

Rogozin's game with the Mistral

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On two separate occasions (25 January and 5 February), the Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who oversees the military-industrial complex, questioned the sense of Russia buying Mistral amphibious assault ships from France. He alleged that the ships are unsuitable for operation in Arctic waters (due to their poor resistance to low temperatures), and that they use types of fuel which are not produced in Russia (as they use technology which is only available in NATO countries). Meanwhile, on 1 February, work began in France on assembling the hull of the first of the two Mistral Russia has ordered (construction started in February 2012), and the Baltiysky Zavod shipyard in St. Petersburg (which is cooperating in the construction) confirmed that this summer it will deliver the aft section of the ship, which was built in Russia, for assembly.

Commentary

- Rogozin's critical statements, which are based on the arguments of opponents to the 2011 contract, are primarily addressed to the conservative part of the establishment, who are reluctant to co-operate with the West. These are mainly retired military figures, who are an important socio-political factor in Russia; they have been trying to regain influence over the reforms to the RF Armed Forces since the defence minister was replaced last November. Rogozin is assuming the mantle of defender of Soviet traditions (in recent days, he also spoke in favour of restoring Volgograd's old name of Stalingrad, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the battle), and supporter of a 'superpower' policy. To what extent he has been assigned this role as part of the ruling team in Russia, and to what extent this is his own attempt to build an independent position in the elite, remains an open question.
- Rogozin's statements can be regarded as part of the negotiation strategy before the next round of Russian-French talks on military-technical cooperation (scheduled for 14-15 February). Russia is aiming to give its shipbuilding industry more modern technologies, access to which was probably the main reason for buying the Mistral. Evidence of this includes the issue (raised on 5 February) of Western fuel production technologies. The tone of Rogozin's statements can also be seen as a challenge to the status of the strategic Russian-French partnership; it shows the French side's relative weakness in its relations with Russia. From the economic point of view, the contract to build Mistral is

much more important for Paris than it is for Moscow; the order for the two ships, estimated at €1.2 billion, has removed the threat of bankruptcy from one of France's biggest shipyards, DCNS in Saint-Nazaire.

- We should not assume that the construction of the Mistral warships for the Russian navy – although there is still no real military justification for it – is under any threat. This is principally demonstrated by the relatively strong involvement of the Russian shipbuilding industry, and the benefits which will arise from the acquisition of new technologies. However, Rogozin's statements have called the construction of two more ships into question; the Russian-French agreement of June 2011 was for a total of four ships to be constructed, but the Russian Federation Ministry of Defence has so far only ordered the two Mistral. Initially, the purchase of further units had been postponed to the next decade, but now the decision to construct them will depend on how the operation of the first two ships turns out.