina — condemned the protests and did not join the demonstrators.

The first farmers' protests in Hungary began on the Ukrainian border in September 2023 and continued until February 2024. The aim of the protests was to symbolically close the road to Ukraine at Záhony in the north-eastern plain of Hungary. The protests were organised by the National Association of Farmers' Circles and Organisations (MAGOSZ) and the National Agrarian Chamber (NAK), both of which have close ties to the Hungarian government. The protests expressed dissatisfaction with the import of Ukrainian grain, which, according to Imre Rácz, the regional director of NAK, was genetically modified, of uncontrolled quality, and produced using chemicals banned in the EU. During the protests, representatives of these national farming organisations urged the Hungarian government to defend their interests against the "Brussels' imposition" to open the EU's markets to Ukrainian grain imports.²¹

The protests in Budapest were less well attended than those at the border. In March 2024, the National Association of Agricultural Producers and Cooperatives (Mezőgazdasági Szövetkezők és Termelők Országos Szövetsége), which is not directly linked to the government, organised several protests in Budapest. Inspired by similar protests in Germany and Poland, the three-day demonstrations aimed to express farmers' discontent amid mounting economic challenges, including the influx of cheap Ukrainian imports and the complexities of the agricultural administration. Contrary to the organisers' expectations, only a few dozen farmers took part in the protests. The association explained the low turnout by saying that farmers were afraid of being perceived as anti-government and feared repression.

5. Challenging assumption 1: “Farmers’ protests were economically unfounded, as Ukrainian agricultural exports did not damage the CEE markets”

Firstly, it is important to note that after the EU signed the Association Agreement with Ukraine in 2014,²² customs duties on wheat, rapeseed, sunflower and maize were partially abolished. This meant that cereals and oilseeds, as well as their derivatives, could enter the EU from Ukraine relatively freely without being subject to special taxes. Oilseeds and their derivatives were not taxed at all. The EU's system of taxation on cereal imports is rather complex but is mostly related to price fluctuations. The fact remains that there have never been strict restrictions on Ukrainian grain imports to the EU. Until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there had been no conflicts in Europe over Ukrainian grain.

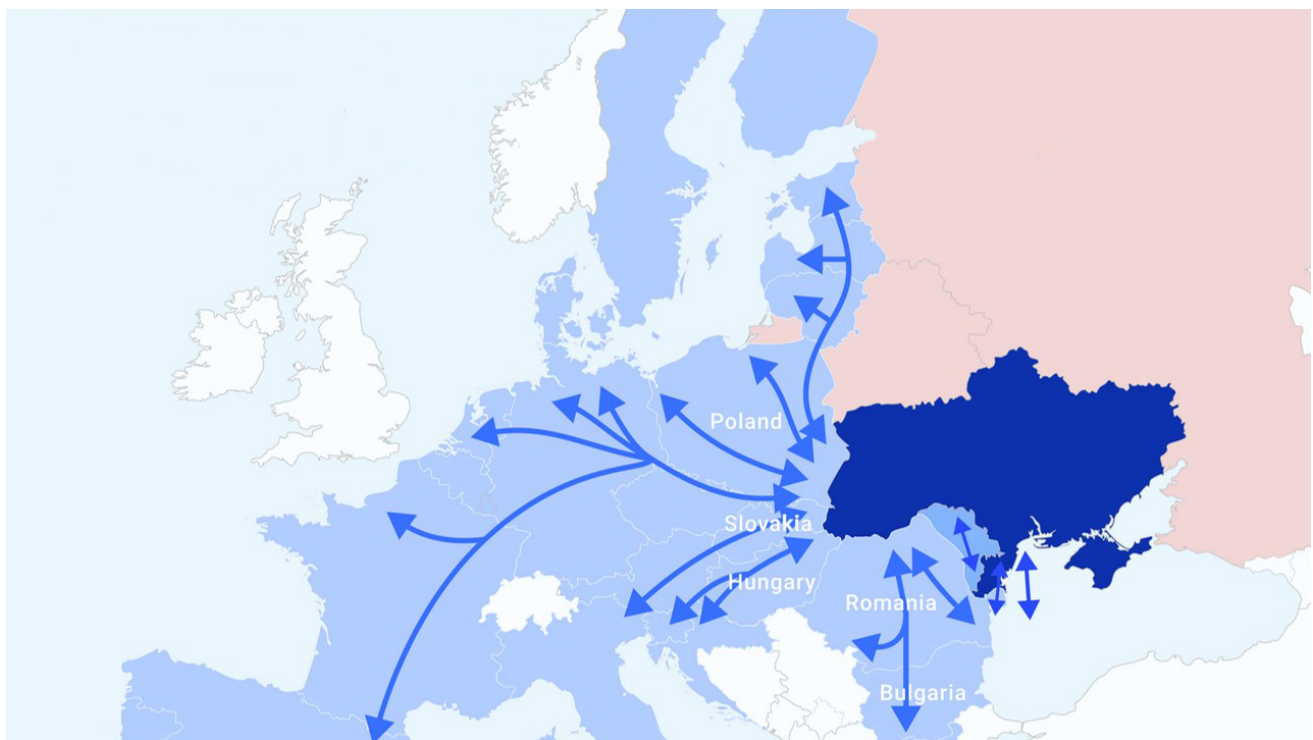
Between March 2022 and March 2023, Ukraine exported 10 million tonnes of cereals to Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. The largest share (4.3 million tonnes) of Ukrainian cereals and oilseeds went to Poland. Although they were initially intended mainly for transit, only 0.7 million tonnes were for transit and 3.4 million tonnes remained on the Polish market. According to Poland's Supreme Audit Office, imports of wheat increased by 17,000% and imports of maize by 30,000%.²³

