

Russian Ice-Class Ship Gets Stuck in the Ice

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

Even with the best Arctic equipment, things can go wrong. According to the *Independent Barents Observer*, an independent Norwegian internet news service in Russian and English, which is now blocked in Russia, the skipper of a Russian ice-class ship, the *Sparta III*, failed to file his route and coordinate with the icebreakers while operating in Yenisei Bay in the Arctic. The *Sparta III* has been used in hauling construction materials necessary for the buildup of northern Russian

military bases. The north-flowing Yenisei River bisects Russia and is a major water transport route carrying ore, smelted metals, coal, and oil. The Yenisei Bay opening into the Arctic Ocean is normally frozen nine months of the year and icebreakers keep the essential shipping route open. The incident is a reminder that the Arctic remains a challenging environment even for purpose-built equipment.

“For weeks, the ship was trapped in thick sea-ice in the Yenisei Bay and it was unable to break free until a nuclear-powered icebreaker came to the rescue. It soon turned out that the ship did not have the necessary permissions for sailing in the area.”

Source: Atle Staalesen, “The military cargo ship that was ice-trapped for weeks delivers goods to Franz Josef base”, *The Independent Barents Observer* (an independent Norwegian internet news service in Russian and English, which is now blocked in Russia), 13 April 2021. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2021/04/military-cargo-ship-was-ice-trapped-weeks-delivers-shipment-franz-josef-base>

It has been a troublesome winter for the 9,490 ton deadweight ship and its owner Oboronlogistika [Defense Logistics]. For weeks, the ship was trapped in thick sea-ice in the Yenisei Bay and it was unable to break free until a nuclear-powered icebreaker came to the rescue. It soon turned out that the ship did not have the necessary permissions for sailing in the area.

This week, the Sparta III arrived in the far northern archipelago of Franz Josef Land. Accompanied by icebreaker Vladivostok, the cargo ship made its way through the sea-ice surrounding the Arctic islands. The Arctic sea-ice has passed its seasonal peak and there is now a 10-30 centimeter thick ice layer along the archipelago’s northern and western coasts that are depicted on ice maps from the Russian Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute. A thicker belt of sea-ice is still separating the southern parts of the archipelago with the rest of the Barents Sea.

It is not known what kind of cargo that the Sparta III is carrying, but the ship has over the past years been extensively used for shipments of construction materials to remote northern military bases. The ship can also carry military hardware. The Naguskoye base is located on the island of Alexandra Land and houses a new major military complex and upgraded airfield.

Shipowner of the Sparta III is Oboronlogistika, a company that is 100 percent owned by the Russian Ministry of Defense. Following its exhausting ice-captivity in the Yenisei Bay, the steering system of the vessel was destroyed, and it had to be towed all the way to Murmansk. According to Oboronlogistika, it has now gotten an extraordinary certification for further operations in the north. The steering and propeller complex has been repaired and a modernized navigation system was installed.

The ship will now follow up on its military and commercial contract obligations and deliver goods to destinations located along the Northern Sea Route. The Sparta III has two cranes that each can lift up to 350 tons.