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Russian strategy in the Mediterranean: A second front

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Abstract:

Since the beginning of the Cold War, the USSR has concentrated its military efforts on Central Europe. The Mediterranean Sea has long been a region of influence for the United States and its allies. The most Moscow achieved was to have a military base in Syria that allowed it to avoid the Turkish straits. However, with the end of the Cold War, the situation changed completely. Central Europe became NATO territory, and Russia had to retreat its line of confrontation. As a complementary strategy, Russia began to strengthen its position in the Mediterranean through both conventional and unconventional means. In addition to its traditional alliances with Algeria and Libya, it formed others beyond the Sahara Desert, supporting coups in places such as Mali, the Central African Republic and Burkina Faso. Almost without realising it, Europe has seen a second front open, where the threats are not only unconventional but also much more diffuse.

Keywords: Russia, Mediterranean Sea, Africa Corp, Military Bases.

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In 2007, Russia implemented a revisionist foreign and security policy. Although Europe was the most obvious theatre of operations, with the invasions of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014 and 2022), the old continent was not the only place where Moscow sought to rebalance its capabilities. The Mediterranean went from being a secondary stage to becoming another theatre of operations in the conflict between Russia and Europe. Although during the Cold War the existence of a land buffer between Russia and NATO meant that Russia considered the Mediterranean to be a less critical arena, the enlargement of the Atlantic Alliance reduced the security glacis, prompting Russia to use the Mediterranean as an arena for confrontation. Furthermore, the invasions of Abkhazia, Crimea and the rest of Ukraine reinforced Russia's view of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea as a single space. Finally, the fall of Bashar al-Assad and the subsequent dismantling of Russian military facilities in Syria have led Russia to initiate a policy of control over a sea, the Mediterranean, which until now had been the *Mare Nostrum*.

### **Soviet policy towards the Mediterranean Sea.**

One of the Soviet Union's main strategic shortcomings was Moscow's difficulty in gaining access to warm seas. This problem was particularly acute in the European part of Russia, as the straits of Denmark, the Dardanelles and Gibraltar meant that the USSR was effectively landlocked. In addition to this geopolitical complication, or perhaps because of it, the Soviet Union ruled out developing a navy comparable to that of the United States. In fact, Khrushchev went so far as to describe the Soviet navy as 'a rowboat crewed by Soviet sailors on a Russian lake'<sup>1</sup>.

It was not until the arrival of Sergei Gorshkov that Moscow began to compete with the United States in naval terms. The technological revolution introduced by Gorshkov enabled Soviet ships to operate farther from the coast, thereby achieving greater strategic capacity<sup>2</sup>. The Soviet Navy became a 'blue-water navy'.

The Soviets, as well as the Russians today, have three fleets in Europe (the Northern,

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<sup>1</sup> ROUCEK, Joseph "Las implicaciones de la expansión Naval Soviética en el Mediterráneo" *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, Num. 117, 1970, p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> DARBY, Joseph "The Soviet Doctrine of the Closed Sea" *San Diego Law Review*, May/June Vol. 23 No. 3, p. 686.

Baltic, and Black Sea fleets), although they conceive of them as a single fleet sailing all the waters surrounding the European continent. The element that best illustrates this assertion is the name used to describe the Mediterranean naval grouping: the Mediterranean Squadron. This is a maritime group that was fed equally by ships from the Black Sea Fleet, the Northern Fleet and the Baltic Fleet. This peculiarity was a direct consequence of the absence of ports in which to moor Soviet ships. For this reason, the Soviets were forced to use tankers and repair ships anchored in international waters in the Gulf of Hammamet, the Gulf of Sirte, and the Gulf of Alborán to carry out their repair and supply operations.

While it is true that the USSR sought to favour socialist governments in places such as Algeria, Egypt and Libya, Moscow never managed to turn the Mediterranean into a sea of safe harbours. In fact, it is striking that Stalin did not provide the expected support to the communist guerrillas of ELAS (People's National Liberation Army), a task that was delegated to the Yugoslavs, and ultimately led to Greece siding with NATO. The explanation for this lack of interest can be found in the consideration given to the Mediterranean, a sea that, far from being a Soviet strategic priority, was regarded as a secondary theatre of operations.

While it is true that the Sixth Fleet and the American bases in Crete, Rota and Naples might lead us to believe that Moscow was vying with the United States for control of the Mediterranean, the reality is that this sea was never a strategic priority for the Kremlin. Proof of this lack of interest can be found in the absence of a "Mediterranean fleet" comparable to that of the Black Sea or the Baltic and, above all, in the fact that only torpedo boats were deployed in Mediterranean waters and that the submarines that plied its waters rarely carried ballistic missiles.

However, we must highlight Moscow's successes in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in Syria, where it has established both a naval base and an air base. However, it also suffered some resounding failures, such as in Vlora (Albania), where it was unable to establish a naval base despite the ideological affinity of the Tirana government.

In short, the Mediterranean Sea was nothing more than a secondary theatre for the USSR, where Moscow failed to establish a network of bases comparable to that of the US or a deployment point for a naval force like the American Sixth Fleet. The explanation

for this situation is straightforward: Moscow prioritised Central Europe as a front for confrontation with the West. The 1,731,000 square kilometres of glacis that the USSR established between Berlin and Moscow led the Kremlin to consider the Mediterranean Sea as a non-priority area. However, the end of the USSR completely changed Russia's strategic assessment of the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the incorporation of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Romania into NATO shook Russian hegemony in two of the seas where it had its 'European fleets': the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea.