Different mechanisms facilitated the influx of Ukrainian grain to Poland. Loopholes in trade and transit regulations, coupled with inefficient governance, enabled grain traders, speculators, and middlemen to illegally import Ukrainian grain into Poland. In some cases, Ukrainian grain was even sold on Polish markets as Polish grain. However, there was also domestic demand for Ukrainian grain. It was legally purchased by Polish millers and livestock farmers, who were unable to buy Polish grain at the required price or quantity. This was due to an artificially created shortage of Polish grain on the domestic market. When world grain prices began to fall in 2022, following a spike in the early months of the war in Ukraine, Poland's then Minister of Agriculture, Robert Telus, urged farmers to hold on to their harvest in the hope of a recovery in prices and better returns. With a shortage of local produce in Poland, millers and livestock producers desperate for grain turned instead to a flood of imports from Ukraine, trucked and railed into the EU.²⁴

The influx of Ukrainian grain, which was cheaper than Polish grain, certainly had an impact on domestic grain prices. However, this impact was not decisive, as an analysis of grain stocks by Najwyższa Izba Kontroli shows.²⁵ Poland's trade balance with Ukraine for agricultural products was negative (except for dairy products) and imports of agricultural products represent only a small part of the trade exchange between Poland and Ukraine. Agricultural prices in Poland are therefore more influenced by world market conditions than by imports from Ukraine. Wheat, rapeseed and maize futures prices on the MATIF exchange in Paris fell, influenced by various factors not directly related to the war in Ukraine. For example, in 2022 there was a sharp increase in exports from Brazil and Russia which caused global grain prices to fall significantly. Overall, world cereal production exceeded consumption in 2022-2023. The global grain surplus in 2022 was around one billion tonnes, according to the 2024 FAO World Food Situation report.²⁶ The Grain Market Report data estimates world grain production for the 2022/2023 season at 2.87 billion tonnes and consumption at 2.3 billion tonnes.²⁷ The grain harvest in Poland, Bulgaria and Romania was also quite large in 2022, leading to a fall in grain prices.²⁸

While grain prices were falling (not only because of the influx of Ukrainian grain), Russia's war in Ukraine severely impacted agriculture in Europe. In Poland, for instance, the price of mineral fertiliser rose by 70% in 2022 compared to 2021, as the main suppliers – Russia and Belarus – cut off exports. In addition, costs for fuel, electricity, chemical inputs, seeds, animal feed, labour, packaging and transport also increased significantly. Depending on the type of farm and its specific input requirements, total agricultural production costs in Poland increased by between 30% and 60% in 2022.²⁹

Romanian farmers experienced similar difficulties. Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu has repeatedly stated that Romania only permitted transit, claiming that “not a single grain of Ukrainian wheat” remained in the country. However, Nicu Vasile, president of the Romanian Alliance for Agriculture and Cooperation (AAC), claimed that significant quantities of Ukrainian grain and processed products had entered the Romanian market. As in Poland, some of the grain was purchased by intermediaries and speculators. In some cases, Romania was declared as the final destination, but the grain



Flow of Ukrainian foodstuffs through the EU's Solidarity Lanes. Source: European Commission

later appeared on the markets of other countries. Besides that, there was also domestic demand for Ukrainian grain. Romanian millers and processors bought Ukrainian wheat and maize because this was more financially and logistically advantageous. In 2023, Romanian grain producers struggled to deliver their grain to the Romanian processors in a timely manner or in the right quantities due to transport bottlenecks and logistical difficulties. The Solidarity Lanes arrangement meant that Ukrainian grain had to be shipped via the Danube and inland roads and railways, causing traffic jams and a shortage of transport vehicles. Romanian farmers said they were struggling to find lorries to transport their own goods, with logistics costs 70% higher than before the war.³⁰ These problems, together with rising fuel and input costs, have led to many bankruptcies among Romanian farmers. In October 2023, 45% of Romanian farmers were unable to pay their debts for seeds, fertilizers and fuel.³¹

