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Russia's Northern Sea Route Cargo Volumes Fall for Second Straight Year

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The Admiral Makarov diesel icebreaker lies at anchor in Providence Bay. **Maxim Antipin / TASS**

Russia's plan to significantly expand cargo traffic along its Arctic shipping route has fallen short for a second consecutive year, the Kommersant business daily reported Monday, citing industry data.

Stretching some 5,600 kilometers (3,480 miles) and crossing five Arctic seas, the Northern Sea Route (NSR) can shorten voyages to Asia by seven to 10 days compared with the traditional route via the Suez Canal.

Yet international demand for the route remains limited due to seasonal navigability, higher insurance and icebreaker costs, limited port infrastructure and geopolitical and sanctions-related risks.

Cargo volumes transported via the NSR totaled 37.02 million metric tons in 2025, down 2.3% from a year earlier, an analysis by consultancy Gecon showed.

The decline follows modest growth in 2024, when NSR shipments rose to 38 million tons, up about 2 million tons year on year.

Under a presidential decree signed in 2018, cargo traffic along the Arctic route was supposed to reach 80 million tons by 2024 and 200 million tons by 2030.

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Russian exports accounted for about 60% of total NSR cargo volumes in 2025, or 22.2 million tons.

Liquefied natural gas (LNG), oil and gas condensate made up 83% of shipments, mainly from the Yamal LNG project, Novatek, Arctic LNG 2 and Gazprom Neft's Novoportovskoye field.

LNG shipments along the NSR fell 2.7% year on year in 2025, while oil loadings from the Novoportovskoye field also declined.

Transport of bulk cargo dropped more than 2.5 times to 410,000 tons, while general cargo, including products from metals producer Nornickel, slipped 2.2% to 3.91 million tons.

At the same time, shipments of oil products jumped 43% to 1.27 million tons, while gas condensate volumes rose 17% to 1.55 million tons.

Cargo flows of ore concentrate surged more than 13-fold to 365,000 tons, largely due to a single shipment of 330,000 tons of iron ore concentrate from the Murmansk region to China.

Overall cargo turnover at NSR ports totaled 32.5 million tons, with more than 90% — or 29.1 million tons — handled by the port of Sabetta.

Cargo volumes along the Northern Sea Route are unlikely to exceed 2025 levels this year due to a lack of growth drivers, Gecon head Mikhail Grigoryev said.

To fully utilize the route, which runs from the Kara Strait to the Bering Strait, Russia needs deeper cooperation with other countries and must seek new markets both in the Asia-Pacific region and the Atlantic basin, he added.

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