SITUATION REPORT · ANALYSE

Baltic under watch

Russia-linked fleet activity

Area	Baltic Sea
Period	January to June 2026
Basis	Open-source online reporting, sanctions registries, maritime data providers
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Executive summary

This note provides a situational picture, based on open-source online reporting, of maritime security incidents in the Baltic Sea over the first half of 2026, including a dedicated assessment of Russia-linked fleet activity.

01 Russia relies on a dual-track asset base, merchant and shadow fleet tankers alongside naval and state-flagged vessels, to advance both economic and military objectives, involving practices such as registration under flags of convenience or falsely declared registries.

02 Russian naval vessels have provided sustained escort to sanctioned tankers transiting the Baltic Sea and the English Channel, extending a protection function once limited to isolated cases.

03 Personnel with reported ties to Russian military or paramilitary structures have been identified aboard sanctioned tankers.

04 Most of the vessels identified are linked to Russia, concentrated under a narrow set of flags and disproportionately represented among sanctioned and falsely flagged vessels.

05 Most sanctioned Russia-linked vessels have changed flag at least once since designation, a pattern that has grown since 2022 alongside successive sanctions packages and is driven mainly by vessels already re-flagged several times.

06 Coastal and EU member states have increased enforcement action against Russia-linked vessels.

~100

distinct maritime security incidents reported in the Baltic Sea, January to June 2026

117

uniquely identified vessels, of which nearly two-thirds are Russia-linked

63 %

of sanctioned Russia-linked vessels with a known designation date changed flag afterwards

Source: Sahar analysis, based on open-source reporting collected over the period, Equasis flag histories and EU, UN and OFAC designation dates.

Context

Since 2022, Russia has remained subject to a sanctions regime targeting its oil exports, yet continues to export the bulk of its oil and sustain the war effort it finances. This is made possible by a shadow fleet, which accounts for between 60% and 80% of Russian crude exports carried outside the G7 price cap framework.[1]

Russia's maritime strategy rests on a dual-track asset base: merchant and shadow fleet tankers on one side, naval and state-flagged vessels on the other. Together, they serve several functions. They sustain sanctioned oil exports through ship-to-ship transfers and vessels registered under flags of convenience or falsely declared registries, relying on opaque ownership and frequent re-flagging to obscure identity. They support military logistics, moving weapons and equipment in support of Russian-aligned forces beyond Europe, including in Africa.[2] They have been implicated in sabotage of undersea cables, relying on the plausible deniability afforded by the combined use of submarines, unmanned underwater vehicles, and shadow fleet vessels.[3]

They are also assessed to have served as launch platforms for drones flown over the airspace of EU member states. Naval escort and onboard security personnel linked to Russian paramilitary or military intelligence structures have been documented aboard some of these vessels. This dual-track approach is accompanied by a formalization of ties between Russia and the fleet: vessels that once sailed with illegitimate or no valid insurance are increasingly covered by sanctioned Russian insurers.[4]

Materials and methods

The dataset combines multi-source reporting, social media from the OSINT and GEOINT community and official channels, specialized maritime press, and official statements from coastal authorities, covering the Baltic Sea from January to June 2026. Processing then operates at two levels:

Event level	Each entry is classified by geographic area and incident type, boarding and seizure, non-compliance or sanctions violations, naval escort or shadowing, exclusive economic zone violations, GNSS and AIS anomalies, cable or pipeline damage, then aggregated into discrete events to identify confirmed maritime security incidents within the Baltic Sea over the period.
Vessel level	Every unique vessel identifier (IMO, MMSI or name) mentioned across the dataset is extracted, yielding a set of uniquely identified vessels for the period. Each vessel is then enriched through cross-referencing against EU, UN and OFAC sanctions registries, Equasis and the Defense Intelligence of Ukraine (DIU) sanctions tracker, establishing current flag, vessel type, sanctions status, flag history and associated ownership or management companies.

> RUSSIA-LINKED CRITERIA
>
> Within this set, a further focus isolates vessels linked to Russia, using two criteria: a current Russian flag of record per Equasis and/or a shadow fleet designation from the DIU.

