

Russians Aboard Ship Seized by Norway Have Returned Home, Foreign Ministry Says

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The Professor Molchanov. **Alexander Ermolin / Handout via REUTERS**

A group of Russians who were on board a ship seized by Norway last week have returned home, Russia's Foreign Ministry [said](#) Wednesday, as it accused authorities in Oslo of trying to push Russia out of the Norwegian Arctic archipelago of Svalbard.

The 69 Russian passengers and crew members were stuck for several days after a Norwegian court on Wednesday [ordered](#) the seizure of the Professor Molchanov, which operates as a cruise ship, at the request of the Ukrainian energy company Naftogaz.

Norwegian authorities [said](#) Tuesday that they had helped the group of Russians return home. Russia's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova credited Oslo's "logistical support" in their return, as well as the help of Russian diplomats.

"As far as we know, practically everyone has already returned home," Zakharova said.

But the legal and diplomatic standoff over the seized vessel is “far from being resolved,” she warned, adding that Russia plans to appeal the arrest of the Professor Molchanov.

Related article: [Norway Seizes Russian Ship to Enforce \\$4.2Bln Claim by Ukraine’s Naftogaz](#)

Russia argues that holding the ship violates the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, which allows equal economic access to the archipelago while giving Norway sovereignty over the territory.

Svalbard, a Norwegian territory since 1925, lies midway between the North Pole and the European mainland. The Svalbard Treaty also allows citizens of signatory states, including Russia, to settle there without a visa.

“We’re convinced that the Norwegian authorities’ actions belie the desire to complicate as much as possible the activities of Russian operators on Svalbard... and gradually move toward reducing Russia’s presence on the archipelago,” Zakharova said.

The Professor Molchanov is being held in the town of Barentsburg, a Russian-operated coal mining settlement on Spitsbergen, the largest island in the archipelago.

Barentsburg is one of two Russian settlements in the Svalbard archipelago, which together have a population of 392, according to the Norwegian government.

The court-ordered vessel seizure was made on behalf of Naftogaz, which is seeking to enforce a \$4.22 billion compensation award for assets Russia took when it annexed Crimea in 2014.

Reuters contributed reporting.

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