

Separatists seize two ships in Mariupol

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Russian-backed separatists have seized two foreign-flagged ships in the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol in the Sea of Azov. The separatists said that the ships were now “state property”, reports Reuters, citing letters it had seen.

The seizures are the first such moves against commercial shipping in this war and will heighten tensions between the international shipping market and Russia.

Mariupol was finally fully captured by Russian and separatist forces in May after a months-long siege.

The self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic, via its foreign ministry, informed two shipping companies that their vessels were the subject of “forcible appropriation of movable property with forced conversion into state property”, without any compensation to the owners, according to two separate letters.

Liberia registered Smarta Shipping, the owner of the Liberia-flagged bulk carrier **Smarta** (IMO 9396567), one of the two vessels taken, said it was informed of the seizure by email on June 30th. It called the seizure unlawful and “against all norms of international law”, adding that “such forced appropriation is in breach of fundamental human rights in so far as property rights are concerned.” It noted that “such action is a serious threat to shipping and to maritime safety.”

(This vessel had been misnamed the “Smart” previously, which meant that it was tentatively misidentified in IMN on Monday. Correct details are below.)

The Smarta had arrived in Mariupol on February 21st to load a cargo of steel. It was hit by shelling on March 20th, seriously damaging its bridge. Smarta Shipping said that the 19-member crew had been taken by force by the Russian military to Donetsk but were released a month later.

The other vessel seized is the Panama-flagged **Blue Star I** (IMO 9375159), according to the letter. This is managed by Odesa-based Fetida Maritime.

A Ukrainian foreign ministry official said it was aware of an announcement by “the Russian occupation authority in Donetsk to create a ‘national’ fleet comprised of ships they had stolen in Mariupol”, adding they were checking on the vessels seized.

There are more than 80 foreign-flagged ships that remain stuck in Ukrainian ports, and insurers will be fully aware of the ticking clock that is the approach of the time when such vessels can be called a constructive total loss.

2005-built, Panama-flagged, 3,254 gt Blue Star I is owned by Blue Star Marine Co Ltd care of manager Fetida Maritime Ltd of Odesa, Ukraine. N AIS since February 26th, when it was listed as being at Mariupol.

2007-built, Liberia-flagged, 9,986 gt Smarta is owned by Smarta Shipping Ltd care of manager Intresco Ltd of Valetta, Malta.