

[Back to previous page](#)



document 1 of 1



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RUSSIA: Kremlin aims to re-assert Arctic route control

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Abstract (summary)

On October 23, the official representative of the Investigation Committee of Russia said that the case of the crew of the Greenpeace icebreaker Arctic Sunrise had been reclassified and that instead of being charged with piracy, the activists were charged with hooliganism.

The Greenpeace protest against Russian energy exploitation in the Pechora Sea is emblematic of the changing operational environment in the Arctic Ocean. Ice reduction trends allow for more human activity in a region Moscow is keen to control. The Kremlin's reaction has been severe because Greenpeace not only challenged Russia's energy interests, but also its control of surface traffic along the Northern Sea Route (NSR).

Full Text

EVENT: On October 23, the official representative of the Investigation Committee of Russia said that the case of the crew of the Greenpeace icebreaker Arctic Sunrise had been reclassified and that instead of being charged with piracy, the activists were charged with hooliganism.

SIGNIFICANCE: The Greenpeace protest against Russian energy exploitation in the Pechora Sea is emblematic of the changing operational environment in the Arctic Ocean. Ice reduction trends allow for more human activity in a region Moscow is keen to control. The Kremlin's reaction has been severe because Greenpeace not only challenged Russia's energy interests, but also its control of surface traffic along the Northern Sea Route (NSR).

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

The legal proceedings against the Greenpeace crew will further damage Russia's international image.

The detention of activists may also undermine any positive publicity generated by the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.

Environmental activism will have little impact on Russia's energy ambitions in the Arctic, which face technical

challenges.

Russian authorities are more concerned with setting a precedent than they are with threats to energy infrastructure.

On September 19, the Russian Coast Guard seized the Greenpeace icebreaker Arctic Sunrise, arresting its 30 crew on charges of sea piracy. This is not the first Greenpeace protest in the area: in August 2012, a group of activists also intruded onto the Prirazlomnaya oil platform in the Pechora Sea (see RUSSIA: Environmental movements will channel dissent - September 12, 2012). The Greenpeace members involved in the most recent case are now awaiting trial in the city of Murmansk for attempting to board the oil platform in protest against what Greenpeace believes is Russia's ecologically dangerous energy extraction in the Arctic.

International reaction to the arrests was initially faint, partly because the vessel's activity around the oil rig violated international standards. The event also generated little criticism among the Russian population: a late September public survey by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion revealed that two-thirds approved of the government's handling of the case.

Greenpeace case.

The reduction in the charge from piracy to hooliganism is not, in itself, a surprise. It has been construed as too harsh by the international community and, from the start, there were signs suggesting that President Vladimir Putin would eventually lean towards leniency:

He has contradicted the Investigative Committee by suggesting that the activists were not pirates.

While the protest violated international law, no damage occurred.

Moscow may have been reluctant to engage in yet another controversy that undermines Russia's image abroad, particularly with the Sochi Winter Olympics starting in February.

Authorities indicated that they found drugs on the ice breaker, possibly pointing to a desire to discredit rather than imprison.

Conflicting interests.

The incident is not a harbinger of future threats from environmentalists against Moscow's energy objectives in the Arctic. Foreign designs on Russia's offshore resources are also not a particularly credible threat:

International law grants Russia access to all sub-soil energy reserves in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) -- an area 200 nautical miles from its shores.

Russia is the most richly endowed Arctic state with approximately 41% of Arctic oil resources and 70% of gas resources are in the area.

Recent speculations of a 'Great Game' scenario with regard to overlapping claims to the continental shelf beyond the Arctic EEZ appears to be overstated. The zone around the North Pole holds far fewer seabed energy resources and will be the last area accessible for exploitation. Moreover, international dispute mechanisms with regard to delineation are clear and respected among Arctic littoral states.

Arctic navigation.

Russia's focus on control of its NSR is an overlooked factor in the Greenpeace incident. Several weeks before the arrests, Greenpeace applied for permission to enter the Arctic waters, but the NSR Administration rejected the application three times. On August 26, the Greenpeace icebreaker Arctic Sunrise disregarded the decision and

entered without permission.

Moscow's response to this incident is meant to reinforce its assertion that it holds unquestionable jurisdiction in its Arctic zone. It promotes the route for commercial paying customers, but restricts access for environmentalists and foreign navies.

Russia asserts that the key straits through its several Arctic archipelagos are internal waters. It also claims regulatory control over all surface traffic within its EEZ. Canada shares Russia's approach to its Arctic straits along the North-west Passage, but takes a much less stringent position on navigation in its Arctic EEZ. Most other nations object to these assertions. Inhospitable sea ice made the issue largely irrelevant in the past, but Arctic climate change is moving the matter from the theoretical to the practical area (see ARCTIC: Polar route will not rival Suez or Panama soon - October 16, 2013).

The latest Greenpeace incident comes during the most active international shipping season in the history of the NSR:

The Arctic experienced record low sea-ice extent in 2007 and then again in 2012. The 2013 ice extent is greater than the previous year, but remains well below historic levels. Climate forecast models portend even more ice recession, leading to seasonal ice-free conditions within a decade.

The length of the ice-free season in the Russian Arctic for large vessels has increased from 84 days in 1979 to 129 in 2006 and then over 170 in 2007 and in 2012.

The number of ships seeking passage through the NSR has increased from four in 2010 to over 400 in 2013.

Strengthening NSR presence.

In anticipation of a more navigable Arctic and further challenges to its jurisdictional claims, Russia has recently moved to strengthen its presence on the NSR:

The majority of Russian activity in the Arctic since 2009 has focused on upgrading infrastructure and enhancing constabulary capabilities along the NSR. These include moves to re-establish more than a dozen border stations and expand aerial and satellite border monitoring capabilities.

The Kremlin also modernised two-decade-old legislation in July 2012 and maritime regulations in January 2013 associated with controlling the NSR.

Russia's military positioning in the Arctic is increasingly focused on the NSR. The Northern Fleet's mission has recently grown to include the protection of the NSR, with the commencement of permanent patrolling missions in 2012 by its naval aviation and surface vessel assets.

Moscow's argument for control of the NSR may have shifted from one based solely on international law towards a more nationalist doctrine. This more expansive interpretation threatens further tensions not just with environmentalists, but with nations unaccustomed to respecting Russia's national legislation.

CONCLUSION: Officials may retain a handful of Greenpeace ringleaders for a trial, while releasing the rest, since the impounded Greenpeace icebreaker is, in a sense, a more valuable asset than the crew. Without the vessel, Greenpeace's ability to disrupt activity in the Arctic would be greatly diminished. The Western coverage of the case will continue to focus on Moscow's authoritarian tendencies, while the Kremlin will augment its efforts to establish firm legal and operational control over the NSR.

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