Environmental Consequences for the Crimean Peninsula Following the Russian Tanker Incident in the Kerch Strait on December 15, 2024

CRIMEA PLATFORM

PARTNERSHIP FUND FOR A RESILIENT UKRAINE

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Key Points

On December 15, 2024, in the southern part of the Kerch Strait near Cape Takil, the tanker Volgoneft-212, carrying 4,252 tonnes of fuel oil, suffered a severe accident due to stormy weather. The vessel broke into two parts, resulting in the death of one crew member out of 13. Simultaneously, the tanker Volgoneft-239, carrying 4,300 tonnes of fuel oil and manned by 14 crew members, also sustained significant damage. Under the force of the waves, the vessel split, with its stern section — carrying the crew — drifting toward Cape Panagia, where it eventually sank to the seabed.[1]

The tankers Volgoneft-212 and Volgoneft-239 belong to the "river-sea" class, enabling them to navigate both inland waterways and coastal marine zones. These tankers are designed for the transportation of crude oil and petroleum products and are part of the Volgoneft series, the most widely produced type of oil tankers in the Soviet Union.

Volgoneft-212 was commissioned in 1969 and is currently registered with the Russian River Register of Shipping under the Russian flag, with St. Petersburg as its home port. The vessel is owned by Kama Shipping LLC (Perm Krai).[2][3]

Volgoneft-239 entered service in 1973 and is also registered with the Russian River Register, with Astrakhan as its home port. It is owned by VolgaTransNeft JSC (Moscow).[4][5]

The Volgoneft-212 tanker.
Source: *Milli.az web portal*

Initial reports estimated that approximately 2,400 to 3,700 tonnes of fuel oil spilled into the sea as a result of the accidents involving both tankers.[6]

This incident represents the world's first recorded spill of M-100 fuel oil — a substance that solidifies at +25°C, is denser than water, and either sinks to the seabed or remains suspended in the water column, making its removal extremely challenging. The primary method of cleanup involves collecting the fuel oil from the shoreline.[7]

For reference: Mazut M-100 is a petroleum product regulated by Russian standard GOST 10585-2013, used primarily in industry and energy sectors. It requires strict adherence to storage, transportation, and operational guidelines.[8]

The accidents caused significant pollution along the Black Sea coastline. The affected areas include the shores of Russia's Krasnodar Krai and temporarily occupied Crimea, stretching from Taman Island to Sevastopol and the village of Popivka—a total of approximately 500 kilometers of coastline.

On the day of the accidents, Russian investigative authorities initiated criminal proceedings for violations of maritime safety regulations that led to the incidents involving Volgoneft-212 and Volgoneft-239. Investigators have been questioning the crew, conducting expert examinations, and carrying out searches in ports and at the offices of ship-owning companies in Perm and St. Petersburg.[9] [10]

Russian news outlet Izvestia reported that both tankers, Volgoneft-212 and Volgoneft-239, should have been decommissioned 10-15 years ago. Volgoneft-212 had been in service for 55 years, while Volgoneft-239 had operated for 51 years — far exceeding the maximum service life of 40 years. Although inspections were conducted in July 2024 to determine their suitability for transporting hazardous materials, one of the tankers reportedly lacked the necessary permits for its voyage. The vessels were in poor condition to operate in stormy waters.[11]

On December 19, it was reported that a court, at the request of investigators, imposed preventive measures against the captains of Volgoneft-212 and Volgoneft-239. The captain of Volgoneft-212, charged with Part 2, Article 263 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (violations of safety rules resulting in death), was taken into custody. The captain of Volgoneft-239, charged with Part 1, Article 263 of the same code, was placed under house arrest. These measures will remain in effect until February 17, 2025.[12] Information regarding the crew members has not been disclosed.

