



The Maritime Shipping Industry

Opaque, Extremely Lucrative, and a Tool of Choice for Sanctioned Governments and their Facilitators



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THE MARITIME SHIPPING INDUSTRY

OPAQUE, EXTREMELY LUCRATIVE, AND A TOOL OF CHOICE FOR SANCTIONED GOVERNMENTS AND THEIR FACILITATORS

It is easy to underestimate just how integral a role the maritime shipping industry has assumed in our increasingly global economy. Over 80% of international trade in goods (by volume) is carried by sea.¹ Given this relative omnipresence in the realm of global commerce, one might assume that the shipping industry is strictly regulated, but in fact, the opposite is true. As this article will describe, the world of marine traffic is, in many ways, structurally opaque. Ports of call, flags of convenience, tanker types, and cargo transfer options all contribute to a lack of clarity around the shipping industry during a time in which transparency is necessary. As western governments continue to rely on sanctions as their tool of choice to cripple pariah states like Russia, bad actors within the shipping industry take advantage of its seemingly intentional opacity to enrich themselves, even if this means enriching sanctioned states in the process.

“As western governments continue to rely on sanctions...to cripple pariah states like Russia, bad actors within the shipping industry take advantage of its seemingly intentional opacity to enrich themselves”

Methodology

Oil tanker activity at the Russian Black Sea Ports of Novorossiysk, Taman, and Temryuk was tracked utilizing publicly available information on the websites [MarineTraffic](#) and [VesselFinder](#). Both resources offer premium features behind a paywall, which we did not pay to utilize, meaning that much of the information gathered was time constrained. The data gathered is from October 11 - November 11, 2022, not including weekends. This in no way purports to be a completely comprehensive accounting of oil tanker activity in the region over the given period of time.

¹ <https://unctad.org/webflyer/review-maritime-transport-2021>

MarineTraffic data lasts approximately 24 hours, and features individual port traffic, as well as limited information about individual tankers. This includes port of origin, the reported destination of the tanker, and arrival and departure times. MarineTraffic also allows for approximately 24 hours of tanker tracking via map.

VesselFinder provides port calls dating back approximately two months in some cases, which proved invaluable in filling the gap between the port of origin, or last port call, of tankers tracked and arrival at Russian ports. It was also useful in substantiating the information provided through MarineTraffic.

