

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has profoundly transformed the European geopolitical, economic, and security landscape. The conflict has revived debates on military deterrence and the balance of power, while also underscoring the centrality of energy and maritime power.

In this regard, the war has demonstrated that maritime energy transport routes constitute a structural element of state power, as previously anticipated by Alfred Mahan. Thus, energy flows and maritime transport have become instruments of economic and political pressure.

Within this context, Western countries, in support of Ukraine, have imposed a series of economic sanctions on Russia with the aim of isolating it from international trade and weakening its economy. In light of this, a phenomenon has emerged that illustrates this new maritime dimension of the conflict: the so-called *Russian shadow fleet*.

The consolidation and expansion of this fleet to trade and transport hydrocarbons subject to international sanctions raise major questions about the effectiveness of Western sanctions. However, Russia has not only used this fleet to circumvent the sanctions regime but has also managed to exploit its capabilities as an instrument of naval power exerted indirectly and covertly.

Despite this, much of the debate has focused solely on its economic dimension. Spain, due to its geostrategic position, is far from being immune to this phenomenon and is, in fact, particularly exposed to it, which leads to the following research question:

What threats does the Russian shadow fleet pose to Spain?

From this, the following hypothesis is derived:

H1: The shadow fleet is not merely a mechanism for sanctions evasion, but also an instrument of Russia's hybrid strategy.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to analyse the nature and operational functioning of the Russian shadow fleet to assess the risks and threats it poses to Spain, both in terms of safety and security.

Origin and Definition

In response to the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the European Union (EU) has imposed economic sanctions on Russia with the aim of constraining its ability to wage and finance the war¹.

These measures target the hydrocarbons sector and its transport by sea. The EU has restricted imports of crude oil, petroleum products and liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Russia² and, together with the G7 and Australia, established a price cap of 60 United State Dollars per barrel for seaborne oil, prohibiting Western companies from providing services to vessels that exceed this threshold. This restriction is particularly significant in the field of maritime insurance, given the near monopoly exerted by the International Group of P&I Clubs in the provision of such coverage³.

Overall, these sanctions have led to a substantial reduction in Russian hydrocarbon exports to the European market. Whereas in 2021 the EU imported an average of 3.5 million barrels of oil per day from Russia, by 2024 this figure had fallen to 0.4 million barrels per day⁴ (Figure 1).

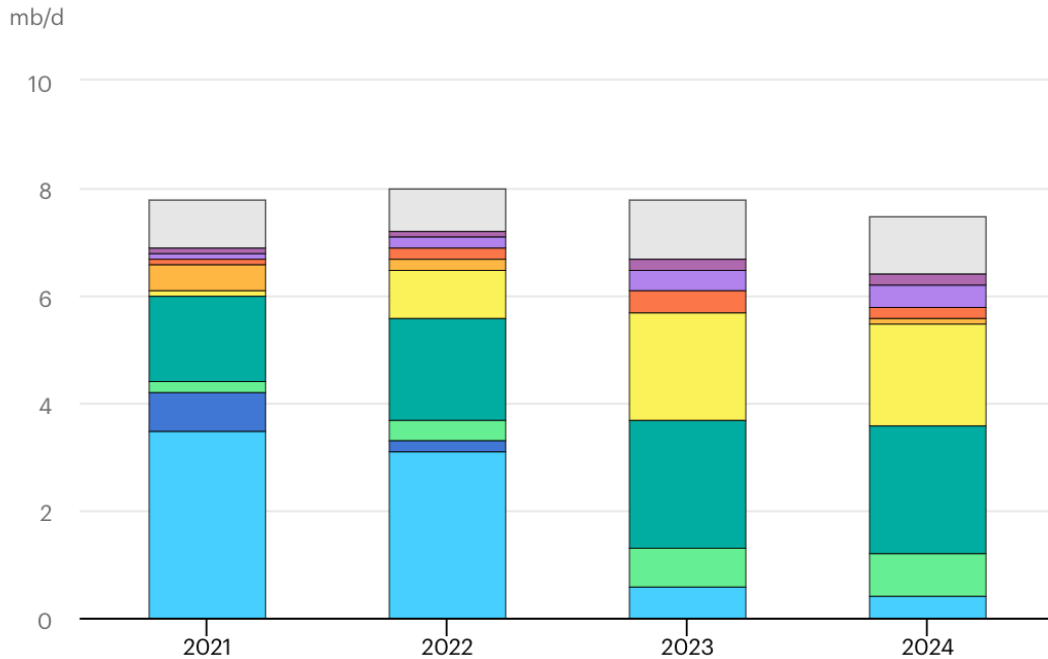
¹ CONSILIUM EUROPA. "Russia's war against Ukraine: EU sanctions" (n.d.). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/#aim>

Nota: Todos los hipervínculos de este artículo se encuentran activos con fecha de 8 de marzo de 2026.

