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Russian nuclear icebreaker is working around the clock to clear vessel jam in Gulf of Finland

The Murmansk-based *Vaygach* will be on station in the Gulf until mid-March

Captain **Aleksandr Skrjabin** of the Russian nuclear-powered icebreaker *Vaygach* is busy. He is working hard around the clock, breaking ice in the Gulf of Finland and shepherding vessels towards port or open water.



"**Last night we assisted** two tankers into the Port of Primorsk. Now we have received an order to assist two large, 100,000-ton oil tankers", Skrjabin reported on the phone on Sunday.

The tankers were tailing the *Vaygach*, when the icebreaker opened the fairway from the island of Gogland to Primorsk.

The entire Gulf of Finland is currently covered by solid ice.

The ice situation worsened further on Sunday, and in the morning as many as 94 vessels were waiting for assistance.

A total of 63 ships were stuck in the ice on Saturday.

The ice cover was too much for the 11 diesel-powered Russian icebreakers waiting at the country's Baltic harbours, which led to a historic decision. The nuclear-powered icebreaker *Vaygach* sailed from Murmansk to assist the trapped ships on Monday.

This is the first time in recent memory that a nuclear-powered icebreaker has been sent to work in the busy Gulf of Finland, which is now a vital causeway for Russian oil exports.

Born and educated in the former Leningrad, Captain Skrjabin started his career in the Russian battle fleet, but after becoming a civilian he has been the master of the *Vaygach* for the past six years.

The nuclear icebreaker spends a large part of her time assisting the passenger ferry *Princess Maria* that operates between Helsinki and St. Petersburg.

The ferry cannot cope with the trip alone, which is why the icebreaker has to assist it in Russian waters.

"This is the most interesting assignment that the *Vaygach* has ever had. That the *Vaygach* is escorting the *Princess Maria*", said Skrjabin drily.

"We fulfill all commands we receive", he continued.

At the weekend, gale-force winds, heavy snow, and the fluctuating temperatures hampered the passage of ships.

The *Vaygach* clears waterways with strong compressed air, blown through the holes on the sides of the vessel.

Over a week, the icebreaker has managed to get some 30 vessels detached from the ice.

Juha Jokiniemi from the Finnish Coast Guard says that the ice is not likely to increase the risk of an accident.

"That is no essential danger there", Jokiniemi commented on Sunday.

According to Jokiniemi, the *Vaygach* has stayed in Russian waters.

BACKGROUND: The *Vaygach* has a sauna and a swimming pool

The nuclear-powered icebreaker *Vaygach* was built in the Wärtsilä dockyard in Helsinki at the end of the 1980s. A nuclear reactor was installed in the vessel in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg).

At present, the Russian nuclear icebreaker fleet includes five functioning icebreakers, while two more are in reserve.

The *Vaygach*, officially designated as a shallow-draft river icebreaker of the *Taymyr* class, has a crew of 91, who can be at sea for as many as seven months without a break.

”As the vessel left Murmansk only one and a half weeks ago, the crew still have fresh fruit and vegetables to eat”, said **Andrei Smirnov**, the deputy general director of icebreaker deployment at Rosatomflot in Murmansk.

The *Vaygach* has enough fuel - namely uranium - for five years. It is possible to make drinking water by purifying sea water.

There is also enough entertainment onboard. There is a sauna, a swimming pool, a gym, a sports hall, a library, and a recreation area aboard the 50,000 hp vessel.

”For example for playing chess and watching movies”, Smirnov noted.

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