

Türkiye's Black Sea Diplomacy Faces Russian Roadblocks

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Türkiye is intensifying its diplomatic efforts to mediate peace between Russia and Ukraine as strikes in the Black Sea continue and civilian vessels get pulled into the crossfire. Ukraine has expressed willingness to revive the Black Sea Grain Initiative, but signals from Moscow dim the prospects of a new deal despite Turkish efforts. Moscow appears to be hardening its negotiating position ahead of the winter months as strikes on vessels carrying agricultural goods in the Black Sea threaten food shortages and attacks on energy infrastructure from both Russia and Ukraine show no sign of letting up.

Signals from Moscow dim the prospects of a renewed Black Sea Grain Initiative despite Turkish efforts. Russian and Ukrainian strikes on Black Sea ports, loading terminals, and ships are disrupting food exports and the global grain supply, and they have struck civilian vessels from other countries (United Nations, July 27; Anadolu Ajansı, August 29; Euromaidan, September 25). Türkiye controls the Turkish Straits, the sole maritime passage between the Black and Mediterranean seas, under the authority granted by the 1936 Montreux Convention (see Black Sea Battleground, May 10, 2022). Ankara has positioned itself as a mediator in much of Russia's war against Ukraine (see EDM, September 11, 12, 2023, April 1, May 19, 2025). As strikes on the Black Sea intensify, Ankara is seeking a larger role in this mediation, but success depends on Russia and Ukraine being willing to negotiate.

Türkiye has called for calm in the Black Sea since the early days of the war (see Black Sea Battleground, October 12, 2022). Russia, Ukraine, Türkiye, and the United Nations launched the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2022, lifting Russia's blockade on Ukrainian agricultural exports (see EDM, September 13, 2022). Russia and Ukraine together make up almost 30 percent of global wheat exports (Euronews, August 19). Under the initiative, Russia allowed merchant ships to pass through the Black Sea. On July 17, 2023, Russia unilaterally suspended the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which was followed by drone and missile strikes on Ukrainian ports. This created a re-imposition of a total naval blockade on Ukraine in the Black Sea (see EDM, July 26, 27, 31, 2023). After suspending the Black Sea Grain Initiative, Russia showed little interest in following through with Türkiye's involvement as a mediator in the war (see EDM, September 11, 12, 2023).

Since June, Ankara has renewed its efforts to mediate Black Sea security. On September 17, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan stated that Ankara has "recently intensified its diplomatic efforts" to negotiate with Russia and Ukraine over the Black Sea (Turkish Directorate of Communications, September 17). Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan echoed this sentiment following a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly on September 23. He stated, "It is necessary to take steps regarding the safety of navigation in the Black Sea, that there can be no explanation for the attack on commercial ships, and that we expect responsible behavior from the parties" (Turkish Directorate of Communications, September 23).

Russia has reacted coolly to Türkiye's diplomatic overtures. Fidan visited Moscow from June 15–17, where he met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss Black Sea security. There, Fidan stressed to Lavrov that current actions in the Black Sea threaten Türkiye's regional security (The Insider, July 16). During the meeting with Putin, he confirmed Türkiye's readiness to host peace talks between Russia and Ukraine (President of Russia, June 17; Interfax, June 18). He then visited Kyiv on July 16, where he again urged both sides to

ensure energy security and safe navigation in the Black Sea to protect global grain supplies (Türkiye Today, July 16).

On August 8, Fidan said that Türkiye had sent a proposal to Russia and Ukraine that would end attacks on civilian ships in the Black Sea (Daily Sabah, August 8). On August 31—ahead of a planned September 1 meeting between Putin and Erdoğan—Fidan said Ankara remained in contact with both Moscow and Kyiv and was seeking to establish conditions for an arrangement similar to the Black Sea Grain Initiative (Daily Sabah, August 31).

Conditions in the Black Sea were the main topic of Putin and Erdoğan's meeting (Interfax, September 1). After the meeting, Erdoğan stressed the need for a mechanism to ensure safe shipping in the Black Sea, saying, "We are seeing the grain crisis re-emerge" (President of Türkiye, September 2). Ankara has continued to emphasize that a major part of its engagement with both Moscow and Kyiv is to ensure the safety of civilian shipping, trade routes, and energy infrastructure in the Black Sea amid the war (Newsweek, September 25).

