

May 14, 2024: Isa Kahraman, on behalf of New Social Contract, is asking the Defense Ministry about suspicions of espionage by Russian reefer ships.

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Transcription and translation

Kahraman: For years, it has been known that Russian authorities conduct espionage missions in the North Sea. With war raging in Ukraine, Russian President Putin issued a legislative proposal emphasizing the use of fishing vessels, among other things, for military purposes. Crews are trained and vessels are equipped to become part of the Russian armed forces and prepared for wartime missions. Now, Pointer's most recent investigation, dated July 4th, reveals that the Kremlin is indeed using this option. Now the way has been open for fishing as one of the exceptions to the EU sanctions. Mr. Chairman, Norebo is one of the largest Russian fishing companies, with oligarch Vitalij Orlov at the helm. This man is seen as a sponsor of Russia in the war on the eastern flank. Norebo vessels are also no strangers to Dutch ports. Research by Greenpeace and Global Fishing Watch shows that they have been using this route for years. A striking detail: Norebo is currently the only Russian fishing company with Eemshaven on its route. Madam/Mr. Chairman, in addition to being a civilian port, Eemshaven has been an important military hub for decades for the transport of military equipment for missions and exercises in which the Dutch military participates. NATO and military partners within the EU also use this port. Last March, the port was once again visited unmolested by one of Norebo's ships, the Arctic Princess, and several others moored there, according to Pointer, a stone's throw from the military site. With the knowledge of what I have just described, and knowing that the Russians have for many years, and now also officially, viewed the fishery as a means of espionage missions, I have the following questions for the Minister. Can the Minister confirm whether there have been any espionage incidents involving these kind of Russian fishing vessels in Dutch waters? Can the Minister explain whether there are other Russian civilian vessels that dock in Dutch ports or sail in Dutch waters?

Chairman: Thank you. The floor belongs to the minister.

Defense Minister: Mr. Chairman, my apologies, I was still with my pen in hand. I suspected more questions. But I would like to thank Mr. Kahraman for raising this point and also for asking these questions. Because indeed, Pointer, in collaboration with marineschep.nl and, I believe, the Danish public broadcaster, has conducted research into this. Mr. Kaharman, and your Chamber as well, knows that the MIVD (Dutch Military Intelligence and Security Service) has been warning for several years about Russian espionage in and around the North Sea. And also the use of civilian equipment in this context. So not always recognizable as a naval vessel or a military ship... but rather, to the eye, a normal civilian commercial vessel. And indeed, also because of the Netherlands' geographical position, because of our role as a transit country. We are, of course, extra vulnerable to military equipment and therefore extra alert to these kinds of things. This also applies to

Eemshaven. Eemshaven is not a military port. In fact, the vast majority of activity in Eemshaven is simply commercial. But it can also serve that function. So, military equipment can be shipped there. There's also other important infrastructure in Eemshaven, such as data or energy infrastructure. So, in other words, we certainly recognize that threat. I think Mr. Kahraman is making a very valid point. We're investigating these types of activities. We've also alerted our defense personnel to this. They are therefore very vigilant when it comes to security. If the port were to be used for the transit of military equipment, for example, then it must always be assessed whether additional measures need to be taken. Of course, not every military activity or form of military transport is always secret. In fact, sometimes it isn't. In that case, we also make it visible. For example, if there are training sessions or transports, it's also useful that it is visible. But we are very vigilant about this, both in taking measures and in assessing whether a suspicious situation might arise. So, in response to Mr. Kahraman's questions, and in addition to everything Mr. Kahraman is fully aware of regarding what we have already done in this regard, I would like to say that I cannot specifically comment on situations observed by the services. But I can refer to the fact that the service, specifically the MIVD, also warns against this particular form of espionage. We are therefore aware that this can happen. We are also aware that non-military activities can indeed occur in that port, which is not military, but where we do have military activities. But this also means that this applies not only to Eemshaven and to the company and the ship Mr. Kahraman refers to, but that we also are alert to other ship movements in the North Sea and, of course, in other ports, particularly non-military ports. Because in Den Helder, we naturally have completely different types of measures, as it is a military port. I hope that I have provided Mr. Kahraman with some insight, to the extent that this is possible here in public.

Kahraman: Mr. Chairman, thank you for the Minister's answer. I understand that no confidential information is being shared here. And that's perfectly fine. My question is, aren't we a bit too naive, knowing that Putin simply issued a decree that even civilian vessels must participate in Putin's war rhetoric and also spy for Russia? That we allow such vessels in. Let me start by talking about ports that also serve a military function. I find that quite problematic in itself. It be certain that we don't allow any Russians to enter our ports or even our waters. So my question to the Minister is, what will the Minister do not to permit these fishing boats into our ports and perhaps even our waters?

Defense Minister: Yes, Mr. Chairman, look, we are alert to this. So there's no naivete on the part of the Dutch government, and certainly not on the part of the Ministry of Defense. We warned about it ourselves. And also about this way of operating by the Russian Federation. I began my answer by saying, indeed, that we are alert not only to Russian naval vessels, but also to other vessels. You're talking about commercial vessels; we also know about research vessels. We are very alert to this, not only when they enter a port, but also simply when they sail past the Netherlands in the North Sea. We also collaborate with other North Sea countries in this regard, for example, within the Joint Expeditionary Force with our neighbors, with the United Kingdom. So we are doing a great deal about this and are taking appropriate measures. There is more we can do. If I am correctly informed, your House will make a decision today on the law on the criminal prosecution of espionage. That is an important step this cabinet has taken to expand its options. In this case, not so much from a military perspective, but rather from the perspective of the Ministry of Justice and Security's approach to address this. As I mentioned, when it comes to a military port, we have completely different options. When it comes to military use of a commercial or civilian port, we can also specifically consider what's needed when a military activity is planned there. At that point, we do have options to act. In preparing my response here in the Vrijhuis, I naturally consulted with colleagues, particularly in this case from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management.

