

Tankers

Shipowners in the frame as Europe cracks down on sales into Russian shadow fleet

Bloc ends national opt-out for Russian tanker sales and demands more checks from sellers



French President Emmanuel Macron and EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas at a meeting of EU leaders in Cyprus.

Photo: Scanpix

Published 27 April 2026, 10:22

Sellers of European-owned oil tankers must secure a contractual obligation to keep them out of Russian employment for their entire working lives, according to new European Union sanctions measures targeting Moscow.

The 20th package announced on Thursday includes more rigorous demands for EU-linked sellers of tonnage as the bloc tries to slow the drift of vessels into the Russian shadow fleet.



[Read more](#)

First stage of EU ban on Russian LNG kicks in tomorrow amid global disruption

The EU first introduced measures to limit the lucrative sale of elderly ships into the Russian-linked market in December 2023, but they have proved ineffective.

The new measures scrap an opt-out clause that member state governments had used to override the ban.

They also increase the requirements on shipowners to ensure vessels do not go to Russia, even after repeated sales of the same ship, according to the legal text.

TradeWinds

Green Seas



Green Seas newsletter

Keep up with sustainability and technology in the shipping and ocean industries.

[Newsletter](#)

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said: “We must keep up this pressure until Putin understands his war leads nowhere.”

Data and industry intelligence suggest that some ships have been sold to middlemen without known links to Russia, before ownership is flipped and the vessel ends up in the shadow fleet.

The new measures demand that any deal should “contain a written contractual prohibition on any further resale or transfer of the vessel” for use in the Russian shadow fleet.

Future buyers must commit to “mirroring the prohibition ... in any further resale that it may undertake”, according to the document.

The practical effect of the measures is to make it riskier for shipowners to sell to unknown buyers rather than an effective block on ships from ever reaching Russian trades, according to analysts.

Intertanko, which represents the interests of independent tanker owners and operators, said the new wording makes it harder to claim the defence that a seller had not known and had “no reasonable cause to suspect” a breach of sanctions.

It has previously raised concerns with the European Commission, the EU’s executive arm, over the rules that increased the bureaucratic burden on shipowners rather than disrupting the shadow fleet.

The new package “simply reinforces our concerns”, said the group. “The shadow fleet operators, meanwhile, continue, regardless.”

Since December 2023, EU-linked shipowners have only had to notify their governments of a ship sale to a third country and provide rudimentary details of the deal.

The bloc claimed new mandatory due diligence checks in its 20th package would make it “more difficult for Russia to expand its shadow fleet”.

Any shipowner selling a tanker to a third country must undertake a risk assessment of it being transferred to Russia, which needs to be “documented and kept up to date”, according to the sanctions package.

The new measures do not say what checks are required.

The EU did not respond to a request for comment. It has previously declined to provide TradeWinds with data on vessel sales since the controls came into force, despite member states being required to notify it of sales.

There have been no known fines or penalties for any EU-linked tanker sales into Russia while shadow fleets have continued to grow.

Britain, no longer a member of the EU, has brought criminal charges against a financier involved in shadow fleet sales for sanctions breaches and money laundering.

But those are related only to money transfers after he was blacklisted.

The EU package of sanctions also adds 46 ships, including some sold by European shipowners within the past six months, said David Tannenbaum, a sanctions expert and director of Blackstone Compliance Services.



Malin Hogberg of Swedish law firm WERKS. (Photo: WERKS)

They include the 159,100-dwt Elbus (built 2005), which was attacked by Ukrainian drones in the Black Sea less than three months after it was sold by Greek shipowner Eurotankers.

The vessel, listed under the ownership of China's Qing Ju Shipping, was sold for a reported \$29.5m in October, according to VesselsValue data.

The price was more than \$11m higher than when Eurotankers bought the ship in 2018.

The sanctions list also includes the 105,600-dwt Atmos (ex-Patmos Warrior, built 2007), which was sold in September by Greek shipowner Polembros Shipping for \$28m, according to VesselsValue.

It is now under the management of China's Wu Yi Shan Shipmanagement Co, according to shipowner database Equasis.

The Atmos has predominantly lifted barrels from Russia's Far East for delivery to China since the sale.

Tannenbaum said the new measures were more robust than previously agreed upon by states.

“What this requires is actual written evidence that they conducted due diligence — and they would be wise to do it,” he said.

About 1,350 tankers, or nearly one-quarter of fleet capacity, are sanctioned or have some link to sanctioned oil trades, according to a Clarksons Research report in February.

It was not immediately clear why an EU seller would want to enforce any breach of contract, unless they were fined for a sanctions breach and tried to recover losses from a buyer down the chain.

But legal experts said recovery from opaque ownership structures would be difficult, leaving the EU seller as the most likely person on the hook.

Malin Hogberg of Swedish law firm WERKS, a former head of the International Group of P&I Clubs sanctions committee, said: “Much of the shadow fleet operates with complex ownership structures that are relatively easy to collapse and close down when someone is onto them.

“Thus, the real exposure will be on the EU-based sellers, rather than on any shadow fleet buyers.”

Russia's mission to the EU said the measures lacked legitimacy, infringed on the rights of third countries and were meaningless without a UN Security Council decision, according to a statement carried by Russian news agencies.

[\(Copyright\)](#)

Read more