

Why are Russian 'shadow' oil tankers still sailing the Baltic Sea?

Tuesday 26 November 2024, by [ANDERSSON Li](#), [CLAUSEN Per](#), [GEDIN Hanna](#), [KONIECZNY Maciej](#), [KYLÖNEN Merja](#), [MALISZ Zofia](#), [SARAMO Jussi](#), [SJÖSTEDT Jonas](#), [VAN AKEN Jan](#) (Date first published: 13 November 2024).

As leftwing MEPs and MPs, we expect a large majority to support us in Thursday's (14 November) important vote on the European Parliament's resolution addressing the Russian shadow fleet. This is a matter of deep seriousness for both Ukraine and the Baltic Sea.

One of the most important ways to support Ukraine is to stop all revenues that finance Russia's illegal war. To do this, the EU must move from words to action and stop the Russian shadow fleet transporting oil on rusty ships via the Baltic Sea.

If you look out from the beaches at Helsingborg, Jastarnia or Warnemünde, you can see the giant tankers that belong to the Russian shadow fleet. These are the ships that bring oil from Russia's harbours and ship it to the world market, in violation of international sanctions.

The G7 sanctions against Russia are designed to put a price cap on Russian oil, but this mechanism is being circumvented by the use of shadow fleet vessels using other nations' flags.

The Russian state-owned shipping company Sovcomflot owns about a third of the ships in the shadow fleet, while the remaining are owned by private investors looking for a quick buck. The tankers are fully loaded with oil, which is resold at a higher price than the sanctions allow.

Since 2023, more than 2,500 Russian oil tankers have sailed through the Baltic Sea, most of them belonging to the shadow fleet. This trade is crucial to Russia's ability to finance its illegal war against Ukraine, with up to half of Russia's total crude oil exports passing through the Baltic Sea, according to the Centre for Eastern Studies.

If we are to impose real sanctions on the Russian economy, the EU needs to act decisively in order to stop the huge tankers carrying oil off the coasts of Finland, Sweden, Poland, Germany and Denmark on a daily basis.

'Ticking time bomb'

There is another layer that makes the issue urgent. In addition to financing the Russian war machine, the shadow fleet is a ticking time bomb, threatening the environment in and around the Baltic Sea.

The shadow fleet consists of outdated, rusty and often uninsured ships with unclear ownership information.

Often, oil is transferred from ship to ship at sea, with a high risk of oil spills. The question is not if - but when - an environmental disaster will take place in the Baltic Sea.

While the EU supplies Ukraine with arms and money, many member states continue to finance Russia by importing oil and fossil gas. It is devastating that the EU has not yet acted to stop this import.

In practice, this means the EU is helping Ukraine with one hand and filling Putin's war chest with the other hand. If we are really serious about doing everything in our power to support Ukraine, we must immediately stop buying the oil that is financing the war.

We suggest a few concrete measures to address the operations of the shadow fleet:

- Ban the sale of Western tankers to buyers outside of The G7 Oil Price Cap Coalition.
- Sanction more of the shadow fleet vessels currently in operation, as the UK has done already.
- Put more pressure on oil brokers and refineries purchasing oil to steer away from Russian products.
- Increase cooperation between local and European officials and allow the European Maritime Safety Agency to monitor the shadow fleet vessels and check for violations of maritime law and environmental rules.

Now is the time for the EU to move from words to action. Substandard vessels that lack insurance and violate the sanctions have no place in the EU.

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