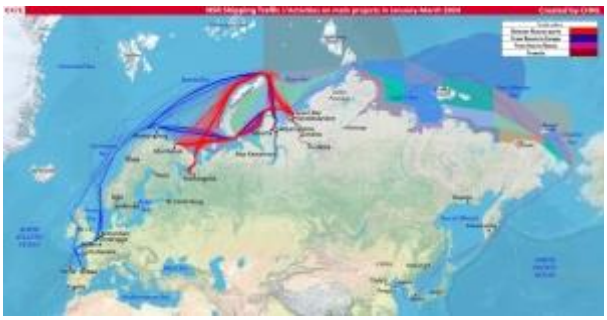
China and Russia, France and Belgium on the Arctic route

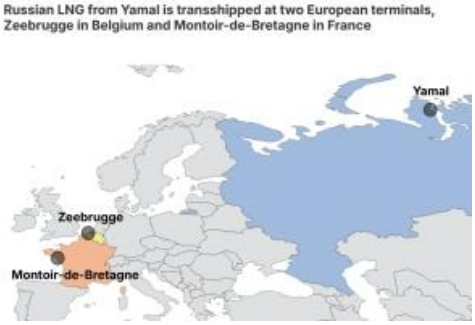
By Marek Grzybowski

Northern Sea Route Russia hosted the first meeting of the Subcommission on Cooperation on the Northern Sea Route (NSR) of the Russian-Chinese Commission for the Preparation of Regular Meetings of the Heads of Government. The main scope of the Subcommittee's activities includes navigation safety, increasing cargo traffic on the NSR, developing logistics routes and exchanging information on ice conditions, Rosatom reported in December 2024.

In 2024, Chinese shipping companies almost doubled the number of voyages on the NSR. In June last year, Rosatom and Chinese companies signed a letter of intent on the establishment of a joint venture in the shipbuilding industry and the establishment of a year-round container line connecting Russian and Chinese ports via the Northern Sea Route. The NSR is the shortest shipping route between Western Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific region.

In 2024, more than 3 million tons of cargo were transported via the Northern Sea Route. This is a record for transit cargo transported via the Arctic route. In the area of the Sannikov and Dmitry Laptev Straits, depths of up to 14 m are recorded. It is assumed that vessels of up to 50,000 deadweight tonnage or container ships with a capacity of up to 4,500 TEU will be able to pass through these straits and the Laptev Sea. In 2014, the route was blazed by the 100,000-ton LNGC Arctic Aurora, which transported almost 67,000 tons of LNG from the port of Futtsu in Japan to Hammerfest in Norway. In 2019, the tanker covered the route with 113,000 tons of ballast, and in 2020, the bulk carrier with a cargo of 105,000 tons.

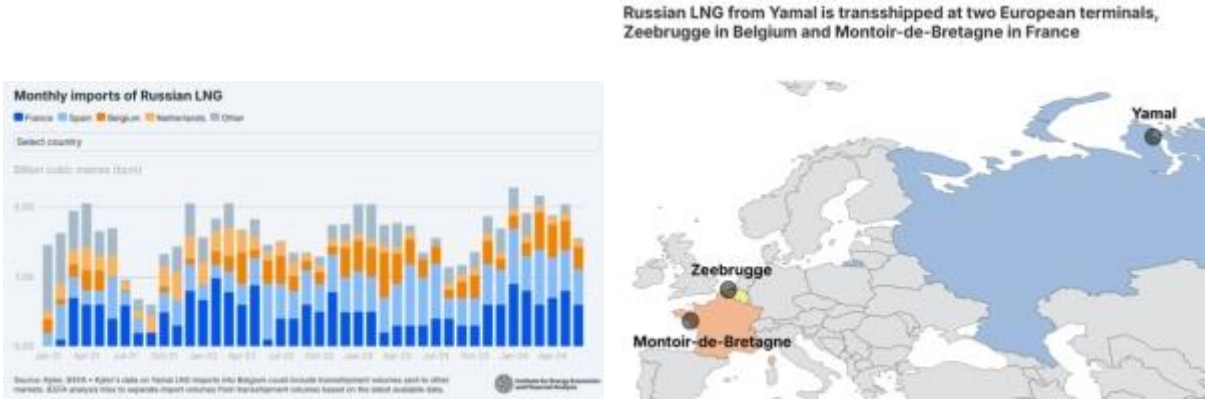




The Northern Route was used by ships in transit to transport 3.08 million tons of cargo in mid-November last year, a Rosatom representative reported, according to the Center for High North Logistics (CHNL), citing data from Spire ShipView AIS and Clarkson Fleet Database. In 2024, a record was set for the number of transit crossings. There were a total of 97 voyages. Of these, 56 ships sailed with cargo and 41 with ballast. Over the past 15 years, there have only been a few good years in which ships traveled from Asia to Europe along the northern route, including to Poland.
In 2024, three main directions of transit connections dominated. These were crossings from Russia to China, transports of goods from Chinese ports to Russia, and travel between the western and eastern ports of Russia, analysts from CHNL have determined. Similarly to 2023, there are no transit trips to ports in Western Europe or other Asian countries. There were 36 passages of ships in both directions between Russian ports. There were 34 voyages from Russian ports to China, and 27 voyages from Chinese ports to Russian ports.