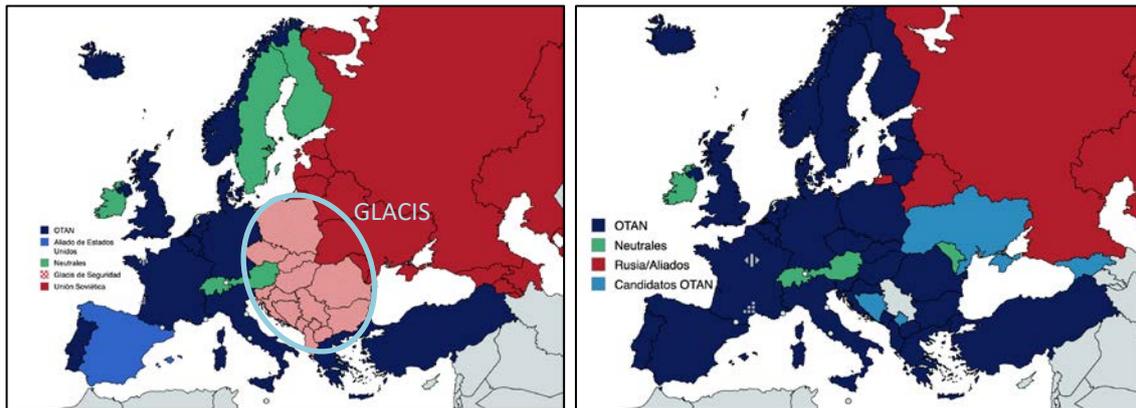
All these events led to a shift in Moscow's perspective on the Mediterranean, rendering this sea a region of great strategic importance. In fact, the Russian Maritime Doctrine of 2022 recognises this change by classifying the Mediterranean and its adjacent waters as an 'Important Area'<sup>3</sup>. However, beyond the Kremlin's wishes, Russia continues to face severe difficulties in achieving its objectives in the region, and its submarines are still forced to leave the Mediterranean due to the impossibility of finding friendly ports where they can be repaired. This lack of capacity does not mean that Russia is abandoning its efforts to influence the region. Still, it does mean that Moscow is projecting instability, rather than stability, to deter Europeans from the Southern Shore.

### **Russian policy towards the Mediterranean Sea**

Regarding the Mediterranean, it is worth noting that Russia has broadly adopted the USSR's conception of the region. However, this has had to be adapted to Putin's ambitions and the current limitations of the Russian Federation. The 2022 Russian Maritime Doctrine mentions 'the Atlantic region', an area comprising the Baltic, Black and Mediterranean seas, which coincides entirely with the area occupied by the USSR's 'European fleet'. The difference between the 'European fleet' of the USSR era and the 'Atlantic Region' of Putin's era lies in the value that the Kremlin attaches to the Mediterranean. While in Soviet times the Mediterranean was subordinate to the glacis of Central and Eastern Europe, now, with the loss of that territory, the Mediterranean has become a main theatre of operations for Russia.

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<sup>3</sup> PARMAR, Sarabjeet, SAWAN, Ranendra and AGNIBOTRI, Kamlesh "National Maritime Foundation "Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2022. An Analysis" National Maritime Foundation, August 2022, p. 4.



Map 1. Balance of Power in Europe between 1949 and 2025. Own Elaboration.

However, despite this conception, Russia's technical shortcomings prevent Moscow from fully implementing its strategy of control over the Mediterranean, forcing the Kremlin to use non-traditional means to promote instability and provoke the departure of Europeans from the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

***The Mediterranean in Russian strategy***

Since the Russian Navy's Operational Unit in the Mediterranean (Pyataya Eskadra) was officially established in 2010, Russia has shown increasing interest in the Mediterranean Sea. Although Russia's presence in the Mediterranean remains limited, NATO's expansion has increased Russian interest in the Mediterranean Sea. The 2001 Russian Maritime Doctrine was replaced by the 2015 version, followed by the 2022 version, in which Russia clearly reveals its intentions for the Mediterranean. However, its strategy is not limited to the Maghreb and Mashreq but has greater strategic significance as it seeks to control a large part of the Sahel countries. To this end, between 2020 and 2023, Russia supported and encouraged a series of coups in places such as Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023)<sup>4</sup>

All these actions have been aimed at controlling the governments of these countries, and above all, at severing their ties with the West. In this way, Moscow uses the Sahel as a factory of instability that it then spills over into the Mediterranean, so that it reaches Europe and destabilises our societies. To this end, Russia does not hesitate to use the capabilities it is developing in the Mediterranean basin, capabilities which, although they

<sup>4</sup> "Military coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, one in Burkina Faso in 2022, and in Niger in 2023 resulted in the expulsion of U.S., French, and other Western forces, and an influx of Russian forces" *The Soufan Center*, 31st March 2025. Available at <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-march-31/>

do not serve to control Europe's southern flank, do serve to destabilise Europe and cause European countries to disagree on where they should deploy their resources.

Having explained Russia's doctrine in the Mediterranean and the Sahel, we will now analyse the military capabilities, port infrastructure, and unconventional means that Russia employs on this southern flank. Let's examine these three aspects.

**Capabilities:** It is not easy to establish with certainty the specific number of personnel that make up the Operational Unit. Although the official allocation is 15 vessels, the Operational Unit typically consists of three frigates, one or two submarines, and a few support vessels. As far as submarines are concerned, at least two have been sighted, although some reports have pointed to as many as five<sup>5</sup>. The submarines identified in the Mediterranean are the Krasnodar (B-265) and the Mozhaisk (B-608). Both the Krasnodar and the Mozhaisk are Kilo 636.6 class submarines (SSK<sup>6</sup>). The Krasnodar, known to Western sailors as 'the black hole' due to its low acoustic signature, has had several encounters with Spanish ships<sup>7</sup>, as the Russian submarine has been too close to our territorial waters<sup>8</sup>.

