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At Europe's Largest Port, Russia Sanctions Meet Their Toughest Test

The Dutch port of Rotterdam and its staff are at the front line of enforcing the European Union's restrictions on trade with Russia. It's no easy task.



Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, is one of the world's biggest, busiest and most automated ports. Credit...Ilyv Njiokiktjien for The New York Times

By [Matina Stevis-Gridneff](#)

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ROTTERDAM, Netherlands — Jolanda Wielenga was checking documents accompanying containers bound for Russia when her heart skipped a beat: One held a substance that could be used to make a chemical weapon.

The substance could be used for both civilian and military purposes. Exporting it to Russia would have been legal before the invasion of Ukraine. But the E.U. sanctions imposed on Russia in recent months had changed that.

Ms. Wielenga, a two-decade veteran customs investigator at Europe's largest port, blocked the shipment.

“I slept pretty well that night,” she said on a recent morning as she paced up the terminal where hundreds of colorful cargo containers, many bound for Russia, were stacked for detailed manual inspection.

Hers was a small victory, perhaps, that showed the stakes and the challenges of actually enforcing the [toughest sanctions](#) the European Union has imposed on any country. Europe’s measures are now estimated to be worth 40 billion euros, about \$40.7 billion. They prohibit everything from high-tech goods to vodka from entering or exiting Russia, and include [a sweeping ban on Russian oil imports](#).

Image



The practical difficulties of carrying through on the E.U. sanctions against Russia, especially the oil ban, are enormous. Credit...Ivly Njiokiktjen for The New York Times

The practical difficulties of carrying through on these sanctions, especially the oil ban, are enormous and left entirely in the hands of Europe’s national governments and their authorities, as the European Union itself lacks federal law-enforcement capabilities.

So the practical business of sanctions policing happens at the sprawling terminals of Rotterdam and smaller ports around Europe, and it is a vastly complex, labor-intensive task that, officials admit, is far from perfect.

“Let’s be clear: It will not be easy. But we simply have to work on it,” Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the bloc’s executive arm, said last month as it moved to adopt the oil ban.

Even before the sanctions on Russia, Rotterdam was falling short in its herculean efforts to block illegal activity, like a massive trade in cocaine. The port intercepted some €5 billion worth of the drug last year, but the E.U. police agency,

Europol, [said](#) that Rotterdam and its Belgian neighbor, Antwerp, remained the biggest gateways for cocaine into Europe.



Jan Kamp, Rotterdam's customs director, remembers the weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine as the most intense period of his decades at the Dutch customs department. Credit...Ily Njikiktjen for The New York Times

Twice the length of Manhattan and sprawling over the area of 17,000 soccer pitches, the Rotterdam port facilities take at least 45 minutes to drive down at medium speed, or more than two hours of leisurely sailing.

It's also the single biggest point of entry and exit for Europe's \$300 billion-a-year trade with Russia, now being undone at record speed.

According to the port's own data, 58 million tons of goods were imported from Russia in 2020 and four million exported; the collective value of the traffic both ways was approximately €34 billion.

"If we had 100 percent sanctions and no trade flow was allowed, that would be the easiest!" the port's chief executive, Allard Castelein, said. In late February, as European leaders decided on their first two rounds of sanctions, he transformed his Covid-era task force into a Ukraine war task force to cope with the immense pressures coming for the port and his staff.

Jan Kamp, Rotterdam's customs director, remembers the weeks after Feb. 24, when Russia's invasion began, as the most intense period of his decades-long career at the Dutch customs department.

Image



Europe's sanctions are now estimated to be worth about \$41.7 billion. They prohibit everything from high-tech goods to vodka from entering or exiting Russia. Credit...Ilvy Njiokiktjien for The New York Times

“That first weekend, when the first regulation went into force, we didn't want to take any risks that a container with certain goods which were not allowed to go to Russia ended up in Russia,” said Mr. Kamp. “So we blocked at the time, a large number of containers, about six or seven thousand. They had to be stopped, we would first investigate,” he added.

