

Putin Orders Large-Scale Military Exercises in Black Sea

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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President Vladimir Putin ordered the launch of large-scale military exercises in the Black Sea on Thursday, projecting Russian power toward Europe and the Middle East in a move that may vex its neighbors.

Officials suggested the surprise drills were designed to test the reaction speed and combat readiness of Russian forces, but Putin's order also seemed aimed at sending a signal to the West that Russia is an important presence in the region.

Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that Putin triggered the maneuvers as he flew back overnight from South Africa after a summit of the BRICS emerging economies.

Peskov said 36 warships and an unspecified number of warplanes would take part, but did not say how long the exercises would last.

Putin has stressed the importance of a strong and agile military since returning to the presidency last May. In 13 years in power, he has often cited external threats when talking of the need for reliable armed forces and Russian political unity.

Late last month, Putin ordered military leaders to make urgent improvements to the armed forces in the next few years, saying Russia must thwart Western attempts to tip the balance of power. He said maneuvers must be held with less advance warning, to keep soldiers on their toes.

Russia's Black Sea Fleet, whose main base is in the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol, was instrumental in a war with ex-Soviet neighbor Georgia in 2008 over the Russian-backed breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In addition to Georgia and Ukraine, Russia shares the Black Sea with Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania.

But foreign affairs analyst Fyodor Lukyanov said the exercises were "more likely part of a wider attempt to reconfirm that Russia's naval and military forces in the south are still able to play a political and geopolitical role."

"It is flexing muscles and may have more to do with what is happening in the Mediterranean, around Syria, than in the Black Sea," said Lukyanov, editor of the journal Russia in Global Affairs.

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