² *Ibid.*

³ CAPRILE, Anna y LECLERC, Gabija, "Russia's 'shadow fleet': Bringing the threat to light", *European Parliament Research Service*, 2024, p.2. URBASOS, Ignacio, "Más presión sobre el petróleo ruso", *Real Instituto Elcano*, 2025, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/mas-presion-sobre-petroleo-ruso/>

⁴ BROOKS, Robin, HARRIS, Ben y MARSHALL, Liam, "Increase pressure or silently acquiesce" *Brookings*, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/increase-pressure-or-silently-acquiesce/>



IEA. Licence: CC BY 4.0



Figure 1. Average Russian oil exports in barrels per day (mb/d) by country and region, 2021–2024⁵.

In response, Moscow has turned to new trading partners, as well as new strategies for circumventing Western restrictions, including the creation of a so-called shadow fleet⁶.

Despite its growing relevance, the term *shadow fleet* lacks a universally accepted definition⁷. In English, expressions such as *shadow fleet*, *dark fleet*, and *grey fleet* are used, which, although often treated as synonyms, may carry different nuances depending on the source.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) defined in 2023 the terms “dark fleet” and “shadow fleet”, equally, as those vessels engaged in operations aimed at

⁵ INTERNATIONAL ENERGY AGENCY, “Russia’s War on Ukraine: Analysing the impacts on energy markets and energy security”, 2025., <https://www.iea.org/topics/russias-war-on-ukraine>

⁶ CAPRILE, Anna y LECLERC, Gabija, *op. cit*, p.2.

⁷ RODRIGUEZ-DÍAZ, Emilio, ALCAIDE, Juan Ignacio y ENDRINA, Nieves, “Shadow Fleets: A Growing Challenge in Global Maritime Commerce”, *Applied Science*, vol 15, nº 6424, 2024, p. 2.

circumventing sanctions or environmental and safety regulations, employing practices such as disabling the Automatic Identification System (AIS) or the Long-Range Identification and Tracking system (LRIT) to avoid detection, or concealing their identity without legitimate safety or security justification⁸.

By contrast, other authors distinguish between “dark fleet” and “grey fleet”, depending on the mechanism used to conceal their activities, while subsuming both under the broader concept of “shadow fleet”⁹.

Muñoz, for his part, brings together the various terminologies and directly links the phenomenon to the hydrocarbons sector, defining the shadow fleet as a maritime structure that, by exploiting loopholes in international maritime law, facilitates the export of hydrocarbons from sanctioned states through vessels acquired specifically for this purpose and operated via corporate structures registered in third countries¹⁰.

Given the multiplicity of definitions, this study adopts the term “shadow fleet” to refer to the set of vessels operating through opaque ownership and registration structures, often relying on fraudulent insurance, flags of convenience, and practices aimed at reducing traceability, whose primary purpose is to circumvent the sanctions regime.

How Does the Russian Shadow Fleet Operate?

Size and Typology

Estimates of the size of the shadow fleet vary considerably due to the opacity of the phenomenon and the lack of a universally accepted definition. Some studies place its size at around 600 tankers¹¹, while others put the figure as high as 1,400 vessels¹².

Although the vast majority of the fleet are oil tankers, recently LNG carriers have

⁸ INTERNATIONAL MARITIME ORGANIZATION, *Resolution A. 1192(33)*.6 December 2023.

⁹ RODRIGUEZ-DÍAZ, Emilio, ALCAIDE, Juan Ignacio y ENDRINA, Nieves, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-8.

¹⁰ MUÑOZ, Rafael, “El fenómeno de la flota fantasma y sus riesgos para España”, *Real Instituto Elcano*, 2025. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/el-fenomeno-de-la-flota-fantasma-y-sus-riesgos-para-espana/>

¹¹ JENSEN, Benjamin, “How to Exorcise Russia’s Ghost Fleet”, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-exorcise-russias-ghost-fleet>.