The Situation on the Territory of the Crimean Peninsula

On December 21, 2024, fuel oil from the sunken tankers reached Kerch, with reports of oil deposits washing ashore along the Kerch Peninsula near Cape Zmiinyi and the Yeni-Kale fortress.[13]

Representatives of the local occupation administration announced the organization of response efforts. A total of 112 personnel, two vessels, and 12 units of ground equipment were deployed for shoreline and water area cleanup operations.[14] The so-called "Head of the Kerch city administration," Oleh Katorhin, declared a municipal-level state of emergency in Kerch. Coastal zone monitoring was conducted to detect oil slicks.[15]

For a week, shoreline cleanup efforts in Kerch continued with the involvement of volunteers and resort staff. With the support of the Russian Ecological Society Headquarters in Crimea, an ornithological center was established to clean oil-contaminated birds and transfer them to the Taigan park for rehabilitation. Preparations were also underway to open an ornithological center in Feodosiia. Assistance was provided by members of the Russian Community of Feodosiia, the Bosporus Legion motorcycle club, and specialists from the Marine Mammal Rescue Center.[16]

The so-called "Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources of Crimea," Olha Shevtsova, began providing regular updates on the cleanup of the fuel oil spill in the Kerch Strait on December 25. However, it was not until December 26 that Serhii Aksonov commented on the spill response during a broadcast on the Crimea 24 television channel. He stated that the "republican authorities" were cooperating with the federal government and Krasnodar Krai.[17]

This delayed response was likely linked to an off-site meeting of the Russian government's emergency commission in Anapa, chaired by the Russian Minister of Emergency Situations, Olexander Kurenkov, and the Russian Minister of Natural Resources, Olexander Kozlov. During the meeting, the head of the Ministry of Emergency Situations proposed classifying the Kerch Strait tanker disaster as a federal-level emergency. This designation would have allowed for the mobilization of additional resources, federal agency support, and financial

aid from Russia's government reserve fund for affected regions. However, no formal decision followed the proposal.[18]

On December 28, Serhii Aksonov announced that the pollution of the Black Sea's protected water area in Kerch and the Lenin district had been classified as a regional-level technological emergency. Decree No. 433-U introduced an emergency regime starting from December 27, appointing Yurii Hotsaniuk as the head of the cleanup operation.

Local authorities were instructed to monitor the coastline, supply materials for pollution mitigation, conduct emergency response operations, and report to the Crimean Ministry of Emergency Situations. The so-called "Ministry of Emergency Situations" coordinated response teams, while the Ministry of Ecology oversaw environmental protection measures and the collection of petroleum pollutants. The Ministry of Housing and Utilities, in collaboration with the Crimean Thermal Power Plant, was responsible for purifying water intake stations to ensure an uninterrupted heat supply.

The "Crimean Ministry of Emergency Situations" established a response headquarters, conducted emergency operations, and mobilized additional resources, including military personnel.[19] [20] [21]

At the beginning of January, reports emerged of petroleum pollution along the Crimean coast, particularly in Kerch district, Feodosiia, Sudak, Alushta, Yevpatoriia, and other areas. Satellite imagery confirmed the significant spread of fuel oil, notably in Koktebel Bay.

On January 8, Serhii Aksonov acknowledged the high risk of further pollution and announced plans to intensify cleanup efforts.[22] [23] [24] [25] [26]

The so-called "Head of the Crimean Ministry of Emergency Situations," Arkadii Ozhyhin, reported that cleanup operations were being conducted with the involvement of the Ministry of Emergency Situations and Crimea's territorial emergency management system. Monitoring covered the coastline from Kerch to Yevpatoriia, including the southern and western shores. The primary contamination zones included Kerch, Kerch district, Feodosiia, Sudak, as well as Yevpatoriia district and the Kerch district, where pollution affected 9 km and 5 km of coastline. Reports indicated that 75 monitoring teams and aviation assets, including a helicopter for aerial surveillance near Yevpatoriia, were involved in the response efforts. [27] [28] [29]

The Situation in the Territory of Sevastopol

On January 3, oil pollution was first detected near Sevastopol, two and a half weeks after the accident in the Kerch Strait. Small spots of fuel oil were observed near Balaklava Bay, Sribnyi Beach, as well as on the beaches of Laspi, Omeha, Uchkuivka, Holuba Bay, Tolstiak, and Zorianyi Bereh Residential Complex in Orlivka, where an oil membrane covered 800 meters of the coastline.