Another submarine commonly found in the warm waters of the Mediterranean is the Novorossiysk, another Kilo-class (636.3) submarine similar to the Krasnodar and the Mozhaisk, but slightly older. The real danger of these vessels lies in their ability to carry Kalibr missiles, which can be launched while the submarine is fully submerged. Despite this presence, since the fall of Bashar al-Assad, submarines have been experiencing severe difficulties operating in the Mediterranean, as they have no support ports where they can resupply or be repaired. Russia is therefore desperately seeking ports to moor its ships.

As far as frigates are concerned, the Admiral Grigorovich (Krivak V class) has been identified, which, in addition to carrying Kalibr missiles, can transport Ka-21 and Ka-31 helicopters. Two of the ships that most concern Europeans are the Admiral Golovko and the Admiral Gorshkov (Gorshkov class<sup>9</sup>). These are two more advanced frigates than the

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<sup>5</sup> The number of Russian submarines in the Mediterranean has increased to five. Snorkel, 11 September 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Diesel-powered and capable of carrying Kalibr missiles.

<sup>7</sup> The Galicia Amphibious Ship and the Baleares Frigate.

<sup>8</sup> "El submarino ruso 'Krasnodar' se pasea por el Mediterráneo bajo la atenta mirada de la española 'Álvaro de Bazán'" *Delta 13 News*, 21st April de 2025

<sup>9</sup> The name Gorshkov is used in honour of the moderniser of the Soviet fleet.

Grigorovich, which also have the capacity to launch hypersonic missiles such as the Zirkon. In fact, in December 2024, Russia demonstrated its strength in the Eastern Mediterranean by launching Zirkov missiles from the two aforementioned Gorshkov-class frigates and a Kalibr missile from the aforementioned Novorossiisk submarine. As mentioned above, the Novorossiisk is also sometimes found in the Mediterranean, but being an older model (2014), it is more prone to breakdowns. In fact, in October 2025, the Novorossiisk<sup>10</sup> suffered a serious technical mishap in the waters off Gibraltar, forcing it to be towed by the Yakov Grebelsky under the watchful eye of the British and Dutch, who monitored its tow<sup>11</sup>.

In addition to these vessels, the Russian Operational Unit in the Mediterranean has an intelligence ship and a supply ship. Regarding the former, the Spanish Navy has repeatedly detected the presence of the *Viktor Leonov*, a maritime espionage ship known as 'Putin's Ear' due to its design to intercept communications and gather information<sup>12</sup>. Regarding the second type, the *Vyazma* and *Yelnya*<sup>13</sup> are noteworthy, as they serve as mother ships that provide refuelling and supply centres for the rest of the Operational Unit. In addition to serving as support vessels, both ships are known to carry out acts of sabotage against submarine communications or power cables.

Ports and Airports: The second element we should highlight is the network of ports and airports that Russia is building in Africa. Since the beginning of the Cold War, Russia has been interested in establishing warm-water ports in the Mediterranean, as this sea presents significant logistical challenges for its ships. The shallow waters of the Turkish straits, combined with the legal restrictions imposed by the Montreux Convention, mean that Russia cannot deploy its boats in the Mediterranean as it would like. For this reason, the Soviet Union established an alliance with Syria, whose primary objective was to secure access to the port of Tartus. However, despite Putin's efforts in the Syrian War, the Kremlin has been unable to support its ally, and the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime

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<sup>10</sup> "Rusia hizo pruebas de lanzamiento de misiles hipersónicos en el Mediterráneo oriental" *Infobae*, 3rd December 2024

<sup>11</sup> "Así terminó el submarino ruso "cojeante" del que se burla el secretario general la OTAN" *La Razón*, 14th October 2025.

<sup>12</sup> "Increased Presence of Russian Spy Ships Around Europe: Viktor Leonov Vessel enters the Mediterranean Sea" *Naval News*, 16th April 2025. Available at <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2025/increased-presence-of-russian-spy-ships-around-europe-viktor-leonov-vessel-enters-the-mediterranean>

<sup>13</sup> "Russian Tanker Yelnya docks in Algeria following strategic withdrawal from Tartus Naval Base" *Naval News Navy*, 20th December 2024. Disponible en <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2024/russian-tanker-yelnya-docks-in-algeria-following-strategic-withdrawal-from-tartus-naval-base>

has dealt a severe blow to Moscow's strategy in the Mediterranean. Ahmed al-Charaa's rise to power has precipitated events, causing Russia to lose its only Mediterranean port. Thus, Russia's strategy in the Mediterranean has collapsed, as Moscow urgently needs safe ports for its ships.

