

European Farmers' Protests: A consequence of the Ukraine conflict?

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In several European countries like France, Germany, Poland, Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands, we are witnessing some of the most significant agricultural protests in recent European history. Farmers have gathered outside the European Institutions in Brussels, blocking roads with tractors and occupying public buildings in France and other countries, all to ensure their concerns are heard loud and clear.

While the specifics vary from country to country, farmers are passionately demanding a fairer wage policy, reduced bureaucratic hurdles, and protection against foreign imports from their government. In France, where 79 individuals were detained during these protests, it's striking to note that in 1946, almost half of France's population were, whereas today, that figure has dwindled to just 2%.¹

European farmers are growing increasingly frustrated with the persistent inability of both national governments and the European Union to effectively tackle long-standing economic challenges. The recent surge in energy prices, exacerbated by the Ukraine conflict, along with rising costs, cheap agricultural imports, and stringent environmental policies, has only heightened farmers' unease. The increase in energy and equipment prices has made it difficult for European farmers to sell their products at a fair price. Many farmers believe despite increased taxes, policymakers prioritize the interests of large agricultural corporations, brokers, and major lobbyists. European farmers also feel vulnerable increased droughts, floods, fires that brought about by climate change. All these policies have pushed European farmers into protests.

European farmers primarily strike for various reasons, including:

- The unbearable bureaucracy of both the EU and national governments. Farmers across almost all countries are fed up with heavy bureaucracy, which has become increasingly intolerable.
- The rising energy prices following the Russia-Ukraine war, the reduction in diesel subsidies for farmers, and the increase in transportation costs.
- While farmers are hoping for more support to counter imports, the government's decision to introduce cheap imports is aimed at reducing food inflation.
- The EU's environmental policies, which enforce responsibilities and regulations targeting carbon emission reduction, continue to weigh heavily on farmers.
- The dominance of large corporations and agricultural lobbies in managing EU subsidies and regulations.

¹ <https://mondediplo.com/2024/02/01editorial>

Impacts of the Ukraine Crisis: Rising Energy Costs and the Import of Low-Cost Agricultural Goods.

The conflict in Ukraine has significantly disrupted EU agricultural policies. With the halt of inexpensive energy imports from Russia, followed by soaring energy prices, farmers have faced escalating expenses. Post the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the surge in energy costs, along with the escalation in diesel prices and transportation expenses, has significantly augmented the financial burden on farmers. As energy and equipment expenses soar, European farmers find themselves unable to attain favorable prices for their produce. Furthermore, the EU's decision to allow duty-free entry of agricultural products from Ukraine initially disrupted farmers in Eastern European nations and subsequently placed strain on those in other member states. Last year, Polish farmers took to the streets, attempting to block border crossings in protest. These unbalanced policies have made the situation increasingly unsustainable for European farmers.

Farmers are seeking more support but are facing challenges due to government policies promoting cheap imports to address food inflation. Furthermore, trade agreements between the EU and MERCOSUR, which encompasses Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, permit the importation of agricultural and animal products from these countries, exacerbating the situation for farmers. Both the removal of quotas for Ukraine and the agreements with MERCOSUR particularly impact the sugar, grain, and meat markets adversely. Farmers are upset about this importation that does not adhere to the environmental standards imposed by the EU for their own products.

Impact of EU Environmental Agriculture Policy, Bureaucracy, and Lobbying

The recent environmental regulations proposed by the European Union pose an additional threat to farmers. The EU aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by renewing the existing Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) payments, which amount to \$60 billion annually. The agricultural sector of the European Union accounts for approximately 10% of the total greenhouse gas emissions. The EU aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in this sector by renewing the current CAP payments. New policies involve crop rotation and less greenhouse gas emissions. However, many farmers believe that these measures will make European agriculture less competitive against imports.

The EU urges farmers to adopt more sustainable agricultural practices and address the climate crisis. However, simultaneously, it requires farmers to produce goods to counter imports that are not subject to the same environmental regulations. This situation leaves farmers in a more challenging and complex position. Additionally, there is a perception that farmers are indifferent to the environment, but this often does not align with reality and unfairly angers farmers.

Farmers are also fed up with the EU's excessive regulations , administration and the complex bureaucratic rules from various sources. This leaves them exhausted from the bureaucratic dictates and regulations imposed by the EU.²

