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Environmental disaster in the Black Sea: Russia's disregard for regulatory standards

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The Russian government has responded with significant delay to the worst environmental disaster in the Black Sea in years. The incident, which occurred in mid-December, was caused by a collision involving two tankers transporting heavy fuel oil (mazut) through the Kerch Strait. Coordinated action at the central level was initiated nearly a month after the accident, following a belated intervention by Vladimir Putin. The full extent of the disaster, along with its environmental and economic repercussions for both Russia and other countries in the Black Sea region, remains unknown.

The accident highlights the environmental risks associated with Russian maritime transport, particularly the shipment of oil and fuel. A disregard for safety procedures represents a systemic risk factor, not only for Russia but also for countries bordering the waters used by its vessels. The progression of events also indicate that the Kremlin has a limited capacity to exercise control over its regions. At the same time, the crisis prompted grassroots mobilisation among the population. Although these initiatives proved effective in addressing the immediate consequences, they present a challenge to Putin's regime.

The disaster and its aftermath

On 15 December 2024, the Russian river-sea tankers Volgoneft-212 and Volgoneft-239, en route to the port of Kavkaz in the Kerch Strait, sustained serious damage due to a storm. The hull of Volgoneft-212 broke apart, causing the vessel to sink and resulting in the death of a crew member. Volgoneft-239 lost steering control and ran aground near the port of Taman in Krasnodar Krai. The tankers were carrying a total of 9,200 tonnes of heavy fuel oil (mazut). According to Russia's Ministry of Transport and the Maritime Rescue Service, 2,400 tonnes of oil leaked into the sea.

The vessels were regularly used to transport fuel between Russian refineries and Black Sea ports. Available information suggests they did not possess the necessary permits to enter the Kerch Strait during winter due to the risks posed by wave height risks. Russian media also reported that the documentation of Volgoneft-239 had expired, theoretically preventing it from operating beyond December 2024. Both tankers, built between the late 1960s and early 1970s, were obsolete and should have been decommissioned 10 to 15 years ago.

In the days following the accident, the storm carried part of the spilled oil onto the shores of Krasnodar Krai. On 21 December, the first reports emerged of mazut washing up on the coast of the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia illegally annexed in 2014, with the first contamination near Sevastopol being discovered on 3 January. Oil pollution was later

observed on the Berdyansk Spit in the northern Sea of Azov, in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, which remains under Russian occupation.

The full scale of the ecological disaster and its consequences – both for the natural environment and the economies of affected regions – remains unknown. According to Russia's Ministry of Emergency Situations, as of 21 January, clean-up operations in the worst-affected areas (Krasnodar Krai, the Republic of Crimea, and the city of Sevastopol) had removed over 170,000 tonnes of contaminated sand and soil from 285 km of shoreline, with more than 950 km of coastline being placed under daily monitoring. In addition, 43,000 m² of water in the Kerch Strait was decontaminated, using approximately 4.5 tonnes of absorbent material to neutralise the pollution.

The properties of mazut further exacerbate the challenges linked to mitigating environmental damage. Unlike other petroleum products, heavy fuel oil does not remain on the surface but gradually sinks to the seabed, where it solidifies unless heated. In practice, this means the fuel must be physically removed when it washes ashore, as no technology exists to efficiently recover it from the seabed. Additionally, the remaining cargo must be pumped out of both tankers. This task will be particularly challenging for Volgoneft-212 due to its sinking, whereas operations on the other vessel are expected to be completed by the end of January. Environmental experts warn that if the mazut is not removed in time, it will resurface after winter, leading to mass fish die-offs. Estimates of bird fatalities vary widely, ranging from around 1,000 to as many as 20,000. Meanwhile, ecologists have reported the deaths of at least 58 whales. As time passes, the scale of losses is expected to grow.

The long-term consequences of the disaster remain uncertain. Regional fisheries, already weakened by the construction of the Crimean Bridge and the closure of certain waters to civilian shipping following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are likely to endure further damage. This, in turn, will impact the food industry which relies on fishing. The tourism sector is similarly at risk, as the contamination has reached the shores of coastal resorts and nature reserves.
The duration required for the spilled heavy fuel oil to break down in the sea remains unclear. Estimates suggest that ecosystem recovery could take anywhere from several years to several decades. There is also a possibility that the environmental crisis could escalate to an international level. The scientific director of the Water Problems Institute at the Russian Academy of Sciences has described the incident as the most serious ecological disaster in Russia since the beginning of the 21st century. He warned that the spilled oil could reach Odessa as well as the coasts of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey.

Slow government response and active public engagement

It must be acknowledged that the Russian government's response to the environmental disaster in the Kerch Strait was notably sluggish. A federal state of emergency was only declared in Krasnodar Krai on 26 December. Although Putin publicly acknowledged the seriousness of the situation as early as 19 December, he did not take decisive action until 9 January, by which point the crisis had clearly spiralled beyond the control of regional authorities. At that stage, the Russian president deemed the response efforts inadequate and put the blame for the slow reaction on the indecisiveness of local officials.

