

Vessels on the Northern Sea Route



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Vessels on the Northern Sea Route**Author:** Ksenia Vakhrusheva**Published by:** Bellona Foundation, Vilnius**About Bellona:**

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General overview

Russia regards the NSR as a single, “historically established national transport corridor of the Russian Federation,” as stated in Article 14 of the Federal Law “On the Internal Maritime Waters, the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone of the Russian Federation.” It applies its regulations to navigation along the entire length and all routes of the NSR. Article 5.1 of the Russian Merchant Shipping Code establishes a permit-based regime for passage along the NSR – any Russian or foreign vessel wishing to traverse it must request permission to use the route from the Main Directorate of the Northern Sea Route Federal State Budgetary Institution. This body was established in 2022 on the basis of the Northern Sea Route Administration, which was transferred from Rosmorrechflot to Rosatom. The Rules for Navigation in the Waters of the Northern Sea Route, adopted by the Russian Ministry of Transport, include provisions requiring the mandatory use of Russian icebreaker and pilotage services.

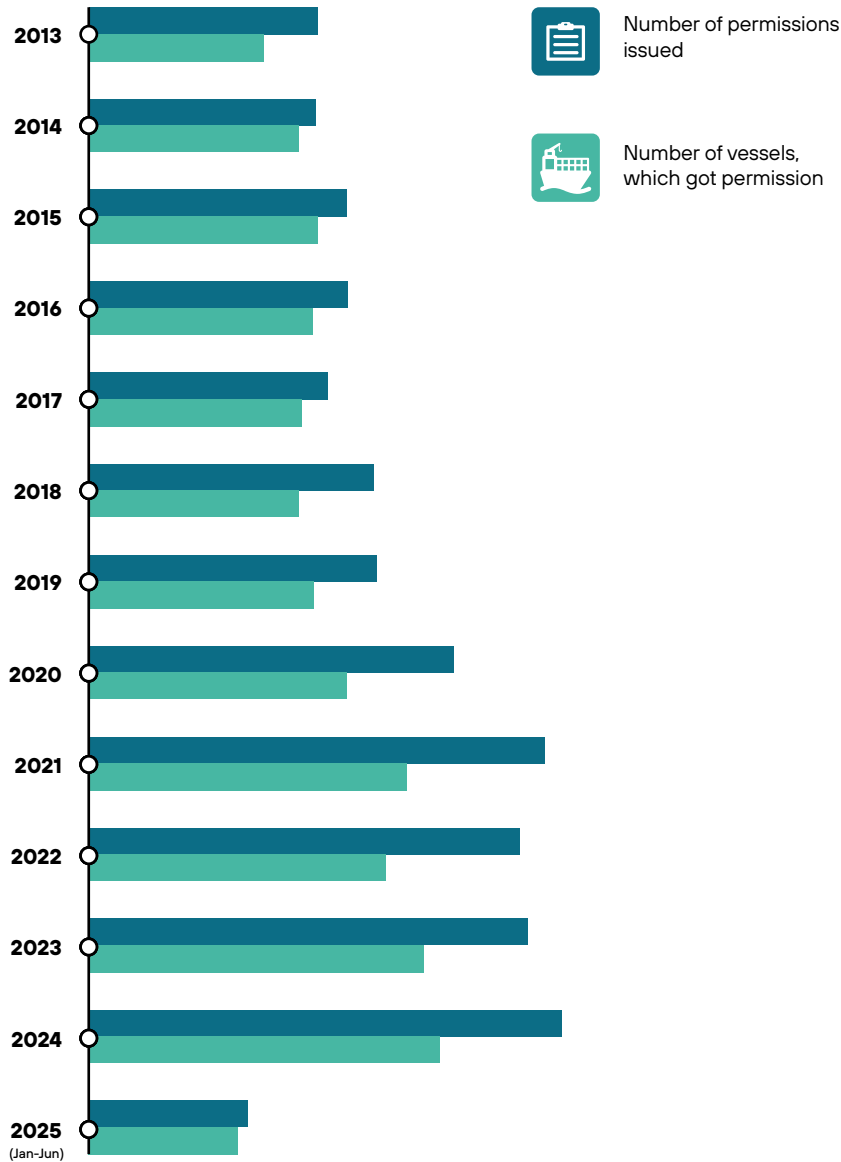
Thus, throughout the year, this official body grants permits to vessels hoping to enter the NSR and specify the requirements for entering – whether there is a need for icebreaker escort, via which zones, and under which ice conditions vessels can passthrough the NSR. The permits are valid for specific times and can be issued numerous times throughout the year to the same vessel under different sailing conditions during different periods of time.