While other countries experienced increases in domestic cereal and oilseed production, Hungary had become a net importer of maize due to the 2022 drought, which affected spring-sown crops and resulted in a 57% decrease in maize production compared to the average of the previous five years. In 2022, Ukraine exported 1.7 million tonnes of maize to Hungary, compared to just 30,000 tonnes before the war.³² In addition to the poor harvest, Hungarian maize producers held on to their produce due to the devaluation of the national currency (HUF). As there was sufficient storage capacity (2021/2022 were not good years in terms of production volumes and many silos remained empty), many maize producers decided to stockpile rather than sell their harvest. In addition, speculators became active on the Hungarian market. In an interview in October 2024, a Hungarian agricultural expert told us that middlemen and traders had bought Ukrainian maize at a relatively low price (Ukrainian maize cost about 120,000 HUF per tonne, while Hungarian maize cost 140,000 HUF per tonne) and stored it, expecting prices to rise. They also planned to buy Hungarian products later on, mix them with Ukrainian grain, and sell them together at a higher price.

These strategies were not only employed by middlemen and traders, but also by domestic oligarchs. For example, Kall Ingredients Kft – a company part-owned by Orbán's childhood friend, Lőrinc Mészáros, who several years ago became Hungary's richest citizen – allegedly imported twelve shipments of maize from two suppliers in 2024 (the reported source countries were Ukraine and India), storing it for a period before selling it on at a higher price (according to our interview with a Hungarian farmer³³, supported by data from Volza – an intelligence website on private companies).

In addition, the falling price of grain and the challenging circumstances faced by Hungarian farmers were exacerbated by the Hungarian government's regulation of maize exports to other countries, including Italy – the key importer of Hungarian maize. By March 2022, it was clear that the next maize harvest would be severely affected by drought. The Hungarian government therefore decided to regulate exports, requesting that all maize exports (including those already agreed) be approved by the National Food Chain Safety Authority (NÉBIH). This decision was taken suddenly, without prior notice. The export regulation was in place for a short period (from 6 March 2022 to 20 January 2023) and did not have a significant impact on export flows. However, the government intervention had long-term consequences for Hungarian maize exports, such as a general loss of credibility among buyers, especially as export licence approval took on average thirty days per request. During one of our interviews, an agricultural expert told us that foreign buyers had become concerned that the Hungarian government would interfere more in the market, so they started looking for other suppliers. The remaining buyers asked for special risk guarantees, resulting in lower prices being paid to Hungarian farmers.

These examples from the three countries show that the arrival of Ukrainian grain in CEE did affect domestic grain prices, making it difficult for grain producers to sell their produce. However, other factors had a significant impact on the fall in grain prices (such as fluctuations in the world market, domestic policies in the countries concerned, speculation and market-based calculations by domestic mills and processors who decided to buy Ukrainian grain, etc.). In addition, Russia's war in Ukraine led to an increase in the prices of fuel and agricultural inputs. All these factors combined to create the so-called "price scissors" phenomenon in which CEE farmers found themselves trapped.

6. Challenging Assumption 2: “Farmers protests were aligned with, or orchestrated by, a specific political force”

Our data shows that most farmers' demands were economically driven and non-partisan in nature. According to the results of our survey in Poland, the main motivation for joining the protests was dissatisfaction with the European Green Deal (33% of respondents believed that Green Deal regulations would lead to a further decline in profitability and 19% believed that agricultural production would become less competitive) and the import of goods from countries outside the EU, not only Ukraine. As a third key factor for joining the protests, Polish farmers pointed to the low or unstable prices for agricultural products on the domestic and EU markets. Besides that, many farmers complained about increasing bureaucracy year on year, the injustices of the CAP, and potential competition with Ukrainian food products if the country were to join the EU. No explicit political demands were raised by the protesters. On the contrary, farmers tried to present their protest as apolitical, denying accusations of collaborating with any political party. During our interview, one of the farmers said:

When we took to the streets, there were quick accusations that we were being controlled by the far right, I don't know whom. This is just nonsense. The farmers organised everything themselves. We called each other, we discussed the form of the protest, where we should go.³⁴

Although the farmers' demands were exclusively economic, several right-wing Eurosceptic parties, including Law and Justice (PiS), have tried to capitalise on farmers' grievances in Poland. PiS was the ruling party for eight years before losing its parliamentary majority at the end of 2023. Although PiS previously supported the EU Green Deal, it attempted to align itself with farmers by criticising EU environmental regulations. The far-right party Konfederacja also gained traction by opposing Ukrainian grain imports and EU policies, striking a chord with rural voters. By contrast, the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska), led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, adopted a more cautious stance, attempting to strike a balance between addressing the protesters' grievances and maintaining ties with the EU.

