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Under Fire, France Stands by Mistral Warship Sale to Russia

By The Moscow Times

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Russian sailors walking near their Russian navy frigate, the Smolny, at the shipyard in Saint-Nazaire in June.

PARIS/ST. NAZAIRE – French President Francois Hollande won broad domestic applause on Tuesday for defying allies Britain and the United States by confirming plans to deliver a helicopter carrier to Russia, with one backer dismissing their objections as hypocritical.

Speaking on the eve of an EU meeting to discuss sanctions on Moscow over the downing of a civilian airliner over Ukraine, Hollande said late Monday that a first Mistral warship would be handed over on schedule in October but that the decision on a second delivery would depend on Russia's attitude.

It was the clearest signal yet that Paris will go through with the controversial deal despite the Ukraine crisis and came only hours after British Prime Minister David Cameron said it would be "unthinkable" for his country to fulfill such an order.

"Hollande is not backing down. He is delivering the first [ship] despite the fact he is being asked not to," Jean-Christophe Cambadelis, head of Hollande's ruling Socialist Party, told i>Tele television on Tuesday.

"This is a false debate led by hypocrites ... When you see how many [Russian] oligarchs have sought refuge in London, David Cameron should start by cleaning up his own backyard," Cambadelis said.

The 1.2 billion euro ($1.62 billion) contract for the two warships, signed by ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy's conservative government in 2011, was the first by a NATO member country to supply Russia with military equipment.

Some 400 Russian sailors arrived in France on June 30 to begin training on the first Mistral, named Vladivostok. They are being housed aboard a Russian ship docked in the western port of Saint-Nazaire and have kept a low profile. They are due to stay until late September.

President Barack Obama expressed concerns about the Mistral contract in June because of Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine. A senior U.S. administration official said on Monday that Washington continued to oppose the deliveries.

"Just because the Americans say 'jump,' we shouldn't jump," Xavier Bertrand, a former minister under Sarkozy and senior member of his conservative opposition UMP party, told France Inter radio. "France's word, its signature, must be respected."

Lukewarm Welcome

The wrangling over the warships highlights the difficulties the 28-member European Union has had in agreeing on a joint line for dealing with Russia, a major gas supplier to countries such as Germany and Italy, as well as to central Europe.

While pressure for tougher action has mounted following the shooting down last week of a Malaysian Airlines plane in an area of eastern Ukraine controlled by the separatists, EU foreign ministers were not expected to deepen sanctions significantly on Tuesday.

Diplomats said it was more likely that they would agree to hasten implementation of measures already agreed upon against Russian individuals at their meeting in Brussels.

With the French economy stagnant, unemployment stuck above 10 percent and Hollande's poll ratings at record lows, canceling the Russian order would have dented the popularity of his socialists around the town of Saint-Nazaire, where the shipyards have long been a major employer.

France faces financial penalties if it does deliver the ships on time.

"If these ships hadn't come along three years ago, we don't know if the company would be around today," Johan Jardin, a delegate for the CFDT trade union at the STX shipbuilding firm told Reuters. "In a way these ships saved our skins."

Protests in the port against the presence of the Russian sailors have drawn only a few dozen demonstrators. Local critics of the contract, such as a local official in the Greens ecologist

party, are few and far between.

Yet despite the fact that local traders have welcomed the sailors as a boost to business, town authorities have sought to keep their presence in the town as low-key as possible.

A town hall official said the sailors would be given a civic reception "probably around the end of August" if they requested it and they had been allocated reserved slots to use municipal sport facilities but had not yet made use of them.

"Then again, perhaps they have not been informed of them," the official added.

See also:

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