Residents of Sevastopol reported fuel oil-contaminated birds, which were taken to an animal aid center at a local veterinary clinic. Despite official statements denying mass contamination, a regional-level emergency regime was introduced in Sevastopol.[30] [31] Almost immediately, the so-called "Decree of the Governor of the City of Sevastopol" dated January 4, 2025, No. 01-UG (governor's decree), titled "On the Introduction of a Technogenic Emergency Situation of Regional Nature in Connection with the Oil Spill in the Water Protection Zone of the Black Sea within the Administrative Territory of the City of Sevastopol", was enacted.[32]

Since January 4, the so-called "Governor of Sevastopol," Mykhailo Razvozhaiev, has published a series of reports titled "Updated Information on the Elimination of the Consequences of the Fuel Oil Spill in Sevastopol". These reports covered measures aimed at combating coastal and Black Sea pollution and provided information on the number of affected animals and the scale of the environmental disaster. It was reported that pollution was detected on one-third of the official beaches, including Nash Parus, Zorianyi Bereh, Viazovyi Hai, Orlivka-1, Sribnyi Beach, Zolotyi Beach, Nakhimovets, and Andriivka, as well as on one of the unofficial beaches, Holuba Bay. In addition, work is underway on the beaches of the Northern side, in particular in the areas of Kacha, Fiolent, Liubimovka-2, and Nimetska Gully.

A significant number of individuals have been involved in the elimination of the consequences of the spill, including volunteers, specialists, and rescue services, as well as dozens of units of specialized equipment. Volunteers are participating in the operations, cleaning beaches, transporting oil-contaminated soil, and supporting the rehabilitation of affected animals. Monitoring of the coastal waters and shoreline is ongoing, and contaminated waste is being transported for disposal.[33] [34] [35] [36] [37] [38] [39]

Fuel oil on the coast near occupied Sevastopol.
Source: *Crimean Wind media outlet*

The occupying administration of Sevastopol attempts to create the illusion of controlling the situation. However, it is evident that the efforts to mitigate the disaster consequences are failing. This is reflected in appeals posted on the Telegram channel of the so-called "Head of Sevastopol," Mykhailo Razvozhaiev, as well as in Russian state-controlled media, which have called on local residents to join the clean-up efforts to remove fuel oil. Since the oil pollution has reached Sevastopol, the entire southern coast of Crimea has come under threat, including popular resort areas and protected coastal territories. This was also confirmed by Russian environmentalist Heorhii Kavanosian.[40] The Delfa Dolphin Rescue and Research Center reported a mass dolphin extinction. Since the incident, 61 dead cetaceans have been recorded, of which 32 are likely victims of fuel oil contamination. The species most affected are the Black Sea harbour porpoises, a vulnerable species. Environmental experts note that most of the animals died within the first 10 days after the spill, but the number of fatalities may continue to rise.[41]

Civilian ships operating near the accident area are involved in monitoring for fuel oil pollution. If the stains were detected, the information would be transmitted to the Maritime Rescue Service, which treats such sections using biosorbents. Diving teams have inspected the sunken parts of the tankers. Research is also ongoing on the ballast part of the tanker Volgoneft-239, which is stranded on a shoal. In parallel, measures are being developed for the transportation of the remaining fuel oil with minimal impact on the environment.[42]

Only 25 days after the tanker accident in the Kerch Strait, the President of the

Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, instructed the creation of a headquarters for the remediation of the fuel oil spill in the Black Sea, acknowledging the incident as one of the most severe environmental challenges in recent years. The headquarters will be responsible for on-site remediation and the development of a plan for raising the sunken tankers.

On January 13, the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Mykhailo Mishustin, established a government commission for coordinating the work, headed by Deputy Prime Minister Vitalii Saveliev. The commission includes representatives of key ministries and agencies, as well as Crimean officials. The commission is tasked with organizing the cleaning of the water area, monitoring the quality of the air and water, preventing further oil product spills, assessing the environmental damage, and preparing a plan for raising the sunken tankers. The Federal Service for Supervision of Natural Resources is responsible for assessing the damage and ensuring its compensation by the liable party.[43] [44] [45] [46]

The cleaning of the coastal areas from fuel oil pollution in Crimea is ongoing. According to official data from the Ministry of Civil Defence, Emergencies and Disaster Relief as of January 31, 2025, approximately 7 kilometers of coastline have been cleaned in the region during the last 24 hours. In total, over 525 kilometers of coastline have been surveyed, of which 204 kilometers have been cleaned. During the operations, more than 601 tons of contaminated sand and soil have been collected, including 22 tons in the last 24 hours. In the city of Sevastopol, cleaning measures are being implemented along a 165-kilometer section between Laspi and the settlement of Andriiivka. As of the stated date, experts have already collected and removed over 611 tons of contaminated materials.[47]