The Romanian farmers' protests were also largely driven by economic factors with the protesters trying to avoid politically loaded demands and slogans. In April 2023, Romanian farmers took to the streets dissatisfied with European directives and the measures of the Romanian authorities regarding the import and transit of Ukrainian grain. While the January 2024 protests were linked to a broader list of demands, the issue of unfair competition caused by cheap grain imports from Ukraine continued to play an important role in the farmers' protests and contributed to increasing their dissatisfaction with the current economic and legislative conditions. In their protests, the farmers complained that the compensation offered by the Romanian state was minimal, that subsidies and compensation were being paid late, and that the Romanian authorities were handling the situation badly overall. In one interview, a Romanian farmer said that the protests were against the authorities' incompetence, rather than being specifically about the import of Ukrainian grain:

We are at breaking point... The protests will continue until these authorities realise that they are incompetent at running the country.

Several political parties tried to join the farmers' protests in Romania in January 2024, seeking to capitalise on the protesters' grievances. These included two nationalist, anti-EU, pro-Russian opposition parties: AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians) and S.O.S. Romania. The leaders of these parties – George Simion and Diana Șoșoacă – participated in the protests and attracted the attention of the national media with their vocal presence. The representatives of protesting farmers issued statements distancing themselves from any political interference, and the national press reported that the two politicians were booed by protesters when they appeared on makeshift platforms.

The protests in Hungary were less critical of the national government, mainly because they were organised by pro-regime farmers' associations. One farmer explained why he was taking part in the protest:

We don't want to bring down the government, we just want the agricultural sector to be put in order, because if things continue like this, four-fifths of farmers could go bankrupt next year.³⁵

The protests aimed to draw attention to the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult for farmers in Hungary to survive. According to the Hungarian social-democratic newspaper *Népszava*,³⁶ Hungarian farmers are facing difficulties due to low purchase prices, unpredictable legal environments and insufficient subsidies. Complaints from farmers about the influx of Ukrainian grain were largely fuelled by the pro-regime mainstream media which circulated the idea that low grain prices were the result of Ukrainian grain being “dumped” on Hungary by the EU. The impact of the Hungarian government's export restrictions was not mentioned.

The economic concerns of the Hungarian farmers cannot be completely separated from the highly political nature of the protests. The farmers' protests were organised by farmers' organisations closely linked to the ruling Orban regime. This is not necessarily indicative of political motivations. However, our analysis of the slogans and speeches used during these protests shows that many of the narratives echoed the regime's anti-Brussels rhetoric. For example, Attila Tilki, a member of Orban's right-wing Fidesz party, said the following at the February 2024 protest:

If there is no farmer, there is no food, there is no future. Ultra-liberal decision-makers in Brussels have made Hungarian farmers the culprits, while at the same time allowing tonnes of Ukrainian grain into Europe. For us, the Hungarian government, Hungarian farmers are the most important.³⁷

During some of our interviews, Hungarian farmers echoed the discourse in the mainstream media. For instance, one of our interviewees³⁸ claimed that Ukrainian maize was contaminated with DON, a toxin produced by the *Fusarium* fungus. This accusation was not completely groundless - a high level of *Fusarium* infection was found in Ukrainian maize. This was, however, in 2021; tests in 2022 showed a relatively low level of infection. Furthermore, Hungarian companies, who are the main buyers of maize, never import products affected by toxins. They always strive to exceed EU-allowed levels of contamination (otherwise their final products would be unmarketable), and they carry out their own analyses of contamination levels.

Thus, although the demands of farmers in the three analysed countries are primarily related to economic conditions and lack an explicit political objective, they are still political in nature. Any protest is an inherently political act involving the making of collective claims in the public sphere, with the aim of influencing power relations. Therefore, it is unsurprising that protests became associated with different political forces. Our findings show that Eurosceptic, right-wing populists attempted to exploit farmers' protests in Poland and Romania, whereas the protests in Hungary were organised by groups linked to the ruling, right-wing Orbán government. However, this does not necessarily make the protests partisan or puppets in the hands of European right-wing populists. Protests repeatedly tried to maintain their independence and distance themselves from political manipulations.

