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Putin Disrupts, But Air Show Goes On

By Roland Oliphant

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The Russian Knights and Swifts aerobatic teams performing together at the MAKS air show at the Zhukovsky airfield outside Moscow on Wednesday. **Nikolay Korchekov**

ZHUKOVSKY, Moscow Region — A police officer politely raised his arms and shook his head as a group of suited men wearing exhibitor badges strolled toward the pavilions where their stands were located.

"It's closed," he said — which was confusing because five minutes ago there had been no police officer on this bustling central path at the MAKS air show.

The officer had appeared like a frowning ghost in the middle of the crowded thoroughfare.

"Why can't we go down there?" a guest asked.

"I can't say."

"How long is it going to be blocked off?"

“I can’t say.”

A reporter walking in the opposite direction to file a story — aware that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was slated to drop by the show Wednesday afternoon to preside over $1 billion worth of deals and watch Russia’s first stealth fighter take to the skies — was able to recognize the signs of an impending Putin visit.

The suspicion was confirmed when, asked whether the path was closed for Putin, the police officer simply pretended not to have heard.

But the reporter was soon as stymied as the businessmen.

The press center — with the only accessible Internet-connected computers around — had been commandeered by the prime minister’s press service.

A young blonde in a see-through blouse and reflector shades, who seemed to have some kind of authority, repeated the police officer’s line when asked how long the disruption might last.

“We announced this morning that there would be a technical break between 1 and 3 o’clock,” she said defensively.

“Technical break” — bureaucratic code for stopping work for undisclosed reasons — was an interesting way of describing Putin’s visit.

As columns of policemen fanned out across the grounds, visitors found themselves stranded and a little confused as routes were cut off. A sense of limbo set in over the parched sun-baked field.

Visitors caught inside the security cordon were unable to leave until well into the evening. Exhausted employees of Russian and foreign aviation firms were still making their way home after 8 p.m.

Nonetheless, business continued throughout the day. Putin presided over the two most patriotic deals, as state-owned Gazprom Avia ordered planes and helicopters from domestic manufacturers.

In Putin’s presence, Gazprom Avia, the airline owned by the gas monopoly, signed an agreement to buy 10 of Sukhoi Civil Aviation’s new Superjet 100 regional airliners.

Gazprom is buying the 100/95LR variant of the Superjet, which has a longer range than the standard model. The new aircraft, which will be delivered between 2013 and 2015, will allow Gazprom to retire its aging Yak-42 jets, the company said in a statement.

The company also ordered 39 MI-8AMT passenger and cargo helicopters from Russian Helicopters. The choppers will be delivered between 2012 and 2016 and will be used to service gas fields and the pipeline network, the company said.

Neither side mentioned the price of the deals.

Other companies quietly got on with business without the prime minister’s help. Canada’s

Bombadier signed a deal to sell Ilyushin Finance three CS100 and seven CS300 aircraft, with an option to supply another 10 of the same planes at a later date. The catalog cost for one C300 is $66 million.

Ukraine's state-owned Antonov Corp. agreed on a timetable for upgrading the Volga-Dnepr freight carrier's 10 An-124 cargo planes, the companies said Wednesday. Volga-Dnepr is the largest civilian operator of the An-124, a monstrous 36-meter-long Soviet-era design that is the only plane on the planet capable of shifting 150-ton loads.

But defense, usually a major element of the MAKS show, has a low profile this year — even though equipment ranging from radar and guidance systems to surface-to-air missiles and predator drones is on display.

"No arms contracts will be signed at this exhibition. I can guarantee you this," Anatoly Isaikin, head of state arms exporter Rosoboronexport, told journalists Wednesday.

He also mentioned that Rosoboronexport lost as much as $4 billion in interrupted and lost contracts as a result of the arms embargo against Libya earlier this year and promised to continue supplying weapons to Syria despite a direct appeal from the United States last week to stop.

"There were deliveries of arms to Syria last year, and there will be deliveries this year. They will continue," he said.

The T-50 fighter, Russia's answer to the U.S. F-22, took to the skies for its first public flight as Putin looked on. But the plane, co-developed with India, is unlikely to start garnering orders before 2015.

Rosoboronexport does plan to sign an agreement with Sagem, which is part of Safran Group, regarding the formation of a joint venture to develop and produce inertial systems, Isaikin told reporters.

Research and development was also in evidence in the civilian sector on Wednesday.

The United Aircraft Corporation, the state-owned company that includes several of the country's top aircraft makers, signed agreements with the Kompozit Holding, Rusnano and VIAM to develop and produce composite polymers.

The ultimate aim is to produce carbon fibers to use in UAC's civilian and military aircraft.

Composite materials are lighter than traditional aluminum, which many believe will eventually be replaced. The first airliner built almost entirely of Polymers, Boeing's 787 Dreamliner, made its Russian debut at the air show.

Carlo Logli, chief executive of Superjet International, the Russian-Italian joint venture responsible for international sales of the Superjet 100, told The Moscow Times that composite materials are still too expensive to be used by makers of smaller, regional airliners, who often sell to customers with tighter budgets.

Meanwhile, the merger of the Sheremetyevo and Vnukovo airports came a step closer to

reality.

A Vnukovo official announced that City Hall's shares in the airport would be transferred to the federal government by October or November, Interfax reported.

The government plans to merge Vnukovo with state-owned Sheremetyevo Airport before privatizing the newly united company.

Also Wednesday the Federal Air Transportation Agency annulled the operating certificate of the RusAir airline, Interfax reported.

The airline's license to operate was suspended for three months after 44 people died when a Tu-134 operated by the airline crashed in Petrozavodsk in June.

Interfax said the certificate could still be reinstated if RusAir can address its safety issues to the agency's satisfaction.

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