

Food security on the agenda of the European Council

Four decades of debate and discussion

The current food security crisis is the first to grab the attention of the European Council since it became a formal EU institution in December 2009. Looking at food security discourse in the European Council from 1981 to October 2022, this briefing will consider the main discussion drivers in each decade. Although food security has not been a regular item on the European Council agenda in recent years, it has drawn EU leaders' attention at various points in the past. The shock to the food system caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine however led to the reappearance of food security on the European Council agenda in the first half of this year, and 2022 has already been a peak year for European Council attention to food security issues, in terms both of meetings and the number of conclusions. Food security is essential for sustaining human life, but it is also interconnected to a number of important policy areas, including climate, migration, external relations, trade, health and agriculture. Some of these linkages will be touched upon in the briefing.

Background

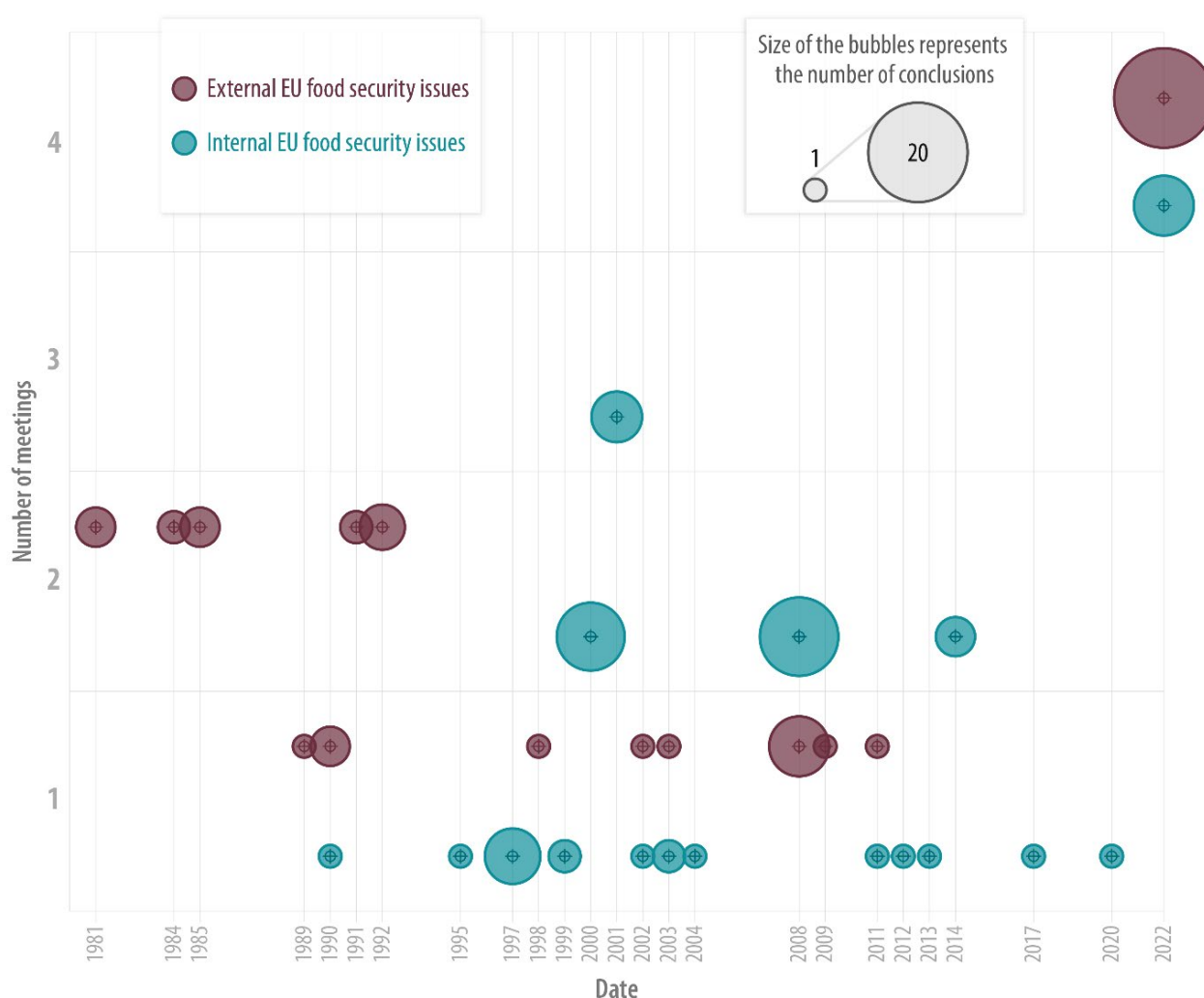
Food security, as defined by the United Nations (UN) Committee on World Food Security, means that 'all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life'. Based on this definition, food affordability, food safety and nutrition, and physical access to food are [key dimensions](#) that need to be stable for food security to exist. Food is essential for human existence and ensuring food security is more than a policy choice, it can be seen as a moral duty. Access to adequate food is also a human right, recognised in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and enshrined in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This right is also covered by [several international conventions](#), treaties and constitutions.