Perhaps the preferred location for establishing 'the new Tartus' is the Libyan port of Tobruk<sup>14</sup>. Although indeed, the Kremlin does not yet have a naval base like the one it had in Syria, Russia has been unloading material from Tartus at the port of Tobruk for months, an enclave controlled by its ally, Marshal Haftar. In addition to Tobruk, Moscow has the Libyan air base at Al-Khadim and, near Benghazi<sup>15</sup>, the Ghardabiya airfield, a facility that seems to have become the new Khmeimim (Syria). Along with Tobruk, Al-Khadim and Ghardabiya, Russia is establishing itself in the interior of Libya by rebuilding the Al Jufra, Brek Al Shati and Matan al-Sarra bases<sup>16</sup>. The latter is a former air base on the border with Chad that is being restored by Russian troops and mercenaries from the Wagner Group (formerly known as the Africa Corps<sup>17</sup>). Some reports indicate that in August 2024, Russia deployed between 2,000 and 2,500 men in Libya, most of whom belonged to the Africa Corps<sup>18</sup>. In total, although still under construction, Russia has five air facilities and one port in Libya, that of Tobruk, capable of accommodating its submarines. This network of ports and airports makes the North African country a new stronghold in the Mediterranean for Russia<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> "With Eyes on Sahel, Russia Shifts From Syria to Libya" *Africa Defence Forum*, 22nd July 2025. Disponible en <https://adf-magazine.com/2025/07/with-eyes-on-sahel-russia-shifts-from-syria-to-libya/>

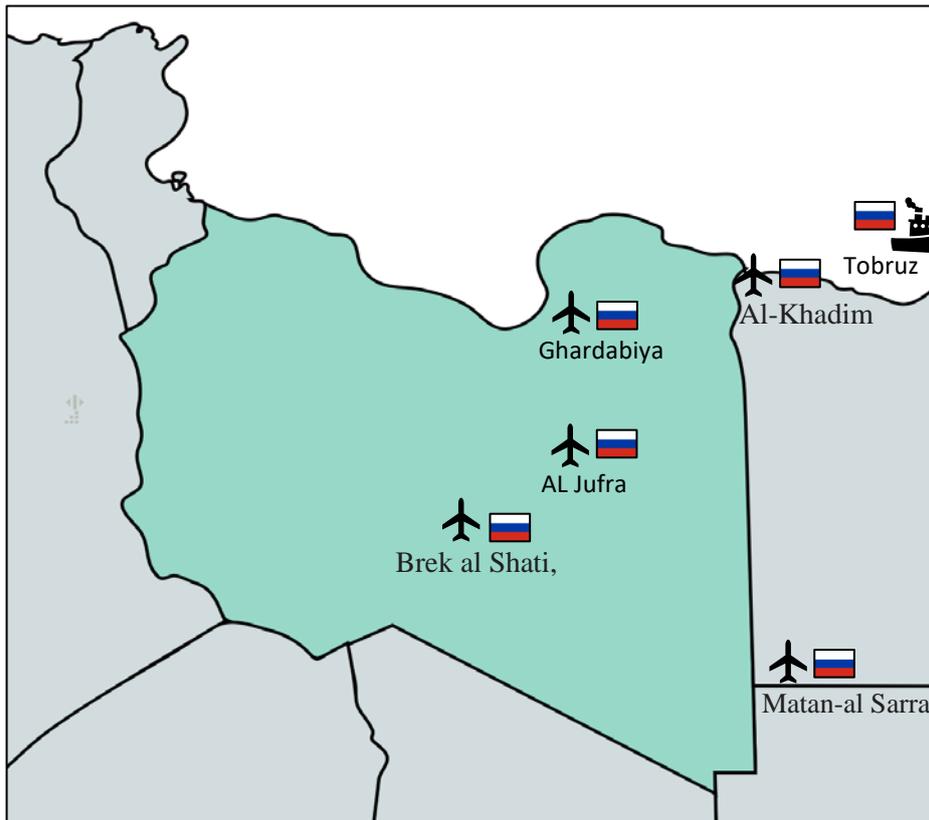
<sup>15</sup> "Libya's Al-Khadim airbase becomes a hub for Russian arms in the Sahel" *Radio Francia Internacional*, 23rd June 2025. Available at <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20250623-libya-s-al-khadim-airbase-becomes-a-hub-for-russian-arms-in-the-sahel>

<sup>16</sup> MCGREGOR, Andrew "Russia Increasing Military Presence in Africa by Reviving Desert Airbase in the Libyan Sahara" *Jamestown Foundation*, 17th April 2025.

<sup>17</sup> The two-year-old Africa Corps, which has links to a covert branch of Russia's army, is ascendant at a time when U.S. and European troops have been withdrawing from the region, forced out by sub-Saharan nations turning to Russia for security" *Associated Press*, 11th June 2025. Available at <https://www.ap.org/news-highlights/spotlights/2025/russia-skirts-western-sanctions-to-ramp-up-its-military-footprint-in-africa/>

<sup>18</sup> "By August 2024, there were a reported 2,000 - 2,500 Africa Corps personnel deployed at various military sites in Libya" *The Soufan Center*, 31st March 2025. Available at <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-march-31/>

<sup>19</sup> "The developments [at Maaten al-Sarra] are consistent with Russia's strategy to establish multiple military bases in Libya, positioning them as a central hub for the African Corps command" *The New Arab*, 28th January 2025. Available at <https://www.newarab.com/news/russia-assert-africa-europe-power-libya-airbase-expansion>



Mapa 2. Russian Military facilities in Libya. Own Elaboration.

We cannot fail to mention Algeria, a country that has increased its cooperation with Russia in recent years, even holding joint military exercises. Although Algeria has been a strategic partner of Moscow since the 1960s, the increase in collaboration and, above all, fears that Russia could establish a naval base in the North African country have set off alarm bells. In recent months, Umm al-Assal<sup>20</sup> has served as a base for Russian MiG-29M2<sup>21</sup> fighter jets, prompting Algeria to upgrade its military facilities. Specifically, the Algiers government has been extending its runways, building ammunition arsenals and developing long-range radars.

