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'Russian Spy' Whale Found Dead in Norway

By AFP

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Oleg Moroz / Unsplash

A Beluga whale whose unusual harness sparked suspicions it was trained by Russia for spying purposes has been found dead in Norway, according to an NGO that tracks the animal's movements.

Nicknamed "Hvaldimir," a pun on the Norwegian word for whale hval and the Russian name Vladimir, the beluga first appeared off the coast of Norway's far-northern Finnmark region in 2019.

At the time, Norwegian marine biologists discovered a harness on the animal with a mount suited for an action camera and the words "Equipment St. Petersburg" printed on plastic clasps.

Norwegian officials said Hvaldimir possibly escaped an enclosure and may have been trained

by the Russian navy as he appeared to be comfortable interacting with humans.

Moscow has never issued any official statement on speculation that the whale could be a "Russian spy."

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On Saturday, the beluga's lifeless body was discovered off the southwest coast at Risavika by Marine Mind, an organization that has tracked his movements for years.

"I found Hvaldi dead when I was scouting for him yesterday like usual," Marine Mind's founder Sebastian Strand told AFP. "We had confirmation of him being alive little more than 24 hours before finding him floating motionlessly."

Fredrik Skarbovik, maritime coordinator at the port of Stavanger, confirmed the beluga's death to the VG tabloid newspaper.

Strand said the cause of the whale's demise was unknown and no visible injuries were found during an initial inspection of Hvaldimir's body.

"We've managed to retrieve his remains and put him in a cooled area, in preparation for a necropsy by the veterinary institute that can help determine what really happened to him," Strand added.

With an estimated age of around 14 or 15, Hvaldimir was relatively young for a Beluga whale, which can live to between 40 and 60 years of age.

Beluga whales can reach a size of six meters (20 feet) and generally tend to inhabit the icy waters around Greenland, northern Norway and Russia. Those include the Barents Sea, a geopolitically important area where Western and Russian submarine movements are monitored.

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