State support for navigation on the Northern Sea Route officially began on May 7, 2018, with the decree of the President of the Russian Federation titled «On National Goals and Strategic Tasks for the Development of the Russian Federation for the Period Until 2024,»⁴⁰¹. This set the goal of increasing the cargo traffic along the Northern Sea Route to 80 million tons by 2024. Since 2019, the increase in the number of vessels permitted entering the NSR is notable.

Graph 1 shows the dynamics of the number of issued permits and the number of vessels which got permissions to enter the NSR in 2013–2025. Vessels can apply for a permit several times during a year for sailing in different navigation periods. The number of vessels in 2013–2022 can be slightly higher due to the absence of data on registration numbers for those years. Vessels which got permissions at the end of the year were likely to be permitted to enter the NSR next year. Since 2018, there has been an increase in the number of vessels permitted to enter the NSR.

¹ Federal Law № 155-FZ “On the Internal Sea Waters, Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone of the Russian Federation”. Article 14. Navigation in the Waters of the Northern Sea Route [in Russian]. (Accessed: June 18, 2025.)
https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_19643/8b899e425a5ee90c385386a11256c62cbacbcc30/E

Graph 1.
Permissions issued and number of vessels permitted to enter the NSR in 2015-2025.



	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025 (Jan-Jun)
Number of permissions issued	635	631	715	718	662	792	799	1014	1264	1196	1219	1312	440
Number of vessels, which got permission	484	583	635	622	591	583	625	716	882	824	929	975	415

Graph 2.
Number of vessels permitted to go through the NSR
in 2019-2025 under **all flags**, other than Russian.

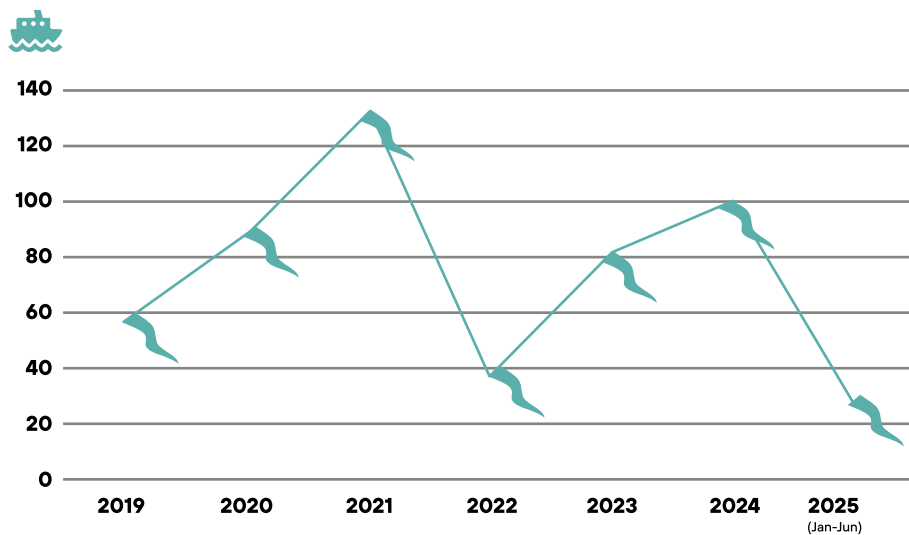


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Vessels permitted to enter the NSR in 2024

In 2024, the NSR administration issued 1,312 permits to 975 vessels for entering the NSR. Ninety percent of the vessels sail under the Russian flag. Approximately half of them did not have, or did not indicate, their International Maritime Organization (IMO) number. Mostly, these were tugboats, barges, other service vessels, fishing vessels, or small scale cargo and river and sea oil tankers which are used locally. Out of 342 vessels of various types under the Russian flag, which indicated their IMO numbers, 188 vessels are older than 25 years.

Graph 3.
Flags of vessels, which got permission to enter the NSR in 2024.