These measures suggest Algiers is preparing the Umm al-Assal base for the arrival of state-of-the-art Russian aircraft<sup>22</sup>, such as the Sukhoi 34, 35 and 74<sup>23</sup>. Perhaps the point of most significant concern to the West in the relationship between Algiers and Moscow

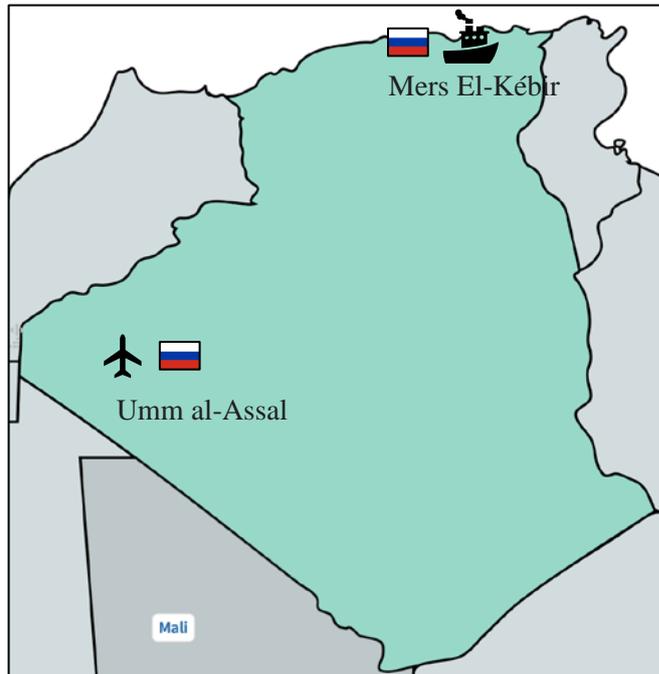
<sup>20</sup> "Russia Considers Building Ports in Several African Countries" *Northern Africa News*, 24th April 2024. Available at <https://nan.media/en/russia-considers-building-ports-in-several-african-countries/>

<sup>21</sup> CHARPENTREAU, Clement "Algerian MiG-29M2 spotted for the first time" *Aerotime*, 2nd February 2021.

<sup>22</sup> NIKOLOV, Boyco "Russian-backed Algerian MiG-29 base stirs Morocco border fears" *Bulgarian Military*. 10th October 2025

<sup>23</sup> DE LOYOLA, Esteban "Argelia, primer país africano que operará el Su-57E ruso" *El Confidencial Digital*, 8th October 2025.

is the naval base at Mers El-Kébir<sup>24</sup>, a port near Oran that is only 140 km from Almeria, within range of Russian short-range missiles such as those being used in Ukraine. For this reason, Russia has been investing money in this facility since 2021, as it not only hosts personnel permanently but also provides significant support for refuelling and repairing its submarines<sup>25</sup>.



Map 3. Russian military facilities in Algeria. Own Elaboration

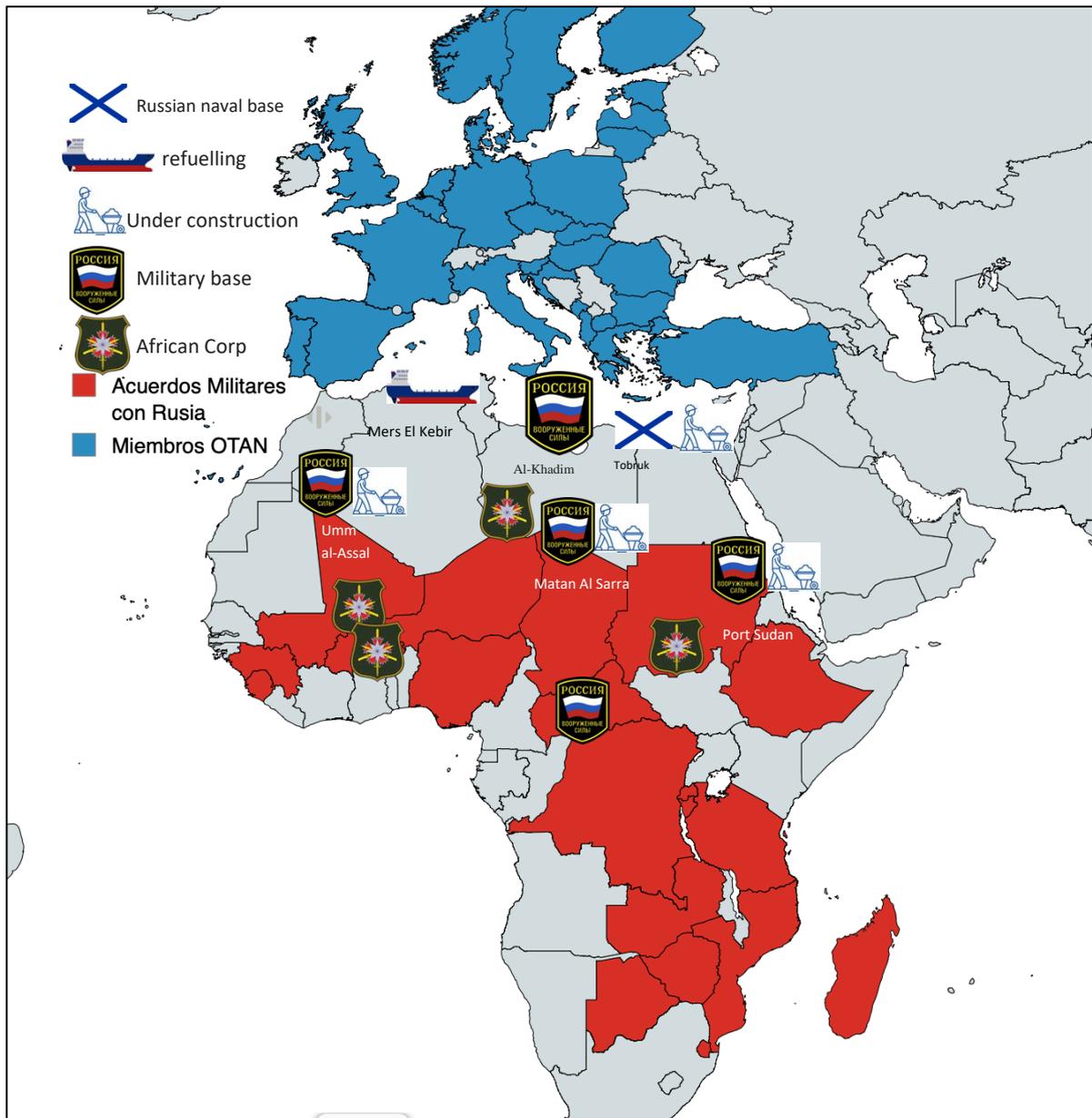
To complete the map of Russian military installations, it is worth noting that last February, Moscow and Khartoum signed an agreement to establish a military base in Port Sudan<sup>26</sup>. Beyond the Kremlin's current policy towards the Mediterranean, the installation of a base in the Red Sea is an old Russian ambition that it has been pursuing for more than 25 years. The facility being built there will serve as a supply point for Russian ships and also a barracks for 300 Russian soldiers, available for air transport to nearby locations<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Russia Eyes Naval Base in Algeria Near Moroccan Border” *Bladi.net*, 13 abril de 2021.

