

Putin Says Greenpeace Activists Aren't Pirates but Broke the Law

By [Alexander Panin](#)

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Greenpeace activists gesturing while being transported to offices of the Investigative Committee on Tuesday. **Igor Podgorny**

President Vladimir Putin said Wednesday that Greenpeace activists who attempted to storm Gazprom Neft's oil platform in the Arctic earlier in September were not pirates but they did violate international laws.

"I do not know the details of what happened, but it is evident that these people are not pirates," he said at the International Arctic Forum in Salekhard, the capital of the Yamalo-Nenets autonomous district. "However, formally speaking, they attempted to take over the platform. ...They violated international laws."

On Sept. 19, Russian border guards took over Greenpeace's Arctic Sunrise icebreaker after the activists attempted to climb the Prirazlomnaya oil platform, 60 kilometers off the coast in the Barents Sea, to protest against drilling plans.

The vessel was escorted to Murmansk on Tuesday and 30 international activists were charged with piracy Wednesday. If convicted, they could face up to 15 years in prison.

“We welcome President Putin’s recognition that our activists are clearly not pirates and acted purely out of concern for the Arctic environment,” said Greenpeace International Executive Director Kumi Naidoo following Putin’s remarks at the Arctic Forum.

But the president’s chief of staff, Sergei Ivanov, earlier tagged Greenpeace actions as “radical.” And despite numerous appeals by nongovernmental groups to free the Greenpeace activists and the support of thousands of individuals, the Investigative Committee so far intends to press on with criminal charges, its spokesman Vladimir Markin said.

Also, the latest news reports said that several of the detained activists have been summoned for questioning.

“The activists’ actions do not fully qualify as piracy because one of the key grounds for such charges would be an attempt to seize property, which is hard to prove in this case,” said Sergei Klimenko, a lawyer with the Khrenov and Partners law firm.

The charges brought against the detainees are likely to be changed, he added.

The case could be reclassified to robbery, vandalism or endangering the safety of infrastructure facilities, said Vadim Tkachenko, an aide to the CEO of consulting company Gradient Alfa.

It all depends on many factors, the main one being the international reaction to this situation, he said.

Piracy charges are unlikely but, if it is proven that the activists endangered the safety of a production site, they may still face prison terms under Russian law, said Ivan Trifonov, Squire Sanders’ managing partner in Russia.

The charges might come from a Gazprom subsidiary, Gazprom Neft, which was slated to start operations at the rig by the end of this year.

“We are considering several ways of reacting [to the activists’ actions],” Gazprom Neft chief Alexander Dyukov told Itar-Tass in Salekhard on Wednesday.

He also said the company was currently evaluating the damage incurred due to the incident but said the losses were unlikely to be big. He added that the management was ready for dialogue.

“It is hard to imagine that the Greenpeace activists did not have a clear understanding of the legal consequences of their actions,” Trifonov said. “Such campaigns are aimed at attracting maximum public attention and international support from countries whose citizens climbed that platform,” the lawyer added.

He also said that while the ecological issues raised by the organization members are truly important, their goals and the ways of achieving them should not be mixed together.

Last year, production at the rig was delayed due to similar actions by Greenpeace, which claims Gazprom Neft will be unable to guarantee safe oil production in the Arctic and the consequences could surpass those of BP's oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010.

Gazprom said at the time that the delay was caused by technical problems, Reuters reported.

Prirazlomnaya has cost Gazprom more than \$4 billion in investments and the company has lost \$200 million due to production delays, Greenpeace said in a statement.

Putin called for improving the environmental situation in the Arctic before being elected president in March 2012. He said that removing industrial waste and developing the Northern Sea Route were government priorities.

French newspaper La Tribune earlier reported, citing Greenpeace sources, that more than 300,000 tons of oil spilled into the Arctic in 2011 alone due to a pipeline leak.

But Putin said at the forum that Russian companies had had no serious accidents while working on the shelf, the Vesti Rossia television channel reported.

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