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the EU is criticized for inefficient spending, environmental neglect, and being influenced by major lobbyists. The reforms made by the EU to align its agricultural policies with sustainability goals are also deemed insufficient and ineffective.³ The European Union's budget covering the period 2021-2027 allocates one-third, or 386.7 billion Euros paid by taxpayers, to farmers. However, farmers are rewarded subsidies per hectare they cultivate, thus around 80% of the EU agricultural budget goes to the largest and wealthiest farmers.⁴ These major agricultural corporations are not only influencing governments and institutions but also the largest environmental organization COP28 and protect their interests.⁵ For example, Copa-Cogeca, one of the biggest lobby in Europe, has been the most influential institution shaping the European Union's agricultural policy for over half a century.⁶ A subsidy system that favors large companies and agricultural lobbies is destroying small and medium-sized farmers. As noted in a recent academic study, it's observed that the voices of small and medium-sized farmers are marginalized, while institutions representing large agricultural corporations are more effective in shaping agricultural policies.⁷ Despite increasing concerns regarding the use of pesticides containing various chemicals and harmful substances in agriculture, the pesticide lobby led by major chemical companies is heavily lobbying to influence EU policies. European farmers oppose this, but their voices often fall short when they try to influence EU lawmakers.⁸ The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), designed to protect EU farmers, has ironically contributed to the decline of small farms. Between 2005 and 2020, the number of farmers in the EU plummeted by nearly 40%, leaving approximately 5.3 million farmers jobless. One of the primary reasons for this decline is the overwhelming influence of large corporate lobbies, which have obstructed efforts to provide assistance to small-scale farmers.⁹

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/01/farmers-hurl-eggs-at-european-parliament-as-leaders-meet-for-summit#:~:text=Farmers%20union%20representatives%20said%20they,be%20protected%2C%20not%20undermined.%E2%80%9D>

³ <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/06/30/eu-reforms-to-common-agricultural-policy-branded-green-washing>

⁴ <https://www.birdlife.org/news/2024/02/01/the-real-deal-behind-europes-farmer-protests/>

⁵ <https://www.desmog.com/2023/12/01/mapped-big-agr-routes-to-influence-at-cop28/>

⁶ <https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/europes-potemkin-lobby/>

⁷ <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-023-10508-5>

⁸ <https://corporateeurope.org/en/2022/03/agribusiness-lobby-against-eu-farm-fork-strategy-amplified-ukraine-war>

⁹ <https://www.birdlife.org/news/2024/02/01/the-real-deal-behind-europes-farmer-protests/>

Responses from the EU and the French Government

The President of the EU Commission stated in a tweet after the farmers' protests in Brussels that they would support European farmers, collaborate to reduce administrative burdens, and address the structural challenges of the sector.¹⁰

The EU announced that it could relax regulations for agricultural emissions and unveiled a new support package of 400 million euros for farmers. Furthermore, the European Commission stated that, following the protests, it would impose restrictions on agricultural imports such as poultry, eggs, and sugar. However, farmers believe that these restrictions may not be sufficient. The EU Commission indicated that farmers would continue to receive EU agricultural support and would be exempt from the obligation to leave part of their land fallow for environmental reasons until 2024. However, farmers will be required to cultivate crops in these areas without using pesticides. Furthermore, proposals to terminate subsidies and tax benefits for diesel fuel in Germany and France, which are the European Union's two largest agricultural countries, were put on hold after farmers staged protests.¹¹

Following the protests in Brussels, France's President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged that Europe's agricultural sector is facing a major crisis. He emphasized the need for a "fundamental" agricultural reform by the EU to ensure that food giants and supermarkets pay fair prices to farmers. Whereas France's newly elected Prime Minister, Gabriel Attal, stated that if the protests end, a fund of 100 million euros would be allocated to farmers. However, it is widely known that this amount is insufficient.

Additionally, Attal emphasized the need for reform to reduce bureaucracy, which affects both farmers and all French citizens' quality of life. Attal stated, "It is estimated that we lose 60 billion euros annually due to procedures and complexities in our daily lives."¹²

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1753086777479352716>

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/why-farmers-are-protesting-europe-2024-02-01/>

¹² https://www.bfmtv.com/economie/60-milliards-d-euros-de-perdu-comment-gabriel-attal-veut-debureaucratiser-la-france_AN-202401300688.html

Conclusion

In Europe, the changes caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, along with higher energy prices, and more bureaucratic rules, have made farmers protest. These growing protests have highlighted concerns about agricultural policies and the challenges faced by farmers throughout Europe.

Farmers also have been at the forefront of policy developments such as biodiversity, the Common Agricultural Policy, the Farm to Fork strategy, and the European Climate Law within the EU. However, the reality is that, alongside climate change, farmers are increasingly exposed to water scarcity, soil erosion, and extreme weather events. Many farmers will have to adapt to the challenges brought about by climate change and face even more difficulties in the coming decades.

The upcoming European Parliament elections in June may bolster the rise of far-right nationalist parties, who are making increasingly appealing promises to farmers. Conservative and far-right politicians are vowing to restore farmers' security and stability.

Agriculture, like elsewhere in the world, is not just an economic sector in Europe; it is also regarded as an area contributing to national sufficiency and sustainability goals in terms of food and nutrition security, ecosystems, environment, and water. With a holistic approach, agriculture plays a central role in human life, shaping societies, influencing not only our daily diets but also our cultural heritage to a great extent. Therefore, both Covid-19 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict have highlighted that agriculture can be a matter of national security, intertwined with strategic issues such as food security, sustainability, and resilience. The Ukraine conflict has shown that energy supply for agriculture can jeopardize food security, and a shortage of grains can endanger food security worldwide.

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