<sup>25</sup> ZOUBIR, Yahia “Algeria-Russia Ties: Beyond Military Cooperation?” *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, Issue Brief, January 2024. Disponible en <https://mecouncil.org/publication/algerian-russian-relations-military-cooperation/>

<sup>26</sup> PEYRONNET, Arnaud “Sudan, Russia’s new gateway to Africa and the Indian Ocean” 6th March 2021. *Fondation Méditerranéenne d’Études Stratégiques*. Available at <https://fmes-france.org/sudan-russias-new-gateway-to-africa-and-the-indian-ocean/>

<sup>27</sup> “The deal allows Russia to set up a naval base with up to 300 Russian soldiers, and also to simultaneously keep up to four navy ships, including nuclear-powered ones, in Port Sudan on the Red Sea” *Al Jazeera*, 2nd June 2021, Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/2/military-chief-says-sudan-reviewing-naval-base-deal-with-russia>



MAP 4: Russian deployment in Africa and the Mediterranean Sea

No traditional means: While it is true that we have seen how Russia uses conventional means to defend its interests in the Mediterranean, it is no less accurate that Moscow does not hesitate to use less traditional means to this end. Essentially, we are discussing emigration as a tool and the so-called 'ghost ships'.

Migration: As it has done in other places such as Finland<sup>28</sup> or Poland<sup>29</sup>, Russia is using migration as a weapon of war or, at least, as a means of destabilising European societies. To achieve this goal, it is essential to control those governments in whose territory the main south-north migratory movements originate or take place.

As mentioned above, since 2021, states such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have begun to replace their governments with others that are less democratic and more favourable to Moscow; their migration policies have become increasingly less cooperative with Europe. Particularly significant is the case of Niger, a state governed by a military junta whose first measure was to abolish the controversial Law 2015/36<sup>30</sup>, a legislative provision that prohibited the trafficking of migrants in Niger. The law mentioned above, which was developed with legal advice from the UNODC and financial support from the EU, was essentially an adaptation of the UN Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants.

In this strategy of using emigration as a weapon of war, we must highlight some of the military bases that Russia has established in the Sahel, as these locations are not only strategic military points but also key sites for controlling migratory flows. An example of this is the aforementioned Matan al-Sarra military base<sup>31</sup>, a site that, in addition to being a military installation, is an oasis used by mafias on their migration routes to Europe. From there, they follow a path through places where Russia has military installations until they reach the port of Tobruk, where they embark on their journey to Italy.

The first to raise the alarm about this phenomenon was Italian intelligence, which warned that Russia was using migration to destabilise European governments. In fact, Draghi's government fell in September 2022 due to a migration crisis originating in Libya, prompting Draghi and Conte to request a formal investigation into Russian interference in the process<sup>32</sup>. The investigation took on particular significance due to the use that

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<sup>28</sup> GERA, Vanesa "Por qué Finlandia culpa a Rusia de repentino arribo de migrantes a su frontera oriental" *Infobae*, 23th November 2023. Available at <https://www.infobae.com/america/mundo/2023/11/26/por-que-finlandia-culpa-a-rusia-de-repentino-arribo-de-migrantes-a-su-frontera-oriental/>

<sup>29</sup> DEUTSCHE WELLE "Polonia acusa a Moscú de orquestar crisis migratoria" 10th November 2021. Available at <https://www.dw.com/es/polonia-acusa-a-moscú-de-orquestar-crisis-migratoria/a-59773022>

<sup>30</sup> CLINGENDAEL "Niger's Repeal of the 2015/36 Anti-Smuggling Law", *Clingendael Alert*, July 2024. Available at [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Clingendael Alert Nigers Repeal of the 2015-36 Anti-Smuggling Law.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Clingendael%20Alert%20Nigers%20Repeal%20of%20the%202015-36%20Anti-Smuggling%20Law.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> MCGREGOR, Andrew "Today, Kufra (Matan al-Sarra) is an important staging point for illegal African migrants making for the Mediterranean coast and ultimately Europe" *Jamestown*, 17th April 2025. Disponible en <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-increasing-military-presence-in-africa-by-reviving-desert-airbase-in-the-libyan-sahara/>

<sup>32</sup> KEALNER, James "Thousands of migrants are being sent across the Mediterranean Sea from areas in Libya

Putin's ally, Matteo Salvini, made of the migration<sup>33</sup> crisis and the resulting shift in Italian politics.

