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North Pole Ice Cap Too Thin for Testing Russia's Giant Icebreaker

By The Barents Observer

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Lev Fedoseyev / TASS

Russia's nuclear-powered Arktika icebreaker will need to undergo a second test voyage to prove its capabilities after Arctic sea ice levels were too thin during its first test run.

After reaching the North Pole on her maiden voyage, state nuclear-powered icebreaker agency Atomflot said the Arktika proved its ability to navigate in ice conditions, adding that the vessel sailed through three-meter-thick ice.

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The statement was likely premature. The Arktika testing crew's captain Oleg Shchapin said new ice tests will be needed, the state-run TASS news agency reported Monday.

"Ice tests are still ahead, probably this year, because the current ice tests did not work out; the

ice thickness was 1.1 to 1.2 meters. It was thin and loose, the icebreaker experienced no resistance at all," TASS quoted Shchapin as saying.

"We tried to find a three-meter ice floe, but could not find one," he added.

Shchapin did not specify where three-meter-thick ice could be found. Currently, the entire Northern Sea Route north of Siberia from the Kara Sea to the Bering Strait is open water. The polar ice cap further north shrank to its second lowest extent in recorded history last month has never been reported weaker and thinner than it was this year.

Multiyear sea ice is currently only found in the waters north of Canada, Alaska and Greenland.

Departing from the Baltic Shipyard in St. Petersburg on Sept. 22, the Arktika sailed straight to the North Pole before heading south and calling to her new homeport of Murmansk on Oct. 12.

The official commissioning of the Arktika took place on Wednesday, Oct. 21, in a ceremony in Murmansk attended by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin. The prime minister also signed the icebreaker's acceptance decree.

In December, the Arktika will begin plowing through ice along the Northern Sea Route. Next summer, however, a new starboard propulsion motor will be installed as the original one short-circuited and stopped working after trial sailings in the Gulf of Finland in February. The Arktika has three similar propulsion motors.

The icebreaker is the first in a series of five nuclear-powered vessels which make up Project 22220.

The four other vessels in the class are named Sibir, Ural, Yakutiya and Chukotka. They are expected to start operations from 2021 to 2027.

All will be based in Murmansk, but mainly operate along the eastern section of the Northern Sea Route.

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