The resulting analysis follows these same two levels: a situational picture of maritime security incidents identified in the Baltic Sea over the period and a dedicated assessment of Russia-linked fleet activity within it.

Unless credited otherwise, the figures below were produced by Sahar's analysis team from this dataset. Screenshots and third-party investigations are credited individually.

Maritime security incidents overview

Between January and June 2026, around 100 distinct maritime security incidents were reported in the Baltic Sea from online open-source reporting, including boarding and seizure, non-compliance or sanctions violations, naval escort or shadowing, exclusive economic zone violations, GNSS and AIS anomalies, and cable or pipeline damage. A single event can register under more than one type: Fitburg counts as both a boarding and a case of cable damage, and several other boardings similarly register as sanctions violations, the vessels involved having already been under EU sanction at the time of interception (Caffa, Sea Owl I, Flora 1, Jin Hui).

Two regulatory milestones mark the period: a joint declaration on AIS and GNSS interference by 14 Baltic and North Sea states in January, formally attributing signal disruption to Russia and calling for coordinated action to strengthen maritime resilience, and the EU's 20th sanctions package in April, which expanded the shadow fleet vessel list and extended port restrictions to a third-country facility for the first time.

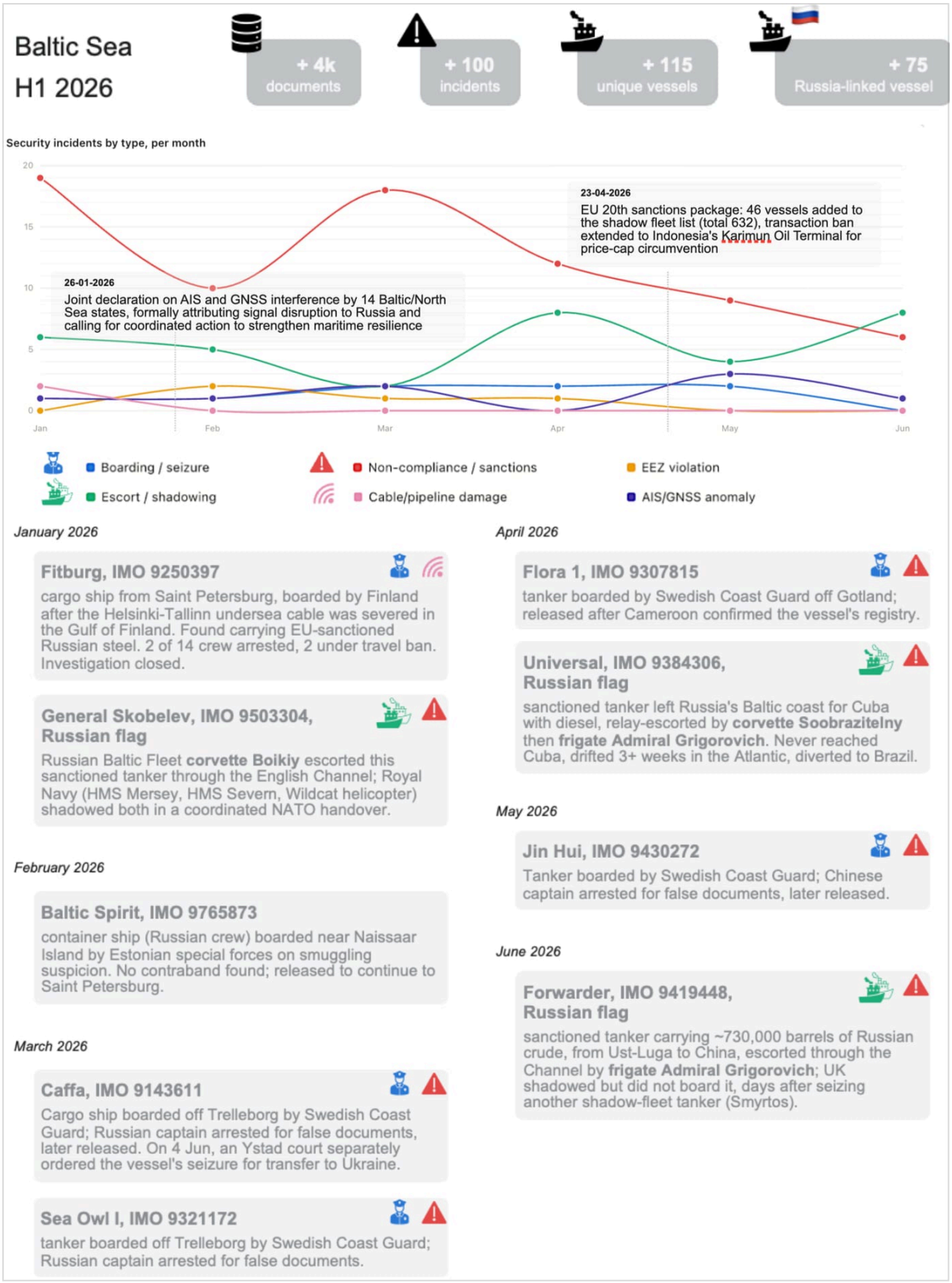


Fig. 1 Maritime security incidents, Baltic Sea, H1 2026. Source: Sahar analysis, based on open-source reporting collected over the period.

Naval escort of shadow fleet tankers was reported throughout the period, involving three named Russian Navy surface combatants:

