# Some Ukrainian and Russian Seafarers Blocked From Entering U.S.


U.S. border officials fear that some commercial ship crew members arriving at a port could overstay their temporary visas

The Port of New Orleans is among those that have barred Ukrainian and Russian crew members working on commercial ships from entering the U.S., industry officials say.

By Vipal Monga and Michelle Hackman
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Ukrainian and Russian seafarers are being denied entry into some U.S. ports by Customs and Border Protection officials, who are afraid the sailors could try to stay in the U.S. to avoid going home.

After Russia invaded Ukraine, Ukrainian and Russian crew members working on mostly commercial ships have been refused entry into the U.S. at several ports including Port Arthur, Texas; Port of New Orleans; Port Canaveral, Fla., and Port of Morehead City, N.C., according to industry officials familiar with the matter. A government official familiar with the matter confirmed the refusals for entry.

It can’t be determined how many sailors have been denied entry, but industry groups have raised concerns with U.S. officials.

A group of shipping organizations sent a letter recently to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas outlining their concerns.

“We understand there are some field offices that are prohibiting disembarkation of Russian and Ukrainian crew members even though they may have valid U.S. visas,” said the letter, which was seen by The Wall Street Journal. “This is creating confusion for these individuals and operational challenges for the shipping community.”

Customs and Border Protection and its parent agency, the Department of Homeland Security, didn’t respond to requests for comment.

The letter writers, including the Cruise Lines International Association, the International Chamber of Shipping and the Chamber of Shipping of America, also addressed the letter to Ms. Yellen, because they said they were concerned about the U.S. sanctions on Russian goods and services. The sanctions could prevent any ship with Russian workers or ones from the separatist Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine from docking in U.S. ports, they said.

The Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control administers and enforces sanctions for the U.S. government.

The action by border officials is forcing many sailors to remain on vessels even if they have valid C-1D visas, which temporarily allow them to remain in the U.S. This also has impeded ships from switching out their crews, potentially leaving sailors stuck aboard beyond the terms of their contracts, said Kathy Metcalf, president of the Chamber of Shipping of America.

The issue surfaced when some crew members, upon arriving at a U.S. port, asked for humanitarian protection from the U.S. government because of the war in Ukraine, according to a government official familiar with the matter. Crew members aboard commercial ships typically hold visas allowing them to disembark for a few days at a time, but port officials still have the authority to turn someone away if they suspect a person might want to overstay a visa.

“Seafarers are the engines that run the ships,” Ms. Metcalf said. She said the entry refusals are making it more difficult for shipping companies to ensure their crews are rested and able to work effectively. “Ships need competent and rested seafarers on board,” she said.

There are more than 76,000 Ukrainian seafarers in the world, making up 4.5% of the total global shipping workforce, according to the International Chamber of Shipping, an industry group. There are just under 200,000 Russians sailors, or about 10.5% of the total seafaring workforce.

Some 50,000 Russian and Ukrainian sailors are at sea or waiting at ports around the world to be replaced. Some are stuck because there are no flights back home, and most can’t get paid as their bank accounts don’t work or have come under sanctions, say shipping executives and crewing agencies.

U.S. ports are barring sailors just as the shipping industry has begun to recover from the pandemic, said Jason Zuidema, executive director of the North American Maritime Ministry Association, a Christian charity.

Thousands of global mariners had been unable to disembark from their ships and were stuck aboard, not seeing their families or standing on land for several months, because of Covid-19 restrictions. Those had started to ease as the latest wave of the pandemic has ebbed, but the war has set some of the sailors back, said Mr. Zuidema.

“Things have been slowly relaxing the last few weeks,” he said. “This just clamps things down again.”

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