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The importance of the Sulina Channel to Ukraine grain trade

The Danube delta has provided Ukraine with an alternative passage for its grain after Russia withdrew from the Black Sea grain deal last month. Of particular importance in this 'new' trade route is the Sulina Channel. Here's why.

Written by [Arjun Sengupta](#)

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A grain warehouse heavily damaged by a Russian drone strike is seen at a compound of a port on the Danube, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Odesa on August 16. (Photo: Press service of the National Police of Ukraine/Handout via Reuters)

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Russia, in overnight drone strikes on Wednesday (August 16), targeted ports and grain storage facilities along the Danube river in Ukraine.

The Danube delta has provided Ukraine with an alternative passage for its grain after Russia withdrew from the Black Sea grain deal last month. The deal, brokered by the UN and Turkey, used to provide safe passage for cargo ships carrying grain from Ukrainian Black Sea ports of Odessa, Chornomorsk and Pivdennyi.

Of particular importance in this 'new' trade route is the Sulina Channel – a 63 km long distributary of the Danube, connecting major Ukrainian ports on the river to the Black Sea, lying completely within the borders of Romania, a NATO member.

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Ukraine, often called the "breadbasket of Europe", is among the world's biggest grain exporters, with its economy heavily dependent on agricultural exports.

The path

The Danube, Europe's second longest river, has historically been crucial for the movement of freight. Near Tulcea, Romania, some 80 km from the sea, the river begins to spread out into its delta which has three major channels – Chilia, Sulina and St George.



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Of these, the Sulina Channel, which has been dredged and straightened, is the only one deep and wide enough for freight transport. This makes it a sort of a riverine 'expressway' – crucial for transport of goods from inland to the Black Sea.

Ships carrying grain from Ukraine leave from Ukrainian ports such as Izmail and Reni on the mainstream (or the Chilia Channel), and head to the port of Sulina, at the mouth of the Sulina Channel.

From there, they head around 140 km south to Constanta, Romania's biggest seaport. Here the cargo is transferred to bigger ships that carry it out of the Black Sea into the Mediterranean through the Bosphorus straits. This route is under constant surveillance and protection of NATO.

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Congestion and lack of capacity

While seemingly a silver bullet against Russia-caused disruptions to Ukraine's grain exports, this route has its problems as well. Russia – as of now – has desisted from attacking NATO-controlled territories, but continued targeting of Ukrainian ports and grain facilities on the Danube can be crippling.

Moreover, Ukraine has historically not used the Danube for grain exports, relying instead on its rail network and Black Sea ports. This has meant that the capacity of Ukrainian ports to handle the volume of grain suddenly coming their way is fairly limited.

One solution, suggested Sorin Grindeanu, Romania's transport minister, is to transport the grain from Ukraine to Romania via rail and use Romanian ports instead. This would, however, lead to considerable loss of revenue in the form of loading fees and other expenses for Ukraine.

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Another problem, given the sheer traffic on the Channel, has been congestion at its mouth. Boats are having to wait for days before they can enter the Channel, causing major delays in shipping.

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