ESCORT	VESSEL ESCORTED AND REPORTED CIRCUMSTANCES
Corvette Boikiy	Escorted General Skobelev through the English Channel under close shadowing by the Royal Navy and a Dutch patrol vessel
Corvette Soobrazitelny · frigate Admiral Grigorovich	Relayed escort duties for Universal from the Baltic exit to the Atlantic
Frigate Admiral Grigorovich	Escorted Forwarder

By late June, Admiral Grigorovich had maintained a near-continuous presence in the Channel since late April. The UK had authorized its armed forces in March to board sanctioned vessels in its territorial waters; in June, it seized the Cameroon-flagged tanker Smyrtos a few days before Forwarder transited the same waters.

Russia-linked fleet overview

Fleet profile

Among the incidents identified in the Baltic Sea over the period from online OSINT sources, a small share named a specific vessel; these were checked in sanctions registries and maritime data providers, yielding 117 uniquely identified vessels.

Nearly two-thirds of these vessels are Russia-linked under the two criteria set out above. Russian naval vessels reported as escorts over the period are not counted here: they hold no record in the commercial registries used for enrichment, and appear at event level only.

Outside direct Russian registration, Russia-linked vessels identified in the Baltic Sea over the period cluster under a small number of flags, led by Sierra Leone and Equatorial Guinea, both flags of convenience. Cameroon also ranks among the most represented flags in the data, itself identified as having absorbed vessels leaving other jurisdictions under sanctions pressure.[5]

Sanctions exposure is high within the vessels identified: more than 80% of sanctioned vessels under EU, UN, or OFAC, and nearly three-quarters of those flying a false or fraudulent flag, are Russia-linked.