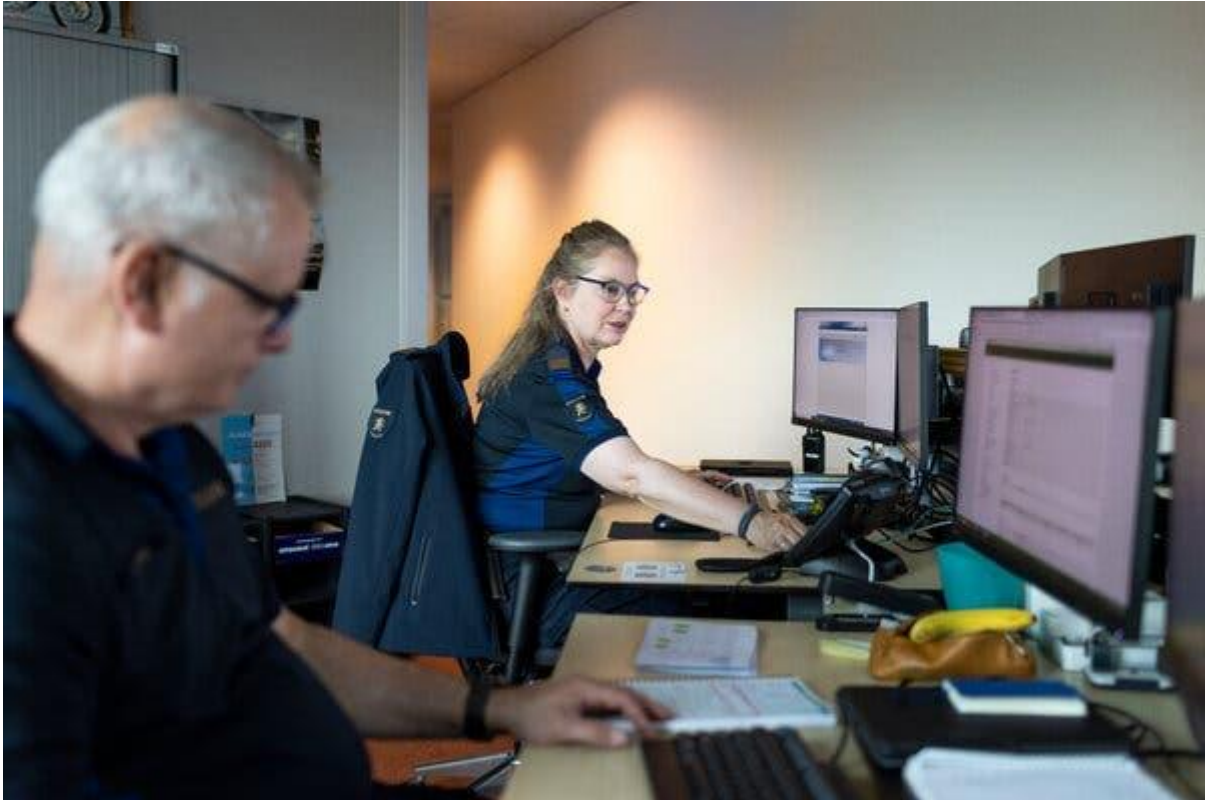
The number of backlogged containers languishing at Rotterdam is now down to about 100 awaiting detailed inspection — not enough to slow the humming of this highly automated port that seldom requires human hands to touch a container.

Mr. Kamp had bolstered his staff in previous years because of Britain's departure from the European Union, building an 850-strong team that left him relatively well-equipped to deal with this new crisis.

“We put in place overtime shifts, extra people from other regions of the country, and we have had dozens of people working on the sanctions,” he said in an interview.

But just extra pairs of hands aren't enough.