Ghost ships: For several years now, Russia has been using a fleet of 'ghost ships' that appear to sail aimlessly from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. Although these ships were initially used to evade sanctions<sup>34</sup> imposed on Russia for its oil sales<sup>35</sup>, their functions extend beyond this task.

Regarding the oil, Russia utilises these flag-of-convenience<sup>36</sup> ships to conduct what is known as Ship-to-Ship (STS) transfers. In other words, a huge crude carrier (VLCC<sup>37</sup>) transfers Russian oil to another vessel exempt from sanctions in international waters, thereby avoiding controls. One of the preferred locations for these oil exchanges is the coast of Ceuta and Melilla. The port authorities of both cities are aware of these manoeuvres and, despite warning port operators that they are liable to sanctions if they facilitate the operation, there is nothing they can do, as the operation takes place outside the 12 miles of Spanish territorial waters. Once the oil has been laundered, it is transported freely to its destination — mainly India and China — where it is sold at prices well above the \$60 set by the sanctions. Thanks to this money, Russia can continue to maintain its war machine in Ukraine, as this activity accounts for 80% of Moscow's energy revenues, which translates into around €5 billion per year<sup>38</sup>.

As far as routes are concerned, those with the highest tonnage bypass Africa, while those with lower tonnage cross the Mediterranean, docking as necessary at ports established by Moscow<sup>39</sup> in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

In addition to transporting oil, which is estimated to account for 10%<sup>40</sup> of the world's total,

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controlled by the Wagner mercenary group" *The Telegraph*, 25th July 2025

<sup>33</sup> CRIPS, James "Collapse of Italian government 'plays into Putin's hands'" *The Telegraph*, 16 July 2022.

<sup>34</sup> "Russia Uses 'Ghost Fleet' to Evade Sanctions, Traffic Weapons Across Africa" *Africa Defence Forum*, 22nd April 2025. Available at <https://adf-magazine.com/2025/04/russia-uses-ghost-fleet-to-evade-sanctions-traffic-weapons-across-africa/>

<sup>35</sup> With the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the G7 forced Russia to sell oil below \$60 per barrel.

<sup>36</sup> Russia has a ghost fleet consisting of some 600 ships that are over 20 years old. The creator of this fleet was Timur Ivanov, who was arrested on corruption charges in 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Very Large Crude Oil Carrier

<sup>38</sup> "Qué es y cómo opera la "flota fantasma rusa" que mantiene en vilo a Occidente" *Infobae*, 29th December 2024.

<sup>39</sup> "Economía rusa: la flota fantasma de Moscú está más expuesta que nunca a las sanciones" *Le Grand Continent*, 11th May 2025. Available at <https://legrandcontinent.eu/es/2025/05/11/economia-rusa-la-flota-fantasma-de-moscu-esta-mas-expuesta-que-nunca-a-las-sanciones/>

<sup>40</sup> MUÑOZ ABAD, Rafael "El fenómeno de la flota fantasma y sus riesgos para España" *Real Instituto Elcano*. 28 July 2025. Available at <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/el-fenomeno-de-la-flota->

the ghost fleet has been used for other purposes such as transporting weapons to places like Syria, Libya and Ukraine, and sabotaging Western interests.

It is well known that the Russian ghost fleet is not limited to oil transport exclusively. Other functions performed by these ships include sabotage, surveillance and the transport of drones. In the case of sabotage, there have been several incidents involving vessels from the Russian ghost fleet. The most famous of these incidents occurred in December 2024, when the Finnish navy captured one of the Russian 'ghost fleet' ships, the Eagle S, as it was preparing to cut the Estlink 2<sup>41</sup> submarine cable connecting Finland to the rest of the European continent with its anchor. Although fortunately they failed, the aim was to leave Finland without power on Christmas Day, when Europeans flock to Rovaniemi, the city of Santa Claus. Espionage is another task carried out by this fleet. An example of these actions can be found in *Vyazma*<sup>42</sup>, a tanker linked to the Russian Operational Unit that usually moves between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, and has been immobilised on several occasions due to charges of carrying out espionage activities on behalf of the Russian government.

The third of these activities is the transport of drones that flooded the airspace of several European states in September. On 22 September, the French navy intercepted a tanker flying the flag of Benin, the Bocaray<sup>43</sup>, for its involvement in the deployment of drones in Poland and Denmark<sup>44</sup>. This arms transport work has resulted in the loss of several ships for Russia, which, according to Moscow, have suffered various acts of sabotage. In total, Russia has lost five ghost ships in unexplained incidents or accidents. Of these five events, four<sup>45</sup> have occurred in the Mediterranean, which gives us an idea of the tension in the area. These are the four incidents that happened in the Mediterranean.