Russian Warm Water Port Tracking: Oil Tanker Activity

October 11 – November 11, 2022

Port of Novorossiysk

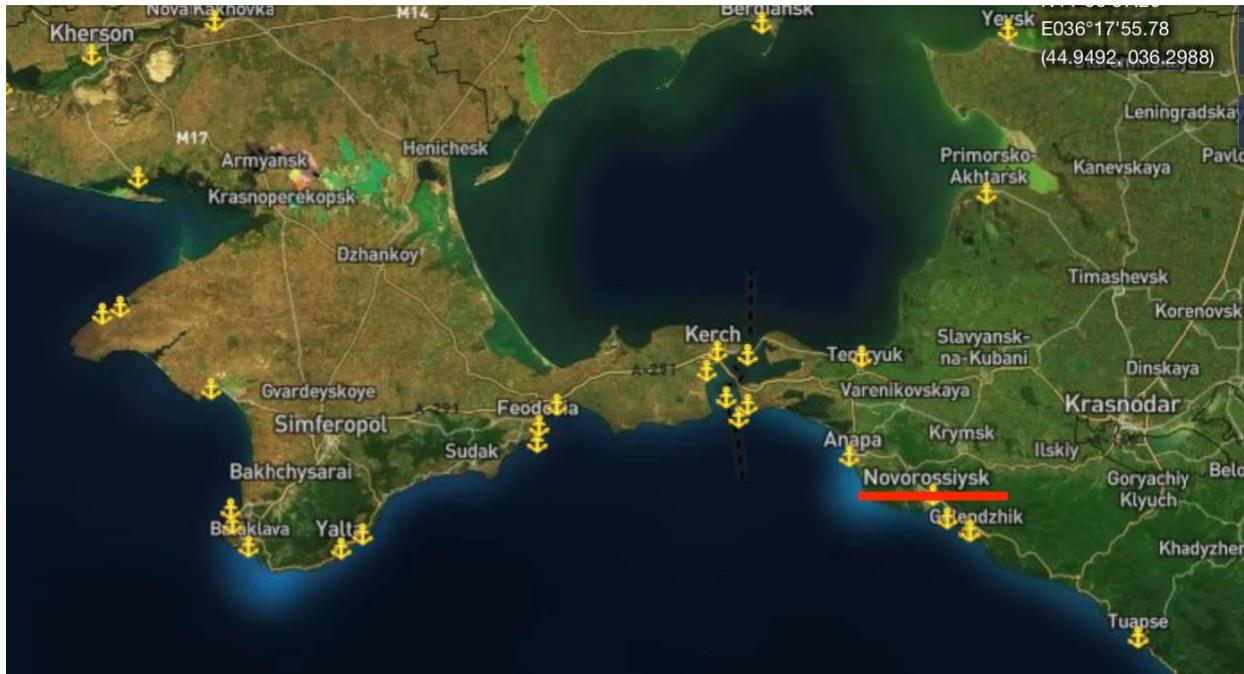


Photo from MarineTraffic

The Port of Novorossiysk is a strategically important location not just as the largest oil hub in the Black Sea, but also as home to the Russian Naval Fleet in the Black Sea. Located on the shores of the ice-free Tsemes Bay in southwest Russia, the Port of Novorossiysk is notable for its close proximity to the CPC Marine Terminal, which is the terminus of the CPC Pipeline. The pipeline carries large quantities of crude oil from the Tengiz, Karachaganak, and Kashagan oil fields in northwestern Kazakhstan.² The port is also home to the Sheskhari Oil Terminal,³ which further solidifies its importance as an oil hub.

² <https://www.cpc.ru/en/about/Pages/maps.aspx>

³ <https://credo-trans.com/russias-port-of-novorossiysk/>

By the numbers

Between October 11 - November 11, the Port of Novorossiysk was visited by:

- 28 oil/chemical tankers,⁴ 26 oil products tankers, 48 crude oil tankers, and 5 bunkering tankers
- Total: **107 tankers**

Of these 107 tankers, 72 either originated from, or made port calls at, Western ports,⁵ including:

- 19 oil/chemical tankers, which were tracked at ports and anchorages in: Romania, Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine
- 10 oil products tankers, which were tracked at ports and anchorages in: Slovenia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, Georgia, and Ukraine
- 43 crude oil tankers, which were tracked at ports and anchorages in: Turkey, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, Guatemala, France, Romania, the Netherlands, Germany, Mexico, Croatia, Finland, and the United States

⁴ The difference between these tankers types is elaborated on in the Endnotes.

⁵ Individual ports and anchorages included in the Endnotes; differentiated by Russian warm water port and tanker type when applicable.

Port of Taman



Photo from MarineTraffic

The Port of Taman is strategically positioned on the coast of the Taman Peninsula of Krasnodar Krai, across the Strait of Kerch from Russian-occupied Crimea. Vessels docking in its port enjoy easy access to the Sea of Azov to the north, and land transport capabilities into Ukraine via the Kerch Strait Bridge. The Port of Taman has developed rapidly over the past two decades, with the help of government subsidies⁶ and high-level political and corporate support.⁷

By the numbers

Between October 11 - November 11, the Port of Taman was visited by:

- 9 oil/chemical tankers, 4 oil products tanker (3 of these being LPG tankers), and 2 crude oil tankers
- Total: **15 tankers**

Of these 15 tankers:

- 12 either originated from, or made port calls at, Western ports

⁶ <https://thecoalhub.com/ministry-of-energy-offers-to-subsidize-taman-coal-terminal.html>

⁷ <https://www.offshore-energy.biz/port-of-taman-to-get-new-dry-bulk-facilities/>

- These included ports and anchorages in Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Romania, and Belgium

Port of Temryuk



Photo from MarineTraffic

winter, the port is advantageously located close to the Strait of Kerch, allowing easy access into the Black Sea, and furthermore, into the Mediterranean.

By the numbers

Between October 11 - November 11, the Port of Temryuk was visited by:

- 3 oil/chemical tankers, 21 oil products tankers (3 of these being LPG tankers), and 3 bunkering tankers
- Total: **27 tankers**

Of these 27 tankers:

- 7 either originated from, or made port calls at, Turkish ports
- The LPG tanker 'Summer' arrived at Temryuk from the Port of Burgas, Bulgaria on October 25, 2022; on November 9, 2022 it arrived back at Temryuk having made a port call at the Port of Mangalia, Romania

- The Russian bunkering tanker 'Mee' arrived at Temryuk from the Port of Kerch, Ukraine on October 18, 2022, before heading back to the Ukrainian port later on the same day

Includes port calls dating back to August 19, 2022 at the earliest

A Closer Look

A more comprehensive look at individual tankers tracked during this research provides insight into which companies, and individuals in charge of these companies, are helping to enrich the Russian Federation while also enriching themselves.

