

## The Ongoing Farmers Protest Across Europe: An Assessment

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The great English poet and novelist Tom Hardy in his book *The Mayor of Casterbridge* writes, “Happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain”. This sentence aptly draws attention to the predicament of farmers who are protesting all across the world. The beginning of 2024 is marked by a series of farmer protests across the world. Although the news of Indian farmers marching to the national capital- New Delhi has us all glued, it is the farmer’s protests across Europe that have picked up momentum.

Farmers from several European countries including France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, and Portugal have abandoned their fields and joined the protests in the streets to voice their opposition to the growing disparities brought about by a number of causes. From creating road blockades to moving their tractors in organised convoys, blocking ports, and pelting eggs at the European Parliament; the farmer's protest has swooned and has garnered huge public support. This article addresses the main complaints, evaluates the reasons for the protest, and examines its effects. The piece concludes with a few suggestions and a plan of action for handling the circumstance.

### The Farmers’ Protest in Europe: A summary

European farmers are protesting in significant numbers to put pressure on the authorities to address their grievances regarding a range of issues, including low sales, rising costs, and the entry of non-European Union (EU) products into local markets. A large-scale event was held in Brussels, Belgium on 01<sup>[1]</sup> Feb, in conjunction with the EU leaders' summit to discuss Ukraine. Later on in the demonstration, the demonstrators set fires and threw eggs outside the parliament.<sup>[2]</sup> Despite opposition from the demonstrators, the controversial Nature Restoration Bill was passed by the European Parliament on Feb 27. The farmers have argued that the law will force them into a more bureaucratic system, which would negatively impact their means of subsistence.<sup>[3]</sup> The Parliament, on the other hand, believes that it is a crucial bill to tackle the climate crisis in the region.

Simultaneous activities are also taking place in other European states such as in France, where farmers have blocked major highways leading to Paris. They are protesting against low incomes and strict environmental policies that are forcing them to invest in advanced production techniques. At the protest locations, the farmers have set up camp in tents, blocking access to the capital city via road. Although, the protest was temporarily halted, demonstrations have been resumed again.

In Germany, the government’s plan to withdraw tax breaks, and removing subsidies on agricultural diesel has resulted in the farmers protesting in large numbers. These decisions were a part of the measures announced by the government in Dec 2023. The farmers contend that these actions have put their livelihoods in jeopardy and will force them into bankruptcy. German farmers had also organised blockades and rallies in Berlin disrupting movements.

In Southern Europe; Italy, Spain and Portugal have not yet witnessed a full-scale protest as it is less affected by the on-going Russia-Ukraine War and the intervention of cheap Ukrainian products. However, these countries are facing climate change issues like heat waves and droughts. Further with the rising water scarcity problem in some of the cities in this region, the

farmers are protesting against the ill-conceived government policies that have not been taking care of the citizens.

On the other hand, countries in Eastern Europe are experiencing the brunt of Ukraine's war. As the EU temporarily lifted the ban on Ukrainian products, it soon found entry in the markets of Poland, Russia, and Bulgaria leading to unfair competition. This has infuriated the farmers, who demanding EU's revised trade liberalisation measures be put in place.

### **Background and the causes behind the farmers' protests across Europe**

The agricultural sector contributes to 1.4 per cent of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the EU.<sup>[4]</sup> The small farms make up huge businesses. In 2022, the EU's agricultural industry created an estimated gross value added of Euro 220.7 bn<sup>[5]</sup>. However, in the past few years, the agricultural sector has been facing a lot of difficulties caused due to both man-made and natural activities. With the rising issue of climate change, various episodes of severe drought, wildfires, and floods; the agricultural sector has experienced a setback. The major causes that have led to the farmers' protest are as follows:

- **Russia-Ukraine crisis:** As the on-going conflict in Ukraine persists, the global economy has been affected, particularly Europe. With the rise in fuel prices which has affected the overall economy, the inflow of cheap Ukrainian agricultural products has disrupted the market dynamics. The local products are being replaced by the inflow of Ukrainian imports which has caused massive dismay among the farmers. Further, the increasing cost of fertilisers and pesticides have added to the farmers' distress.
- **Rising costs of living and lower sale price:** The on-going conflict has altered the market dynamics influencing various sectors including agriculture. The farming basics like- fuel, energy, fertilisers, transportation, etc. have become expensive. Further, the government and retailers have been forced to lower the sale price, thereby, making cost of living expensive. The protestors in France and Germany have particularly raged against tax breaks on agricultural fuels.
- **Irregular government policies:** Both the EU trade policies and the individual government policies on farming have been questioned constantly. Whether it is the EU's decision to temporarily lift the ban on cheap Ukrainian imports or the trade deal with MERCOSUR (Southern Common Market); it has been largely criticised by the protestors as it creates an unfair competitive market for the local goods. Further, stringent policies like reducing the use of fertilisers and increasing the growth of only organic products has become both expensive and unviable for the farmers.
- **Unplanned climate crisis tackling policies:** The climate crisis is an on-going phenomenon which countries across the world are trying to mitigate together. Due to global warming, a series of extreme weather occurrences like drought, wildfires, rains and floods have affected the region. The state governments and the EU have not been very successful in finding solutions to the growing problems. Most of the plans to tackle climate issues like the Brussels Plan to limit nitrogen emissions have been criticised by the farmers as being unfair and unrealistic goal to achieve.

### **Impact of the farmers' protest**

The farmer protest in Europe is a proof of how inconsistencies in government's decisions lead to mass public unrest resulting in protests and demonstration, disrupting the normal functioning of a state. There have been multiple cases of road blockades, tractor conveying, and sit-in demonstrations along with smaller violent actions like egg pelting or sparking fire. Instances of blockade at the ports, airports have also been reported.

The farmer protests across Europe have disrupted the normal functioning of the states and have resulted in collateral damages like shortage of food and public nuisance. Another significant aspect that is associated with the farmer's protest is the affiliation and involvement of right-wing groups. These groups are actively supporting the farmer's demands to cater to their electoral gains as most of the states in Europe gears up for elections in 2024[6].

### **The way forward**

The agricultural sector contributes to 1.4 per cent of the total GDP of the EU. Most of the countries in Europe are still heavily dependent on agricultural. The government and the EU should reform their policies to ensure that the farmers are benefitted while the highest economic goals are also achieved. As some of the countries like France have announced mechanisms for controlling imports and fair competition, it is essential to also offer subsidies on some items. A crucial issue that needs to be addressed by the respective state governments and the EU is the spread of this movement via social media. With misinformation at a rampant rise and the content that Artificial Intelligence can generate, the governments should also be looking out for them. The need of the hour is a strategic policy to tackle the war, internal political dynamics, and climate issues that holistically address the demands of the farmers while achieving economic goals. If these protests persist for some more months, it will have a serious impact on the upcoming elections.

### **End notes**

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[1]

[2] Biesemans,B;Rossignol C, Tractors roll into Brussels in farmer protest over plans to limit nitrogen emissions, Thomson Reuters, Accessed on 18 March 2024 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/tractors-descend-brussels-farmer-protest-over-plans-limit-nitrogen-emissions-2023-03-03/>

[3] Badgamia, Nishtha EU parliament passes controversial nature law despite political backlash, farmers' protest Accessed on 18 March 2024 <https://www.wionews.com/world/eu-parliament-passes-controversial-nature-law-despite-political-backlash-farmers-protest-694470>

[4] Eurostat: Statistics Explained, Accessed on 18 March 2024, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Performance\\_of\\_the\\_agricultural\\_sector#:~:text=Agriculture contributed 1.4 to the EU's GDP in similar,food and beverage processing industry.](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Performance_of_the_agricultural_sector#:~:text=Agriculture contributed 1.4 to the EU's GDP in similar,food and beverage processing industry.)

[5] Ibid.

[6] Farmers Protest in Europe, Mitkat Report, 21 February 2024

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