

## Spoofing and other sanctions-busting techniques could ease Russian oil export difficulties

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Oil products tanker **Kapitan Schemilkin** (IMO 8727965) sought to disguise its whereabouts by using sanction-busting techniques, reports NGO Global Fishing Watch in an investigation that was verified by the UK's *Financial Times*.

The report added to the accumulating evidence that companies aligned to Russia have worked out methods that will mitigate the impact of western oil export restrictions.

Last week there were warnings that Russia had amassed a so-called “shadow fleet” of tankers and tankships, numbering up to 100 mainly older and mid-size vessels, which it planned to use to export Russian oil, the origin of which could subsequently be disguised via various subterfuges, such as ship-to-ship transfers, fake paperwork, merging with legitimately sourced oil, etc.

Samir Madani, co-founder and chief executive of TankerTrackers.com, said that “we have seen Russian tankers carrying out what looks like practice runs [for sanctions] in recent months,” said.

GFW revealed that the 138-metre *Kapitan Schemilkin* made two trips using concealing techniques, previously the domain of sanctioned countries Venezuela and Iran. The ship visited an offshore mooring near Malta from May to July, before visiting the Teknecik power plant in Northern Cyprus a month later, according to the findings. In both cases, the tanker spoofed a false position on its AIS transponder, which indicated that the vessel was sailing in circles in Greek waters.

That spoofing was quite subtle, in that earlier false signals had clearly been inaccurate, serving not so much to deceive as to conceal the real location of the vessel concerned. Bjorn Bergman, a data analyst working for GFW and SkyTruth, another environmental NGO, said that “we see a whole range of false tracks – and, in general, they are getting more realistic.”

GFW's work on spoofing techniques was funded by the Defence Innovation Unit within the US Department of Defence as part of a programme to understand weaknesses in satellite navigation and monitoring systems.

GFW used European Space Agency radar satellite imagery to show that the Kapitan Schemilkin was not in the places where it was claiming to be. A vessel of the same size that was not broadcasting a position was sighted at a Maltese mooring and then in Northern Cyprus on photos taken by Planet Labs.

Backing up these findings, GFW noted that, when the ship was claiming to be sailing off Greece, its signals were at times being picked up by telecommunications satellites over the wrong part of the Mediterranean. At various points in the journeys, the Kapitan Schemilkin also notified other vessels via AIS that it was sailing to Malta and to Northern Cyprus.

Rechmortrans, the Rostov-based owner of the Kapitan Schemilkin, did not respond to requests from the *FT* for comment. Rechmortrans shares a director with a company on which the US imposed sanctions in 2021 after one of its vessels made two trips to Venezuela.

Bergman said that although AIS is an open system that was vulnerable as a result, “we have been able to develop robust solutions for detecting position manipulation. So vessel operators that choose to do this will just shine a spotlight on themselves.”

The *FT* independently accessed satellite photography from Planet Labs, satellite radar imagery from the European Space Agency’s Sentinel-1 satellites and AIS data from Spire, a satellite data and analytics company.

1989-built, Russia-flagged, 4,407 gt Kapitan Schemilkin is listed on Equasis as owned by Morflot LLC of Rostov-na-Donu, Russia. Manager is listed as Rechmortrans Ltd of Rostov-na-Donu, Russia. As of December 12<sup>th</sup>, the vessel was underway in the Black Sea, heading for Novorossiysk, Russia.

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