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[fantasma-y-sus-riesgos-para-espana/](#)

<sup>41</sup> BOCKMANN, Michelle W., "Dark fleet tanker reportedly detained off Finland after undersea cable cut" *Lloyd's List*, 26th December 2024. Available at <https://www.lloydlist.com/LL1151949/Dark-fleet-tanker-reportedly-detained-off-Finland-after-undersea-cable-cut>

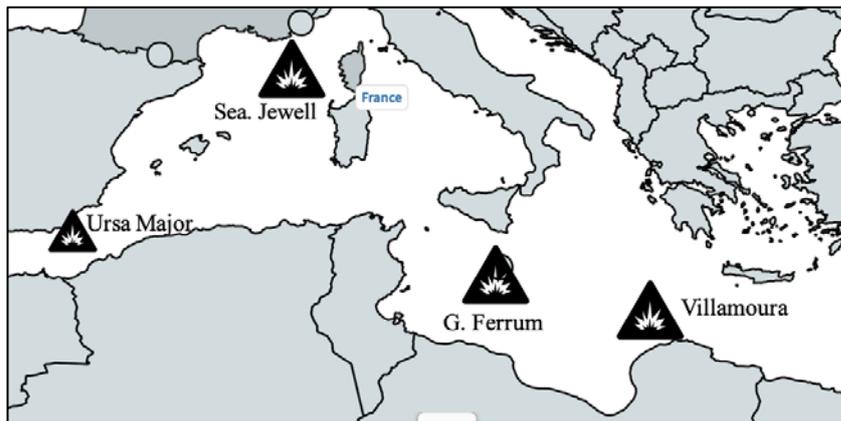
<sup>42</sup> FRESNEDA, Carlos, "Cerco a los barcos de Putin en el Mediterráneo" *El Mundo*, 19th July 2025. Available at <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2025/07/18/687a7bcb21efa0aa2a8b4590.html>

<sup>43</sup> SCHOFIELD, Hugh "French troops board oil tanker linked to Russian 'shadow fleet'" *BBC*, 1st October 2025. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2j1gynjddo>

<sup>44</sup> "Francia abordó un petrolero ruso de la "flota fantasma" que estaría vinculado a los drones detectados en Dinamarca" *Infobae* 1st October 2025. Available at <https://www.infobae.com/america/mundo/2025/10/01/francia-abordo-un-petrolero-ruso-de-la-flota-fantasma-que-estaria-vinculado-a-los-drones-detectados-en-dinamarca/>

<sup>45</sup> "Una ola de sospechosas explosiones de petroleros recorre el Mediterráneo" *El Mercantil*, 4th July de 2025.

The first of these incidents took place on 27 June 2025<sup>46</sup> and involved the ship *Vilamoura* (Liberian flag), which was sunk off the Libyan coast near Zuwentina. The second was that of the *Seajewel* (Panamanian flag) and occurred on 15 February 2025<sup>47</sup> in the Italian port of Savona-Vado. The third incident was the sabotage of the *Grace Ferrum*, which occurred on 20 March 2025<sup>48</sup> in the port of Tripoli. The last was the sinking of the *Ursa Major*, which occurred on 24 December 2024<sup>49</sup> just 57 miles off the coast of Almería.



Map 5. Incidents involving Russian ghost ships in the Mediterranean. Own Elaboration

## Conclusions

Since the fall of the USSR and, in particular, the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe, Russia has increased its presence in the Mediterranean both qualitatively and quantitatively. While during the Soviet period the Mediterranean Sea was an area of little influence for Moscow, it has now become a priority area for Russia, which sees opportunities to open a second front with Europe. NATO's penetration into what Moscow considered its near abroad has turned the Mediterranean into a strategic asset of the first

<sup>46</sup> "Explosive device likely damaged Greek tanker (*Vilamoura*) off Libya last week" *Reuters*, 6th July 2025.

Disponible en <https://www.reuters.com/world/explosive-device-likely-damaged-greek-tanker-off-libya-last-week-operator-says-2025-07-06/>

<sup>47</sup> BARKHUSH, Amira "Explosions Damage Russian Shadow Fleet Oil Tanker *Seajewel* in Italian Port" *United 24*, 18th Febreo 2025. Disponible en <https://united24media.com/latest-news/explosions-damage-russian-shadow-fleet-oil-tanker-seajewel-in-italian-port-5979>

<sup>48</sup> "The Liberia-flagged chemical and products tanker *Grace Ferrum* was damaged off Libya in February, three sources said, with one adding that the vessel would require a salvage operation" *Reuters*, 19th Febrero 2025. Disponible en <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/three-tankers-damaged-by-blasts-mediterranean-last-month-causes-unknown-sources-2025-02-19/>

<sup>49</sup> "Rusia afirma que el hundimiento de su barco entre España y Argelia fue un acto terrorista", *El País*, 24th December 2024. Disponible en <https://elpais.com/internacional/2024-12-25/rusia-afirma-que-el-hundimiento-de-su-barco-entre-espana-y-argelia-fue-un-acto-terrorista.html>

order. However, despite Russia's desire to influence this area, Moscow has not only failed to solve its infrastructure problems but has actually increased them. Specifically, I am referring to the lack of ports where its ships can be repaired and resupplied in the Mediterranean. The loss of the Tartus naval base has precipitated events, forcing Russia to seek alternatives in places such as Libya and Algeria.

This lack of capacity has significantly conditioned its strategy in the region. Russia's inability to influence Mediterranean countries has led Moscow to focus on the Sahel. This area has become a hotbed of instability, reaching Europe via the Mediterranean and destabilising societies on the old continent. Migration, drug and terrorism issues are shaking up traditional electoral bases, opening up options for extreme parties closer to the Kremlin's interests.

On the other hand, the international organisations responsible for European security – NATO and the EU – are divided over whether to focus their efforts on the southern or eastern flank. In this regard, the Nordic countries and the CEECs believe that all budgetary efforts should be focused on the Russian threat, while those in the south are committed to addressing the challenges coming from North Africa. The reality is that these are complementary realities, as the Sahel has its own problems, which have been exacerbated by Russian action in the area.

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