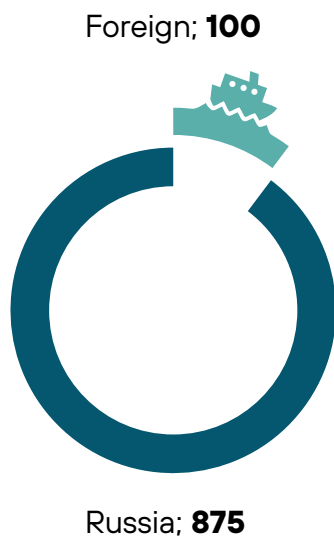


Table 2.
Number of vessels going under all flags, other than Russian, which got permission to enter the NSR in 2024.

Flags	List in Paris MoU	Number of vessels
Panama	Grey	23
Gabon	Not in the lists	12
Liberia	White	12
Hong Kong	White	10
Barbados	White	9
China	White	8
Bahamas	White	7
Cyprus	White	7
Marshall Islands	White	5
Malta	White	2
Sierra Leone	Grey	2
Cook Islands	Grey	1
Kazakhstan	Not in the lists	1
Palau	Black	1
Russia	Grey	875

One hundred vessels going under foreign flags got permission to enter the NSR in 2024. Fourty percent of them have flags of the countries that are either grey- or black-listed in the Paris Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control (ParisMoU – an agreement between 28 states for harmonized port control according to international shipping standards) or are not on that list due to too little number of inspections.

These vessels include:

- **33 LNG tankers (6 with no ice class)**
- **22 oil and oil products tankers (6 with no ice class)**
- **18 bulk carrier (12 with no ice class)**
- **10 container ships (6 with no ice class)**
- **8 general cargo ships (1 with no ice class)**
- **3 Trailing Suction Hopper Dredgers (1 with no ice class)**
- **3 Heavy load carriers (2 with no ice class)**
- **1 yacht (no ice class)**
- **1 research icebreaker**
- **1 Anchor Handling Tug Supply**

All LNG tankers, except two, were built and used for transportation of LNG from Novatek's Yamal LNG plant located in the Arctic roughly at the midpoint of the NSR. LNG tankers regularly delivered LNG both to Europe and Asia. Two LNG tankers transported LNG from St.Petersburg ports to Asia, but those deliveries are not regular. Eleven LNG tankers and 2 oil/gas condensate tankers are owned by the Greek shipping company Dynacom; seven LNG tankers are owned by the Japanese Mitsui group; six LNG tankers are owned by the UK-based *Seapeak Maritime Ltd*. The rest tankers are owned by various companies registered in UAE, Seychelles, and Russia.

More than half (12) of oil and oil products tankers are older than 15 years. Many of oil and oil products tankers changed names and flags in 2024 or 2025 and had gaps in tracking. Mostly they were used to deliver oil from Murmansk to China and India. Most of the oil and oil products tankers are owned by offshore companies registered in the Seychelles and UAE.

Among eight Chinese vessels were one research icebreaker, two heavy-load carriers, two general cargo vessels, one container ship, and two Trailing Suction Hopper Dredgers. General cargo and container ships were used for deliveries between China and Archangelsk. A heavy-load carrier was likely delivering equipment from China to the sanctioned Arctic LNG 2 project. Container ships under the flags of Panama, Liberia, and Hong Kong were also used to deliver goods between China and Russia.

Most of the vessels under foreign flags that got permission to go through the NSR were used to carry Russian oil and gas for export to Europe (mostly LNG) and Asia (mostly oil). During 2025, many of those vessels appeared on sanction lists from the US, the UK, and/or the EU.

Methodology and sources

All data in this brief were obtained from open sources. Data about permissions to vessels for entering the Northern Sea Route from 2022 till 2025 were taken from the official website of the Federal State Budgetary Institution «Main Administration of the Northern Sea Route» (<https://nsr.rosatom.ru/>). The data about number of permissions from 2013 till 2021 were taken from the Federal state budgetary institution “Informational analytical and statistical center of Rosmorrechflot” (<http://www.nsra.ru/>).

Details of the vessels, including their type, year built, and owner were taken from the IMO website. Vessels tracks were taken from the historical data available on the Global Fishing Watch website (<https://globalfishingwatch.org/>). Other data were retrieved from different mass media sources.



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