Over the years, the European Council has discussed a number of topics that fall under the umbrella of food security. There are both internal (food safety) and external (food aid) dimensions to EU food security conclusions; the conclusions on some topics (food supply chains and sustainable food production) can include both elements. However, whereas the European Council's [2014-2019 Strategic Agenda](#) made no mention of food, the [2019-2024 Strategic Agenda](#) mentions food twice. The current Strategic Agenda recognises the importance of sustainable agriculture as well as ensuring food safety and standards. The omission of food issues from the previous strategic agenda and the limited reference to food in the current strategic agenda further demonstrates that food security-related issues have not been a salient topic on the agenda of the European Council in recent years. There was no urgency for the European Council to deal with food security issues, as the EU was not facing any internal food security crisis and EU leaders were focused on the COVID-19 crisis, which took up much of their time from the start of 2020 until the end of 2021. However, [food security](#) has now re-emerged as a topic on the agenda of the European Council, owing to the impact of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, which is exacerbating existing food security challenges worldwide and has sent global food prices skyrocketing at certain points in 2022.



European Council debates

Chart 1 – Focus on food security issues in the European Council



Main drivers of European Council discourse on food security

The European Council's discussion of food security issues in the 1980s focused exclusively on the external aspects (see Chart 1). The two main focus points were on food aid to Poland in 1981 and on helping developing countries create sustainable food strategies. In response to the economic crisis and food shortages in Poland (then under communist rule), the European Community intervened and set up programmes to supply food to Poland at special prices. In the 1980s, food security topics were mentioned in European Council conclusions, but there was no significant discussion dedicated to the topic.

In the early 1990s, the main food security issues on the European Council agenda were linked to food aid for eastern Europe. When eastern European countries began to move from centrally planned to more market-oriented economies, their agricultural sectors were strongly impacted but to varying degrees. In the initial years of the transition, gross agricultural output [decreased](#) (-25 % in the Balkan countries and -45% in the Baltics). A major reduction in subsidies, increase in input costs, reduced fertiliser use and supply-chain issues are some of the factors that led to food security issues in the region during this period. Towards the end of the 1990s, the European Council grew increasingly concerned about food safety in Europe. This was a reaction to the outbreak of the BSE

(bovine spongiform encephalopathy) crisis in Europe. The European Council's attention to food safety issues continued into the early 2000s. In addition to the BSE crisis, foot and mouth disease (FMD), the need to restore public confidence in the food system and the establishment of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) drove the discourse.

In the first 6 months of 2008, food affordability was a recurring topic that captured the European Council's attention. Food-price inflation worldwide was caused by a [number of factors](#), chiefly increased demand for certain agricultural products such as feedstocks for biofuel production, high oil prices, and speedy economic growth in some emerging economies, which led to increased demand for livestock food produce. Food inflation in 2007 and early 2008 led to [violent protests](#) and unrest in certain parts of the world.

