

“Safe sea corridor” for Ukraine grain exports looks very unlikely

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Any resumption of Ukrainian grain shipments via the Black Sea and the Bosphorus Straits would face a myriad of challenges, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda has admitted. Lithuania was the first country to propose a kind of protective flotilla operated by third-party countries, escorting a convoy of vessels carrying the grain.

Russia has blockaded Ukrainian ports since it invaded the country on February 24th, although it claims that the mines have been laid by Ukraine. The extended blockade is raising the risk of a global food crisis Nauseda said on the sidelines of the Davos World Economic Forum this week that “it could take weeks, not months, but if there will be no will of the Russians to open this window, it will be impossible”.

He added that “the Russians could use this instrument as yet another leverage to destabilize the situation in the world. They are highly interested to do as much harm as possible.”

Nauseda said that another option might be to reroute Ukrainian grain through other ports in the region by rail. An “experimental train” sent from Ukraine via Poland to the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda took three weeks, he said. The logistical problems surrounding rail exports are huge – different gauges, an overloaded system, and bureaucratic regulations are just some of the problems faced by this option, which does not appear to be scalable to anywhere near the required throughput levels.

“It may be possible to find some amendments, compromise with the Polish authorities,” Nauseda said. “It could be quite a realistic way to export through Poland and the Baltic countries.”

Poland's operator of dry-bulk terminals warned on Tuesday it's currently impossible to fully re-route shipments of Ukrainian agriculture products. It said that its port facilities on the Baltic coast were already operating at full capacity.

Estonian President Alar Karis has also argued for Europe to arrange Black Sea escorts. "The UK and some others probably will join us, because it's a humanitarian crisis which we are facing if the grain doesn't get out of the country," Karis said in an interview in Davos on Tuesday. However, the UK has said that "there are no current plans to deploy UK warships to the Black Sea."

Nauseda would not comment on whether he was holding direct conversations with the UK on potential naval escorts, or with Turkey, which regulates maritime traffic through the Bosphorus strait to the Black Sea.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba seemed to be taking a realistic view of the situation when he said that at the moment, he saw no desire from NATO now to help secure safe passage of grains.

"If NATO did not close the Ukrainian skies in the most tragic moments of the war, why should they dare to close the Ukrainian sea to allow the free passage of vessels with Ukrainian agricultural products," he said at a breakfast organized by the Victor Pinchuk Foundation in Davos on Wednesday.

Kuleba said that, while he would "wholeheartedly welcome the decision", he said that "I just don't see the stamina and the bravery to take all the risks associated with this operation." Kuleba warned that the interruption of Ukraine's agricultural cycle threatened a multi-year global food crisis, adding that "in the end the problem is that you cannot trust Russia, even if they sign papers guaranteeing safe passage.