For comparison, in 2020, about 1.3 million tons of goods were transported in transit along Russia's Arctic borders, Vyacheslav V. Ruksha, Deputy Director of ROSATOM and Director of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) Directorate at ROSATOM, reported in March 2021. NSR statisticians report that in 2019, almost 680,000 tons of goods were transported in transit along the northern sea routes, and in 2020, about 1.3 million tons of goods. In the good year 2023, 79 voyages were made and about 2.1 million tons of goods were transported. In the weakest period, in 2022, only 43 ships with about 0.1 million tons of goods were allowed to transit.

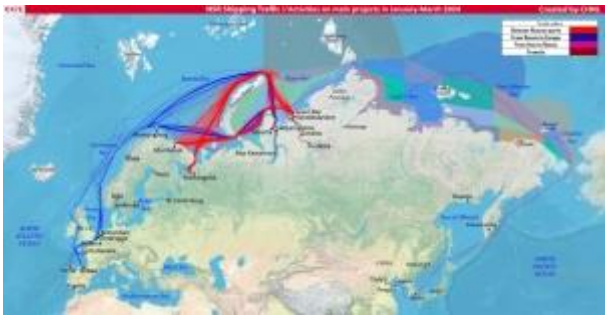
In 2024, the northern route was mainly used to transport crude oil. There were also bulk goods, such as coal, fertilizers, iron ore. Small quantities are cargo in containers. Single voyages were made to transport LNG and petroleum products. There were also general cargo transports and several voyages with seafood cargo. However, this data is not complete.



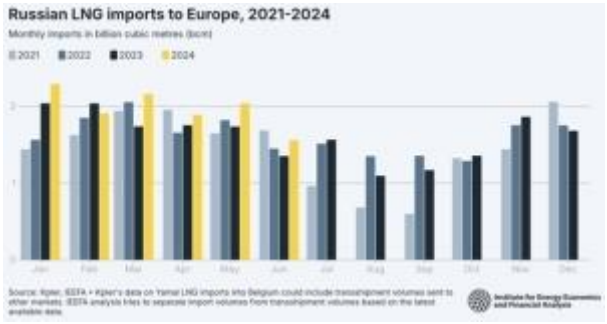
LNG to Europe by gas carrier

Last winter, the northern routes were used to export LNG from the Sabetta port, crude oil from the Arctic Gates terminal in Cape Kamenniy, gas condensate from the Sabetta port, and shipments of Norilsk Nickel products from the Dudinka port to Murmansk, Norwegian analysts have determined. In addition, packages of materials, equipment, and supplies are delivered by sea to the construction sites of new terminals in the NSR area. This concerns the Vostok Oil and Arctic LNG-2 projects.

In the winter season, transportation is carried out by ice-class ships. More than half of all voyages are carried out by Arc7 class ships. This is over 85% of the vessels that traverse these seas. These routes are also used by Arc4 ice-class ships. They are mainly used to deliver materials and supplies to the Vostok Oil and Arctic LNG-2 construction sites.



LNG tankers were sailing to Western ports at full speed, LNG was imported from the port of Sabetta In 2024. In the first 4 months of last year, LNG export was carried out via 99 deliveries – the Norwegians determined. The main directions of deliveries were gas terminals managed by France, Belgium and Spain. Loading was also carried out near the island of Kildin, near the port of Murmansk. Each of the 15 LNG tankers made 6-7 voyages in the first 4 months of 2024. In a similar period in 2023, we recorded 96 voyages, and in 2021 89 voyages – informs CHNL.
Crude oil is exported throughout the year by tankers, mainly with the Arc7 ice class, to the RPK Nord transshipment terminal in Murmansk. Then the oil is sent on for export. This is about 15 deliveries per month. For example, in 2024, there were 58 voyages in the January-April period, and in 2021, during the same period, there were 66 deliveries of oil to Murmansk.
Before Russia's attack on Ukraine, 18.7 million tons of LNG were delivered to Western European ports from the port of Sabetta in 2021, and 18.6 million tons of LNG were exported in 2020. A total of 263 deliveries were made by 25 ships. In the summer, the voyages were performed by tankers with a lower ice class than Arc 7. Before 2022, LNG tankers delivered gas to France (ports of Saint-Nazaire – 32 deliveries and Dunkirk – 28), Belgium (port of Zeebrugge) – 53 voyages, China – 31 deliveries (port of Beihai – 4, Caofedian – 2, Dalian – 2, Fujian – 2, Jiangsu – 3, Shanghai – 1, Shenzhen – 2, Tangshan – 6, Tianjin – 3, Yangkou – 4, Zhoushan – 1) – Norwegian analysts calculate. Other countries that received gas from the Yamal wells also included Spain, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Japan, Portugal, South Korea.



In addition, 9 deliveries were made with transhipment near Kildin Island. For comparison, previously the main recipients of gas from Yamal in 2020 were Belgium (62), France (57), Spain (30); in 2019 – Norway (102, transhipment in Honningsvåg), France (32) and Belgium (26). 47 LNG carriers were sent to Asian terminals in 2021.