7. Challenging Assumption 3: “Farmers protests jeopardised the EU’s solidarity and support for Ukraine”

Most of the farmers interviewed in all three countries stated that they are not protesting against Ukraine or Ukrainian grain exports but against injustices in the system. Many Polish farmers we spoke to felt that it was unfair that cheaper products from outside the EU could enter the EU. Countries outside the EU do not have the same regulations as the EU, which affects prices and makes EU farmers uncompetitive. Farmers stressed that this is not just a problem for Ukrainian products but also for products from many other non-EU countries, such as Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan or China. A Polish organic farmer who was involved in the protests told us in an interview:

Even before this massive influx from Ukraine, we have been struggling with cheap imports from China, for example, for many, many years. And somehow the media are completely silent about this situation. But there are also imports from Kazakhstan, for example, from other former Soviet republics. And they simply undercut our prices. And the second issue is the quality of these raw materials. Here there is no duty, there is nothing, we are not going to control anything, we are not going to look in. And suddenly all of this started to flood our country. So, I think this is hypocrisy, pure hypocrisy coming straight from Brussels, that on the one hand we are muzzled, our feet are tied, and we are told to run, and on the other hand we are allowed to bring everything over the border without controls, without these restrictions, without these environmental programmes.³⁹

Although we did not explicitly ask about the war in Ukraine during our interviews in Romania, some interviewees mentioned it as a contributing factor in the disappearance of smaller farms:

You can no longer live off farming ... unless you have 400 sheep and you get subsidies for them ... otherwise it is more expensive to keep the sheep than to buy the cheese. We are forced to give up production...and now with Ukraine...I had to sell the maize for less than one leu...I preferred to rent my land.⁴⁰

In an open letter to the President of Romania, the Romanian Alliance for Agriculture and Cooperation argued in favour of imposing the ban on agricultural products from Ukraine:

We are in solidarity with the Ukrainian people, and we understand the farmers’ desperate need to sell their current grain stocks at a discount to prepare for the new season. Nevertheless, although we understood the need for a transit corridor last year and we do our best to support the Ukrainians, thinking of their farms in a humanitarian way, we cannot do this if the European Union does not treat Romanian farmers in the same way. Until now the costs of this Solidarity Lane were not shared equally amongst member states, the most affected being the states that share a border [with Ukraine].⁴¹

Hungarian farmers also emphasised the injustices of the system, distinguishing between helping the Ukrainian people and helping multinational corporations operating in Ukraine. A representative of the National Chamber of Agriculture said:

In Brussels they don’t represent the interests of Ukrainian small farmers, but those of the multinationals operating in Ukraine. Hungarian farmers are like mountaineers whose rucksacks are regularly made heavier by Brussels by adding stones.⁴²

A similar discourse can be traced in the Polish farmers’ protests. One of the protesters told us in an interview:

We are well aware that this is not necessarily about an ordinary Ukrainian, but about Ukrainian oligarchs with foreign capital.⁴³

Although there are private family farmers in Ukraine who produce and export grain and oilseeds, the main producers and exporters of these commodities are, indeed, large agribusinesses and agroholdings, often with oligarchic and foreign capital.⁴⁴ On 19 June 2023, the Association of Farmers and Private Landowners of Ukraine (AFZU), which represents the interests of Ukrainian family farmers and smallholders, sent a letter to the Polish National Council of Agricultural Chambers (KRIR), to explain the reasons for the conflict:

Under the guise of Ukrainian farmers, export-oriented Ukrainian companies, in close cooperation with European business structures, disregarding the interests of not only Polish farmers, but also Ukrainian and other farmers in the European Union, imported a certain quantity of grain products into the customs territory of Poland.⁴⁵

Investigative reports published by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project⁴⁶ (OCCRP) on 5 July 2023 and the RISE Project⁴⁷ on 7 March 2025 revealed complicated schemes used by businesses and politically connected individuals in Europe and Ukraine to profit from the influx of Ukrainian grain. These schemes involved shell companies, some of which were set up after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and are currently under investigation by Ukrainian authorities for fraud and tax evasion. Allegedly, the shell companies bought Ukrainian grain at a low price (with little or no tax paid) and sold it on to transnational corporations, including COFCO International (China's largest food and agriculture company), Ameropa Holding (a Swiss agribusiness company with extensive operations in Romania), and Viterro (part of the Glencore conglomerate). As a result, Ukraine lost essential tax revenues, while transnational corporations increased their profits.

Besides that, Russian propaganda is becoming increasingly present in the region and fuelled farmers' discontent. During the farmers' protests in Poland, there were several anti-Ukraine posters that were shared by national media.⁴⁸ In response to this scandal, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the following statement: "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs notes with the greatest concern the appearance of anti-Ukrainian slogans and slogans glorifying Vladimir Putin and his war during the recent agricultural blockades...(…)... This kind of action reflects badly on Poland, the country that first helped Ukraine, and on Poles, who took in Ukrainian refugees".⁴⁹ Indeed, Poland ranks first (in terms of GDP) among all countries that helped Ukraine; many Polish farmers received Ukrainian refugees and sent aid to Ukraine.

During our observations of the protests in Warsaw in March 2024, we noticed a few pro-Putin slogans. However, we found no evidence to suggest that the farmers' protests are directly linked to Russian propaganda. None of the informants in our study expressed anti-Ukrainian views; on the contrary, they repeatedly emphasised their support for the Ukrainian people.

