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Britain Links Azerbaijani Traders With Rosneft Ties to Russia's Shadow Fleet

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British authorities have identified two Azerbaijani nationals with close ties to Russia's state oil giant Rosneft as key players in a sprawling network that has moved billions of dollars' worth of Russian oil in defiance of Western sanctions.

In a report released Wednesday, Britain's National Crime Agency (NCA) named Etibar Eyyub and Tahir Garaev as central figures in what it describes as an increasingly sophisticated "shadow trade" system designed to obscure the origins of sanctioned Russian crude.

Both men are reportedly close associates of Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin, a longtime ally of President Vladimir Putin who is under sanctions from the U.S., the EU, Canada and other Western governments.

According to the report, Eyyub and Garaev were granted "privileged access" to Rosneft oil products, which enabled them to trade more Russian crude in 2024 than any other entity.

Their operations, the NCA said, rely on a global fleet of over 100 aging tankers that employ a range of deceptive practices to disguise the cargo's Russian origin.

These tactics include routinely disabling the ships' onboard tracking systems, transferring cargoes at sea to obscure the oil's origin and changing national flags to evade detection, the NCA report said.

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The NCA said the operation designed to evade sanctions is structured around two company groupings known among traders and brokers as the "blue" and "red" groups.

The "blue" group maintains a facade of legitimacy, working with Western banks and commodity exchanges and securing financing at favorable terms. The lead companies in this segment, 2Rivers DMCC and 2Rivers PTE, were sanctioned by the U.K. government in December 2024.

The "red" group, in contrast, handles the direct movement of Russian oil using companies with intentionally opaque ownership structures and an array of replaceable shell companies. Their tankers frequently undertake offshore transfers to other ships and blend Russian oil with other grades to further disguise its provenance.

British officials in May expanded sanctions to target five Azerbaijani individuals, including Garaev and Eyyub, as well as the firms BX Energy, Romarine and Nord Axis. They also blacklisted over 100 tankers tied to the network.

British authorities assessed that vessels controlled by Eyub and Garaev formed the backbone of what they refer to as Putin's "shadow fleet," moving cargos valued at more than $24 billion in 2024.

Authorities identified the company Nord Axis as a key logistical hub in the "red" network.

The findings offer a glimpse into how Moscow has continued to move its energy exports despite sweeping sanctions imposed after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The report also underscores the difficulties faced by Western governments in enforcing restrictions on Russian oil and the growing reliance of the Kremlin on covert intermediaries operating in legal gray zones.

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