

Mistral Warship Deal Between France and Russia is About Economy, Not Ethics

By [Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber](#)

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A Russian naval ship carrying 400 sailors has docked at a French harbor to start weeks of training aboard a warship that France is selling to Russia.

As 400 Russian sailors docked on the French coast Monday to train on a Mistral-class helicopter carrier, analysts agreed that France's sale of warships to Russia against the backdrop of the Ukraine crisis showcases the triumph of economic concerns over the West's seemingly consolidated political stance on Moscow.

France's training of Russian sailors and its sale of two Mistral warships to Russia for 1.2 billion euros (\$1.6 billion) has prompted the indignation of France's Western partners, who have said that the country should support efforts to isolate Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea and the subsequent unrest in eastern Ukraine. France has defended its decision by saying that rescinding the deal would hurt Paris more than Moscow.

“For France, the Mistral contract represents more than just a billion euros,” said Vadim

Kozyulin, a senior researcher at the Moscow-based Center for Political Studies of Russia.

“France and Russia extensively cooperate in the military field on optics technology, electronics and air navigation. If France would have turned Russia down on the ships, this would have jeopardized all aspects of bilateral technical cooperation with Russia and other countries as well. You damage your reputation if you go back on a deal like this.”

President Vladimir Putin told France's TF1 television network in June that the Mistral deal, Moscow's first major foreign arms purchase since the collapse of the Soviet Union, could in fact lead to more technical bilateral cooperation with France.

“We expect our French partners to fulfill their contractual obligations, and if everything goes as we agreed, we will not rule out the possibility of further orders — and not necessarily in naval shipbuilding,” he said.

France's decision to fulfill its contractual obligations toward Russia despite pressure from its allies also stems from the country's domestic economic realities, according to Olivier de France, research director at the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs.

“Despite all declarations of intentions — including the idea that NATO would take the Mistral initially destined to Russia — we see that the determining factor in France's decision is related to any country's concerns during a time of economic uncertainty: employment and industrial interests,” de France told *The Moscow Times* on Monday.

The French government said the construction of Russia's two warships would represent 5 million hours of work and generate 1,000 jobs for a four-year period, assuaging the country's unemployment rate which rose to 10.1 percent during the first quarter of 2014, according to France's National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies.

A regional division of the National Front, a far-right French party known for its euroskepticism and nationalist views, released a statement on its website last week welcoming the arrival of the Russian sailors, saying that the “successful conclusion of this contract, in spite of the pressure of foreign powers, is an extremely positive development for the SFX shipyard, the city of Saint-Nazaire and French foreign policy.”

“France's quest to fulfill its national interests — notwithstanding objections from other euro-Atlantic powers — is in fact a foundational principle of the French Fifth Republic,” said Yevgenia Obichkina, a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations specialized in French politics. “The opposition would have viewed France's refusal to honor its contractual obligations as offensive to France's traditional quest for its national interests.”

In early June, U.S. President Barack Obama said that it would have been better for France to “press the pause button” on its 2011 deal with Russia. Four U.S. lawmakers wrote a letter to Obama in May, urging him to oppose a deal they said would “only abet its efforts to undermine Eastern European governments that aspire to be modern, European democracies.”

Amid talk of imposing additional sanctions against Russia, U.S. and European business representatives have lobbied their governments, urging them to be mindful of the detrimental effect of economic sanctions on their business interests.

Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski has also called on France to suspend its deal with Russia, which would prevent it from obtaining two ships that can carry 16 helicopters, 13 tanks, 50 armored vehicles and up to 700 troops.

“We [Western powers] have determined Russia to be the aggressor in Crimea and I do not think France would want to be in a position in which it supplies effective weapons to an aggressor,” Sikorski told Le Monde newspaper in early June.

Factions of the French population have also expressed their discontent regarding their country's warship deal with Russia. On Sunday, local media reported that some 50 protesters had gathered by the port of Saint-Nazaire on the western coast of France — the site of the Russian fleet's training — and waved signs that read: “[French President Francois] Hollande, no to the training of Putin's 400 killers” and “Hollande, the honor of France is worth more than Mistral.”

Ultimately, France's self-interested decision to go ahead with the Mistral deal represents a political victory for Russia.

“On a purely technical level, it would not be the end of the world if Russia never received the two ships from France,” Kozyulin said. “What is most important here is that France's fulfillment of its contractual obligations gives Russia the impression that it has not been the target of Western economic sanctions. This is a crucial for Russia on a political level.”

See also:

[Putin Expects France to Honor Deal on Mistral Warships](#)

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