

Navy and Courts' Migration North Draws Criticism

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Judges, experts and opposition politicians criticized the idea of concentrating the country's three federal courts in St. Petersburg and argued that the moves will benefit neither city. **Denis Grishkin**

When the Navy's blue-and-white St. Andrews flag goes up on Wednesday above its new headquarters in St. Petersburg, the landmark Admiralty building, the military's top brass will mark the end of a historic struggle that has cost at least one admiral his job.

After the ceremony, Navy Commander-in-Chief Viktor Chirkov and the Navy command will officially start their work in the 18th-century site, built as a shipyard under Peter the Great.

The decision to move the Navy's main office more than 600 kilometers north from Moscow to St. Petersburg was originally announced in 2007 but has taken five years to complete — mainly because of stiff resistance, including from Navy Commander Vladimir Vysotsky.

Work went ahead on the move only after Dmitry Medvedev fired Vysotsky in May in one of his

last actions as president, and analysts say the benefit of the move is still hard to gauge.

St. Petersburg lies on the Baltic Sea, but the Baltic Fleet's headquarters are located more than 800 kilometers to the south in Kaliningrad. "They could just as well have moved the Navy command to Yekaterinburg or Vladivostok," said Vasily Kashin, an analyst with the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a think tank.

The Navy is not alone in relocating to St. Petersburg. Earlier this week, plans to move two federal courts from Moscow to the northern capital were leaked to national media.

The migration of these government agencies from Moscow to St. Petersburg has been put in motion for ambiguous reasons, and the shift was criticized this week by judges, experts and opposition politicians who called it a waste of money that would benefit neither city.

Chirkov dismissed talk of internal resistance to the Navy's move Tuesday by saying that only three of his staff had chosen to resign from military service rather than relocate. "You can say that we incurred no losses," he told reporters in St. Petersburg.

He also argued that working in St. Petersburg was "comfortable" and allows Navy officers to be closer to the shipbuilding industry, RIA-Novosti reported.

The Supreme Court and the Higher Arbitration Court will move to the site of a planned luxury residential complex by the end of 2014, Kommersant reported Monday.

The site is close to the Constitutional Court, which moved to St. Petersburg in 2008.

The idea of concentrating the country's three federal courts in St. Petersburg was first suggested in 2003 by Valentina Matviyenko, the former longtime St. Petersburg governor who at the time served as the Kremlin's envoy to the Northwest Federal District.

President Vladimir Putin approved the move of the Constitutional Court to his and Medvedev's hometown in 2007, arguing that it would increase St. Petersburg's importance and would help to reduce judicial corruption.

But plans for the other two courts to relocate were apparently buried until this April, when Medvedev included them in his scheme to move many other federal agencies from downtown Moscow to territories acquired by the capital in July.

That plan, which was intended to help cut down on chronic congestion in the city center, was put in doubt last month when the Kremlin's property department said it was rethinking the moves amid reports of spiraling costs.

Experts polled by Kommersant said that moving the two courts to St. Petersburg would cost significantly more than the Constitutional Court's relocation, which officially carried a bill of 5.3 billion rubles (\$169 million).

No official figures were published on the cost of moving the Navy's headquarters, but the Nezavisimoe Voyennoye Obozreniye weekly reported in 2007 that the Navy had asked for 15 billion rubles for the move.

Sergei Mitrokhin, the leader of the Yabloko opposition party, argued that moving the courts will be expensive not just for state coffers but also for citizens.

"It will be more complicated to travel to court hearings, because Moscow is much more accessible from many regions than St. Petersburg," he said by phone.

Mitrokhin added that the capital would feel little relief from the departure of a few hundred judges and their staff. "Moscow will continue to suffer from overload," he said.

But some argued that physically separating judges from the executive might strengthen the separation of powers — generally thought to have been undermined by President Vladimir Putin's centralization policies, dubbed the "power vertical."

"The further the judiciary is from the executive, the better, [because] it weakens a court's dependency on constant government control," said Boris Pustyntsev, the head of Citizens Watch, a civil rights group based in St. Petersburg.

In e-mailed comments, Pustyntsev pointed to Germany, where the main federal courts are located in the western city of Karlsruhe, far from the capital, Berlin.

Others disagreed. "With modern means of communications, it is no problem to influence a court, regardless of its location," Tamara Morshchakova, a former judge at the Constitutional Court, told The Moscow Times.

Although nominally a federation, Russia has no tradition of decentralization, and no significant political, military or judicial institution has been based outside Moscow since the Bolsheviks moved the capital there from St. Petersburg in 1918.

Alexander Kynev, an expert on regional politics, said that it was wrong to believe that moving state institutions outside Moscow would lead to political decentralization.

"It does not matter where a building is located, or where bureaucrats work. The main point is where the power is," Kynev said.

Analysts agree that the country's centralization has only increased since Putin first became president in 2000. "The centralization of control is a core element of Putin's policy" said Masha Lipman, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

And Moscow is not just the capital, but the center of everything in the country. "Any Russian with any ambition wants to be in Moscow," she said.

Morshchakova, the former Constitutional Court judge, said many of her peers at the affected courts opposed the move, which she called "unnecessary and unjustified."

Mikhail Barshchevsky, the government's envoy to the supreme, constitutional and arbitration courts, said he expected that two-thirds of the two courts' judges would oppose the move.

"The majority of them prefer to resign rather than to move and to convince their family members to follow them," he told the Rapsi legal news agency.

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