



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Science and Technology; SPACE; Russia

RUSSIA'S SPACE CHIEF: VENUS A "RUSSIAN PLANET"

After news broke that phosphine gas, a potential indicator of life on other planets, was discovered by scientists in the atmosphere above Venus, Dmitry Rogozin, the head of Russia's ROSCOSMOS space agency, wasted no time in claiming the planet for the Motherland. Venus, Rogozin announced, is a "Russian planet."

While the remark has generated widespread incredulity in the West, Rogozin's claim actually harkens back to earlier milestones in space exploration. In 1970, just over a year after American astronauts set foot on the Moon, the Soviet Union successfully landed the first of several spacecraft on the surface of Venus. Five years later, the Soviets beamed the only image ever taken on Venus' surface back to Earth. According to commentary from ROSCOSMOS, the gulf between Soviet and American exploration of the planet was so large during the Cold War that Americans took to referring to Venus as "The Soviet Planet." (*CBS News*, September 17, 2020)

SPY CHIEF ANNOUNCES DESTRUCTION OF NOVICHOK STOCKPILES

In a public show of compliance with international norms on chemical weapons, Russia's spy chief has announced his country's destruction of all Novichok stockpiles, the nerve agent believed by experts in the west to have been used to poison opposition politician Alexei Navalny last month. Sergei Naryshkin, former Chairman of the State Duma and current head of the country's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), claimed the step was taken to vindicate Russia in any future incidents involving the Novichok group of chemical weapons.

However, Naryshkin made clear, the move wasn't intended as any sort of admission in the Navalny case. In fact, according to the FSB chief, Navalny had no poison in his system when he was transferred from a Russian hospital in Omsk to a facility in Berlin for treatment. The Kremlin has steadfastly denied any involvement in Navalny's poisoning. (*RBC*, September 15, 2020)

NAVALNY TEAM SHEDS LIGHT ON TOMSK POISONING

Navalny's compatriots, meanwhile, are disclosing more details in their mentor's poisoning. Mere hours after Navalny fell ill on a flight from Omsk to Moscow, members of his Anti-Corruption League organization searched his vacated hotel room for the cause. In it, they found disposable water bottles that had purportedly been consumed by Navalny, and that evidence was carefully packaged and sent on to Germany. Those water bottles are believed to have played a key role in identifying the Soviet nerve agent Novichok as the substance that poisoned the dissident.

As to who actually was directly responsible for Navalny falling ill, that remains a mystery. The hallway outside Navalny's hotel room was monitored by two surveillance cameras, but the footage for the hours before his departure was seized by authorities and has not been made public. (*Meduza*, September 17, 2020)

FACIAL RECOGNITION EXPANDING ON MOSCOW METRO

Moscow's ever-expanding surveillance capabilities will receive a boost next year with the upgrade and expansion of camera systems located on the city's underground metro system, one of the largest in the world. Maxim Liksutov, Moscow's Deputy Mayor for Transport, recently announced plans to implement the world's first pay-by-face fare system on the metro, where patrons simply need to step up to a turnstile and stare into a camera to gain access. Liksutov's goal is to install a pay-by-face option at every metro station by early 2021. In addition, 12,300 new facial recognition cameras are being installed on metro cars throughout the system by the end of this year. In recent years, approximately 200,000 cameras have been installed throughout the Russian capital. (*The Moscow Times*, September 18, 2020)