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Belgium Holds Russian 'Shadow Fleet' Tanker on 10M-Euro Bond

By AFP

March 03, 2026



The Ethera tanker. **@BelgiumDefence / X**

A suspected Russian "shadow fleet" oil tanker seized by Belgium is being held on a 10-million-euro ($12 million) bond after inspections revealed infractions, Brussels said Tuesday.

The Ethera, which Belgium says is part of a flotilla of aging vessels Moscow uses to avoid Western sanctions, was seized by Belgian special forces in the North Sea on Sunday.

Investigations carried out after it was brought to the port of Zeebrugge confirmed it had been sailing under a false Guinean flag, the Belgian government said.

In total inspectors found 45 infractions, including technical defects, leading to the ship being impounded, it added.

The tanker's Russian captain and its 20-strong crew were ordered to remain on board.

"The ship will only leave the port once it is compliant and the deposit has been paid," said Belgium's mobility minister Jean-Luc Crucke.

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Most of the crew was of Indian origin, with three Georgians and one Indonesian national among the seven officers on board, the government said.

Russia has used its so-called "shadow fleet" of tankers of opaque ownership to get around restrictions on its lucrative crude exports imposed over its 2022 all-out invasion of Ukraine.

The Belgian Defense Ministry said the seized vessel was on the European Union's sanctions list. The EU has blacklisted hundreds of vessels in a bid to sap Moscow's war chest.

"Our government is taking decisive action against ships from the shadow fleet," said Belgian Defense Minister Theo Francken.

"With this operation, we are enforcing European sanctions, protecting the North Sea, and limiting the financing of the Russian war against Ukraine."

In February, it was revealed that two employees of a Russian private security company were aboard another suspected Russian "shadow fleet" tanker seized by France in September.

The two men were employed by Moran Security Group, a Russian private security company, and were tasked with monitoring the crew and gathering intelligence, a source with knowledge of the matter told AFP.

French forces boarded another suspected Russian tanker, the Grinch, in January. But the ship was later let go after its owner paid a multi-million-euro fine.

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