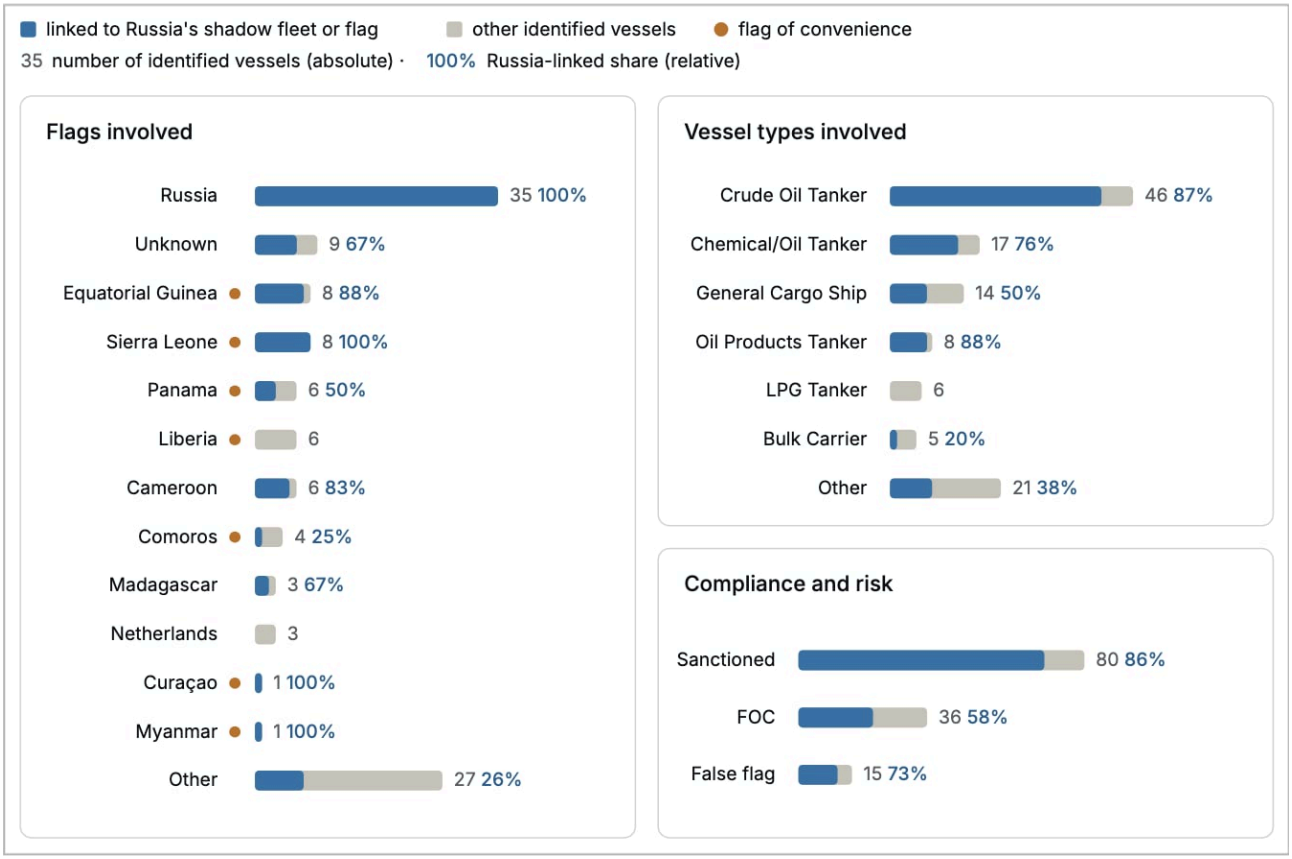


Fig. 2 Vessels involved, Baltic Sea, H1 2026. Source: Sahar analysis, based on Equasis, EU, UN and OFAC sanctions registries, and the DIU tracker.

Re-flagging behavior

Re-flagging sets the Russia-linked subset apart from the rest of the identified vessels. Most sanctioned Russia-linked vessels changed flag at least once afterward, with the sharpest rise occurring within weeks of designation. This figure likely understates the true extent of re-flagging. Some vessels recently sanctioned falsely declare a flag under which they are not actually registered, leaving no trace of the change in available registries.

The interval between successive flag changes has also narrowed markedly since 2022, from a median of around seven years to four to five months, a change far less pronounced among the rest of the identified vessels. The narrower interval among Russia-linked vessels is observed mainly among those with several prior flag changes, consistent with an established pool of vessels rather than an inflow of newly designated ones. The shift coincides closely with the escalation of sanctions in 2022, while the pattern among the remaining identified vessels stays more irregular over the same period.

