

Putin Likes Palaces More Than Outer Space

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The fascinating images that the U.S. Curiosity Mars mission has beamed back to Earth have generated as much excitement as photos of half-naked supermodels.

Many Russian observers were quick to point out that the start of Curiosity Mars activity coincided with the latest accident in the Russian space program: Yet another Proton rocket booster crashed, taking with it another payload of satellites intended for orbit. It was the seventh failed launch in the last 20 months.

This result was inevitable considering that Federal Space Agency head Vladimir Popovkin had gained notoriety for bashing a man over the head with a bottle at a recent corporate party. It seems both had been vying for the attention of top model Anna Vedishcheva, whom Popovkin had hired as his spokeswoman.

The Americans can boast that they have the Mars rover, while the Russians are left with Popovkin.

A little over a year ago, the RadioAstron telescope was launched into space from the Baikonur Cosmodrome. Everyone has heard of the Hubble Space Telescope that explores distant galaxies, quasars and other amazing cosmological phenomena. What most people don't know is that the RadioAstron telescope is 1,000 times more accurate than the Hubble. It is a truly remarkable scientific achievement.

RadioAstron was originally an international project, but after a number of participants withdrew, practically everything was accomplished by Russian scientists led by distinguished astrophysicist Nikolai Kardashev. What's more, it was accomplished with very little money and scientific support.

RadioAstron achieved such incredible imaging resolution with a simple technique called triangulation. Put briefly, if you use two devices in different locations to measure the angle to a particular source of radiation, the greater the distance between the two devices, the more accurate the resulting measurement. RadioAstron is essentially a network. The radio telescope itself is located in extremely high orbit and is linked with Earth stations through a technique known as Very Long Baseline Interferometry, or VLBI. Together, they effectively create a single radio telescope 350,000 kilometers in diameter.

Members of the political opposition often complain that I rarely write about positive news coming out of Russia. But why doesn't the official state media write positive news?

For example, how much coverage has state-controlled television given to the launch and operation of RadioAstron or the incredible work carried out by Kardashev?

Russia's science sector is a disaster, but it is not as bad as we are led to believe by the official media.

I think that this attitude toward science is primarily a result of the worldview held by the ruling elite, and their worldview is defined by what President Vladimir Putin either encourages or discourages.

The problem is that Putin's ideological horizons apparently extend no further than the 15th century. The interests of such a ruler, presumably sent by God to preside over his people, are confined to palaces, feasts and the quest for eternal life.

Putin is in favor of oligarchs and even government officials buying yachts, private jets and professional sports teams. His philosopher's stone is Russia's immense natural resource wealth. As for eternal life, an Russian aluminum magnate is reportedly buying overseas patents on medicine that is supposed to increase a person's life span.

Science is simply not part of Putin's worldview, and so an extraordinary radio telescope that can see into the farthest reaches of space is not even a blip on his tiny radar screen.

Yulia Latynina hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvyy radio.

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