Montesperanza

Flag: Portugal/Madeira

Tanker Type: Crude Oil Tanker

Owned by: Ibaizabal Tankers



Photo from VesselFinder

The Montesperanza is the only tanker tracked during this research to have made a port call at an American port; the Port of Corpus Christi in early September. The vessel proceeded to make port calls in Mexico and Spain before arriving at the Port of Novorossiysk, Russia in late October. Since late November, the Montesperanza has made port calls in Turkey, France, and Libya.

The Montesperanza is owned by Spanish tanker giant Ibaizabal Tankers.⁸ The company was implicated in a recent Investigate Europe and Reporters United analysis as among the European shipping sector's most prominent Russian facilitators. Between February 24 and August 31, 2022, the Ibaizabal-owned tanker *Monte Uliia* visited the Russian port of Ust-Luga five times, carrying Russian crude oil twice to the Netherlands, and three times to Poland.⁹

⁸ <https://www.ibaizabaltankers.com/flota/montesperanza/>

⁹ <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/en/2022/shipping-tycoons-trading-with-russia/>

Alejandro Aznar Sainz - Owner of Ibaizabal Tankers

The Aznar Sainz family has been involved in maritime trade in the region for well over a century, and they are among the 200 richest people in Spain with an estimated net worth of €380 million.

When the Spanish King Emeritus, Juan Carlos de Borbon, formerly accused of money laundering and tax fraud, was ordered to pay over €5 million in back taxes to the Spanish Treasury,¹⁰ Alejandro Aznar Sainz was among the businessmen to come to the disgraced monarch's aid, donating to his cause.¹¹

Alejandro Aznar Sainz and his wife also found themselves in hot water with the authorities in 2019, when they were fined €200,000 by the Spanish Supreme Court for building a hunting lodge within Cabañeros National Park without the relevant permissions.¹² That same year, Aznar Sainz was awarded the 'Great Cross of Naval Merit', among other distinctions, by the Spanish Ministry of Defense for his company's donation of a tugboat that would become the operating ship of the Catalan rescue NGO Proactiva Open Arms.¹³

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/spanish-prosecutor-drops-fraud-case-against-former-king-juan-carlos-2022-03-02/>

¹¹ <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/en/2022/shipping-tycoons-trading-with-russia/>

¹² <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/en/2022/shipping-tycoons-trading-with-russia/>

¹³ <https://www.publico.es/espana/condecoraciones-defensa-concede-medalla-millonario-dono-barco-proactiva-open-arms.html>

Lucky Sailor

Flag: Malta

Tanker Type: Oil/Chemical Tanker

Owned by: Eastern Mediterranean Maritime Ltd.



Photo from VesselFinder

The Lucky Sailor spent much of early October in the Italian port/anchorage of Sarroch, before arriving at the Port of Novorossiysk, Russia on October 24, 2022. The vessel proceeded to make port calls in France (in November) and Belgium (in December), before arriving at the Port of St. Petersburg, Russia on December 26, 2022. It was last tracked at Wilhelmshaven Anchorage, Germany on December 31, and is en route to the Port of Nordenham, Germany.

The Lucky Sailor is part of the Eastern Mediterranean Maritime fleet.¹⁴ This Greek company was also implicated in the Investigate Europe and Reporters United analysis; they ranked third among European companies tracked in both volume and number of shipments of Russian petroleum products between February 24 and August 31, 2022.¹⁵ In recent years, Eastern Mediterranean Maritime tankers have also been implicated in the transport of Iranian¹⁶ and Venezuelan¹⁷ oil, in spite of sanctions against these countries.

¹⁴ <https://www.eastmed.gr/tankers-mr/#1586163102842-b4a73f8b-aba3>

¹⁵ <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/en/2022/european-ships-bolster-russian-fossil-fuel-trade-despite-looming-eu-sanctions/>

¹⁶ <https://www.ifmat.org/08/04/eastern-mediterranean-maritime/>

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-venezuela-oil-deals-special-report-idUKKBN23J1N7>

Thanasis Martinos - Managing Director of Eastern Mediterranean Maritime

Among the many prominent positions held by Greek shipping magnate Thanasis (Athanasios) Martinos, chief among them is Governor of Mount Athos, an Orthodox spiritual center in the North of Greece which enjoys autonomous status. The 'Holy Mountain', comprising some twenty monasteries housing upwards of 1,400 monks, is sacred to all Orthodox Christians, and has been since as early as the 10th century.¹⁸

Given the site's significance to Orthodox Christians worldwide, and the already established connections forged between Thanasis Martinos and the Russian Federation, it should come as no surprise that many prominent Russian officials have visited the Holy Mountain since Martinos assumed the role of Governor in 2019.