Speaking to reporters at the UN General Assembly on September 23, Erdoğan stated, "The issue of security in the Black Sea is very important for both us and our region. The Black Sea is not, should never be, a front of this war" (TRT Haber, September 24). Fidan, on September 15 during a press conference in Baku, stated that the spread of Russia's war against Ukraine in the Black Sea was "not an acceptable situation" as the lives of Turkish citizens and the operations of Turkish companies are at risk (Türkiye Today, September 15). In a September 19 conversation with reporters, Fidan described Türkiye's mediation efforts as an outside perspective offering moral or other points of view. He explained that countries and mediators that "focus on results rather than looking for credit" are more effective (NTV, September 19). In an interview with Newsweek published on September 25, Erdoğan stated, "Türkiye's priority is to prevent the war from turning into a conflict that draws in other countries." He asserted that Türkiye's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its ability to maintain direct contact with Putin allow Türkiye to act as a mediator (Newsweek, September 25).

Ukraine has recently appeared at least rhetorically open to Türkiye's diplomatic efforts, saying the next steps are up to Russia. Following a meeting with Erdoğan on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote on X, "We discussed security in the Black Sea, first and foremost how to ensure the operation of the maritime export corridor ... What is needed is simply Russia's readiness to stop its terrorist strikes on our infrastructure, so that Ukraine can reciprocally halt its long-range responses" (X/@ZelenskyyUa, September 23). He echoed this sentiment on September 25 after discussions with leaders of Egypt, India, Türkiye, and various Middle Eastern countries, saying there were proposals for a reciprocal ceasefire in the Black Sea so goods can be delivered without problems (RBC-Ukraine, September 25).

Ukrainian officials have said Kyiv would agree to a deal similar to the Black Sea Grain Initiative. They worry, however, that Russia will keep asking for more, with additional demands unrelated to grain, and that such a deal would be difficult to reach because Russia abandoned the original initiative in 2023 (Middle East Eye, September 24). Ukrainian Energy Minister Denys Shmyhal said Ukraine is ready for a ceasefire that would also include protecting energy infrastructure alongside security in the Black Sea, especially as winter approaches and Black Sea strikes put food security at risk and strikes on energy infrastructure from both Russia and Ukraine continue (RBC-Ukraine, September 24).

Commentary from Moscow points to a hardening negotiating position ahead of the winter months. At a September 1 press conference in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Putin acknowledged that Ukraine's 40-day summer strike campaign inflicted real damage, estimating the total economic costs at around 1

percent of Russia's gross domestic product (GDP). He stressed, however, that the situation was not critical and that Russia would retaliate against Ukraine's "most sensitive economic sectors" (President of Russia, September 1). Putin's statements underscore that Moscow views its Black Sea blockade as a political weapon against Kyiv.

He argued that a prolonged blockade will lead to three cumulative problems for Ukraine. First, a foreign exchange crisis; second, a budget crisis; and third, a banking crisis. Moscow sees current diplomatic efforts for a moratorium on Black Sea strikes as only benefiting Ukraine; as Putin contends, "That is precisely why they have gone running to all our friends—to the Arab states, not just one but several; to our Indian friends; and to a few others, including Türkiye—with the same plea" (President of Russia, September 1).

Influential foreign policy commentators have put forward similar arguments. For example, in an August interview, Dmitry Trenin, president of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, implied that the 2022 Black Sea grain deal was a gift from Moscow. He then argued that Russia's current strikes against Ukraine's Black Sea infrastructure will force the West to "face the question of whether to take risks for itself or agree to the Russian formula for peace" (*Russia in Global Affairs*, August 17). Russian political scientist Dmitry Suslov also argued in *Russia in Global Affairs* that Ukraine "may not survive the winter" due to Russia's Black Sea blockade. He believes the West will seek de-escalation in this area but that "Russia, of course, will not agree to such a partial truce." Any comprehensive settlement, he continued, will now involve "even greater concessions from Ukraine than the Anchorage agreements" (*Russia in Global Affairs*, September 23). In a September 24 front-page article in *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*—one of Russia's most widely read newspapers—columnist Mikhail Rostovskiy opined that only continued war awaits Russia, calling a surge in Western diplomatic efforts "white noise." Instead of engaging in talks, he argued, Russia should prepare "for an even tougher and bloodier phase of the Ukrainian conflict this winter" because Ukraine and Europe are "not ready to accept Russia's main demands" (*Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, September 24).

