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France Releases Suspected Russian ‘Shadow Fleet’ Tanker After Fine

By AFP

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The oil tanker Grinch under the watch of a French Navy vessel near Marseille. **Denis Thaust / SOPA Images / Sipa / TASS**

France on Tuesday released the oil tanker Grinch, suspected of belonging to Russia’s sanctions-busting “shadow fleet,” after its owner paid a multimillion-euro fine.

French forces and allied partners boarded the tanker last month between Spain and Morocco shortly after it departed Russia. The vessel was escorted to a port near the southern city of Marseille.

Ship-tracking services MarineTraffic and VesselFinder showed the tanker was sailing under a Comoros flag.

The Grinch is believed to be part of a fleet of mostly aging tankers used to transport Russian oil in violation of a crude price cap imposed by Western countries and the G7 over the full-

scale invasion of Ukraine.

Vessels in the so-called "shadow fleet" frequently change the flags they fly and sometimes sail under invalid registrations to evade monitoring and enforcement.

"The tanker Grinch is leaving French waters after paying several million euros and undergoing a costly three-week immobilization," Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot wrote on X.

"Evading European sanctions comes at a price. Russia will no longer be able to bankroll its war with impunity through a shadow fleet off our shores," he added.

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France's public prosecutor's office and regional authorities said the vessel's owner was fined by a Marseille court under a guilty-plea procedure. The company also committed to obtaining a new flag for the ship, though officials did not disclose where the owner is based.

A tanker named Grinch is under UK sanctions, while another vessel, Carl, sharing the same registration number, is sanctioned by the United States and the European Union.

The January boarding was the second such operation in recent months. In September, France detained the Russian-linked tanker Boracay, a vessel claiming to be registered in Benin — a move condemned as "piracy" by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The captain of the Boracay is scheduled to stand trial in France next week.

The EU currently lists 598 vessels suspected of belonging to Russia's shadow fleet, barring them from European ports and maritime services.

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