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Russia Starts Building Warship Similar to France's Mistral as Paris Stalls Delivery

By Matthew Bodner

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Russia has begun work on a helicopter carrier similar to a previously ordered, French-built warship whose delivery has been stalled due to Paris's concerns over Moscow's role in the Ukraine crisis, news agency TASS reported, citing a senior navy official.

The assault vessel is being built in St. Petersburg's Yantar shipyards and will "join the navy in 2018 after the completion of construction and all phases of testing," the head of the navy's shipbuilding department, Vladimir Tryapichnikov, said late last week.

The ship, the second of Russia's new Ivan Gren-class (Project 11711) landing vessels, was ordered a month after Paris froze a 1.2 billion euro ($1.3 billion) deal for two Mistral-class assault ships in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for rebels in eastern Ukraine.

In an apparent reference to the stalled Mistral deal, the ship will be named the Pyotr Morgunov — the name of a Red Army commander who played a decisive role in the 1942 defense of the Crimean city of Sevastopol from Nazi forces in World War II.

The Morgunov and its sister ship, the nearly completed Ivan Gren, are not direct replacements for the French Mistral helicopter carriers, but will still allow the Russian navy to land ground forces onto enemy beaches up to 4,000 kilometers from their home ports.

But even in this capacity, they are considerably smaller than the Mistrals. The Morgunov, for example, has space for 300 marines supported by one helicopter and either 40 armored personnel carriers or 13 tanks.

One Mistral ship, for comparison, can deploy up to 900 troops supported by at least 16 helicopters and up to 60 armored vehicles.

To make up for this lost capacity, Tryapichnikov said the navy would begin building progressively larger landing ships by 2020. The new ships will have space for a few helicopters, but not the 16 to 35 carried by a Mistral-class helicopter carrier.

With that in mind, the head of the navy, Admiral Viktor Chirkov told TASS Friday that a Mistral-style vessel has been pencilled into the military's long-term shipbuilding program through 2050.

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