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Russia Scrambles to Escort Ships Stuck in Arctic Shipping Route – Reports

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The Mikhail Somov scientific expedition vessel was among those stranded on the Northern Sea Route.
Vera Kostamo / TASS

Dozens of ships have gotten stuck in the sea ice of the Russian Arctic due to an earlier-than-expected freeze over the past week, media outlets have reported.

Moscow has invested heavily in the so-called Northern Sea Route as the Arctic warms disproportionately faster than the rest of the world and opens the strategic shipping route connecting Europe and Asia to year-round navigation.

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Northern Sea Route operators said they were surprised by the early sea-ice formation, which previously did not warrant icebreaker escorts. Unlike in previous years, an ice layer 30 centimeters thick had already formed across most of the Laptev Sea and East Siberian seas by

late October, according to The Barents Observer.

“The weather has changed dramatically,” the Vedomosti business daily quoted an unnamed source at state-owned nuclear power company Rosatom, which operates the Northern Sea Route, as saying.

The source described the “light” snow cover forecast by state weather monitoring institute Rosgidromet as “inaccurate.”

Vedomosti reported that at least 18 vessels were stuck in five locations along the Northern Sea Route awaiting icebreakers as of Friday.

Russia last week dispatched two icebreakers to escort several bulk carriers, a cargo ship and an oil tanker, The Barents Observer reported Tuesday.

A Rosatom source quoted by Vedomosti said the operator plans to resolve the navigation issues with the help of four icebreakers by late December.

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