The Norwegians state that "over the past three years, countries have been systematically receiving LNG ships from Yamal LNG: Belgium, China, France, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom". However, "more dynamic exports within this project were observed in the winter".
Russia remains the EU's second-largest gas supplier, after Norway, and ahead of the US, with LNG imports growing, according to the 2024 State of the EU Energy Union Report. – Despite the EU agreeing to a ban on the transshipment of Russian LNG until March 2025, transshipment of this fuel from the Russian Yamal terminal in EU ports increased by 15% year-on-year in the first half of 2024 – says Ana Maria Jaller-Makarewicz, Chief Energy Analyst for Europe at IEEFA, in a statement for High North News. This is despite the EU's announcement to limit gas imports from Russia.

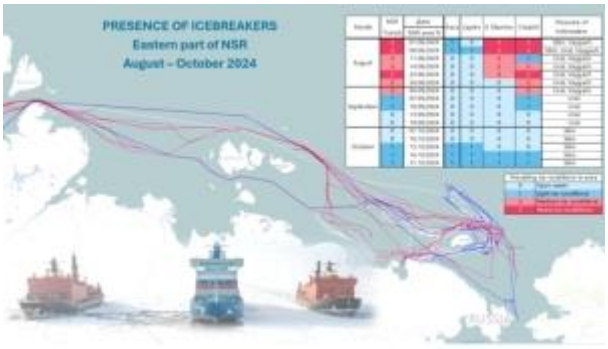
– We remain fully committed to completing the phase-out of Russian gas, which can be done without compromising the security of Europe's energy supplies – explained EU Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson to reporters in Brussels during the presentation of the EU Energy Union report.

A few EU countries, notably France, have completely different policies. France more than doubled its imports of Russian LNG in the first six months of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023, according to new data from the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA).

China and Russia on the Northern Sea Route

Vladimir Panov, Executive Secretary of the Subcommittee from the Russian side and Special Representative of the Rosatom State Corporation for Arctic Development, outlined key areas of joint activity at the Russian-Chinese meeting. These include safety of navigation, planning and ensuring the growth of cargo traffic along the NSR, promoting the development of logistics routes, exchanging data on the NSR ice situation, meteorological conditions and others.

Russia and China have reached numerous detailed agreements on the safety of navigation along the Northern Sea Route (NSR), according to Alexey Likhachev, CEO of Rosatom. He was speaking at the first meeting of the Subcommittee on Cooperation in the NSR of the Russian-Chinese commission. Rosatom is heavily involved in the NSR and owns Russia's fleet of nuclear-powered icebreakers, the only such fleet in the world. The new icebreaker Yakutiya (Yakutiya, Якутия) was recently put into service. Yakutiya is the fourth nuclear-powered Arktika-class icebreaker of Project 22220. It was built at the Baltic Shipyard in St. Petersburg. It is 173 meters long and can break ice sheets 2.8 meters thick. It is powered by two RITM-200 reactors.



The subcommittee was established after Putin visited Beijing to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping in June last year. Likhachev said: "We have already concluded a number of detailed agreements between our countries on the safety of navigation. We are developing constructive cooperation on other important issues. I believe that we have laid a solid foundation for the further work of the subcommittee," Liu Wei, Chinese Minister of Transport and co-chair of the subcommittee, also said that China and Russia have reached a number of important consensuses on the upcoming joint work.

"Although we are holding the first meeting of the Subcommittee, we have already drawn up a number of agreements on the safety of navigation between our countries. We are also dealing with other important issues in a fully cooperative manner," said Alexey Likhachev, head of Rosatom.

Rosatom is engaged in providing services to carriers on the Northern Sea Route (NSR). It is also the operator of the NSR infrastructure. Rosatom not only ensures safe navigation on the NSR routes,

including icebreaker escort, but also builds ports. It also initiates partnerships with international transport and logistics companies and promotes this sea route connecting Europe and Asia. The transshipment capacity of Arctic ports has recently increased to 40 million tons. Rosatom has deepened the Ob Gulf, is engaged in the construction of a coal terminal for the Syradasay coal deposit, and has signed contracts for dredging services in the Bukhta Sever port and the construction of a cargo terminal and a quay for floating energy units at Cape Nagleynyn, the management informs.

The Northern Sea Route is the shortest connection between Western Europe and the Pacific ports. The length of the NSR is 5,600 miles, while the total distance from Murmansk to Chinese ports via the NSR is 7,000 miles. The connection through the Suez Canal is about 12,500 miles. More precisely, from Rotterdam to Shanghai you have to sail, along the Northern Route, over 8,000 miles, through the Suez Canal – over 10,500 miles, around the Cape of Good Hope – about 13,800 miles, and to the Korean Busan (respectively) – about 7,700, over 10,700 and over 14,000 miles. The disadvantage of the Northern Sea Route is its seasonal availability and the limitation of the size of vessels crossing it. Another inconvenience is the need for ships to have reinforced hulls and ice or Arctic class (reinforced hull).