

Baltic states call for new rules to tackle shadow fleet threat

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Navibulgar

The Bulgarian owner at the centre of a new cable cutting incident in the Baltic has denied its ship deliberately carried out the latest damage to subsea infrastructure in the region, something analysts are disputing while politicians discuss clamping down further on ships leaving Russia.

The Swedish Prosecution Authority seized the 32,200 dwt, Navibulgar-owned bulk carrier *Vezhen* yesterday, suspecting it of damaging an underwater fiber optic cable linking Latvia and the Swedish island of Gotland on Sunday, the latest in a series of undersea sabotage attacks plaguing the Baltic region.

On its homepage, Navibulgar has responded claiming it has not information about intentional actions by the crew of the *Vezhen*, suggesting instead that the ship ran into bad weather.

Dimitris Ampatzidis, a risk and compliance analyst at maritime data giant Kpler, suggested the weather on Sunday in the region was calm to moderate, and the *Vezhen's* movements that day bore

striking similarities to other ships accused of similar sabotage such as the *Yi Peng 3* and the *NewNew Polar Bear*.

“A vessel slows down, deviates from its expected course, exhibits erratic movement, and soon after, a vital undersea cable is found damaged. The sequence of events follows a now well-documented pattern,” Ampatzidis wrote in an article carried by MarineTraffic.

“What makes this incident particularly striking is how predictable it is when compared to previous events. The combination of vessel behavior and infrastructure damage forms a worrying pattern that continues to unfold in plain sight,” Ampatzidis argued.

Lithuania’s foreign minister, Kestutis Budris, called yesterday for a review of current shipping regulations following a spate of subsea infrastructure damage.

Seabed gas pipelines, power cables and fiber optic cables have all been attacked – likely by merchant ships dragging their anchors – in recent months across the Baltic, forcing NATO to establish Baltic Sentry, a naval protection operation.

“Navigation rules in the Baltic Sea need to be reviewed, especially when it comes to the use of anchors,” Budris wrote in a social media post.

In relation to the vessels used by Russia to evade sanctions, he wrote that “the shadow fleet is a major problem that puts our environment and critical infrastructure at risk.”

A joint statement from the heads of state or government of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden earlier this month noted: “Combatting breakage of undersea cables and pipelines represents a global problem.”

The statement went on to discuss the threats posed by the growth of the shadow fleet.

“Russia’s use of the so-called shadow fleet poses a particular threat to the maritime and environmental security in the Baltic Sea region and globally. This reprehensible practice also threatens the integrity of undersea infrastructure, increases risks connected to sea-dumped chemical munitions, and significantly supports funding of Russia’s illegal war of aggression against Ukraine,” the statement read.