

Masked Provocateur: The Russian Shadow Fleet

How Soviet-Era TTPs Are Furthering Russia’s Subterfuge

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Operating in a nautical netherworld via opaque ownership and location cloaking methods, Russia’s antiquated shadow fleet has simultaneously evaded sanctions to support the nation’s wartime economy and provided a platform for Moscow’s hybrid warfare against Western states since 2022.^{[1][2][3][4]} The Kremlin-directed fleet has resurrected Soviet-era tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) to sow socioeconomic discord and normalize irregular warfare via a new form of below-kinetic gray zone tactics.^[5] In skirting NATO’s Article 5 and obfuscating responsibility, Russia strategically positions itself as a cloaked instigator of hybrid warfare.



Ports visited by sanctioned Siren II oil tanker^[6]

In 2024–2026, Europe cracked down on Russia’s shadow fleet, which caused the Kremlin to further entrench its gray-zone tactics of alternating transit routes, reflagging vessels, and staffing ships with security personnel.^{[7][8][9][10]} Hybridity permeates Russia’s shadow fleet: it is an amalgamation of commercial and military operations, Soviet strategies paired with twenty-first century technology, and actions conducted via ambiguous attributions.

Alternate Names	Dark fleet, Ghost ships
Size	~3,200 vessels
Average Age	16–20 years
Operating Areas	Baltic Sea Black Sea English Channel Ireland’s Exclusive Economic Zone Mediterranean Sea Murmansk Northern Sea Route
Commodities	Agricultural products Coal Dual-purpose goods Fertilizers Liquefied Natural Gas Oil and Petroleum Weapons

Russia’s shadow fleet^{[11][12][13][14][15][16][17]}

Incentives, Adaptations, and Tactics

Since its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia has operated a shadow-fleet network of vessels and intermediaries to circumvent Western sanctions and trade military and commercial commodities with key allies such as China, Iran, and North Korea. As of 2026, profits from sanctioned cargo transports continue to sustain Russia’s war against Ukraine. Much of the fleet consists of aging tankers with limited commercial value that operate outside traditional shipping and insurance systems; such vessels can be bought cheaply, are easily replaced, and require minimal technical expertise to operate. Despite its dilapidated condition, the fleet conveyed 65–70% of the country’s nautical oil exports from 2022–2025 while routinely violating maritime regulations by:^{[18][19][20][21][22][23][24]}

- Operating without active automatic identification system (AIS) transmitters
- Manipulating their global navigation satellite system (GNSS) positioning data
- Disguising ownership through shell companies and frequent name and flag registry changes
- Concealing cargo by enlisting secondary vessels to dock at smaller ports to offload cargo, a practice known as ship-to-ship transfers (STS)

Moscow’s maritime posturing relies on three Cold War-era TTPs that use deception, misdirection, and manipulation to obfuscate attribution and enhance plausible deniability:

Maskirovka	Engaging in deceptive tactics in an effort to afford deniability; Russian for <i>masking</i>
Reflexive Control	Using manipulation and fear of provocation to bolster plausible deniability
Hybrid Asymmetry	Exploiting regulatory gaps, engaging in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities, and propagating disinformation

The doctrine of *maskirovka*—Russian for military deception—focuses on masking vessels’ movements, ownership, and conveyed cargo. Russian shadow-fleet vessels have increasingly sailed under false flags or frequently changed flag registries—also known as “flag hopping”—so crews can claim sovereign protection; the number of falsely flagged Russian ships rose by 500% from December 2024–September 2025.^{[25][26]} Additional *maskirovka* tactics include turning off AIS transmitters, falsifying port documentation, spoofing locations, and obscuring ownership records.^{[27][28][29]}

Reflexive control involves using methods that spark uncertainty regarding the vessels’ sovereignty, consequently complicating how countries might respond without provoking an international incident.^[30] By operating below NATO’s Article 5, Russia gauges Europe’s response, evades culpability, and evaluates loopholes within maritime regulations such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).^{[31][32]}