The European Council discussed three main aspects of food security between 2010 and October 2022. First was the increased food prices in 2011 and 2012. These were caused by a [number of factors](#) similar to those that caused the food price increases in 2008. Second was sustainable agriculture, since the Heads of State or Government wanted sustainable agriculture to be part of the common agricultural policy reforms. Third, has been the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Of the three, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the weaponisation of food has captured by far the most European Council attention, in terms both of the number of meetings at which it has been discussed and of the number of conclusions. This period also differs from previous decades, as the European Council has been an official EU institution for the entire period, not simply an informal body.

European Council conclusions

The most commonly mentioned topics in food security-related conclusions are food policy/strategy and food safety (27.5 % and 21.4 %, respectively). The years 2008 and 2022 have seen the highest number of European Council conclusions on food security topics. Of all the food security conclusions from 1981 to October 2022, 18.4 % were in 2008, and 23.5 % in 2022. The European Council's attention was drawn to food security issues in mid-2008, as the [cost of food increased significantly](#).¹ The impact of these price spikes was global but affected developing countries in particular. According to the [European Commission](#), these increases were due to a blend of rising oil prices, greater demand for biofuels, and trade issues, such as trade restrictions and panic buying. The European Council devoted attention to this food security issue in the first half of 2008, when prices were peaking. However, in the second half of the year, food prices began to fall again and attention turned to the global financial crisis. There are both similarities and differences in how the European Council responded to the 2008 and 2022 crises (see Table 1).

Table 1 – The European Council's reactions to the 2008 and 2022 food crises

Similarities	Differences
The European Council supported international actors such as the UN, the G7 and the World Bank as it assembled the High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis (2008) and the Global Alliance for Food Security (2022).	In March 2008, EU leaders invited the Council to identify the factors that were leading to food price increases, whereas in 2022 the European Council required no such investigation and directly blamed Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
Food export restrictions were discouraged by EU leaders in 2008; and similarly, in 2022 the European Council committed to keeping global trade in food free of unjustified trade barriers.	In June 2008, the European Council outlined its support for providing food aid to the most critically impacted territories; so far, in 2022, EU leaders have yet to call for such a response.
The European Council demonstrated its awareness that price surges would have the harshest impact on developing and exposed third countries.	

Similarities	Differences
The European Council proposed that the EU should support sustainable, more productive, agriculture in developing countries.	
The European Council noted, in both crises, that increases in food and energy prices led to inflationary pressures.	
Food affordability was a concern for the European Council in both crises.	

Meetings

The years 2001 and 2022 saw the highest number of European Council meetings dealing with food security topics (see Chart 1). In 2001, the focus was on food safety. In 2022, in contrast, the issue was food security and affordability. Both crises were very different in nature. The 2022 crisis was ignited by a series of external factors and impacted both EU and global food security. Conversely, in 2001, tackling the spread of BSE and FMD were internal challenges for the EU. The EU could take steps in coordination with the Member States to directly end the crisis, for example, through research, establishing standard testing, and introducing the Food Safety Regulation and EFSA.

European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)

In 1999, the European Council made its first call for an independent food agency. The following year, the European Commission published its [white paper on food safety](#), which underlined that the European Council had stressed the importance of 'improving quality standards and reinforcing systems of checks throughout the food chain, from farm to table'. The first measure outlined in the white paper suggested establishing an independent food safety authority, in line with calls from the European Council. At its December 2000 meeting, the European Council continued to call for a European food authority that must 'operate with the highest possible level of scientific excellence, independence and transparency, thus helping to prevent crises'. In the first half of 2001, the European Council urged the co-legislators to agree on the final adoption of a European Food Authority in line with the timeline set out in the Nice and Stockholm European Councils. At the December 2001 meeting of the European Council, EU leaders welcomed the setting up of the European Food Safety Authority, which was eventually [established in February 2002](#).

Unsurprisingly, given the origin of EFSA, its [core mission](#) is safety in the food chain. EFSA provides independent scientific advice on food-related risks and communicates on risks associated with the food chain.

Food crises led to changes in EU food policy and the [creation of the European Food Safety Authority](#), which the European Council pushed for. The current food security crisis, which is attracting a relatively high degree of attention from the European Council, could lead EU leaders to call for further changes to the EU's long-term food strategy and regulations, as they did in the early 2000s when the European Council was not yet an official EU institution.

