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OSC Report: Ukraine -- Tensions With Russia Over Black Sea Fleet

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Tensions Between Ukraine, Russia Escalate Over Russian Black Sea Fleet

Relations between Ukraine and Russia in recent months have deteriorated based in part on military activities of the Sevastopol-based Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF RF). Ukrainian officials complained that the BSF RF's actions are illegal and intentional provocations. Soured diplomatic relations have resulted in Moscow's refusal to send the newly appointed Russian ambassador to Ukraine. Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev blamed Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko for the breakdown in relations. Some observers warned of a possible Russian military provocation in Crimea.

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A series of incidents in Sevastopol in recent months has increased tensions and soured diplomatic relations between Ukraine and Russia.

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- Sevastopol State Motor Vehicle Inspection (DAI) officers reported that on three separate occasions in July the BSF RF was intercepted transporting Mirage cruise missiles from unit to unit in densely populated areas without the required security escort and permits from Ukrainian authorities (*Ukrayinska Pravda*, 23 July).

• The Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) stated on its website that by transportii

the cruise missiles without Ukrainian permission, the Russian Black Sea Fleet is



Sevastopol DAI intercept a cruise missile being transported by the BSF RF (Ukrayinska Pravda, 23 July).

being
"intentionally
disrespectful
of Ukrainian
national
sovereignty."
The NSDC
said that
such actions
were
becoming a
regular
occurrence
devised to
increase
tensions
between

Ukraine and Russia (www.rainbow.gov.ua, 24 July).

- The conflict over actions of the BSF RF in Sevastopol in July precipitated the expulsion of diplomats by both Ukraine and Russia. Vsevolod Loskutov, Charge de Affairs of the Russian Embassy in Ukraine, subsequently declared that the new ambassador to Ukraine, Mikhail Zurabov, will not be dispatched to Ukraine until Russia sees a change in Ukraine's political course (*Izvestiya*, 18 September).

Russians Insist Fleet \square o Stay

Ukrainian authorities have repeatedly stated that the BSF RF is expected to withdraw from Sevastopol in 2017, and President Yushchenko reaffirmed this as recently as 20 September in an address on the national television channel UT 1. Some Russian officials, however, have insisted the fleet will stay.

- Navy Commander-in-Chief Vladimir Vysotskiy asserted, "We believe it is desirable and justifiable to base a part of the main forces of the BSF in Sevastopol after 2017." He claimed that Ukrainian leaders -- both the president and the prime minister -- never said unequivocally that the BSF RF should leave and that current calls by Ukrainian politicians for the BSF RF to leave by 2017 are "thoughtless, shortsighted, and won't lead to anything good" (RIA-Novosti, 26 July; *Ukrayinska Pravda*, 27 July).

- In an interview on Ukraine's most popular television channel, Inter TV, former head of intelligence of the BSF RF Vladimir Solovyov asserted, "We shall not leave in 2017" (*Flot Ukrayiny*, 16 September).

Russians Blame Yushchenko

Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev and former Ambassador to Ukraine Viktor Chernomyrdin both have placed the blame on deteriorating relations between the two nations solidly at President Viktor Yushchenko's feet.

- In August Medvedev wrote a scathing letter of complaint directed against Yushchenko, charging that the Ukrainian president's policies were intentionally anti-Russian, and in a recent address to students at the University of Pittsburgh, Medvedev stated that he blamed Yushchenko for "not doing enough to develop relations with Russia" and, in fact, steering relations "in a direction not in the best interests of the two nations" (*Kremlin.ru*, 25 September).
- At a news conference in Sochi, Medvedev stated that he saw no prospect for the improvement of relations between Russia and Ukraine under the current leadership and expressed hope that the new leadership "will have quite a number of possibilities to significantly improve our relations" (ITAR-TASS, 14 August).
- In a recent interview, former Russian Ambassador to Ukraine Viktor Chernomyrdin asserted, "in the time of Viktor Yushchenko's presidency, the fact of the matter is that our relations have deteriorated as never before" (*Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 24 September).

Media, Observers Debate Chances of Military Conflict

Some Ukrainian observers have claimed that if all other Kremlin methods fail, and especially if the new president of Ukraine to be elected in January 2010 turns out to be uncooperative with Moscow, the use of force cannot be excluded.

