

Russian Sailors Leave French Port, Mistral Deal Still Uncertain

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A ship carrying the Russian sailors who have been training for months on a French-built Mistral helicopter carrier left the French port of Saint-Nazaire on Thursday, with it still unclear whether Paris will finally deliver the ship to Moscow.

A Reuters reporter saw their ship, the Smolny, leave the Atlantic Ocean port and head out to sea. French media reported this week how many of the 400 sailors had been stocking up with parcels of purchases at local retailers.

"This is not a departure for good in the sense that the decision on whether to supply the ship has not been taken," a spokesman for French naval and defense group DCNS said.

The sailors arrived in late June at the shipyard to begin training on a first carrier, which France was due to deliver to Russia by the last quarter of this year.

Tensions between the West and Russia over Ukraine have cast doubt on a 1.2 billion euro (\$1.49 billion) deal to supply two French warships to Russia, Moscow's first major foreign

arms purchase in the two decades since the fall of the Soviet Union.

French President Francois Hollande, who this month became the first Western leader to meet Russia's Vladimir Putin in Moscow since the standoff, has said the situation in eastern Ukraine did not permit the delivery of the carrier.

The DCNS spokesman said work on the second carrier was continuing.

Last week a Kremlin foreign policy aide said Russia would accept either money or the delivery of the two helicopter carriers to resolve the dispute.

France faces pressure from Western allies to scrap the deal, but it faces potential compensation claims if it breaches terms. Moreover, suspension of contracts is a sensitive issue as France finalizes other military deals. The contract has also created about 1,000 jobs in France.

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