In 2020, during a time in which coronavirus restrictions were limiting international travel, Thanasis Martinos welcomed Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin to Mount Athos.¹⁹ According to Ukrainian MP Dmytro Natalukha, Martinos has also welcomed the likes of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and former president Dmitry Medvedev to Mount Athos since assuming his position.²⁰

Russian dissident journalist Alexander Nevzorov has also reported that Martinos provided special permission for Putin's suspected mistress, Alina Kabaeva, to visit Mount Athos, despite women and children being forbidden from visiting the sacred site.²¹

¹⁸ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/454/>

¹⁹ <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/561103534/o-episkeptis-kai-i-tixi-ton-pagon/>

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/dmytronatalukha/status/1562817826314162178?lang=en>

²¹ <https://twitter.com/DmytroNatalukha/status/1562817839970496512/photo/1>

Ryman

Flag: Malta

Tanker Type: Crude Oil Tanker

Owned by: TMS Tankers Ltd.



Photo from VesselFinder

The Ryman made port calls in the Netherlands and Italy in September and early October, before arriving at the Port of Novorossiysk, Russia in mid-October. It departed for Bulgaria on October 17, 2022. Since the beginning of December, the Ryman has made port calls in Libya, Italy, and Poland. It was last tracked en route to the Port of Skagen, Denmark.

The Ryman is part of the TMS Tankers fleet.²² Among all of the European companies tracked as part of the Investigate Europe and Reports United analysis, the Greece-based TMS Tankers ranked first in total volume of Russian petroleum product shipments between February 24 and

²² <https://www.tms-tankers.com/fleet.html#>

August 31, 2022. It ranked second in total number of shipments with 75.²³ As a result of this, TMS Tankers has been branded international sponsors of war by the Ukrainian government.²⁴

George Economou - Founder of TMS Tankers

Economou, whose company has been labeled an international sponsor of war, is a prominent patron of the arts, with a gallery bearing his name at the Tate Modern in London.²⁵ He was lauded for his “outstanding generosity” when, in 2019, he donated the Peter Doig painting *Two Trees* to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.²⁶ He also owns a private collection located in Athens that bears his name.²⁷

DryShip Inc, of which George Economou is founder and CEO, has in recent years found itself embroiled in controversy over abnormal financial transactions that eventually aroused the suspicion of the Securities & Exchange Commission (SEC).

In 2015, after failed attempts to diversify the company, DryShips sold its tanker fleet back to George Economou, who officially owned 18% of the company by the end of that year. In late 2016, Economou bought the majority of the outstanding debt in DryShips at a steep discount, effectively assuming the role of chief banker of his own company; he owned almost no common shares in the company by the end of 2016. The following year, DryShips engaged in a series of fundraising deals with a British Virgin Islands firm Kalani Investments, a subsidiary of the Canadian hedge fund Murchinson Limited. These totaled approximately \$700 million. As part of these transactions, the firm received discounted shares of DryShips, which they then sold to investors at a profit; this activity wiped out almost all of the common stock value in DryShips, much to the chagrin of average investors, many of whom have sued the company. The proceeds from the sale of discounted shares were used by DryShips to add to their fleet; many of these ships were purchased from George Economou, himself.²⁸

In 2021, Murchinson and its chief investment officers, Marc Bistricher, agreed to an \$8.15 million settlement paid to the SEC for allegedly violating trading rules.²⁹

²³ <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/en/2022/european-ships-bolster-russian-fossil-fuel-trade-despite-looming-eu-sanctions/>

²⁴ <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/en/boycott/2/>

²⁵ <https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/george-economou-gallery>

²⁶ <https://www.metmuseum.org/press/news/2019/peter-doig-two-trees>

²⁷ <http://www.thegeorgeeconomoucollection.com/>

²⁸ <https://www.freightwaves.com/news/dryships-forges-ahead-as-legal-challenges-persist>

²⁹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/financier-behind-dryships-stocks-wild-ride-has-settled-with-sec-11632151697>

Seavision

Flag: Malta

Tanker Type: Crude Oil Tanker

Owned by: Thenamaris Ships Management



Photo from MarineTraffic

The Seavision is most notable for its multiple stops at the Port of Novorossiysk, Russia in recent months. The vessel spent the majority of late September in the Port/Anchorage of Fos-Sur-Mer, France, before arriving at the Port of Novorossiysk on October 16, 2022. It departed for Greece the following day, before arriving back at the Port of Novorossiysk on November 8, 2022. The Seavision then made a port call in Romania before returning to Novorossiysk on November 23, 2022. Since then, it has made port calls in Turkey, Italy, and was last tracked en route to France.