Fuel oil spill on the beach in Kacha villadge near Sevastopol. **Source:** *Ukrainian National News (UNN)*

Expert Opinions

In December 2024, several environmental and governmental organizations expressed serious concern regarding the consequences of the tanker accident in the Kerch Strait, which resulted in extensive petroleum product pollution.
Greenpeace Ukraine, on December 15, published a commentary by Dr. Paul Johnston, Head of Greenpeace Research Laboratories, who warned about the difficulty of localizing petroleum products due to winds and currents moving to the northeast. He underscored the danger for marine fauna, particularly due to the fuel oil spill, which causes severe harm.[48]

On December 17, Nataliia Gozak, director of Greenpeace Ukraine, noted that accidents involving old tankers pose a serious threat to the ecosystem, calling on the European Union to add the Russian shadow fleet to the sanctions list.[49].

On December 18, Dmytro Volovyk, director of the Pryazovskyi National Nature Park, reported that areas of the Azov Sea coast have been affected by pollution. He noted that it is already apparent that the pollution will damage local fauna, including benthos and seabirds.[50]

On December 16, the Ministry of Environmental Protection of Ukraine stated that the accident poses a serious threat to the Black Sea, particularly to the waters, bottom sediments, and marine organisms. The Ministry also reached out to international organizations for coordination of actions.[51]
On January 10, 2025, Ukrainian Scientific Center of Ecology of Sea recorded oil slicks on the southern coast of Crimea, while Odesa region remains unaffected by the contamination threat.

On January 13, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria coordinated joint response measures, emphasizing the environmental threat posed by Russia's outdated fleet. Preliminary assessments estimate the environmental damage to exceed $14 billion. Ukraine has appealed to international institutions, calling for decisive action against Russia, which continues to violate international maritime law. Ukraine stressed that ignoring this case would set a dangerous precedent for the future. [52] [53]

Yevhen Khlobystov, Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, noted that the full scale of the Kerch Strait disaster remains unknown due to Russia's lack of transparency. Official reports claim that 4,000 tons of fuel oil were spilled, but there are doubts about the accuracy of this figure, as the leakage may have continued beyond the New Year. The pollution has spread from the Taman Peninsula to Crimea, with the fuel oil dissolving in the water, posing a significant threat to marine life. Khlobystov explained that Odesa is unlikely to be directly affected due to the prevailing currents in the Black Sea. However, assessing the long-term consequences is difficult due to limited data availability. He also emphasized that international law lacks effective enforcement mechanisms against Russia and called for the development of new response strategies for environmental disasters.

Pavlo Holdin, Ukrainian zoologist, paleontologist, ecologist, expert in modern and fossil marine mammals, Professor, Doctor of Biological Sciences, and Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Evolutionary Morphology at the I.I. Schmalhausen Institute of Zoology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Scientific Center for Marine Ecology, notes that the fuel oil spill in the Kerch Strait is ongoing, making it difficult to assess the full scale of the disaster. Fuel oil contains toxic organic compounds, heavy metals, and sulfur, all of which are detrimental to the marine environment. Natural biodegradation and environmental factors do not eliminate the toxicity of these pollutants. Instead, toxins accumulate within food chains, posing a threat to fish, birds, and humans. In shallow waters, fuel oil contamination is particularly destructive, as its residues can persist in sediments for decades. The long-term consequences of the disaster include chronic poisoning, declines in fish and bird populations, and the unsuitability of seafood for consumption.

Biologist Vladyslav Balinskyi, Head of the Green Leaf NGO, emphasizes the seriousness of the fuel oil spill in the Kerch Strait, attributing it to the poor condition of the tankers. Low-quality fuel oil contains toxic substances that pose a threat to ecosystems and human health. The contamination depletes oxygen levels, accumulates within food chains, and causes harm to fish birds, and the seabed. The Russian authorities have failed to take adequate measures to mitigate the consequences of the spill. The situation requires immediate international cooperation and decisive action to restore the environment and prevent further leaks.