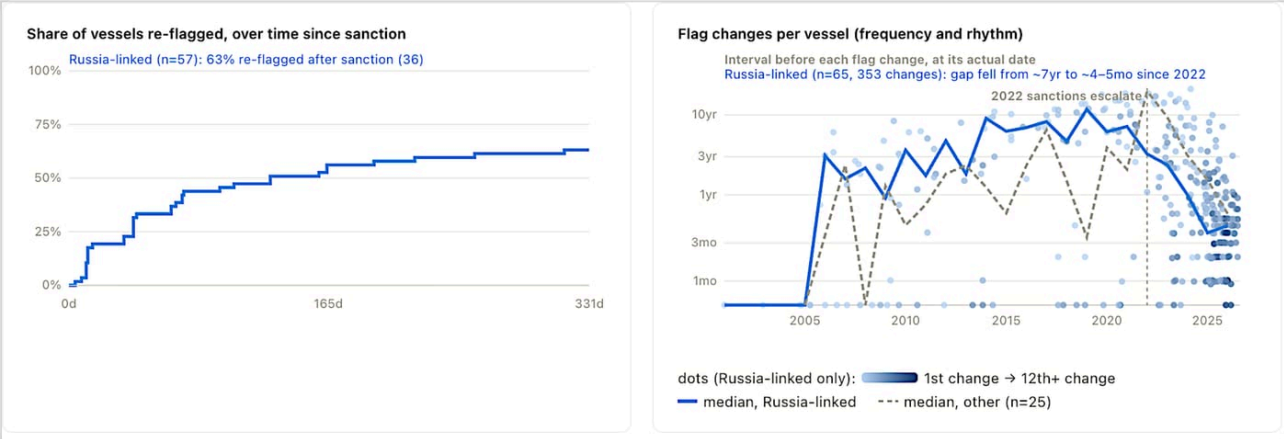


Fig. 3 Re-flagging behavior, Baltic Sea, H1 2026. Source: Sahar analysis, based on Equasis flag histories and EU, UN and OFAC designation dates. Left: among the 75 Russia-linked vessels identified, the 57 sanctioned under EU, UN or OFAC with a known designation date; 36 of them (63%) changed flag after designation. Right: the 90 vessels of the full set that changed flag at least once, of which 65 are Russia-linked and 25 are not. Each dot is a documented flag change for a Russia-linked vessel, positioned by date of change (x) and by time elapsed since the previous change (y, log scale); the gradient marks the rank of the change, from first to twelfth and beyond.

Onboard military presence

In March 2026, a joint investigation by OCCRP, Helsingin Sanomat and Delfi identified individuals without maritime qualifications aboard shadow fleet vessels operating in the Gulf of Finland.[6] Several had backgrounds as former Wagner Group fighters or ties to Russian military intelligence, in some cases reportedly hired through the Russian private security companies RSB Group and Moran Security Group.

In May, Estonian border guards photographed the Marshal Vasilevskiy, a sanctioned Gazprom-operated LNG carrier, fitted with permanently installed heavy machine guns. The same investigation reported that personnel carried aboard the vessel since 2025 included individuals with a documented background in Russian security or military structures.



Fig. 4 Source: OCCRP, "Russia Weaponizes Civilian Tanker in Baltic Sea, Surveillance Images Show", 29/06/2026

