

Russia plans to open naval bases in Ukraine in response to NATO's eastward expansion

By [Vladimir Radyuhin](#)

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Russia plans to open naval bases in Ukraine in response to NATO's eastward expansion, military sources have said.

Ukraine may agree to the re-opening of a Soviet-era submarine base in the Crimea and the establishment of three naval bases on Black Sea coast, said the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* quoting Russian military sources.

"The planned expansion of the Black Sea Fleet is Russia's response to the NATO expansion to the East," said Admiral Vladimir Komoyedov, former Black Sea Fleet Commander, referring to the establishment of NATO bases in Romania and Bulgaria, both Black Sea coastal states.

Following the extension last month of the Russian lease of the Black Sea naval base at Sevastopol in Ukraine's Crimea till the year 2042, Moscow is drawing up plans for the modernisation of the Sevastopol base and the opening of new military facilities in the Crimea, said the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev is expected to sign a package of agreements on upgrading the Sevastopol base when he pays an official visit to Ukraine next week.

According to the paper, Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin discussed with his Ukrainian counterpart Nikolai Azarov last week the return of Russian submarines to the former Soviet secret base dug deep into a cliff at Balaklava near Sevastopol.

Russia also eyes opening naval bases in the Ukrainian ports of Nikolayev and Odessa, as well as in the Danube river delta, which Ukraine shares with Romania, said the paper.

Russian-Ukrainian relations have dramatically improved after pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko, who had led the 2004 "orange revolution" was ousted in presidential elections earlier this year.

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Articles by: **Vladimir
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