¹² WINDWARD, “2 Dark Fleet Risks You’re Overlooking”, octubre de 2023. <https://windward.ai/blog/2-dark-fleet-risks-youre-overlooking/>

also been incorporated to transport gas to China¹³ along with general cargo vessels whose actual cargo is difficult to determine¹⁴.

Among the tankers employed, the Aframax class, with a capacity to transport around a million of oil barrels, predominates¹⁵. Nevertheless, Panamax, Suezmax, Medium Range (MR) and Very Large Crude Carrier (VLCC) tankers are also used, the latter capable of transporting more than two billion barrels¹⁶. More than 80% of this fleet consists of vessels over 10, 15, or even 20 years old, which would likely have been retired from the conventional market had they not been incorporated into the shadow fleet¹⁷.

Flags of Convenience and Opaque Ownership Structures

One of the main mechanisms employed by the shadow fleet is the use of flags of convenience. Under international maritime law, a vessel's flag determines its nationality¹⁸; consequently, ships operate under flags of third countries offering laxer regulatory and fiscal conditions¹⁹.

Therefore, numerous shadow fleet vessels sail under the flags of the Bahamas, Panama, Liberia, or the Marshall Islands, among others. These "convenience states" certify that vessels registered under their flag comply with international regulations²⁰, although in practice such compliance is often not verified²¹. Moreover, this practice allows these vessels to call at EU ports, as, legally, they are not considered Russian²².

This is compounded by the practice of *flag hopping*, defined as the repeated re-registration of a vessel under different flags to avoid detection and tracking²³. This

¹³ URBASOS, Ignacio, "La flota fantasma de GNL en el nuevo orden gasista", *Real Instituto Elcano*, 2025. https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-flota-fantasma-de-gnl-en-el-nuevo-orden-gasista/#_ftn1

¹⁴ MUÑOZ, Rafael, "¿Cómo afecta la flota fantasma rusa a España? Estrategia podcast 159", *Global Strategy*, Podcast audio, 3 de noviembre de 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQhTq4hzY1Q>

¹⁵ MUÑOZ, Rafael, "El fenómeno de la flota fantasma y sus riesgos para España", *op. cit.*

¹⁶ LIN, Max, "FACTBOX: Shadow fleet expands to maintain sanctioned oil flows" *S&P Global*, septiembre de 2025. <https://www.spglobal.com/energy/en/news-research/latest-news/crude-oil/090325-factbox-shadow-fleet-expands-to-maintain-sanctioned-oil-flows>

MACIAS, Jose, "What the Bella-1 Teaches Us About Targeting Shadow Fleets", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2026. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-bella-1-teaches-us-about-targeting-shadow-fleets>

¹⁷ BROOKS, Robin, HARRIS, Ben y MARSHALL, Liam, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ MUÑOZ, Rafael, "El fenómeno de la flota fantasma y sus riesgos para España", *op. cit.*

¹⁹ WINDWARD, "Flag of Convenience" (n.d.). <https://windward.ai/glossary/flag-of-convenience/>

²⁰ RODRIGUEZ-DÍAZ, Emilio, ALCAIDE, Juan Ignacio y ENDRINA, Nieves, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²¹ CAPRILE, Anna y LECLERC, Gabija, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²² MUÑOZ, Rafael, "El fenómeno de la flota fantasma y sus riesgos para España", *op. cit.*

²³ WINDWARD, "Flag Hopping" (n.d.). <https://windward.ai/glossary/flag-hopping/>

practice is typically combined with the registration of vessels under offshore entities or shell companies in jurisdictions with lax regulatory frameworks, with the aim of concealing the true ownership and hindering the attribution of legal responsibility²⁴.

AIS Manipulation

Another practice employed is the manipulation of the AIS, which is responsible for transmitting in real time a vessel's position, identity and destination²⁵.

Shadow fleet vessels frequently rely on two main techniques. The first, known as *blackout*, consists of the complete deactivation of the AIS, allowing vessels to operate without revealing their location and significantly hindering the monitoring of their movements. The second, *spoofing*, involves the deliberate alteration of AIS-transmitted data through the emission of false or manipulated information to conceal the vessel's actual position or simulate a different one²⁶.