From 23 March 1981 to the present day, issues relating to food security have been discussed at 40 separate European Council meetings. Factors both internal and external to the EU have impacted the discussion on food security in the European Council. The highest number of meetings touching on food security issues took place in 2001 and 2022 (see Chart 1), with the topic raised at three or more meetings. In 2001, the European Council's attention was drawn to food security, owing to the

FMD and BSE crises, and EU leaders focused on food safety, food supply chains, and the establishment of the food safety authority. So far in 2022, the European Council's attention has been drawn to food security as a result of the impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on global food security, food affordability, and supply chains.

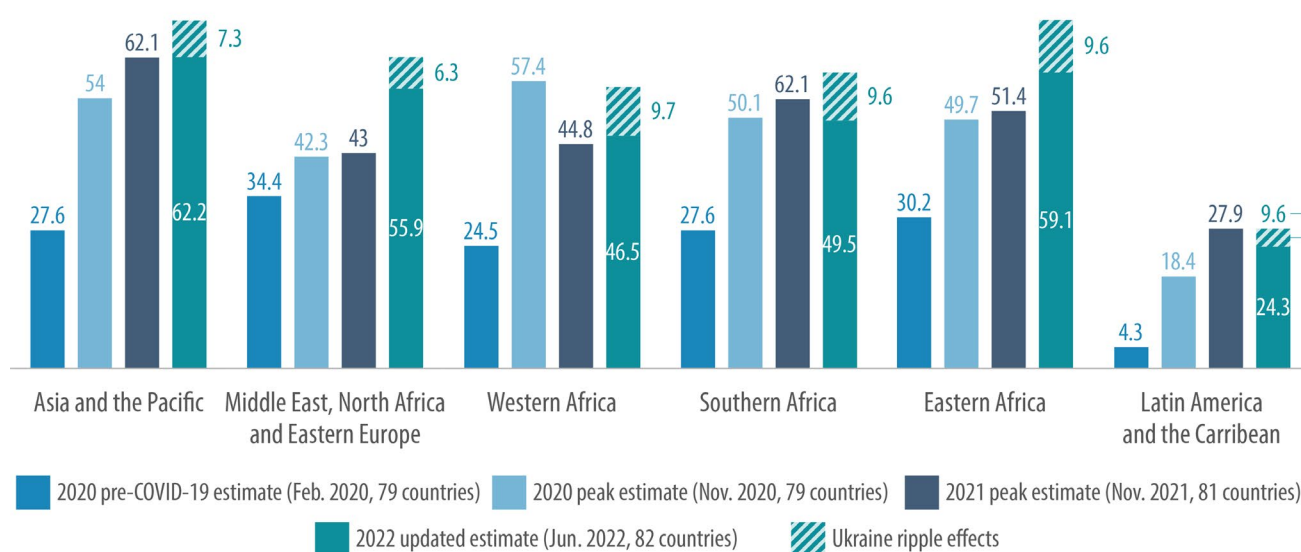
Of all European Council conclusions on food security issues, 21.4% relate specifically to food safety. However, food safety was generally only discussed by the European Council during the 6-year period from 1997 to 2003. Food safety crises – specifically BSE and later FMD – brought the topic to the fore, with the European Council releasing a Declaration on Food Safety in 1997. The European Council reacted to the need to restore public confidence and called for the safe production and supply of food to be treated as an EU priority.

Renewed interest in food security following Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Global food insecurity has been on the rise for a number of years and predates February 2022, [8%](#) of the global population was affected by hunger in 2019. This was due to a number of factors, including climate change, socio-economic conditions, conflicts, and natural disasters. When the [COVID-19 pandemic hit](#), attempts to control the spread of the virus had knock-on effects on food security, as supply chains were disrupted, the economic situation worsened for many people, and actors in all parts of the food system were impacted. As a result of these compounding factors, up to [828 million](#) people were affected by hunger in 2021. Despite this, food security had not featured on the agenda of the European Council for a number of years. In the past, the European Council had dedicated considerable attention to crises with a strong direct impact on the EU, but there had been no threat of mass food shortages in the EU for a number of years. Furthermore, in 2021, the European Council was focused on managing the pandemic and the energy crisis. This explains why food security was low on the European Council agenda in recent years.

