



BULLETIN

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The Military and Political Significance of the Black Sea Fleet Following the Agreement of 21 April 2010

by Robert Śmigielski

The signing of the agreement to keep the Russian Black Sea Fleet stationed at Sevastopol is a major diplomatic success for Russia and could be a prelude to closer political and economic cooperation with Ukraine. Despite the decline in combat capability of the Fleet it remains an important instrument for implementation of Russia's foreign policy. The currently existing plans for upgrading the Fleet will not however lead to change in the balance of power in the Black Sea region.

The Legal Grounds for Deploying the Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine. Under the agreement signed on 31 May 1997 between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the status and conditions for stationing the Russian Federation's Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine in the ports of Sevastopol, Theodosia and Mikolajow (shipyards) Russia may station 388 vessels (and this includes fourteen submarines), and 161 planes and helicopters at the airports in Hvardiis'ke and Kacha. The level of personnel in the Fleet in the Crimea—where 70% of its infrastructure is concentrated—may not exceed 25,000 naval personnel. The agreement has been signed for a period of twenty years—up until 28 May 2017—and was to be extended automatically for subsequent five-year periods unless either of the parties gives the other party at least one year's written notice of termination. Because the agreement did not specify the rules for replacement of vessels and other types of armaments listed as part of the Black Sea Fleet stationed in Ukraine, further agreements were needed to regulate this issue, on a case-by-case basis. During Victor Yushchenko's presidency Ukraine refused Russia this right and claimed that the Russian forces would have to leave Ukrainian territory as of the moment the twenty-year lease period expired. It argued that it would be contrary to art. 17 of the Ukraine constitution for the Fleet to continue to stay, as this article forbids the location of foreign military bases on Ukrainian territory. Article 14 of the transitional provisions of the Constitution say however that existing military bases may be used (without specifying limitations in time) by foreign armed forces according to the conditions agreed—as in the case of the agreement for the Fleet—and an international agreement ratified by the Supreme Council of Ukraine.

In Kharkov on 21 April 2010 Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Victor Yanukowich signed an agreement extending the agreements of 1997 for 25 years starting from 28 May 2017. The clause regarding automatic extension of the treaty for subsequent five-year periods remains in force. The fee for the lease is said to be \$100 million per year from 2017. From 2010 however Ukraine will receive a discount on purchases of gas from Gazprom of approximately \$3 billion per year.¹ The agreement was ratified on 27 and 28 April by the parliaments of both countries.

The Fleet's Military Potential. Approximately 18,000 naval personnel currently serve in the Fleet, of which 15,000 are in the Crimea and 1700 are in coastal defence and marine aviation forces. From Russia's point of view a key limiting factor for its military usefulness is the closed nature and dimensions of the Black Sea, the exit from which is controlled by a NATO member state—Turkey. This means that the Fleet's combat capacity cannot be exploited fully, especially as most of the duties set for the navy can be carried out by properly equipped and organized marine aviation. This part of the Fleet is currently made up of only two regiments equipped with an aging planes. The situation with regard to the vessels in the Fleet looks even worse, however. Russia's limited financial capability has

¹See: J. Cwiek-Karpowicz, "Rosyjsko-ukraińskie porozumienia w sprawie stacjonowania Floty Czarnomorskiej oraz preferencyjnych cen gazu", *Biuletyn PISM* no. 63 (671) 23 April 2010.

meant that the funds that it has have been used mainly for the needs of the ocean fleets: the North and Pacific Fleets. In the Black Sea Fleet only five out of approximately forty-five ships were put into service after 1990. More than half have been in service for more than 25 years, nine ships were put into service in the 1970s, and three as early as the 1960s. Most of these will have to be withdrawn in the near future. The flag missile cruiser the "Moskva" is no longer technologically capable of meeting the demands of modern warfare, and the only relatively modern "Kilo" submarine is undergoing an overhaul after a breakdown in December. Over the last decade only two minesweepers and one small landing craft have been added to the Fleet.