Military-affiliated Telegram channels have spread similar messages. Since August, the most popular war propaganda channels have been claiming that Russia's strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure and blockade of the Black Sea will lead to a collapse of Ukraine's economy. They often put forth the narrative that Ukraine will not adhere to an energy ceasefire and will only use it to prepare for more strikes against Russian infrastructure.

The channel "Rybar," for example, argues that negotiations should not discuss stopping strikes against Ukrainian energy and port infrastructure. The channel has continuously posted that Russia will only consider negotiations once Ukraine's economic and political systems are destroyed, so that "it no longer poses a threat" (Telegram/@rybar, September 8, 15, 23). The channel "Two Majors" warns the West that the conflict will make economic activity in the Black Sea prohibitively expensive, and that the Russian Armed Forces will not limit its strikes to only Ukrainian vessels, saying, "We do not care which flag the ship is sailing under" (Telegram/@dva_majors, September 19, 23).

All dismiss the prospects of a new grain deal. The channel "Legitimate" says the Kremlin opposes negotiating a Black Sea truce with Zelenskyy and will agree only to a final, "full-fledged peace" deal—a euphemism for removing Zelenskyy (Telegram/@legitimniy, August 19). The channel argues against engaging with Türkiye's attempts to negotiate a second Black Sea grain deal, because "Zelenskyy successfully disrupted the first agreement when it was profitable for him" and "this time it will be the same" (Telegram/@legitimniy, August 8). The Kremlin-aligned foreign policy commentator Sergei Poletaev has similarly reasoned against a ceasefire at the frontline or a pause on infrastructure strikes, asserting that Ukraine will use a ceasefire to "fight for Crimea" (Telegram/@vatfor, September 23).

The official Kremlin line has grown more assertive. On September 24 at the UN General Assembly in New York, Dmitry Polyansky, Russia's Permanent Representative to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), displayed no desire to ease tensions in the Black Sea, proclaiming the "Kyiv regime and its Western sponsors, who supply it with the tools to commit crimes, bear full responsibility for the armed escalation and aggravation of the transport and logistics situation in the Azov-Black Sea area" (RIA Novosti, September 24). He then argued that the 2022 Black Sea Grain Initiative was used by the West to supply weapons to Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov added to this sentiment, calling attempts to revive the Black Sea Grain Initiative "completely unacceptable and unrealistic" (RIA Novosti, September 24).

Russian commentary unambiguously rejects negotiations and expands the scope for escalation, potentially even beyond Ukraine (see EDM, July 23, September 14). NATO's frontline states have increasingly come under rhetorical attack. For example, Moscow has closely followed the Lithuanian parliament's decision to remove the constitutional ban on stationing nuclear weapons and foreign military bases on the country's territory (LRT.lt, September 22). On September 11, Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov called the plan a "serious escalation" and stated that if nuclear weapons get deployed to Lithuania, then "the territory of this country will also be targeted by our nuclear weapons" (Interfax, September 11).

On September 25, shortly following the vote by Lithuania's parliament, an article was published by Russia's state-run news agency, *RIA Novosti*, titled, "Another Special Military Operation Awaits Russia. It Will be Short." The article was written by regular contributor Alexander Nosovich—who the investigative center "Dossier" has linked to the Russian Presidential Administration and Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) (Dossier, November 25, 2020). In the article, Nosovich compares Lithuania to Ukraine and threatens the country with a nuclear strike, saying:

Russia is committed to a path of escalation heading into the winter. Reading into Moscow's statements, it becomes clear that the Kremlin sees its blockade of the Black Sea and strikes on Ukrainian port and energy infrastructure as points of political leverage. Ukraine's increasing ability to strike deep inside Russia has also changed the Kremlin's calculus. Moscow is now unlikely to take any small de-escalatory steps unless Ukraine is forced to refrain from striking inside Russia—a demand Kyiv understandably views as asymmetrically benefiting Moscow. Zelenskyy has vowed to press on with the campaign if Russia refuses to negotiate (Ukrainska Pravda, August 24; Kyiv Post, September 24). Whether Türkiye's diplomatic efforts will make a difference is yet to be seen.

Note:

[1] RIA Novosti has since removed the article, with a note now saying that it "did not correspond to the opinion of the editorial board, the editorial policy, and the state policy of the Russian Federation." The article's link, which currently shows that message, can be viewed here. The original article can be read in full on the Internet Archive here.

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