

French-Built Russian Warship Starts Trial Run

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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PARIS — A French-built warship designed to strengthen Russia's ability to deploy troops, tanks and helicopter gunships embarked on its first test run Wednesday — just as Western powers are trying to rein in President Vladimir Putin's military threat to Ukraine.

The Vladivostok helicopter carrier set sail from the French Atlantic port of Saint-Nazaire, while just a few hundred kilometers away in Paris, France's government hosted American, Russian and other leading world diplomats amid mounting tensions over Ukraine.

The warship is part of a 1.2-billion-euro (\$1.6 billion) deal that marked the biggest-ever sale of NATO weaponry to Moscow, a deal that already raised eyebrows both within Russia's military circles and among France's Western allies when it was struck in 2011.

France has criticized Russia's military incursion into Ukraine's Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, but says it has no plans to scrap the defense deal. That is because France, like many of Russia's

European trading partners, has found itself wedged between efforts to squeeze Russia diplomatically and its own economic interests.

The French government's top priority is reviving a lackluster economy and reducing unemployment, and this deal underpins some 1,000 jobs.

The Vladivostok is on track to be delivered by the last quarter of this year, said spokesman Emmanuel Gaudez of DCNS, a state-backed naval shipbuilder manufacturing the warships, along with South Korean-controlled shipbuilder STX.

A sister ship, the Sevastopol — named, ironically, for a Russian-controlled port in Crimea — is scheduled to be delivered about a year later. "We are not going to comment on the political situation — that is for politicians to decide," he said.

A few Russian customers and military personnel are to visit the ship later this month, and a larger Russian delegation is expected in June, company officials said.

"But now with what is happening in Ukraine, perhaps they have other priorities — I don't know," said Christophe Morel, a CGT labor union delegate on the STX board.

Russian military analysts say the warships would not make a big impact on Russia's aging Navy, despite their large cost. However the deal still has symbolic importance because it involves sensitive military technology shared between Moscow and the West.

France has joined the U.S. and Britain in suspending preparations for a Group of Eight summit in Russia in June, and France and European Union allies are considering possible sanctions against Russia.

But French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, speaking on RTL radio on Monday, said "we are not there yet" when it came to suspending any defense exports.

In contrast, Britain's government said Wednesday it was reviewing all British arms exports to Russia "in light of recent events."

British firms sold Russia some £120 million (\$200 million) worth of equipment covered by export licenses between 2012 and 2013, according to information made public by the government and compiled by the London-based Campaign Against Arms Trade.

Much of it has been dual-use equipment such as machine parts, cameras, electronics, and navigation systems, but other items include riot gear, sniper rifles, and drones. Britain's Foreign Office said none of the weapons were sold to the Russian military.

The French Defense Ministry, meanwhile, trumpeted on its website the capabilities of the warships it is selling to Russia: up to 750 troops, up to 16 helicopter gunships, and as many as 60 armored vehicles.

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