Thus, our analysis of the situation in the three countries demonstrates that the farmers' protests were not directed against Ukraine and did not seek to undermine the EU's solidarity with Ukraine. Instead, farmers were protesting against the corruption and injustices of the globalised agri-food system, which prioritises the interests of transnational corporations and global trade over those of family farmers.

8. Outcomes of the farmers' protests

In response to the farmers' protests, the Polish government took a number of actions and made various promises. Thus, the embargo on Ukrainian grain, which was imposed by the Law and Justice (PiS) government in 2023, was extended by the new government led by Donald Tusk (and remained in force at the time of writing this article). On 26 February 2024, the Minister of Agriculture, Czesław Siekierski, announced in the Polish parliament that the government would urge the EU to adapt its policies to meet the needs of Poland's agricultural sector, particularly with regard to the Green Deal. Prime Minister Donald Tusk later confirmed that Poland was seeking solutions to protect the domestic market from destabilisation, including by providing financial aid to farmers and strengthening border controls with Ukraine to reduce the influx of competitive agricultural products.⁵⁰

In Romania, the Alliance for Agriculture and Cooperation and the Union of Patriotic Farmers signed an agreement with the Romanian Minister of Agriculture, Florin Barbu, on 15 January 2024. This agreement provided for the allocation of new benefits and privileges to Romanian producers. The authorities promised to review the current tax system, reduce fuel prices, and create new markets for Romanian products and raw materials.⁵¹ The government also promised to implement the emergency granting of payments and compensation for losses suffered by Romanian farmers affected by imports from Ukraine, and the monitoring of imports via electronic seals with GPS at the Port of Constanța.⁵² In February 2024, Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu signed an agreement providing for the establishment of an Interministerial Committee at the level of the Prime Minister's Chancellery to analyse and find solutions to the protesters' demands. The committee comprised representatives of relevant ministries, as well as farmers and transporters.⁵³

The Hungarian government, in alliance with the National Association of Farmers' Circles and Organisations (MAGOSZ) and the National Agrarian Chamber (NAK), implemented a number of immediate protective trade measures. The unilateral embargo on Ukrainian grain and oilseeds, imposed in 2023, has been extended several times and remains in place at the time of writing this article.⁵⁴ In addition, a working group formed by NAK recommended stricter oversight of Ukrainian grain imports, reinstatement of customs duties, and monitoring for phytosanitary and quality (e.g. mycotoxin) compliance.⁵⁵ Beyond the immediate trade measures, the protests catalysed broader political and policy debates in Hungary. They strengthened the relationship between the Orbán administration and pro-government farming organisations such as MAGOSZ and NAK, helping to bolster the government's political legitimacy in rural constituencies.

At the EU level, several support mechanisms and policy changes were implemented in response to farmers' protests across Europe. The European Commission provided 100 million euros in compensation to farmers in Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary who were affected by the influx of grain from Ukraine in 2023. Other changes included relaxing or removing certain requirements of the Green Deal and other EU environmental policies.⁵⁶ The EU Agri-Food Chain Observatory (AFCO) was established to enhance transparency in the agri-food supply chain by analysing prices, costs, and the distribution of margins and added value. The Unfair Trading Practices (UTP) Directive was reintroduced to protect farmers selling their products to large supermarkets and food processing companies. In the context of global trade, the EU-Mercosur deal was postponed, and the EU-Ukraine trade agreement was renegotiated.⁵⁷

Regarding the EU-Ukraine trade agreement, the European Commission has revised the terms of the "Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area", replacing temporary wartime trade measures with a long-term framework that is more predictable and reciprocal. Under the revised agreement, quotas for sensitive products such as sugar, poultry, eggs, wheat, maize and honey have increased slightly, while quotas for less sensitive items have increased moderately. Some products have also been fully liberalised. The EU has committed to enhanced monitoring of grain imports, particularly wheat. The agreement includes robust safeguard mechanisms that allow either party to restrict imports if they cause market disruption. As part of its EU accession process, Ukraine has committed to aligning its agricultural production standards with EU rules by 2028, including those relating to animal welfare and pesticide use.

The outcome of the farmers' protests suggests a (soft) shift towards protective measures at national and EU levels. However, it is difficult to estimate how effective these measures will be in alleviating the burden on farmers (many of them currently remain in the form of promises and will be renegotiated in the future). Furthermore, many of the policy changes come at the expense of the environment. While rolling back environmental regulations temporarily alleviates some of the farmers' problems, it will inevitably cause farmers (and consumers) greater harm in the long term.

9. Conclusions

The protests in CEE have sparked controversial political and media debates about their nature and consequences. It has been argued that (i) the farmers' protests were economically unfounded, as Ukrainian agricultural exports did not damage the CEE markets; (ii) the farmers' protests were aligned with, or orchestrated by, a specific political force; (iii) these protests jeopardised the EU's solidarity and support for Ukraine. We analysed farmer protests in Poland, Romania and Hungary in light of the above criticisms.

