# How Germany and Estonia are tackling Russia’s shadow fleet to enforce oil sanctions



In early 2025, authorities in Germany and Estonia took decisive action against oil tankers believed to be part of Russia’s extensive "shadow fleet," a covert network of vessels facilitating the evasion of sanctions imposed on Russia’s oil exports. This fleet has become a critical tool in Russia’s efforts to continue its energy trade amid international sanctions related to its military activities in Ukraine.

In January 2025, the German government seized the M/V Eventin, a Panamanian-flagged oil tanker that had lost power and steering capabilities north of the German island of Rügen in the Baltic Sea. Carrying 100,000 tons of crude oil from the Russian port of Ust-Luga destined for Port Said, Egypt, the vessel posed a significant hazard to navigation and risked causing environmental damage if it had run aground. The Eventin was subsequently confiscated in March 2025 following its inclusion in the European Union’s sanctions package against Russia earlier that year.

Several months later, in April 2025, the Estonian navy detained another tanker, the Kiwala, which was also listed on the EU sanctions list for allegedly sailing without a valid flag. Although the vessel flew a Djibouti flag at the time, Djibouti disavowed its registration, leading Estonian authorities to treat the tanker as stateless and detain it accordingly.

The term "shadow fleet" refers to a group of ships engaged in illicit activities to circumvent international sanctions and safety regulations. According to Prof Raul (Pete) Pedrozo, an expert in maritime law at the U.S. Naval War College, these vessels often operate by avoiding flag and port inspections, operating without valid insurance, and engaging in deceptive practices such as disabling automatic identification systems (AIS), falsifying vessel identities, and conducting ship-to-ship (STS) oil transfers to obscure cargo origins.

While the International Maritime Organization (IMO) defines the shadow fleet narrowly in terms of illegal operations, broader definitions include vessels lacking Western insurance or those flagged in countries outside sanctioning coalitions. Some analyses categorise vessels into “cleared,” “gray,” and “dark” fleets based on their compliance and transparency, with the gray and dark fleets representing vessels with questionable legality and active deception.

Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Price Cap Coalition—comprising the G7 nations, the EU, and Australia—implemented an oil price cap mechanism to control the purchase price of Russian crude oil and petroleum products. The coalition aims to reduce revenues flowing to Russia by setting price ceilings for Russian oil shipped by sea, allowing Western maritime and financial services to operate only if these conditions are met.

However, Russia has responded by expanding its shadow fleet, reportedly composed of between 400 and 600 ageing tankers, many acquired from non-EU/G7 countries. These tankers fly "flags of convenience" from nations such as the Cook Islands, Liberia, Malta, and Panama, which complicates enforcement of sanctions. Russia’s fleet is supported by opaque ownership structures and non-Western insurance providers, further allowing it to evade Western oversight.

Prof Pedrozo explained that this fleet enables Russia to generate tens of billions of dollars in additional revenue beyond sanctioned prices, sustaining its military efforts. For instance, it is estimated that the shadow fleet allowed Russia to secure an extra $8 billion between January and September 2024 alone.

The use of deceptive shipping practices by shadow fleet vessels raises significant safety and environmental concerns. The ships, typically over fifteen years old and poorly maintained, engage in risky behaviours including frequent blackouts of AIS transmitters, falsified navigation data, and unreported STS transfers often conducted in international waters outside the jurisdiction of coastal States. Incidents such as engine failures, fires, collisions, and oil spills have been recorded, with coastal States often bearing the financial and environmental repercussions due to the lack of adequate insurance on these vessels.

For example, the tanker Andaman Skies was denied entry into an Indian port in March 2025 due to lacking valid seaworthiness certificates but proceeded to conduct an STS transfer at sea, further complicating regulatory efforts. Additionally, in December 2024, the shadow fleet tanker Eagle S was seized by Finnish authorities for intentionally damaging a critical undersea fibre optic cable connecting Finland and Estonia, an act suspected to be linked to intelligence operations.

Maritime experts state that enforcement is complicated by the limits of international law. Coastal States have sovereignty over their territorial seas but must allow innocent passage of foreign vessels. Port States have the strongest enforcement powers but often lack consistent application, enabling shadow fleet vessels to frequent ports with lax regulatory regimes.

In response to these challenges, the G7 announced the creation of a Shadow Fleet Task Force in 2025 to enhance the monitoring and constraint of illicit shadow fleet operations. Prof Pedrozo underscores that the effectiveness of sanctions depends heavily on international cooperation and consistent enforcement, particularly given the ongoing global demand for Russian petroleum products.

The detailed evaluation of the shadow fleet puts a spotlight on the complex interplay of maritime law, international sanctions, and the geopolitics of energy trade, highlighting the difficulties faced by the international community in addressing the issue. Prof Pedrozo, a retired U.S. Navy captain and chair of the Law of Armed Conflict at the U.S. Naval War College, provided expert analysis on the topic.

The article was originally published by Sites@Duke Express.

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