- Prominent Ukrainian political analysts Volodymyr Horbulin, former head of the NSDC, and Oleksandr Lytvynenko of the Kyiv Institute of Problems of National Security claimed that if the January 2010 Ukrainian presidential election does not yield the results Moscow wants, "one cannot completely exclude the application of direct force." Horbulin and Lytvynenko contend that "key among Russia's foreign policy tasks is to return Ukraine to its orbit within the next five years." They assert that Russia plans to split Ukraine into three parts, the east and south will be merged with Russia, the center will have a pro-Russian government and the west, where pro-independence sentiments are strong, will be isolated from the rest of the country (*Dzerkalo Tyzhnya*, 19 September).
- The independent *Kyiv Post* cautioned that Russia may go as far as using a provocation by pro-Russian groups in Crimea as a pretext for intervention on the peninsula in order to maintain the BSF RF presence there beyond 2017. The publication called attention to a bill recently passed in the Russian parliament which provides a legal basis for "defending" Russian citizens abroad by use of force (24 September).
- Political analyst Oleksandr Derhachov declared that while both Ukraine and Russia are responsible for the worsening of their bilateral relations, Russia is neither willing nor ready to treat Ukraine as a full-fledged independent country. He asserted the Kremlin is taking advantage of Ukraine's weaknesses, most importantly, Ukraine's "weak political elite who

are not ready to protect national interests." Derchachov opined that there will be more confrontation or a "very complex game" played out in Ukrainian-Russian relations (*Den*, 14 September).

Similarly, leader of Russia's opposition Svoboda Party Yuriy Belayev asserted that "the entirety of Russia's policy toward Ukraine is founded on aggression." He said that this line of policy will continue because, "in order to stay in power, Russia needs continuing conflict" and one source of conflict between Russia and Ukraine is the status of Sevastopol. Belayev stated that "Russian media constantly escalates the rhetoric against Ukraine...it is obvious that they are preparing for something very serious" (UNIAN, 23 September).

Other political observers have opined, however, that while Russia may desire to use force against Ukraine, its military is currently in no position to do so.

- Sevastopol-based defense analyst Dmytro Shtyblikov, in an article entitled "Russian Citizens Are Being Prepared for a War With Ukraine," stated that Russia is not likely to agree to withdraw its fleet from Crimea in 2017 but for the time being it does not have "the means to create a numerical and armed advantage to carry out operations in Crimea" in order to engage in a full-fledged war with Ukraine (*Flot Ukrayiny*, 16 September).
- Anti-Kremlin Russian military expert Pavel Felgengauer agreed that "while Russia may want to invade and may have the legal ability to do so," the Russian military is in such poor shape that "it will not be ready to invade Ukraine for at least another three years but more likely, five to ten years" (*Glavred*, 10 September).
- The independent daily *Gazeta Po-Kiyevski* opined the possibility of a military conflict between Ukraine and Russia over the Crimean peninsula is "unlikely" because Moscow would risk losing its Crimean investments and spur anti-Russian sentiments across Ukraine but cautioned that "a Ukrainian-Russian confrontation could lead to an unplanned armed conflict. Only a small spark is required...and an armed conflict, undesired by either, could be the result and it would be an explosion more terrifying than South Ossetia" (31 August).

Despite some observers' predictions of a Russian use of force, the Ukrainian president and other officials insist that there is no imminent danger of armed conflict between the two nations.

- President Yushchenko told Ukrainian media that there will not be a war between Ukraine and Russia and that the loss of Ukrainian independence "is out of the question" (*Kommersant-Ukraina*, 1 September).
- Valentyn Nalyvaychenko, head of Ukraine's Security Service (SBU), asserted that it is not possible that the current increase of tensions

between Ukraine and Russia will result in the "the use of force in Crimea" (31 August, *Glavred*).

- Anatoliy Hrytsenko, chairman of the Rada's National Security and Defense Committee, also rejected speculations about a possible war between Ukraine and Russia. He asserted that war between the two countries would be a "disaster for the whole of Europe" considering the "number of nuclear power plants, river dams, chemical and other facilities in Ukraine and the European part of Russia" (*Ukrayinska Pravda*, 14 September).
- Rada speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn stated that there is no danger of a military threat. He said, "everyone understands very well what the reaction of the world will be even if we hypothetically imagine such an extreme situation" (UkrInform, 15 September).

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