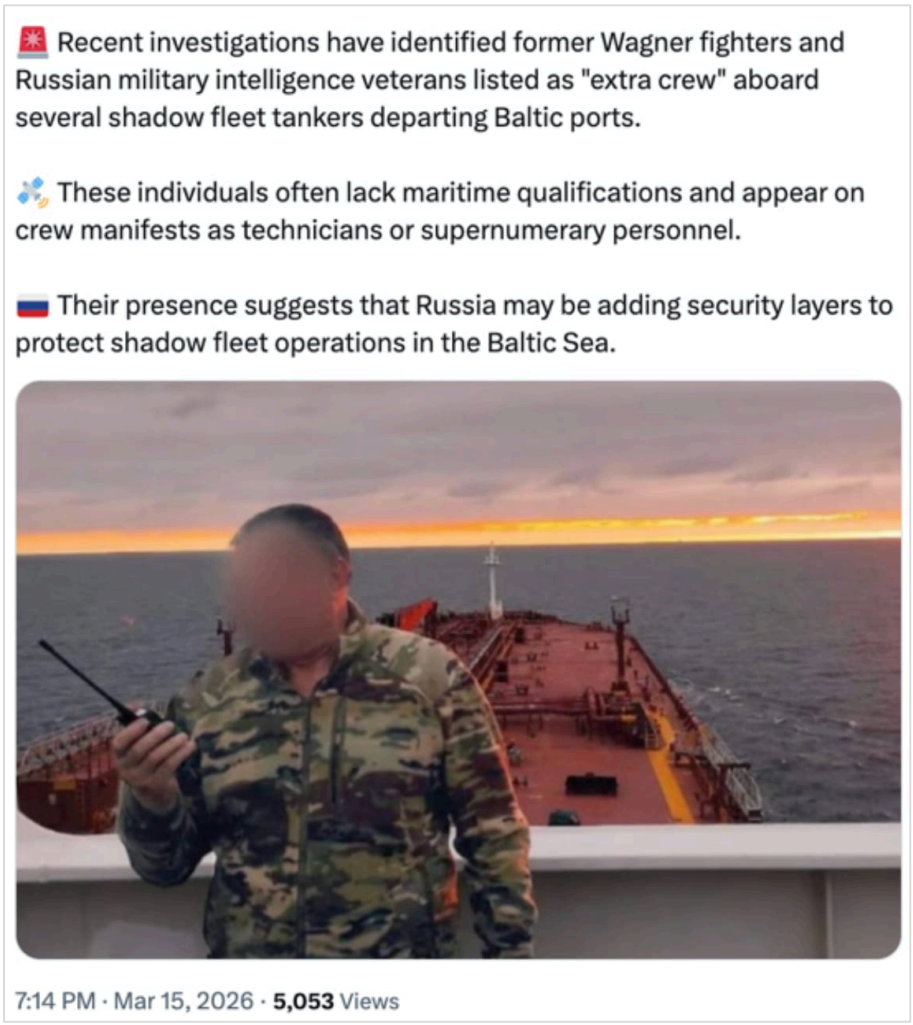


Fig. 5 Source: X, 15/03/2026, OSINT community account (Russian Forces Spotter)

Transit and logistics activity

Among the vessels identified in the Baltic Sea over the period, Sparta IV and Sparta, both Russian-flagged and sanctioned, were traced to SC-South LLC, a sanctioned subsidiary of Oboronlogistika, the Russian Ministry of Defense's dedicated logistics contractor.[7] In January and again in May, each departed a Baltic port under Russian naval escort and was later reported reaching the Russian naval facility in Tartus, Syria. During the May transit, the tanker General Skobelev, sailing in the same convoy, broadcast a false AIS position off Estonia while reportedly transiting the Mediterranean.