Repressive measures, including the arrest of the captains of the damaged tankers (on 19 December) and the launch of a criminal investigation into negligence in managing the

disaster's aftermath (on 24 December), were implemented prior to other central government actions. A federal emergency task force was only established on 12 January, and a government commission was formed on 13 January. This sequence suggests that the Kremlin attempted to reassert control and project authority. To reinforce this stance, Putin redirected blame for the slow response onto regional authorities. The regional authorities, in turn, had likely submitted overly optimistic reports over an extended period, further exposing the inefficiency of Moscow's highly centralised, top-down oversight system (see '*A tactical pause. The Kremlin's regional policy in the shadow of the war*').

Russian pro-government media have accurately highlighted the difficulties in mitigating the consequences of the disaster and the potential environmental risks it poses. At the same time, state propaganda has sought to focus on positive aspects of the situation, particularly the mobilisation of local communities, while emphasising Putin's decisive role in managing the crisis.

It is particularly noteworthy how local communities actively responded to the disaster, stepping in to clean contaminated sections of the coastline and assist affected wildlife in the absence of an effective state response. Despite lacking proper resources and infrastructure, volunteers managed to save several thousand birds. In many cases, they took on the bulk of the work under hazardous conditions. In Krasnodar Krai alone, medical assistance was required for 146 volunteers, and one person, a 17-year-old student, died.

Volunteers also displayed considerable assertiveness. Residents of Anapa recorded an appeal to Putin, criticising local authorities for their inefficiency (the 2025 Krasnodar Krai budget included a 50% cut in environmental protection funding). Some pursued legal action to demand coastal rehabilitation, while a petition advocating for a state of emergency in the region gathered over 115,000 signatures. Numerous irregularities were also reported. Companies contracted by the state to remove contaminated sand allegedly disposed of clean sand in the process. Tractors operating in polluted areas were reportedly washed directly in the sea, and contaminated sand was stockpiled near residential areas.

The grassroots initiative has received a mixed response from the authorities. Regional officials, distrustful of civic activism – an approach typical of Putin's regime – clashed with volunteers and attempted to exert pressure on them. They accused the volunteers of spreading disinformation, with one group reportedly detained on charges of poaching. Meanwhile, the ruling United Russia party sought to capitalise on the disaster and use it for image-building purposes, staging clean-up efforts involving high-ranking regional officials. In Crimea, residents reported that their involvement was restricted by military fortifications and a civilian access ban in certain areas. At the same time, Putin publicly praised citizens for their role in mitigating the disaster's impact. The head of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs, Grigory Gurov, also criticised the deputy minister of education, science, and youth policy of Krasnodar Krai for verbally attacking volunteers engaged in rescuing birds.

Ukrainian reactions

The ecological disaster provided the Ukrainian authorities with an opportunity to highlight Putin's aggressive and 'insane' policies, which they argued had led to the accident in the Kerch Strait. In a special address, President Volodymyr Zelensky called on the international community to compel the Russian leader to end military operations and hold him criminally accountable. To coordinate efforts in addressing the disaster's consequences, Ukraine

initiated consultations with Bulgaria and Romania. It also appealed to several international organisations – including the UN Secretariat and its relevant agencies, the International Maritime Organization, and the European Union – calling for a "strong international response". Kyiv warned that "ignoring this incident would amount to condoning its repetition in the future".

Environmental and political implications

The circumstances of the disaster highlight the notorious negligence by Russia's maritime transport sector in adhering to regulations and the disregard for associated risks, particularly environmental ones. On 17 December 2023, just days after the Kerch Strait incident, another tanker, Volgoneft-109, sent out an SOS signal following damage to its cargo tank. Then, on 4 January, a heavy fuel oil spill occurred off the coast of Kamchatka. While the damaged vessels in these cases operated solely within Russian waters, similar risks exist for ships transporting Russian oil and fuel along export routes. The use of the so-called 'shadow fleet' (see '*Denmark and Sweden: how to stop the 'shadow fleet*") to facilitate Russian exports raises the possibility of similar disasters occurring in international waters, including the Baltic Sea. The opaque ownership structures and unclear insurance status of these vessels further complicate potential compensation claims in the event of an oil spill.

The slow response to the environmental crisis highlights both the shortcomings of the Kremlin's rigid system of regional control and Putin's, as well as the wider political leadership's, reluctance to take responsibility for failures. It should be emphasised that repressive measures were prioritised to reinforce the perception of the central authority's effectiveness in the eyes of the public. Considering all this, high-profile dismissals of certain regional officials may be anticipated in the near future.

The public mobilisation in response to the disaster is particularly striking, given the increasingly repressive nature of Putin's regime and the near-total dismantling of civil society structures. While grassroots efforts to clean up the mazut spill have been publicly acknowledged by the Kremlin as valuable, as they are not perceived as an immediate political threat such spontaneous activism remains problematic from an authoritarian perspective at the same time. As the authorities regain control over the situation, they are likely to gradually suppress these independent initiatives.