

Shipping Times Decreasing as Arctic Ice Melts at Record Pace

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Arctic sea ice is melting at a near-record pace, opening shipping lanes for cargo traffic between Europe and Asia, Russia's environmental agency said.

Ice cover is close to a record low, opening "almost the entire northern sea route to icebreaker-free shipping" as of early August, the Federal Meteorological Service said on its web site Wednesday.

The so-called ice extent is as much as 56 percent less than average in some areas, allowing "very easy" sailing that will persist through September, the service said.

Melting ice is making it easier for Russian and other European shippers to service Asia via the northern sea route, which is about one-third shorter than the Rotterdam-Yokohama voyage through the Suez Canal, saving time and fuel. Iceland's President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson said last year that the pace of global warming in the Arctic was three times faster

than elsewhere, cutting journeys between Asia, Europe and America by as much as half.

Melting occurred "at a rapid pace through the first half of July and is now tracking below the year 2007, which saw the record minimum," the U.S. National Snow and Data Center said on its web site July 18.

Three of 16 groups of oceanic scientists expect the extent to break the record low of 4.14 million square kilometers reached on Sept. 16, 2007, the Fairbanks, Alaska-based Arctic Research Consortium of the U.S., or Arcus, said on its web site.

That compares with about 6.86 million square kilometers now, according to Russia's environmental agency.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has vowed to transform the Soviet-era Arctic route, first plied in 1932 between Arkhangelsk and the Bering Strait, into a year-round passage, and commodity producers including Norilsk Nickel, Novatek and EuroChem have already starting sending test shipments.

The northern way dates to 1932, when the Soviet Union sent the first vessel from Arkhangelsk to the Bering Strait. The route is currently used, with the help of icebreakers, from July to November.

The North Pole may be completely ice-free in the summer within a few decades, rather than by 2080, a prediction made by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Russia's chief forecaster, Alexander Frolov, said last year.

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