However, Russia's war on Ukraine has exacerbated food security issues by causing a massive shock to food supplies owing to both countries' important role in the global food supply chain (see Chart 2). Russia and Ukraine account for about [30%](#) of global wheat exports, [20%](#) of corn and mineral fertilisers, and [80%](#) of the world's sunflower oil trade.

Chart 2 – Number of people acutely food insecure or at high risk (millions)



This shock to the food system pushed food security onto the European Council agenda in the first half of the year. 2022 is not yet over, but it has already been a peak year for European Council attention to food security issues, in terms both of meetings and of the number of conclusions. Food security has been mentioned at each of the four formal European Council meetings since

24 February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, and was also included in the [Versailles Declaration](#). The European Council holds Russia [responsible](#) for the food crisis, on account of its weaponisation of food by attacking agriculture, stealing Ukrainian agricultural products, and blocking exports.

The food security crisis is having a global impact, but the effect is more significant in vulnerable countries. In the Middle East, Russia and Ukraine supply around [75 %](#) of wheat imports, a figure reaching [90 %](#) in east Africa. The European Council has expressed concern about the impact on vulnerable countries and thus signalled its support for specific initiatives at EU and international level, such as '[solidarity lanes](#)', the [Food and Agriculture Resilience Mission](#), and the establishment of the [Global Alliance on Food Security](#). Furthermore, the European Council urged Russia to unblock the Black Sea ports. In July 2022, the UN brokered a [deal](#) with Russia, Turkey and Ukraine to allow Ukrainian grain exports via Black Sea ports. The UN's efforts to reach this agreement were strongly supported by the European Council. This initiative is, for the moment, addressing the most pressing elements of the food crisis.

The food crisis has been worsened – beyond Russia's actions – by third countries introducing export restrictions following the start of the war, with the aim of ensuring domestic supply and reducing prices. Such food export restrictions were on the agenda of the 12th Ministerial Conference² of the World Trade Organization. The statement following the meeting noted that there had been an agreement to show restraint, but no ban. In May 2022, the European Council reiterated its promise to keep global trade in food commodities free of unjustified trade barriers. During the 2008 food crisis, the European Council had similarly discouraged export restrictions, however some countries have failed to learn from past lessons or to listen to calls from the WTO and the European Council. According to the [World Bank](#), as of 28 November 2022, 19 countries had implemented 23 food export bans, and 8 had implemented 12 export-limiting measures.

Future food security challenges

Energy, the economy and the war in Ukraine are likely to garner most of the European Council's attention in the winter of 2022 to 2023. The Black Sea grain initiative and EU solidarity lanes have enabled [25 million tonnes](#) of harvested products to be exported from Ukraine, thereby stabilising markets. Food affordability in the EU and food security worldwide are nevertheless likely to be mentioned by the European Council in the coming months, but mostly as an aside in the discussions on the Ukraine war and the difficult cost of living situation that many Europeans are facing.

In the spring of 2023, food security may draw increased attention in the European Council as the international community uncovers i) the impact of the 2022 fertiliser shortage on the harvests in 2023, and ii) the degree to which Ukrainian agriculture has been able to achieve its usual output despite the ongoing war. Russia's ongoing invasion is hindering the ability of Ukrainian farmers to prepare for next season, most likely resulting in lower Ukrainian yields next year. Fertiliser shortages and resulting fertiliser price increases will impact the harvest in countries around the globe, further reducing next year's yield. If food security remains a key point on the European Council agenda, EU leaders may push for change in some aspects of the EU's food security strategy and legislation, as they did in response to the food safety crises of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

From October 2022 to January 2023, acute food insecurity is likely to deteriorate further in 19 countries, [according](#) to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Food Programme. An April 2022 [report](#) by the World Bank suggested that the war in Ukraine has impacted global patterns of trade, production, and consumption of commodities to such an extent that prices will remain at historically high levels until the end of 2024. Consequently, food security is likely to remain an important topic on the EU's short- to medium-term agenda.