According to UNCLOS, flag states have primary jurisdiction over their vessels and are held criminally liable—stipulations Moscow exploits with its reflagged ships.^[33]

In using hybrid asymmetry tactics, Moscow leverages civilian cover and unconventional tools to exploit adversaries’ regulatory and security gaps. The commercial shadow fleet ships give Moscow excellent cover to not only orchestrate sanctions evasions and illicit trade but also to conduct sabotage, intelligence, and surveillance operations. According to 2026 United24 Media reporting, a network of security services, defense agencies, centralized banks, and trusted pro-Kremlin intermediaries have financed the shadow fleet as part of “a covert extension of Moscow’s military and intelligence operations.”^[34]

These three dual-purpose TTPs underscore Moscow’s goals: profiteering whilst testing Western resolve. Demonstrating restraint while capitalizing on opportunity, the Kremlin denies involvement in its fleet’s illicit activities while Europe scrambles to ascertain the best course of action in offsetting such operations.

Cold War-Era TTPs Meet New Gray Zone Tactics

While initially a primarily economic tool to circumvent sanctions, Russia’s shadow fleet has been increasingly militarized and integrated into state security structures.^[35] Following Europe’s crackdown on shadow vessels starting in 2024, Russia began adding “supernumeraries” or “technicians” to its ship manifests in mid-2025—particularly for ships transiting the Baltic Sea. These non-traditional staff include: private security personnel, suspected Wagner Group mercenaries, military troops, ministry officials, and Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) personnel.^{[36][37]} A joint investigation by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, iStories, Delfi, and Helsingin Sanomat found 13 of the 17 crew aboard 20 trips made by sanctioned Russian tankers did not possess maritime credentials and had state security or private military company affiliations. Former Wagner Group mercenaries and GRU officials, including from the

special forces Spetsnaz Brigade, were aboard *Kira K* in December 2025, while Ministry of Defense “technicians” were aboard *Lebre*.^[38] These personnel likely surveil the ships’ Russian crew while also overseeing hybrid operations, thereby further entrenching the fleet in Moscow’s reflexive control statecraft.

Russia has also equipped some merchant vessels with listening and recording devices to surveil NATO planes and ships. Finnish authorities discovered such devices aboard the Russian tankers *Eagle S* and *Swiftsea Rider* during their 2024 seizures.^[39] Finnish officials also accused the *Eagle S* of intentionally severing four telecommunication cables and the Estonia-Finland Estlink 2 undersea power cable in December 2024, which caused an estimated \$70 million in damages. However, Moscow’s *maskirovka* tactics proved successful: a Finnish court dismissed the case over jurisdictional complications, lack of evidence, and lack of intent, noting the crew must be tried by their home nations or St. Vincent and Grenadines—the flag under which *Eagle S* sailed at the time of seizure.^{[40][41][42][43][44]}



Russian shadow fleet tanker *Eagle S* ^[45]

Sabotaging undersea infrastructure—a form of reflexive control—is likely an attempt to disrupt European networks in critical nautical thoroughfares like the Gulf of Finland and Barents Sea.^{[46][47]} The shadow fleet’s economic impact is therefore twofold: funding Moscow’s wartime economy by conveying sanctioned cargo while saddling Europe with expensive undersea repairs. According to NATO Allied Maritime Command Vice Admiral Didier Maletierre in June 2026, “All of our economy under the sea is under threat.” A reported likely participant of these sabotage incidents is Russia’s Main

Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (GUGI)—a classified Ministry of Defense directorate tasked with overseeing naval intelligence vessels, acts of underwater sabotage, and seabed warfare.^{[48][49]}