Overall, we found that the inflow of Ukrainian grain did have an impact on the domestic markets of the analysed countries, but the amplification of the effect is the result of ill-conceived national policies, business speculation and corruption. In addition, the fall in world grain prices significantly impacted domestic prices, which remained low even after the countries (except Romania) imposed a unilateral ban on Ukrainian grain. We showed that CEE farmers were caught in the so-called "price scissors" as production costs rose exponentially (largely due to Russia's war in Ukraine) while prices and demand for their products (grain) fell.

Although the protesting farmers claimed that their demonstrations were solely related to economic hardship and apolitical in nature, it is difficult to distinguish the "political" from the "economic". The issues raised by the farmers were largely related to the systemic crisis of globalised neoliberal agriculture. Right-wing populism has recently risen in Europe, capitalising on societal dissatisfaction with neoliberal globalisation. Populists often denounce growing dependence on the global economy and foreign competition when promoting their nationalist and, at times, xenophobic "us versus them" discourse and politics. It is therefore unsurprising that farmers' protests have provided a breeding ground for Eurosceptic, right-wing political parties.

Finally, the question of "solidarity" became important when talking about the farmers' protests in CEE. The farmers' protests have led to multiple embargos on Ukrainian grain and oilseed imports at both the national and EU levels. This has had a negative impact on the Ukrainian economy, which is highly dependent on agricultural exports. At the same time, CEE farmers have repeatedly stressed that they do not oppose Ukraine or the Ukrainian people. This was, indeed, evident in their actions: farmers in countries bordering Ukraine (especially in Poland) provided significant assistance by hosting Ukrainian refugees and sending aid to Ukraine. When justifying their protests against the influx of Ukrainian grain, farmers argued that oligarchs and multinational corporations benefited from "Solidarity Lanes" at the expense of European and Ukrainian farmers. Several sources have suggested this may indeed be the case, revealing the schemes through which transnational corporations and politically connected individuals in CEE and Ukraine benefited from the situation.

Overall, the analysis of the farmers protests in Poland, Romania and Hungary points towards the larger problem – the unsustainability and injustice of the globalised agrifood system, which is characterised by narrow specialisation in agricultural production, is dependent on international trade and industrial production methods, and allows corporate actors to benefit from every situation, especially the polycrisis, at the expense of family farmers.

The state of agriculture in Poland, Romania and Hungary⁵⁸

	Poland	Romania	Hungary
Farm structures	Predominance of small farms (75% of all farms cultivate less than 10 ha of land). There are 1,300,000 farms, but only 400,000 or even fewer of them were fully active	Predominance of small farms (96% of Romanian farmers cultivate less than 10 ha) There are 3,000,000 small-scale family farms – the largest number in Europe	Predominance of large-scale, monoculture-oriented industrial farms with oligarchic capital. The average size is over 28 ha There are approximately 198,000 active farms in Hungary
Farm consolidation and land concentration	192,000 farms (13% of the total number) ceased to exist between 2010 and 2020. Many small farmers lease their land, legally or illegally, to larger farmers. Farm consolidation and land concentration is taking place	Almost 1,000,000 farms, mainly small family farms, disappeared between 2010 and 2020. Local barons seized power and resources that had been legally granted to communities through land restitution laws. Resource grabbing (from land grabbing to seeds grabbing) continues today.	99,000 farms, mostly smaller farms (33% of the total) have disappeared between 2010 and 2023. The top 1% of landowners control about 20% of agricultural land, and speculative land purchases enabled by the ruling regime are leading to the gradual disappearance of smallholders.
Economic challenges	Rising production costs (fuel, fertilisers, pesticides, animal feed), low and unstable purchasing prices, competition with the foreign (cheaper) products, unequal distribution of funds under the CAP, dependency on subsidies		
Administrative challenges	Administrative complexity of EU funds. Meeting EU environmental standards is also becoming more complicated		
Social capital problems	Rural depopulation, ageing of farmers, lack of farm successors, shortage of agricultural labour		
Environmental/ climate problems	There have been serious problems with droughts and floods in recent years. However, the 2022 grain harvest was relatively good, with production in Poland 4% higher than in 2021 and in Romania 22.6% higher than in 2021.		Due to the extreme drought in 2022, Hungarian farmers harvested 10% less barley, 21% less wheat and 57% less maize. Sunflower yields fell by 29% and rapeseed by 31%.
Role in the international grain trade	In recent years, Poland has increased its role as an exporter of cereals, particularly wheat and maize, but it remains primarily a regional European exporter rather than a major global one. In 2023, Poland exported a record 1.3 million tonnes of wheat, most of which went to Lithuania, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and Ireland. In addition to wheat and maize, Poland also produces rye, oats, triticale and barley for the domestic market.	Romania is one of the main European exporters of cereals. In the 2023-2024, Romanian farmers and traders exported over 10,6 million tons of cereals. The main destinations of Romania's cereal exports are Egypt, Jordan, Spain, Algeria and Italy. Furthermore, Romania is the largest producer of sunflowers in the EU, both in terms of production and in terms of hectares cultivated with sunflowers.	Farmers grow wheat, maize and barley, but mainly for the domestic market, and eventually export to other countries (e.g. maize to Italy). Hungary also imports cereals from Ukraine, Slovakia, Romania, France, and Austria. The fastest growing cereal import markets for Hungary in 2021-2022 were Ukraine, Slovakia and Romania