The Seavision is part of the Thenamaris Ships Management fleet.³⁰ Another company based in Greece, Thenamaris Ships Management ranked sixth in volume and eighth in number of shipments of Russian petroleum products between February 24 and August 31, 2022, according to the Investigate Europe and Reports United analysis.³¹ As a result, Thenamaris Ships

³⁰ <https://www.thenamaris.com/fleet-overview/tankers/>

³¹ <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/en/2022/european-ships-bolster-russian-fossil-fuel-trade-despite-looming-eu-sanctions/>

Management has also been labeled an international sponsor of war by the Ukrainian government.³²

The Martinos Family Business

The Martinos family is intimately involved in many of the largest shipping businesses in Greece. Thanasis Martinos' involvement in the industry has already been elaborated on. Their family company, Thenamaris, is led by Nikolas Martinos; he is the son of Konstantinos Martinos, brother of Thanasis and Andreas Martinos. Andreas, for his part, owns Minerva Marine Inc, who have also been labeled international sponsors of war by the Ukrainian government.³³

³² <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/en/boycott/4/>

³³ <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/en/boycott/3/>

The Tactics

Among the many tactics employed by shipowners to avoid the prying eyes of regulators, and conceal who they do business with, the flying of flags of convenience, as well as engaging in ship-to-ship transfers, are chief among them.

Flags of Convenience

Many of the tankers tracked over the course of this research flew ‘flags of convenience’. These flags, the most common of which are those of Liberia, Panama, and the Marshall Islands, are so called because they allow ship owners to skirt rules and regulations and avoid high taxes. For the sailors aboard these vessels, this often translates to very low wages, increased work hours, poor living conditions, and inadequate access to food or drinking water.³⁴

Ship owners keen on avoiding the laws and regulations imposed by their country of origin must simply pay a fee to fly one of these flags of convenience; this is a major source of income for countries like Liberia and the Marshall Islands, who lure ship owners in with the promise of lax regulation and not-so-strict adherence to international standards. These tankers need not even visit the country to fly their flag.³⁵

Ship-to-Ship Transfers

A sanctions evasion tactic that has seen increased use since the outset of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine has been ship-to-ship transfers. Ship-to-ship transfers, which are exactly what the name suggests, provide a way to obscure the origins of oil products being shipped via tankers. Most countries require companies to report the place of origin of their cargo with customs authorities, but some companies falsely give the location of a ship-to-ship transfer instead. Oftentimes, oils are mixed together during these ship-to-ship transfers to further obscure its place of origin.

In the first six months following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 41 vessels made ship-to-ship transfers of oil off the coast of Greece with tankers that left Russia and later arrived at European ports. There was only one such vessel in 2021.³⁶

These ship-to-ship transfers, which are likely to increase as EU sanctions against the Russian petroleum sector strengthen, can be environmentally harmful, especially when they occur in open waters. There is high potential for oil spills, and the exhaust gasses and garbage left behind by oil tankers can hurt fisheries and marine ecosystems.

³⁴ <https://www.itfglobal.org/en/sector/seafarers/flags-of-convenience>

³⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2014/11/07/362351967/liberias-flags-of-convenience-help-it-stay-afloat>

³⁶ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Energy/Russian-oil-still-flowing-to-Europe-via-waters-off-Greece>

Conclusion

The undeniable economic significance of the maritime shipping industry makes it all the more heinous that skirting its regulations, and upending sanctions regimes in the process, is so easy for major actors within it. And while the world of marine traffic may be deliberately opaque, with its flags of convenience, offshore terminals, and ship-to-ship transfers, the sanctions evasion laid out within this article is anything but opaque; it's brazen. The oil tanker tracking done as part of this research relied on publicly available information, which to a significant degree, showed that Russian petroleum products have continued to be transited to Western ports months after the beginning of the War in Ukraine. The European companies facilitating this, many of which have been highlighted in this article, have not only enriched themselves as a result of these actions, but they have enriched a nation which continues to commit war crimes on a massive scale. No amount of reputation laundering on the part of the owners of these companies should distract from the vastly self-interested, callous actions that they have taken in becoming facilitators of the Russian Federation.