The All-Ukrainian Environmental League stated that the incident caused catastrophic damage to marine ecosystems: the oil slick formed on the water surface, blocking oxygen and leading to the death of marine species and the degradation of ecosystems. The contamination spread to the waters of the Azov and Black Seas, reaching the coastline of Berdiansk and posing a threat to Ukraine's coastal areas. The lack of timely cleanup efforts resulted in further ecosystem deterioration, damage to fisheries, tourism, and public health. The incident highlighted the urgent need for enhanced environmental monitoring and international cooperation to prevent and mitigate future spills.

Greenpeace Ukraine emphasized that the consequences of this environmental disaster should have been immediately addressed — something the Russian occupiers failed to do properly, demonstrating at the very least criminal negligence. The catastrophe could have been prevented by decommissioning outdated river tankers from maritime use. Today, Russia continues to operate similarly obsolete tankers in the Baltic Sea to circumvent sanctions and transport oil. This so-called "shadow fleet," which helps finance Russia's war against Ukraine, poses a serious threat of causing an equally devastating maritime incident in European waters. The European Union must urgently include the "shadow fleet" in its sanctions lists, as similar disasters could soon become a common occurrence along the shores of European nations.

Fuel oil on the coast near occupied Sevastopol.
Source: *Crimean Wind media outlet*

Conclusions:

1. The Volgoneft-212 and Volgoneft-239 tanker accidents in the Kerch Strait resulted in a spill of 2,400 tons of fuel oil, posing a severe threat to the Black Sea ecosystem. The high density of the fuel oil and its freezing temperature significantly complicate cleanup efforts.

2. The contamination has affected the coastlines of Russia's Krasnodar Krai and the Crimean Peninsula. As the fuel oil settles on the seabed, it harms marine ecosystems, destroys benthic organisms and plankton, and leads to the death of dolphins and seabirds.

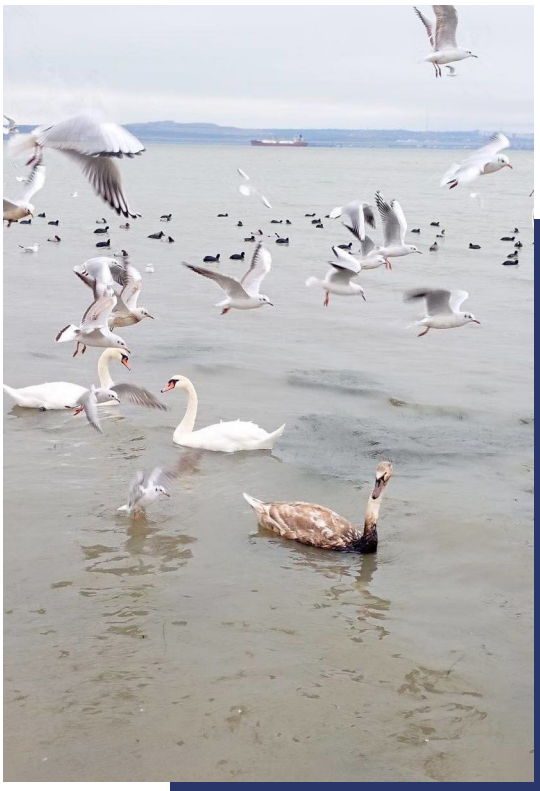
3. The root cause of the accident was the continued operation of obsolete vessels that had exceeded their service life, as well as their technical unsuitability for use in storm conditions.

4. The response to the disaster followed a typical pattern for authoritarian states: while criminal cases against the captains were initiated immediately, and inspections of shipowners began, it took nearly a month to classify the spill as a federal-level environmental disaster. During this time, the ecological crisis remained the responsibility of local authorities, with insufficient funding for mitigation efforts.

5. Russia's presence in the Black Sea poses not only military and food security risks but also severe environmental threats.

6. The long-term consequences of the disaster will persist, and the restoration of ecosystems will require international cooperation — a process that is significantly hindered by Russia's policies.

A dead dolphin on the Black Sea coast.
Source: *Ukrainian National News (UNN)*



Birds on the Black Sea coast.
Source: *Ukrainian National News (UNN)*

Links

1. https://cutt.ly/je0CXmTU
2. https://www.korabel.ru/fleet/info/9376.html
3. Data from the Unified State Register of Legal Entities of the Russian Federation
4. https://www.korabel.ru/fleet/info/9448.html
5. Data from the Unified State Register of Legal Entities of the Russian Federationї
6. https://cutt.ly/je0CXmTU
7. https://t.me/Mintrans_Russia/4844
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