Russia’s dark fleet activities, however, do not pertain solely to the seas. From August 2024–February 2026, AIS data and synthetic aperture radar satellite imagery triangulated Russian shadow ships’ geolocations and placed them in close proximity to 144 nighttime drone incursions across 13 European nations, per a 2026 International Institute for Strategic Studies investigation. Reportedly used as launch, recovery, and network relay platforms, Russian vessels including the *Arctica*, *Boracay*, *Hav Dolphin*, *Jin Hui*, and *Vladimir Rusanov* were strategically positioned near multiple locations where such UAV overflights took place, including at Copenhagen Airport; Denmark’s Skrydstrup Air Base; France’s Ile Longue nuclear-submarine base; Sweden’s Koge Port; and UK Air Bases Fairford, Feltwell, Lakenheath, and Mildenhall. The flights allowed Moscow to surveil strategic command, nuclear, and air defense infrastructure, identify radar blind spots, and map sites that were providing Ukraine with logistical support.^[50]

Although officials in Belgium, Germany, and Sweden have accused Russia of UAV incursions, proof of Moscow’s explicit involvement remains largely elusive.^[51] Only one Russian ship, the military intelligence vessel *Zhigulevsk*, was directly implicated after launching a drone that violated Swedish airspace in February 2026, and confirmed Russian drones were used in only three of the 61 incursions that took place from September–November 2025.^{[52][53]} However, European authorities and security analysts assert Russia and its shadow fleet are likely behind the incursions, citing key parallels with Moscow’s playbook: the surveillance of critical European infrastructure, an ongoing UAV campaign to test NATO’s resolve, and inexpensive military-grade drones flying in formation.^{[54][55][56]} French and German officials consequently seized two shadow vessels in September and October 2025 under suspicion of launching drones—the *Scanlark* and *Boracay*—the latter of which had intelligence personnel from the FSB-affiliated Moran Security Group aboard.^{[57][58][59][60]}

The likelihood that Russia's shadow fleet has participated in the recent drone incursions is bolstered by Moscow's adherence to the *maskirovka* doctrine, reflexive control, and hybrid asymmetry. The clandestine commercial vessels provide cover for Russia to launch ISR missions with ambiguous attribution. The incursions disrupt commercial activities at strategic airports, resulting in interceptions and airport closures that cost Western states millions of Euros.^{[61][62]} They test NATO's responsiveness and resolve, identify vulnerabilities, pose military security risks, stoke fears of provocation, and normalize airspace violations at a frequency and level to which Western nations scramble to respond.^[63] All of this occurs below the threshold of kinetic war—the shadow fleet's underlying methodology.

Implications of Russia's Nautical Playbook

The shadow fleet's resurrection of Soviet-era TTPs demonstrates Moscow's ingrained dedication to non-linear hybrid warfare adaptations. Saddled with sanctions, the Kremlin pivoted to increasingly rely on its inexpensive, illicit vessels to instigate asymmetric costs against Western states. From 2022–March 2026, Russian shadow vessels were involved in at least 25 reported incidents—including collisions, explosions, and sabotage—which, due to the ships' insufficient insurance and *maskirovka* methods, placed the financial burden of repairs on affected littoral nations. The antiquated vessels also pose environmental risks: if even one tanker spilled, it could result in estimated clean-up costs of \$859 million for Europe.^[64] Meanwhile, the Russian tankers convey 3.7 million oil barrels daily and generate \$87–100 billion in annual revenue—profits used to keep Moscow's wartime economy afloat.^{[65][66][67]}

The shadow fleet's cost-effectiveness, coupled with its successful evolution into a devoted instigator of below-kinetic twenty-first century warfare, indicate the Kremlin will continually adapt the vessels to suit its economic and geopolitical objectives. After all, the implementation of Soviet TTPs affords Moscow the means by which the fleet can operate below NATO's collective security thresholds while obfuscating attribution. The Kremlin can subsequently label Western states as the aggressors

should a situation escalate, as Russia has done with the Ukraine conflict.

Russia will undoubtedly continue its modus operandi of applying Cold War-era tactics to the latest technological advancements. Future developments will likely include shadow vessels serving as hubs for unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) operations, functioning as reference nodes for conducting electronic warfare and GNSS interference, and providing reinforcements for the Kaliningrad exclave and bases situated near Finland and the Baltics. A masked provocateur, the dark fleet embodies the direction Moscow's hybrid warfare will continue to take.

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