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Russia's Siberian Waters See Record Ship Traffic as Ice Melt Accelerates

The Northern Sea Route is becoming a highway to move Russia's oil and natural gas exports while some global carriers shy away

By Costas Paris
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The Arctic has gone through its warmest summer on record, and with the ice melting, more ships than ever are sailing along Russia's Siberian coast, underscoring its role as a growing energy transport corridor and potential as a new ocean trade route.

The Northern Sea Route, which runs from Alaska to the Baltic Sea, counted 71 vessels and 935 sailings across the waterway from January to June this year, according to the NSR information office. That was up by double digits from the same period a year ago and a big increase from the 47 vessels and 572 voyages in the same period of 2018.

The mostly frozen seaway is used in warmer seasons to move some of Russia's energy exports to overseas markets. Container ships and general cargo vessel operators also have used the route to move goods between Asia and Europe as it cuts an average 10 days of sailing time compared with the standard route through the Suez Canal.

Freight transport on the NSR is at its highest from July to November. Some sailings also take place in the rest of the year, and the Russian government expects largely ice-free year-round trips starting in 2024.

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