STS Transfers

Ship-to-ship (STS) transfers consist of the transfer of cargo between vessels on the high seas or in international waters. Although legal, such operations facilitate the evasion of controls and make it more difficult to trace the origin of the cargo²⁷.

Only in the first year since the imposition of sanctions, 822 such transfers were recorded in EU waters, primarily off the coast of Greece, but also near Malta, Ceuta, Romania, Sweden, and Italy²⁸. However, increased monitoring by Greek authorities has led to a geographical shift of these operations towards Morocco, bringing them closer to Spanish waters²⁹, increasing the risk of accidents and oil spills in areas of national interest.

²⁴ RODRIGUEZ-DÍAZ, Emilio, ALCAIDE, Juan Ignacio y ENDRINA, Nieves, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

²⁵ CAPRILE, Anna y LECLERC, Gabija, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ LEVI, Isaac y PREZANTI, Alex, "Policy Briefing: Tackling The Russian 'Shadow' Fleet", *State Capture and Center for Reseach on Energy and Clean Air*, pp. 5-6.

²⁹ SU, Sherry, "Russian Oil Finds New Site for Controversial Cargo Switching" *Bloomberg*, 3 de junio de 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-06-03/russian-oil-finds-a-new-place-to-switch-in-the-mediterranean-sea>

Fraudulent Insurance

The exclusion of the shadow fleet from the Western maritime insurance system constitutes another key element of its operation. Protection and Indemnity (P&I) insurance is a mandatory form of coverage for international maritime transport, covering liabilities arising from collisions, pollution, and oil spills³⁰.

As a result of being excluded from the International Group of P&I Clubs, many vessels operate without valid maritime insurance or rely on insurers of lower solvency, such as the Russian company Ingosstrakh, or on offshore insurance providers operating outside the sanctions regime.³¹

Spain and the Shadow Fleet

Although the shadow fleet is a global phenomenon, Spain is particularly exposed due to its geostrategic position. The reorientation of Russian energy flows following Western sanctions has reshaped maritime hydrocarbon trade patterns, shifting export routes towards China, Turkey, India, and Brazil.

To reach these markets, vessels departing from the Arctic and the Baltic rely on two main corridors. The first, the Mediterranean route, passes through the North Sea, the English Channel, and the Strait of Gibraltar before heading towards Turkey or continuing to Asia via the Suez Canal. The second, the Atlantic route, bypasses the Mediterranean and necessarily transits through the maritime area surrounding the Canary Islands before rounding the Cape of Good Hope en route to Asia. To a lesser extent, vessels from the Black Sea also head towards Brazil via the Strait of Gibraltar (Figure 2).

However, instability in the Middle East has disrupted these routes, prompting many tankers to circumnavigate Africa and transit via the Canary Islands in order to avoid the Suez Canal and the Straits of Bab el-Mandeb and Hormuz. Similarly, part of the traffic originating from the Black Sea has been forced to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar³².

³⁰ BROOKS, Robin, HARRIS, Ben y MARSHALL, Liam, *op. cit.*
CAPRILE, Anna y LECLERC, Gabija, *op. cit.*, p. 3-5.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² HILGENSTOCK, Benajmin *et al.*, "Establishing 'Shadow-Free' Zones: KSE Institute Unveils Strategy to Rein in Russia's Shadow Fleet", *Kyiv School of Economics*, octubre de 2024, p. 11. <https://kse.ua/about-the-school/news/establishing-shadow-free-zones-kse-institute-unveils-strategy-to-rein-in-russia-s-shadow-fleet/>

As a result, in the first six months of 2024, more than 52 million barrels per month of crude oil and refined products transited through the Strait, equivalent to approximately 83 monthly shadow tanker voyages (Figure 3).