Russia has been shown to be an important actor in the global food system; and the detrimental impact of export restrictions on food products and of the blocking of Ukrainian exports are also evident. Bearing in mind these factors, there is potential to further weaponise food. President Putin could renege on the deal to allow Ukrainian grain exports from Ukrainian ports or limit the export

of Russian food products to vulnerable third countries unless sanctions are dropped. Developing sustainable and resilient agri-food systems globally could help to prevent food from being used as a pawn in future conflicts. Still, in the short term, this is not a feasible solution.

COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have clearly demonstrated the risks inherent in globalised supply chains for food security and other strategic products, particularly when the importer depends chiefly on one supplier. Following the COVID-19 crisis, the EU has taken steps to ensure food supplies in Europe by establishing a European food security crisis preparedness and response mechanism (EFSCM). The role of the [EFSCM](#) is to 'assess how to improve cooperation between the public and private sectors and evaluate risks when crises arise'. Nevertheless, in March 2022, in the Versailles Declaration, the European Council called for the EU to reduce its dependencies on key imported agricultural products. More still needs to be done if the EU wants to ensure food security. This will include investing in sustainable local agriculture production, shortening supply chains, and reducing dependencies by diversifying sources of key imports, through a robust trade policy that also influences the EU's trade partners to move towards a more sustainable system.

There are various threats to future food security in the EU and globally. One of the most obvious challenges is climate change. Determining the impact climate change will have on food security in the future is complex and characterised by many variables, but it is well established that climate change will pose a significant challenge to both food safety and food security. The direct and indirect impacts of climate change have the potential to compound current food security struggles. The current food system is part of a vicious cycle because it contributes to worse climate change outcomes. In [March 2022](#), EU leaders called for the EU to help farmers transition to a sustainable food system, and in [May 2022](#), they recognised that local, sustainable food production would reduce structural dependencies.

Food production is a major contributing factor to global warming. If global population growth estimates are reached in the coming decades, there will be more people than ever in need of food; in the same timeframe, the world will also be under pressure to reduce the detrimental effect of human activity on the climate. Furthermore, the anticipated population growth rate will stretch resources such as land and clean water even further, both of which are essential to food production.

The EU's common agricultural policy has been vindicated as food security has not been at stake in the EU despite the food crisis. However, the crisis may have long-term EU policy implications. In recent years, the [focus](#) has been on methods of making agriculture more sustainable; however, current global food security issues have sparked a debate on whether to prioritise food quantity over sustainability objectives. This has been seen with the Commission's decision to postpone publication of a [proposal](#) for a regulation on the sustainable use of pesticides until June 2022 because of the war in Ukraine. In July 2022, in [response](#) to the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine on the global food system, the Commission implemented a 1-year [derogation](#) from rules on crop rotation and maintenance of non-productive features on arable land. These farmland areas are supposed to be set aside to improve biodiversity and preserve soil health. The [farm to fork](#) strategy is the EU's roadmap to a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system. One of the flagship initiatives is a proposal for a legislative framework for sustainable food systems that is still expected in [2023](#). Postponing or halting environmental legislation may ultimately feed into longer-term food insecurity issues.

Conclusion

[EPRS](#) has shown that the European Council has a strong role in EU crisis management. Against this backdrop, the findings in this briefing highlight that the European Council gives more attention – in terms of meetings and conclusions – to food security crises when these impact the EU directly. Whether food security remains on the agenda of the European Council in the near future will depend on i) the gravity of the crisis, ii) the level of impact on the EU, and iii) whether new crises with a more significant impact on the EU occur.

A serious challenge for food security implies a serious challenge for humanity itself, which depends on affordable access to nutritious and safe food. Given the importance of food security in the EU and globally, the development of a sustainable and resilient agri-food system that can respond to the challenges of the future should be a priority for the EU in the medium and long term. The European Council, whose role it is to define the general political direction and priorities of the European Union, is well placed to ensure this is taken forward as a priority for the EU.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The World Bank Food Price Index rose by 60 % within a few months in 2008, and international prices of maize, rice, and wheat increased by 70 %, 180 %, and 120 %, respectively, compared with mid-2007.
- ² The 12th Ministerial Conference took place from 12 to 17 June 2022.

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