Endnotes

Oil/Chemical Tankers

Chemical tankers are designed to carry chemical products like ammonia, palm oil, methanol, etc to consumer ports, and are often broken down into three types depending on the safety related hazards involved in its transportation.³⁷ If such a tanker is also carrying at least a partial cargo of oil, then it can be considered an oil/chemical tanker.³⁸

Oil Products Tankers

Oil products tankers are designed to carry refined hydrocarbon products like kerosene, gasoline, paraffin, etc. from processing plants (refineries) to distribution centers/consumer ports. They tend to be short range coastal tankers and are thus smaller in capacity.³⁹

Crude Oil Tankers

Crude oil tankers are designed to transport unrefined crude oil from its point of extraction to oil refineries. Crude oil tankers are larger than product tankers, owing to the vast quantities of crude oil extracted from offshore drilling platforms, or transported via pipeline to a terminus on the coast (as with the CPC Pipeline).⁴⁰

Bunkering Tankers

Small tankers fitted with fuel pumps used for loading fuel oils into ship tanks; generally don't travel far from their home port.⁴¹

Port of Novorossiysk

- 19 oil/chemical tankers visited the ports of:
 - Constanta and Constanta Anchorage (Romania)
 - Istanbul, Mersin, Trabzon, Tuzla, Dordyol, Marmara Ereğlisi, Samsun, Diliskelesi and Aliaga (Turkey)
 - Agioi Theodoroi, Lakonikos Gulf, and Kalamata (Greece)
 - Varna (Bulgaria)
 - Sarroch and Gela (Italy)
 - Dunkirk East (France)
 - Rotterdam Botlek (Netherlands)
 - Hamburg (Germany)
 - Liverpool (United Kingdom)
 - Izmail (Ukraine)
- 10 oil products tankers visited the ports of:

³⁷ <https://www.marineinsight.com/naval-architecture/oil-tanker-ships/>

³⁸ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/engineering/chemical-tanker>

³⁹ <https://www.marineinsight.com/naval-architecture/oil-tanker-ships/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.marineinsight.com/naval-architecture/oil-tanker-ships/>

⁴¹ <https://www.wartsila.com/encyclopedia/term/bunkering-vessel>

- Koper (Slovenia)
- Burgas (Bulgaria)
- Diliskelesi, Istanbul, and Gebze (Turkey)
- Piraeus and Syros (Greece)
- Batumi (Georgia)
- Kerch (Ukraine)
- 43 crude oil tankers visited the ports of:
 - Istanbul, Ceyhan, Korfez, Aliaga, Nemrut, and Tuzla (Turkey)
 - Trieste, Santa Panagia, Milazzo, Vado Ligure, Augusta, and Sarroch (Italy)
 - Burgas and Burgas Anchorage (Bulgaria)
 - Pachi, Lakonikos Gulf, Agioi Theodoroi, Piraeus, Kalamata, and Thessaloniki (Greece)
 - Santa Cruz de Tenerife Anchorage, Algeciras Anchorage D, Cartagena, Castellon, and Escombreras (Spain)
 - Puerto Santo Tomas (Guatemala)
 - Fos-Sur-Mer and Le Havre (France)
 - Constanta and Midia (Romania)
 - Rotterdam and Rotterdam Anchorage 5 (Netherlands)
 - Wilhelmshaven (Germany)
 - Dos Bocas Anchorage (Mexico)
 - Omisalj (Croatia)
 - Porvoo (Finland)
 - Corpus Christi (United States)

Port of Taman

- 15 tankers (9 oil/chemical tankers, 4 oil products tanker, and 2 crude oil tankers) visited the ports of:
 - Burgas and Varna Anchorage (Bulgaria)
 - Istanbul Anchorage, Korfez, Marmara Ereglisi, Samsun, and Yalova (Turkey)
 - Agioi Theodoroi and Gythio (Greece)
 - Augusta (Italy)
 - Constanta and Midia (Romania)
 - Ghent (Belgium)

Port of Temryuk

- 7 tankers visited the Turkish ports of:
 - Tekirdag, Derince, Samsun, Limas, Korfez, Tuzla, Marmara Ereglisi, and Eregli