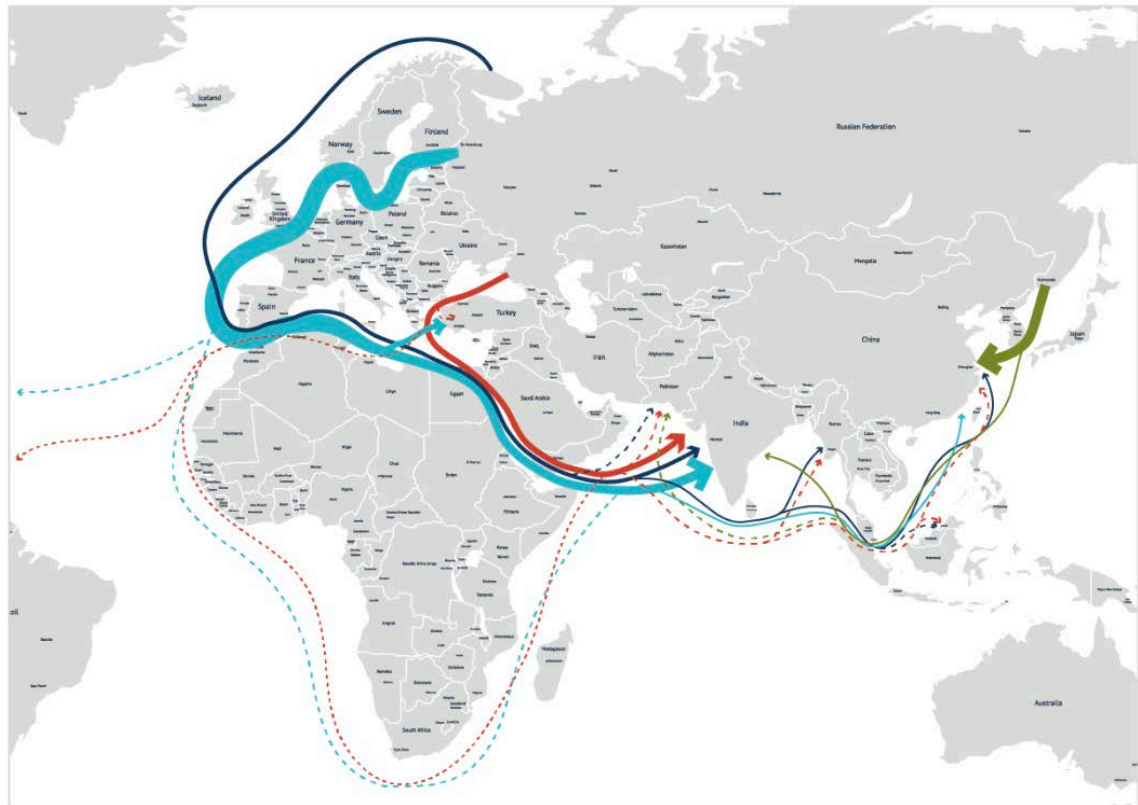


Figure 2. Main corridors of the Russian shadow fleet and traffic density³³.

³³ *Ibid.*



Figure 3. Average monthly transit of the Russian shadow fleet and volumes transported across key maritime corridors³⁴.

Moreover, the Atlantic route running between Tenerife, Gran Canaria, and Fuerteventura (Figure 4) has become established both as a transit zone and as a holding area for shadow tankers, while the port of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria has become a regular bunkering hub³⁵.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ MUÑOZ, Rafael, “El fenómeno de la flota fantasma y sus riesgos para España”, *op. cit.*