Christopher Swift, a former official in the U.S. Treasury Department and a national security lawyer at Foley & Lardner, was critical of European enforcement measures. “The European Union doesn't invest as much in enforcement measures” as the United States, he said. “It's handled by national government agencies — some are more interested in helping Ukraine than others.”



For the people working at Rotterdam, every E.U. sanctions package has brought new burdens. Credit...Ilvy Njiokiktjien for The New York Times

“Enforcement resources are stretched thin and sometimes not properly targeted,” he added.

Ms. Wielenga, who discovered the shipment with the suspicious chemical agent bound for Russia, is specially trained to apply sanctions and has years of experience in this type of work.

The hardest category of sanctions to deal with as a customs officer, and the one that Ms. Wielenga specializes in, are those on so-called dual-use goods: items set for export to Russia that can have both civilian and military purposes.

These can range from boots to tiny springs. Boots could be for hiking, springs for making toys. Ms. Wielenga’s job is to examine them, often with the help of laboratories, to find out whether they are in fact intended to be used in combat or to make weapons.

But if officials are concerned about complicated detective work to apply the sanctions against Russia-bound goods, the oil embargo will be a whole new ballgame.

Ultimately, they warn, it won’t be possible to apply it in a perfect or total way.

The embargo gives E.U. countries until the end of this year to phase out Russian oil imports, with small exceptions.

Rotterdam’s role in the transport of Russian fuels is singular. It’s the gateway for some one-third of Russian crude oil (soon to be fully banned), a quarter of its

liquefied gas (not banned) and coal (banned), and a fifth of refined oil products (banned).

Image



“If we had 100 percent sanctions and no trade flow was allowed, that would be the easiest!” the port’s chief executive, Allard Castelein, said. Credit...Ivvy Njiokiktjien for The New York Times

The E.U. sanctions stipulate that coal imports will be fully banned by early August. This was an easier measure for the member states to agree on, even though they rely on Russia for about 45 percent of the coal they import.

Oil is more complicated because it can be reshipped, blended, refined or relabeled to conceal its Russian origin.

Of the five oil companies that operate in Rotterdam, three have refineries at the port and, partly for reputational reasons, committed to stopping the use of Russian oil before the embargo was agreed at E.U. level late in May.

“You can’t continuously monitor nor control traded crude oil volumes, which might pass through 50 pairs of ownerships before they reach an end destination,” said Mr. Castelein, the port chief executive.

“It may move from one vessel to another, from one port to another, from one region to another and ultimately it will be processed somewhere, and it will come back as a product somewhere else,” he added.

Independent experts say he’s right. The fungible nature of crude oil means that Rotterdam’s role as the key node in the trade of Russian oil in Europe will continue being a challenge as far as the application of this embargo is concerned.

Blending Russian oil with crude from other countries and then relabeling it is not prohibited. A new mixture containing Russian oil and branded “Latvian blend” suddenly appeared this spring.

Image



The embargo gives E.U. countries until the end of this year to phase out Russian oil imports, with small exceptions. Credit...Ilyv Njiokiktjen for The New York Times

Shell was heavily criticized in spring for buying blends that contained up to 49.99 percent Russian oil. The company later apologized and [said it would no longer buy blends with any Russian content](#).

But sellers have other workarounds beside blends. Refining Russian oil in another country and then relabeling its origin is also not prohibited. Shell’s chief executive, Ben van Beurden, sounded a caution about [the difficulties of tracing oil](#) in May as he announced the company’s outsized quarterly profit, noting: “Diesel going out of an Indian refinery that was fed with Russian crude is considered to be Indian diesel.”

Russian oil barred from Europe could also change hands midocean: Ship-to-ship transfers of oil, done by tankers pulling up close and emptying the contents of the one into the other, can happen in the high seas, where sanctions and other national laws don’t apply.

“I truly hope that we do realize that such sanctions might not be as effective as we would hope, because energy tends to flow to the lowest pressure point,” Mr. Castelein said.

Patricia Cohen contributed reporting from London.