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Ice on Russia's Northern Sea Route Has Disappeared, Opening Up Arctic Shipping Lanes

But the number of ships that have set a course along the Arctic route remains low.

By The Barents Observer

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The Arctic shortcut that connects Asia and Europe is open and ice-free and shipping appears smooth, including for vessels without ice class standards.

The last pieces of frozen water vanished in mid-August and data shows that the whole route is now free of ice. This includes the East Siberian Sea, a region that normally has the longest-lasting ice cover.

The August-October period is peak season for Arctic shipments. But the number of ships in

the area still remains low.

Figures from Russia's Northern Sea Route administration say that a total of 94 vessels in the last week of August were sailing in the waters between the Bering Strait and the Novaya Zemlya archipelago.

The vast majority of the ships are on the western part of the route, in areas where ice had already vanished in July. Only about 30 vessels were located in waters east of the Kara Sea.

There are about 20 tankers among those vessels that are now sailing on more than 5,500 kilometers long sea route. Several of them are transporting oil from the terminal of Novy Port, others are liquefied natural gas (LNG) carriers serving the Yamal LNG plant.

The latter includes the Nikolay Urvantsev, the brand-new ship that is on its maiden voyage through the Russian Arctic waters. The 299-meter, Arc7 ice-class standard longship was this July officially handed over by the Korean shipyard Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering to the owner of the Japanese transport company Mitsui OSK Lines.

The Nikolay Urvantsev is a part of a 15 LNG carriers fleet that by the end of 2019 will shuttle to and from the Sabetta terminal in the Yamal peninsula. Two other new carriers, the Vladimir Voronin and Nikolay Yevgenov, made similar maiden trips earlier this summer.

Political priority

The Northern Sea Route is a top priority for the Kremlin. President Putin said that he wanted annual shipments on the route to reach 80 million tons in 2024.

In 2018, shipments amounted to about 20 million tons, and estimates made by the Natural Resources Ministry predicted a total of 30 million tons by the end of 2019.

The lion's share of the shipments is LNG from Novatek's Yamal LNG plant, while only a minor part is shipped transit across the route.

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However, despite the rapidly growing volumes, the number of shipping companies planning to move ships into the area remains low. According to the Northern Sea Route administration, a total of 662 vessels had requested sailing permission on the NSR by late August, which is at the same level as last year. In 2018, a total of 808 ships applied for permission and in the previous five years, the number ranged between 660-730.

Furthermore, only a limited part of the ships now sailing on the route actually carry goods. The official NSR list of vessels shows that almost half of them are tugs and support and service vessels, most of which are involved in oil and gas-related activities. They either assist in the ongoing well-drilling operations of the Arkticheskaya, Amazon and Nan Hai Bao Hai rigs or engage in operations related to Yamal LNG and the Sabetta sea terminal.

Rapidly melting ice

Developments on the Northern Sea Route are closely connected with current dramatic climate changes in the area. 2019 is about to become the warmest year on record and ice melting is reaching unprecedented levels.

According to the National Snow & Ice Data Center (NSIDC), the extent of the Arctic sea ice is this year close to the level of 2012 with the lowest minimum in the satellite record.

Mapping from the Center shows that sea ice retreat in the first half of August was mainly in an area of patchy sea ice in the East Siberian Sea and along the ice edge in the northern Beaufort and Chukchi Seas.

The retreating ice is accompanied by high air temperatures. Over the first half of August, air temperatures along the Siberian coast were generally 2 to 7 degrees Celsius above the 1981-2010 average.

Meanwhile, near-average temperatures prevailed over the central Arctic Ocean, the NSIDC said.

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