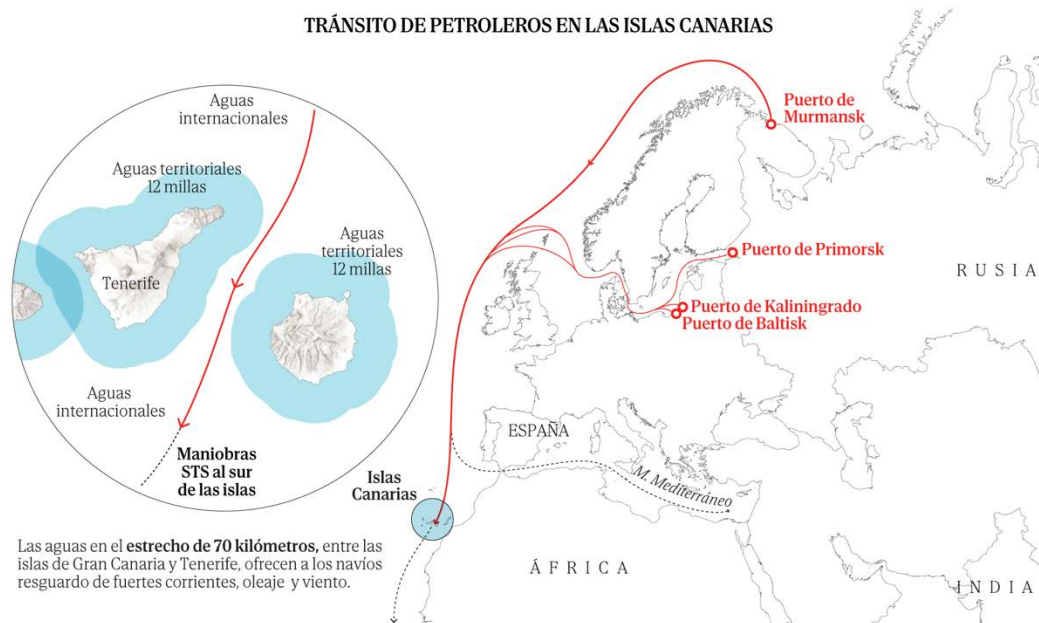


Figure 4. Shadow fleet transit through the Canary Islands³⁶.

Consequently, the presence of shadow fleet vessels in waters adjacent to Spain and within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) far from being temporary is structural and sustained, thereby exposing the country on a permanent basis to the risks and threats associated with this phenomenon.

Risk and Threats

The analysis of the Russian shadow fleet usually identifies the environmental risks as the most immediate and pressing concerns, linking them to the concept of safety³⁷. However, limiting the issue to this dimension is insufficient, as the Russian shadow fleet also constitutes a source of threats in terms of security³⁸.

³⁶ ALEMANY, Luis y AMADE, Emilio, "La flota fantasma de ruinosos petroleros rusos que puede causar el próximo desastre medioambiental en Canarias", *El Mundo*, 25 de septiembre de 2024. <https://www.elmundo.es/papel/2024/09/25/66f2c7f621efa0144c8b45aa.html>

³⁷ *Safety* se refiere a la seguridad frente a riesgos accidentales o fallos técnicos que puedan causar daños a personas, bienes o al medio ambiente.

³⁸ *Security* alude a la seguridad frente a amenazas deliberadas o intencionales.

Environmental and Economic Risks

The primary environmental threat associated with the shadow fleet is oil spills. The risk of spills is significantly higher than in the conventional fleet due to the advanced age of the vessels, their poor maintenance, and the use of high-risk operational practices such as STS transfers and AIS manipulation, which increase the likelihood of mechanical failures, collisions, or groundings³⁹.

This risk is exacerbated by the absence or inadequacy of P&I insurances, which complicates compensations for coastal states and reduce prevention mechanisms, as alternative insurers do not impose stringent maintenance or safety standards⁴⁰.

For Spain, this risk is particularly concerning, as potential economic consequences are compounded by environmental damage. The Canary Islands constitute a critical area in this regard, given their dependence on tourism and the services sector⁴¹.

In 2024, the collision of two shadow fleet vessels in the Kerch Strait, which released only 5% of the capacity of an Aframax tanker, was described as the worst environmental disaster in Russia in the 21st century⁴². This suggests that a spill involving a partially loaded Aframax could generate impacts comparable to those of the *Prestige* disaster⁴³.

In this context, one of the most concerning cases was that of the tanker *Agate*, built in 2005 and flying the flag of Vanuatu, which remained adrift for 29 days south of Tenerife while fully laden within Spain's EEZ, transporting crude oil from the Russian port of Novorossiysk⁴⁴.

The risk is equally significant in the Strait of Gibraltar, where an accident could have global repercussions by affecting one of the world's key maritime chokepoints.

³⁹ BRAW, Elisabeth, "The threats posed by the global shadow fleet—and how to stop it", *Atlantic Council*, 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-threats-posed-by-the-global-shadow-fleet-and-how-to-stop-it/>.