The Significance of the Black Sea Fleet in Russia's Foreign Policy. The main task of the Fleet is to protect Russia's interests in the Black Sea basin, for instance the routes for transportation of energy resources. In its attempt to reinforce its position as an exporter of gas and crude oil Russia is developing its own transmission network and is trying to take control over export of energy resources from the Caspian countries. It is planning to add more pipelines to the already operating Blue Stream: The South Stream and Trans-caspian, and the Burgas–Aleksandropolis oil pipelines.

Despite the decline in combat capability the Black Sea Fleet could play an important role in the event of a rise in tensions around Pridnestrovia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which lie within its sphere of activity, as can be seen by the activities of ships in the Fleet during the Russia-Georgia conflict of 2008. Units in the Fleet are also the part of Russia's marine forces that operate closest to the Gulf of Aden and Somalia basin, where pirates operate and civilian shipping is at risk. The return of the Russian navy to the Mediterranean (Syria has agreed to make its port in Tartus available, where there is a point providing material and technical security for the Black Sea Fleet) will be helpful not only in combating piracy but also in rebuilding Russia's influence in the Middle East. The opportunity to make its military presence felt in a region which is vital to its interests is also important to Russia.

Perspectives. The significance of the agreement goes beyond strictly military issues. The extension of the lease for the base in Sevastopol means that it will remain the main port for the Black Sea Fleet. A program that Russia has conducted for a few years, "Creation of a system for stationing the Black Sea Fleet in the Russian Federation in the years 2005–2020" (up to now 25% of the 90 billion rubles set aside for the project have been spent), envisages setting up a base in Novorossiysk with the capacity to replace Sevastopol, but this port has less advantageous hydro-meteorological conditions (storms in winter and a poorly developed coastline). The bases in the Crimea will also not be replaced by the ports in Suchumi and Ochamchira, in which Russian ships are to be stationed until 2059 under an agreement with the authorities of the separatist Abkhazia of 17 February 2010. In the conditions of a financial crisis Russia may reduce funds for the base in Novorossiysk and designate them for upgrading the infrastructure in Sevastopol, and the ships making up the Fleet itself. Because it is unlikely that there will be a rapid increase in the number of ships under construction, it should be expected instead that vessels from the Northern Fleet (Kilo submarines) and the Baltic Fleet (frigates and corvettes) will be transferred to the Black Sea. A submarine intended for the Black Sea Fleet, the "Sevastopol," and 20380 type corvette have been under construction for a few years. If business transactions go ahead with France, Sevastopol will probably become the mother base for the Mistral² amphibious assault ship. The intention is that the modernized Black Sea Fleet will include troops protecting the coast and marine aviation, marines and assault ships, a number of submarines, up to ten corvettes and one or two frigates for combating piracy. As opposed to the Soviet period, during which the Fleet's task was to counteract the potential of the American 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean, Russia does not now see the objective as maintaining a counterforce to the NATO in the region.

The presence of the Fleet in the Crimea—with an extensive social and cultural infrastructure—strengthens the Russian element on the peninsula, of which 60% of inhabitants are Russian. Upon completion of service a lot of officers stay in Sevastopol, and the extension of the lease for the base will mean that this process continues. The Russian presence in the Crimea will also have an impact on Ukraine's domestic policy, contributing to further social divisions. The treaty concerning the Black Sea Fleet also signals the beginning of moves intended to bring about closer economic and political cooperation between the two states (Russia's expansion would presumably include the arms, missile and space, aviation, ship-building and energy industries). This will have negative implications for Ukraine's prospects for integration into NATO, and—probably—the EU.

² J. Kumoch, "Negocjacje w sprawie okrętu typu Mistral – implikacje dla stosunków Francji z partnerami z NATO", *Biuletyn PISM* no. 29 (637) 19 February 2010.