They, too, are very aware of this situation and have now decided to inform the responsible authorities, which in this case is Groningen Seaport. In the future, they have stated that they will no longer be able to grant an exemption for this ship's mooring, partly due to the concerns we currently share. I think that precisely because the cabinet and your House have also explicitly drawn attention to this, it also means that other parties are becoming increasingly alert. That's precisely what we aimed for.

Kahraman: Mr Chairman, can I infer from the Minister's answer that she genuinely intends, together with her colleagues, to stop Russian ships in ports where military activities are also taking place, in the most safe way possible?

Defense Minister: Look, only a very limited number of Russian ships that can even call at those ports. Military ships, of course, are not welcome here, and that's completely out of the question. In this specific case, it concerns a Russian-flagged ship transporting fish. So, without going into whether that's the case here, that in itself is indeed a risk. There are two things you can do, and we will always do them. One, consider whether special measures are necessary if this occurs, because a military activity is planned. That doesn't happen every day in Eemshaven. In fact, it's not the main location for military activities, not even for transit at the moment, but that is possible. So, as soon as such a military activity occurs, mitigating measures will be taken. My colleague from INW has now made the decision in principle to no longer grant an exemption for this specific transport, this specific ship in that port.

Kamer: I'm pleased to hear the minister say we're not naive about the threat of espionage, but also sabotage, in the North Sea. At the same time, we've been waiting for some time for the implementation of the North Sea strategy. Can the minister explain why this hasn't been drafted yet?

Defense Minister: Last year, the House of Representatives received a comprehensive letter from the Cabinet regarding the North Sea strategy, which the House had long requested. A great deal has happened since then, including at the Ministry of Defence. I just mentioned the international cooperation we now have. The House of Representatives has also been informed that the Ministry of Defence has taken on an additional formal task regarding the protection of the North Sea. This indeed concerns both espionage and the potential for sabotage of the vital infrastructure that passes through the North Sea. That task has been initiated. That's been the case since July. So, a great deal is happening. However, the details and the design still need to be handled by the chamber. I don't have a precise idea of when we will complete it. I'd have to check. But we are definitely working hard on it.

Kamer: That's also very important, because it's not just about recognizing a danger, but also about having sensors so you know there's a danger, and about having sufficient capacity to respond. My party does attach importance to the implementation of this strategy, its further elaboration, taking effect as soon as possible, because, as the minister also says, we cannot be naive. So my very specific question would simply be, is that even possible before the summer recess? Because it's still quite a few weeks away, but if it goes beyond that again, it will be very late.

Defense Minister: No, I completely understand that. Again, we're not waiting to do what we have to do. But I'll take it back to the cabinet. And I really hope that works out, because I want it to happen as soon as possible.

Chairman: Mr. Krol. Mr. Boswijk, yes. Similar, as two drops of water.

Boswijk: I know, I know. What a compliment for that colleague of mine. I'm completely out of my element. That's convenient, because your time is up too. That's how it goes. Mr. Chairman, it's actually quite strange. We often discuss current topics that are in the media during oral questions, and that is what we want to talk about. However, this is a topic that has been around for a long time. We, the CDA, put this topic on the agenda in November, so even before the full-scale Russian invasion. My colleague Erkers just mentioned it. A strategy was promised in response to the motion we submitted. I also know that some work has been done, and we have been informed about it. What frustrates us is that the final strategy has already been postponed several times, partly due to a lack of financial support. We have already asked the committee several times, "come on", and we have received several answers. It takes more time. So, I'd like to add to Mr. Kamers statement: yes, please, we want it before the summer. And if necessary, in draft form, without financial backing, and even confidentially. But we have absolutely no idea what exactly has happened with the implementation of this motion at this point.

Defense Minister: Madam/Mr. Chair, I understand Mr. Boswijk's impatience. He points out that he has been working on this topic for a long time now. The only thing I want to say, for reassurance—this may not sound entirely positive—is that we are not waiting for a document that is still in the works, where coordination is still far away and where, indeed, funding issues may still arise. But in the meantime, we will, of course, do what we have to do. I personally consider that the most important thing. But I hear the House clearly, two spokespersons are now also calling for speed and urgency. I want that too. The cabinet wants that too. I will take that back with me. We will do everything we can to present this strategy to the House as soon as possible.

Heer Pol: It has become clear that the Minister of Defense is not responding adequately enough to the threat of this potential espionage. The question for the Minister, therefore, is what additional, concrete measures will she take to better protect our interests across the board—not just this specific incident, but the entire spectrum—against these threats.

Defense Minister: I don't know exactly what Mr. Pol bases his conclusion that I or the Cabinet are not responding adequately to the risks of espionage. I would also point out that the Cabinet, and the services in particular, have long been pointing this out and that the Cabinet has indeed taken measures. Regarding my own role, the role of the Ministry of Defense, I just outlined in response to Mr. Kahraman's question that we have taken several additional measures. I even ensured, through a Cabinet decision, that Defense has been given a formal task, so that we are also able to respond adequately with our Navy. So I dispute that we are not responding adequately. We fully protect our military infrastructure and our military locations. Wherever military activities are underway, we take appropriate measures. We have warned military personnel and defense personnel, so that they can act appropriately in a suspicious situation outside defense locations. In other words, the Cabinet, Defense, and all defense personnel are extremely alert to this threat.

Chairman: Very good. Thanks to the Minister of Defense for answering these questions.