CAPRILE, Anna y LECLERC, Gabija, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁰ HILGENSTOCK, Benajmin *et al.*, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ MUÑOZ, Rafael, "El fenómeno de la flota fantasma y sus riesgos para España", *op. cit.*

⁴² BROOKS, Robin, HARRIS, Ben y MARSHALL, Liam, *op. cit.*

⁴³ HILGENSTOCK, Benajmin *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁴⁴ MUÑOZ, Rafael, "Las aguas circundantes a Canarias se convierten en refugio de buques ante el conflicto EE UU-Venezuela", *Canarias7*, 11 de enero de 2026. <https://www.canarias7.es/economia/aguas-circundantes-canarias-convierten-refugio-buques-ante-20260111080000-nt.html>

VESSELFINDER, "Agate", (n.d.). <https://www.vesselfinder.com/vessels/details/9310707>

The most recent incident occurred on 22 January 2026, when the tanker *Chariot Tide*, flying the flag of Mozambique and departing from the Russian port of Ust-Luga, was left adrift northwest of the Moroccan coast while carrying approximately 400,000 barrels of refined products bound for Tangier. The malfunction, linked to the vessel's ageing condition, required Spain and Morocco to deploy emergency tugboats to prevent its sinking and a potential environmental disaster⁴⁵.

Hybrid Warfare

Critical Subsea Infrastructure

Spain possesses an extensive network of submarine cables that ensures both domestic connectivity and integration with the global system. It currently has more than 30 submarine cables⁴⁶, in addition to gas pipelines connecting the mainland with Africa and the Balearic Islands.

Incidents recorded in the Baltic Sea since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine targeting subsea infrastructure, linked to vessels associated with the Russian shadow fleet, highlight the potential use of commercial shipping for covert military operations⁴⁷. In this context, the persistent presence of such vessels in Spanish waters through which this infrastructure runs constitutes a significant risk.

Vulnerability is particularly acute in the case of submarine cables, as they can be damaged or severed by anchors or dredging equipment⁴⁸. Furthermore, opaque ownership structures, the use of flags of convenience, and AIS manipulation provide Russia with a high degree of plausible deniability in the event of sabotage.

While this risk must be taken into account, the primary concern lies in the capability

⁴⁵ MUÑOZ, Rafael, "¿Hemos estado cerca de un accidente con un petrolero fantasma?", *Canarias7*, 6 de febrero de 2026. <https://www.canarias7.es/economia/puertos/estado-cerca-accidente-petrolero-fantasma-20260206115011-nt.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.canarias7.es%2Feconomia%2Fpuertos%2Festado-cerca-accidente-petrolero-fantasma-20260206115011-nt.html>

VESSELFINDER, "Chariot Tide", (n.d.). <https://www.vesselfinder.com/es/vessels/details/9323376>

⁴⁶ TELEGEOGRAPHY, "Submarine Cable Map", (n.d.). <https://www.submarinecablemap.com>

⁴⁷ BOROCHAN, Irina y SOLDATOV, Andrei, "Moscow's Offshore Menace: How the Shadow Fleet Enables Russia's Hybrid Warfare in Europe", *Foreign Affairs*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ BUEGER, Christian, LIEBETRAU, Tobias y FRANKEN, Jonas, "Security threats to undersea communications cables and infrastructure: consequences for the EU" *European Parliament*, p. 29.

itself that Russia has developed through its shadow fleet, as the current frequency and intensity of such sabotage incidents remain relatively low.

Espionage, Intelligence, and Unmanned Systems

Moreover, Russia appears to have expanded the use of the shadow fleet as a platform for drone launches, surveillance activities, and intelligence collection.

In August 2025, a Russian drone, reportedly launched from a shadow vessel, flew over and photographed a German frigate and critical infrastructure⁴⁹. Subsequently, between September and November of the same year, a series of drone incursions were registered in several European countries, in some case forcing the temporary closure of airports⁵⁰.

Various indicators suggest that these incursions did not originate from Russian territory, but rather from shadow fleet vessels⁵¹, whose ability to operate discreetly, remain adrift for extended periods, and sail under foreign flags complicates attribution.

Furthermore, according to *Lloyd's List*, the tanker *Eagle S*, linked to damage to a Finnish subsea cable in 2024, was equipped with devices capable of monitoring NATO vessel and aircraft movements⁵², reinforcing the hypothesis of covert naval intelligence operations.

Spain is not immune to these dynamics. An illustrative case is that of the cargo vessel *Lauga*, which remained adrift for five hours off the coast of Málaga in September 2025 before resuming its course towards Saint Petersburg. The vessel had been monitored by Germany a month earlier following the detection of a swarm of drones in its vicinity. Similarly, there are suspicions regarding its involvement in surveillance activities targeting submarine cables, as well as in the transport of weapons intended to supply the Wagner Group/Africa Corps⁵³.

