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EU Eyes Legal Loopholes to Seize Russian Oil Tankers in Baltic Sea – Politico

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NATO military exercises in the Baltic Sea. **NATO / flickr**

EU member states are exploring legal avenues to seize Russian oil tankers in the Baltic Sea, Politico Europe reported Monday, citing anonymous EU diplomats and government officials familiar with the matter.

The private discussions reflect growing frustration over Russia's ability to circumvent oil sanctions, which continue to generate revenue for its war in Ukraine. However, the proposals face significant legal, logistical and financial hurdles.

According to Politico, potential justifications for seizing Russian vessels include environmental risks, such as oil spills, and recent incidents of damaged undersea cables, which could be cited under international piracy laws. Another proposed approach involves enacting national laws that would allow countries to seize tankers not insured by recognized operators.

The EU would reportedly be asked to coordinate efforts on all three legal fronts.

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Each route presents challenges, experts told Politico. Countries have limited authority to detain vessels for environmental or safety concerns beyond their territorial waters, for example.

Likewise, piracy laws typically apply to attacks on ships, not undersea infrastructure. Seizing vessels under national laws also risks legal challenges under international maritime regulations.

"Politically, it's just a hot mess," said Isaak Hurst, principal attorney at the International Maritime Group.

A senior Latvian intelligence official said EU members were "working with partners to find a balance" between freedom of navigation and the right of coastal states to protect critical infrastructure.

"Even if we can just slow down ships, it hurts Russia," another anonymous official was quoted as saying. "Every day is expensive — if you combine this with the state of the Russian economy … everything matters."

The EU has so far sanctioned more than 70 ships suspected of transporting Russian oil, with 74 additional vessels reportedly under review.

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