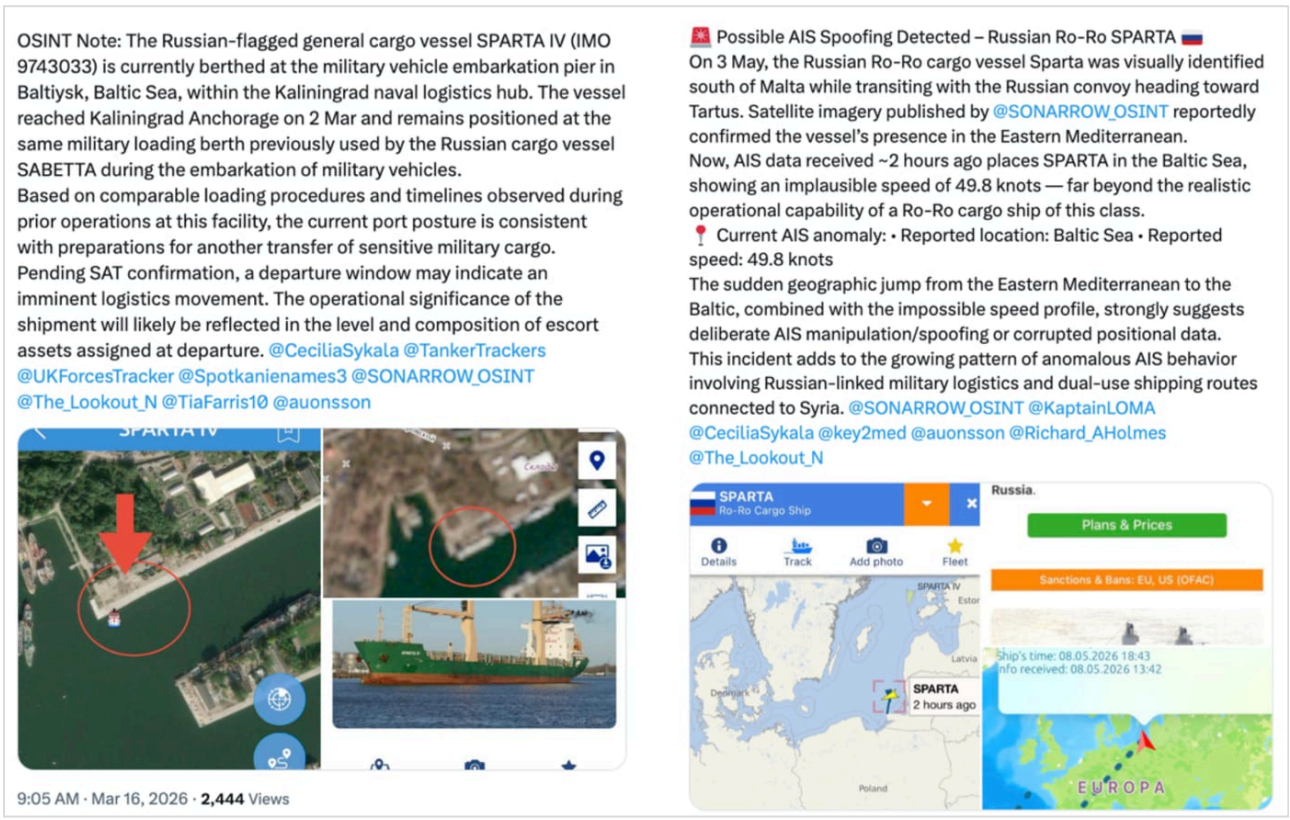


Fig 6 Source: X, 16/03/2026 & 8/05/2026, OSINT community account (Russia Maritime Watch)

Assessment

This dual-track posture is increasingly overt, both operationally at sea and in fleet management.

Open-source reporting on the Baltic Sea over the period documents a dual-track asset base, merchant and shadow fleet tankers operating alongside Russian naval and state-flagged vessels, in support of both oil exports and military logistics.

At sea, Russian naval vessels escorted sanctioned tankers on several occasions during the period, individuals with reported ties to regular, semi-regular or private military structures were identified aboard some of them, and hybrid activity extended to suspected sabotage of critical infrastructure.

In fleet management, the pace of flag changes among vessels suspected of belonging to the shadow fleet has accelerated since 2022 and successive sanctions packages. Coastal and EU member states have increased surveillance and enforcement over the same period, with more reported boardings and seizures of Russia-linked vessels.

Sources

1. S&P Global Commodity Insights, "Factbox: Shadow Fleet Expands to Maintain Sanctioned Oil Flows", 3/09/2025
2. The Sentry, "Doubling Down: Russia's Military Network in West Africa", 04/2026
3. ACLED, "Russia's Shadow Fleet Presents a Sustained Hybrid War Threat at Sea", 22/05/2026
4. Lloyd's List, "One in Three Baltic Tanker Transits Are Covered by Russian Insurance", 26/02/2026
5. RUSI, "Countering Shadow Fleet Activity through Flag State Reform", 02/09/2025
6. OCCRP, "From Wagner to GRU, Russian Military Men Are Manning Moscow's Shadow Fleet", 10/03/2026
7. OpenSanctions, "SC South LLC" entity profile: https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/NK-BhcSpnZYTvoz9gTawDotPL/