⁴⁹ URBANCIK, Johanna, "Russian spy drones over Germany turn into an even greater threat", *Euronews*, 10 de septiembre de 2025. <https://www.euronews.com/2025/09/10/russian-spy-drones-over-germany-turn-into-an-even-greater-threat>

⁵⁰ BOROCHAN, Irina y SOLDATOV, Andrei, *op. cit.*, p.2-3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² BOCKMAN, Michelle Wiese, "Russia-linked cable-cutting tanker seized by Finland 'was loaded with spying equipment'", *Lloyd's List*, 27 de diciembre de 2024. <https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1151955/Russia-linked-cable-cutting-tanker-seized-by-Finland-was-loaded-with-spying-equipment>

⁵³ MARTÍN, Nacho, "El "extraño" caso del buque ruso 'Lauga': incursión de cinco horas en aguas españolas", *El*

Arms Transportation

Finally, although it does not constitute an immediate and direct threat, the covert transport of military materiel through vessels linked to the shadow fleet has significant implications for regional stability and Spanish strategic interests.

As in the case of the *Lauga*, in September 2025 the cargo vessel *Sparta IV*, escorted by the Russian frigate *Admiral Grigorovich*, was monitored by the Spanish Navy while transiting the Strait of Gibraltar under suspicion of transporting military equipment to the Syrian port of Tartus⁵⁴, highlighting the existence of covert logistical-military operations.

Nevertheless, arms transportation is not limited to Syria. Vessels such as the *Barbaros* have been linked to the supply of weapons to military juntas in the Sahel⁵⁵, a region of growing Russian influence and strategic importance for Spain.

These transfers contribute to the militarisation and destabilisation of the Sahel, intensifying confrontations between military juntas, jihadist groups, and insurgents. The resulting deterioration in security expands the operational space for terrorism and acts as a catalyst for irregular migration flows towards the Canary Islands and southern Europe, with direct implications for Spain's security and border control.

Conclusions

The economic sanctions imposed by the EU and the G7, rather than weakening Russia's capacity to finance the war, have facilitated the expansion of a merchant fleet capable of sustaining Russian export capacity through a parallel maritime system that exploits the grey areas of international maritime law. This model has not only enabled Moscow to continue exporting hydrocarbons outside the sanctions framework but has also generated risks and threats for most sanctioning states.

Independiente, 30 de septiembre de 2025. <https://www.elindependiente.com/economia/2025/09/30/extrano-caso-lauga-incursion-cinco-horas-buque-ruso-aguas-espanolas/>

⁵⁴ EUROPASUR, "El buque ruso 'Sparta IV', bajo vigilancia por su carga militar, cruza el estrecho de Gibraltar", 26 de septiembre de 2026. https://www.europasur.es/campo-de-gibraltar/buque-ruso-sparta-iv-vigilancia-militar-cruza-estrecho_0_2004881579.html

⁵⁵ ADF, "Russia Uses 'Ghost Fleet' to Evade Sanctions, Traffic Weapons Across Africa", 22 de abril de 2025. <https://adf-magazine.com/2025/04/russia-uses-ghost-fleet-to-evade-sanctions-traffic-weapons-across-africa/>

Spain, due to the systematic presence of these vessels in the Strait of Gibraltar and the waters surrounding the Canary Islands, is particularly exposed to this phenomenon. This exposure translates into threats in terms of both safety, due to environmental and economic risks, and security, given the potential use of these vessels as instruments of hybrid warfare.

In response to the research question: What threats does the Russian shadow fleet pose to Spain? this study concludes that such threats are multiple, evolving, and structural. The shadow fleet does not merely represent an environmental risk, in the form of potential oil spills with severe ecological and economic consequences but also constitutes a threat to national security due to its potential use for sabotaging critical subsea infrastructure, conducting intelligence activities, deploying drones, or transporting military materiel to the Sahel. This assessment confirms the proposed hypothesis: the shadow fleet is not merely a mechanism for sanctions evasion, but also an instrument of Russia's hybrid strategy.

Accordingly, given its current and potential impact on Spain, the dual nature of this phenomenon within the framework of global geopolitical competition must be carefully considered in areas such as maritime security and, more broadly, national security.

*Eduardo Carballido Gómez**

Estudiante del Máster en Paz, Seguridad y Defensa. IUGM-UNED.

www.linkedin.com/in/ecarballidogomez