

Press release

Russian flag refuge: 107 vessels join the Russian flag registry since January 2025

Between January 2025 and June 2026, the Russian flag registry grew 36% in response to diplomatic pressure on ‘shadow’ vessels.

HELSINKI, 25 September 2026 - As sanctioning countries increase pressure on open registries, the ‘shadow’ fleet has had to choose between flying false flags and risking detainment or settling under the Russian ship registry. As a result, the number of vessels in Russia’s registry has grown significantly. Today, CREA published a new analysis revealing that, between January 2025 and June 2026, 107 vessels were added to Russia’s flag registry, a 36% increase, which peaked in December 2025 when 25 new vessels were added in a single month.

The numbers reflect the shift in open registries moving away from allowing sanctioned tonnage to be transported on ‘shadow’ vessels, notably Barbados and Palau, which have cleared their registries of sanctioned vessels entirely, Panama, which has cut its count by almost two-thirds from a May 2025 peak, as well as the world’s largest ship registries launching a shared database ([Registry Information Sharing Compact, RISC](#)) to combat flag hopping and other forms of sanctions circumvention. However, many vessels have migrated to more weakly regulated or opaque registries: 46 unique vessels formerly flagged by Comoros or Gambia had joined Russia’s registry by June 2026. Others have moved to Sierra Leone and Equatorial Guinea — or continue operating with no recognised flag at all.

‘Russia’s ‘shadow’ fleet is moving in waves from one open flag registry to the next in a game of whack-a-mole. As flag registries come under pressure to expel sanctioned Russian ‘shadow’ vessels, the vessels hop between flags — sometimes sailing under fraudulent flags that leave them vulnerable to detention — before settling under the Russian registry as a final safe haven. The Russian flag registry has become a one-way refuge for sanctioned vessels: for every ship that leaves, roughly nine enter, helping protect the oil lifeline funding Russia’s bloodshed in Ukraine,’ said the report’s main author, Luke Wickenden, Energy Analyst in the Europe-Russia Policy & Energy Analysis Team at CREA.

The report notes that 93 of the 107 vessels that joined the Russian registry were previously under sanctions, and 90 were sanctioned by more than one jurisdiction. The vessels that had carried Russian crude before their first sanction changed flags three times as often as before, ultimately settling under the Russian flag. Sixteen had also carried Iranian or Venezuelan oil, showing how these shadow fleets draw on the same pool of ageing, sanctioned vessels.



After reflagging to Russia, these vessels continued to transport Russian fossil fuels globally, carrying EUR 5.2 bn in crude — primarily to China — and operating in ship-to-ship transfer zones off Egypt and in the Red Sea.

Russian-flagged and sanctioned vessels pose serious risks to coastal states. This was demonstrated in March 2026, when the Arctic-Metagaz exploded while carrying 60,000 tonnes of Russian LNG and drifted uncontrolled for over a month, with Russia mounting no salvage operation and leaving Libya, Malta and Italy to manage the crisis.

‘Ukraine’s allies must sanction the companies facilitating Russia’s ‘shadow’ fleet and operating false flag registries or flags of convenience, while interdicting and imposing heavy fines on vessels that violate international maritime standards. The Arctic Metagaz incident exposed the Russian flag for what it is: a shield for dangerous vessels, without any support when disaster strikes, leaving coastal states to manage the risks and clean up the mess,’ said Luke Wickenden.

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Notes to editors

The report related to this press release is available [here](#).

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About CREA

The Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) is an independent research organisation focused on revealing the trends, causes, and health impacts, as well as the solutions, to air pollution. CREA was founded in December 2019 in Helsinki and has staff in several Asian and



European countries. The organisation's work is funded through philanthropic grants and revenue from commissioned research.

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About the methodology

This analysis draws on data from the [Russia Fossil Tracker](#), which combines Kpler's ship-tracking and trade intelligence with Equasis's vessel registry and affiliation records. Every vessel's flagging history is derived from Equasis; trade values are estimated using Kpler cargo volumes and CREA's own pricing methodology.

The analysed vessel population includes every vessel recorded in Kpler's seaborne fossil fuel trade data since January 2024, filtered to include only vessels active in the fossil-fuel trade. Registry composition and 'new-joiner' figures cover the subset currently operating under the Russian flag.

The sanctioned-vessel-by-flag and de-flagging figures count sanctioned vessels by their current flag across all registries. The trade-activity figures cover Russian fossil fuel deliveries (crude oil, oil products, and LNG) made by new joiners after their respective Russian flag registration dates.