



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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A MYSTERIOUS MISSION FOR RUSSIA'S NEW DRONE

A Russian aviation blog has leaked the first public images of Russia's new heavy attack drone, and the pictures have prompted more questions than answers. The images confirmed that the Okhotnik, or "Hunter," has a flat-wing design resembling the U.S. B-2 stealth bomber. Yet while the wing design suggests prioritization of stealth capabilities for the slow-moving drone, defense industry sources in Moscow have previously asserted that the Okhotnik will serve as the prototype for Russia's new sixth-generation fighter jet – suggesting that some kind of air-to-air combat mission for the UAV is also envisioned. Despite Russia's past history of unverified claims about its aircraft, some analysts are reconciling the seemingly contradictory missions for the drone with the hypothesis that the Russian military may intend to pair its advanced fighter jets with swarms of Okhotnik drones as decoys or bomb trucks. (*Business Insider*, January 24, 2019)

THE KREMLIN AND THE CRISIS IN CARACAS

As a new political chapter kicks off in Venezuela, Russia is working to shore up its long-time partner, embattled Venezuelan strongman Nicolas Maduro. Multiple anonymous sources say that, prior to the recent massive protests and opposition leader Juan Guaido's self-declaration as president, small groups of Russian contractors arrived in Venezuela via Cuba. Although the Kremlin has refused to comment on the matter, flight tracking data obtained by the Reuters news agency indicates multiple Russian government aircraft indeed landed in the region in the past several weeks, although the planes' passengers or cargo remain unconfirmed.

The contractors are reportedly affiliated with the Wagner Group, a paramilitary organization that has increasingly acted as the Russian government's covert foreign policy arm abroad. The contractors' mission, sources say, is to provide physical protection to Maduro and prevent his detention by any opposition sympathizers in the Venezuelan security forces. (Reuters, January 25, 2019)

MOSCOW'S TRASH TROUBLES

A remote town in Russia's far north is fighting a plan to transform its forests into a garbage dump for Moscow. In an effort to relieve the environmental burden on Russia's capital, officials are laying the groundwork to transport half a million tons of trash annually by train to Shies, a small town outside Arkhangelsk, and dump it in a newly constructed mega-landfill. Arkhangelsk officials cite their \$500 million budget deficit as proof that the region cannot afford to reject the infrastructure investment that the landfill will bring.

Local residents, however, have responded with fury, accusing the authorities of deception and a misplaced belief that the town's remoteness would silence their opposition. Tens of thousands of local residents have already joined protests against the dump, and activists remain determined to continue. Their complaints are bolstered by environmentalists who point to the hazards of staging the dump in Shies, given the likelihood for widespread contamination if effluence leaks via the Dvina River into the White Sea and up into the Arctic. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 31, 2019)

NO CARE FOR THE ELDERLY

Russian President Vladimir Putin's efforts to "optimize" the country's health system are leaving its elderly citizens out in the cold. "In the Russian capital itself, the authorities have now shut down the only hospital in the Russian Federation devoted exclusively to the treatment of diseases among the elderly civilian and military, a hospital that had been helped up to 10,000 patients a year, according to its medical staff," writes Paul Goble in his *Window on Eurasia* blog. "The hospital was erected in 1956, and it long was a center in the Soviet Union and then Russia for leading specialists in the disease of the aging. But its destruction began in 2013 when Putin launched his health 'optimization' program to save money on the treatment of the population... The powers that be without consulting patients, doctors or people in the neighborhood closed many of the specialized units of the hospital and allowed the building to fall into disrepair, apparently so that they could justify their current plans to demolish it entirely and force patients to go elsewhere." (*Window on Eurasia*, February 4, 2019)