Questionnaire for conducting interviews with participants in the farmers' protests in Poland.

1. The farm

- Since when have you been running your farm?
- How large is the farm, what part of it is your property, and what part is leased—and from whom?
- What type of farm do you run? What do you produce? Do you also engage in agricultural processing? What kind?
- Is the farm your main source of livelihood?
- How many people work on the farm? Do you employ seasonal workers?
- Do you want/plan to expand it? What is, in your opinion, the optimal size of a farm?
- Which type of farm is easier to run in Poland—small or large?
- Does the way you run your farm differ from what you remember from childhood, from how your parents ran theirs (for those born into farming families)? How do you evaluate these changes? Are they positive or negative?
- Is there someone who will take over your farm? What is its future?
- How would you describe the financial situation of your farm? Is it profitable? If yes, what makes it profitable? If not, why not?
- Have you felt the increase in production costs in recent years, and in what way?
- How do you assess your position on the market/the prices of your products on the market? Would you like to change anything, and if so, how?
- Have you taken loans to run your farming activity? For what purpose? Do you think it was worth using this financial support?
- What subsidies do you benefit from? Are they sufficient? How do they affect the situation of your farm?
- What makes your work as a farmer the most difficult? (Follow-up: bureaucracy, prices.)
- Do you make use of, or plan to make use of, eco-schemes? Which ones?
- Where do you get your knowledge about the Green Deal?
- Part of the Green Deal is the Farm to Fork strategy—are you familiar with its principles? Would you be interested in developing direct sales? What conditions would have to be met for you to decide to do so?
- Does the import of products from Ukraine/Russia/other countries affect your farm? How? Do you think that easy access to agricultural products from other countries is good for Polish farming (e.g., cucumbers from Spain)?
- Is the situation of your farm similar to that of other farmers in your area?

2. Assessment of the Agricultural Situation

- What is the main problem related to agricultural policy in Poland?
- Who is responsible for the prices of agricultural products and production inputs? Would you support regulating them?
- Who currently decides on the shape of agriculture? Politicians? Middlemen? Corporations? Farmers?
- What would be your vision of the desirable agricultural model in Poland—based on small, medium, or large farms?
- Do you see a future in organic farming? Why or why not?
- Are you satisfied with Poland being a member of the EU? What do you value the most, and the least?
- If there were a referendum today on Poland joining the EU, how would you vote?

3. Motivation for Participation in the Protest / Perceived Reasons for the Protest

- Why did you take/are you taking part in the farmers' protests?
- Do you belong to any organization that organized the protest?
- Are your neighbors/friends also taking part in the protest?
- Which protest demands do you consider the most important?
- Why do you think the protests erupted specifically at this time?
- Do you think that farmers protesting in other European countries have similar goals? Do you support these goals? Do you feel solidarity with farmers from other countries? Do you feel you are protesting together?
- Do you think it was a good thing that the European Union withdrew some environmental regulations in response to farmers' protests in Europe? What will be the long-term consequences for European agriculture? Will this really help European farmers?
- What do you think about the course of the protests? What has been successful, and what not?
- Do you believe the protesters have already achieved some of their goals?
- Would you change anything in the way the protest was organized? Or in its demands?
- Do you think the protests will have any influence on agricultural policy? If so, in what way?

4. Demographics

- Age
- Gender
- Place of residence
- Education
- Voivodeship (region)

Endnotes

- 1 In May 2022, the European Commission put forward an action plan for EU-Ukraine Solidarity Lanes to facilitate Ukraine's agricultural export and bilateral trade with the EU which were severely impacted by Russia's blockade of the Black Sea ports. Since its inception, Solidarity Lanes has facilitated the export of more than 136 million tonnes of Ukrainian grains, ores and steel, and imported more than 52 million tonnes of essential merchandise such as fuel, vehicles, fertilisers, military and humanitarian assistance into Ukraine. The Solidarity Lanes span across the Danube region, Poland, the Baltics, and the Adriatic region through rail, road, and inland waterways, which are key for all imports flowing into Ukraine and complement the Ukraine Black Sea corridor set up in autumn 2023.
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