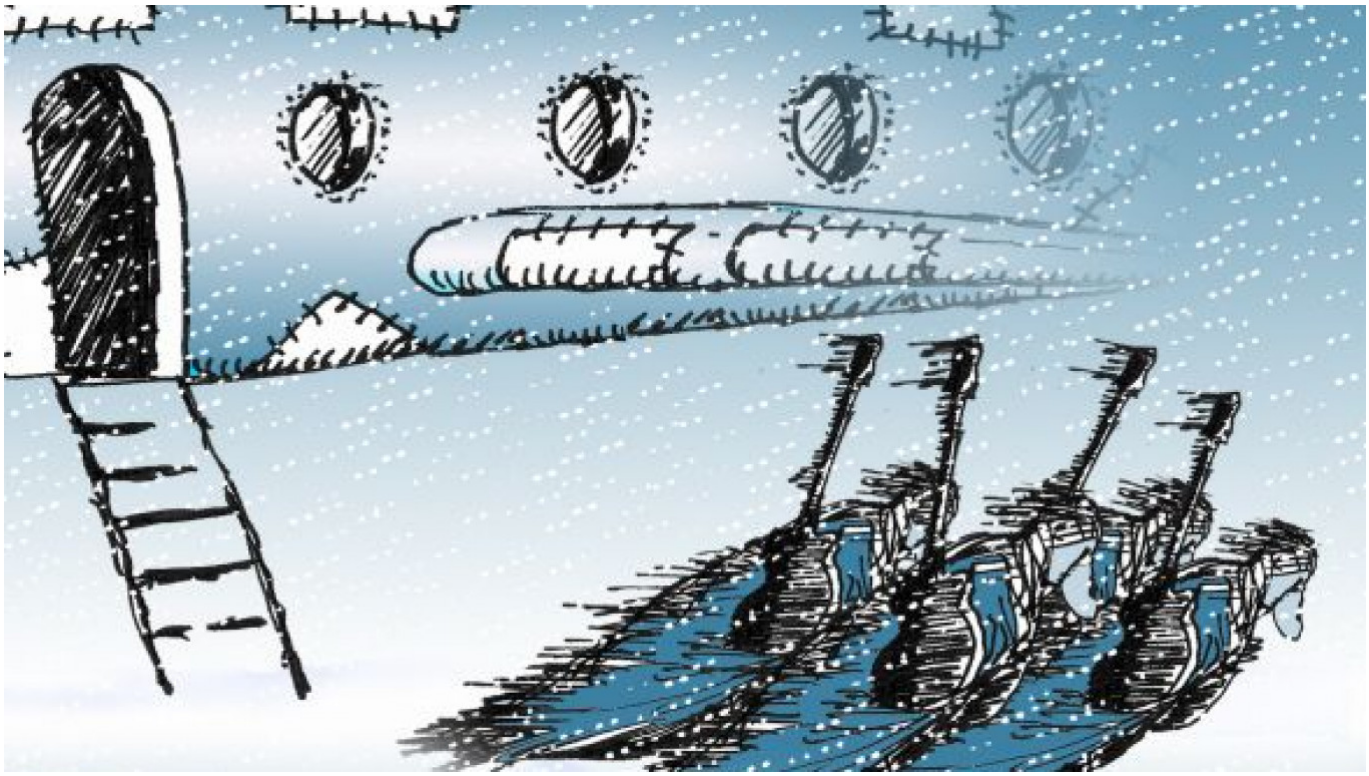
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In the Spotlight: Planes That Catch Fire

By Anna Malpas

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On New Year's Day, one of Russia's oldest pop groups, Na-Na, was preparing to fly back to Moscow in a creaky old plane after giving a concert in the oil town of Surgut in West Siberia. It was not the most auspicious start to the year, and things went from bad to worse.

The 27-year-old plane from the obscure airline KogalymAvia caught fire just before taking off from Surgut's airport, killing three people and injuring more than 40 others. Na-Na were traveling business class and managed to escape, even if their luggage, passports and, sadly, their wages in cash burned up.

In a surreal turn of events, Na-Na musicians became the main witnesses of the accident to the media, even getting quoted on the BBC.

In another uncharacteristically solemn move, they wrote a letter to President Dmitry Medvedev asking him to decorate the brave aircrew members who managed to open emergency exits in thick smoke and darkness, as people trampled on them in panic.

Na-Na has been around as a group since 1989, when they were big-haired New Romantic

types, experimenting with single gloves and ripped women's tights, and even singing live. The video to their greatest hit, "Faina," has guns, a simulated orgy and people eating food off the naked body of singer Vladimir Politov.

Now they are cleaner-cut and wear hideous black-and-yellow shirts and waistcoats to replay the old hits. You might not recognize many of the members, three of whom joined in 2008. The only original member is Politov, now 40, who has become quite an establishment figure, with Interior Ministry medals for performing in Chechnya.

The band probably wins the honors as the oldest Russian boy band, although it has tough competition from Ivanushki International, a manufactured pop group formed in 1994 that still clings onto its youth, even though the oldest member is 41.

More famous than the musicians is the band's eccentric impresario, Bari Alibasov, a tireless self-publicist who likes to be photographed with his collection of toilets, which he displays in his living room. This year, he held a public rehearsal of his funeral in a crematorium. He also sued a blogger for calling him a "Kazakh-Tatar gastarbeiter," arguing that he cannot be called a guest worker in his own country — and winning 1.1 million rubles ($36,500) in damages.

Na-Na was innovative when it started out, experimenting with Western-style merchandising including Na-Na chewing gum and underwear, Alibasov told 7 Dnei magazine two years ago, reclining in his incredibly tasteless apartment with split-level floors covered with tufted carpet and a zebra-print bed.

The accident exposed the exhausting travel and incredibly unglamorous destinations that make up the daily life of a Russian pop star.

Na-Na said in their letter to Medvedev that they had flown to Surgut from Mineralniye Vody, a resort in the North Caucasus, the day before the air crash — a grueling round trip. You have to give it to the band: They are seasoned troopers. Amazingly, they went back to Surgut for another concert five days after the crash.

On their web site, you can see a video of them playing at a club and thanking the crew members, who look rather stiff and dressed up, sitting at a table loaded with bottles.

It wasn't the only news over the holidays that evoked the loneliness of the long-distance traveling pop stars. The singer of Boney M, Bobby Farrell, still inexplicably popular in Russia, was found dead from a heart attack in a hotel room in St. Petersburg. In a sad detail, he had just played at a party for a Gazprom affiliate.

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