

Top 10 News Stories Over New Year's Holidays

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The wreckage a Russian jet that veered off Vnukovo's runway and split into three pieces after landing on Dec. 29. **Alexander Usoltsev**

The events that unfolded throughout the long holiday break — from a plane crash to attempts to find clarity for child adoptions by U.S. parents to a new formidable submarine entering service — have possessed a magnitude that would better befit a busy news week.

While some of them likely filled Russians with pride, a good companion for a nationwide break that lasted from Dec. 29 to Jan. 9, others were more controversial, and the deadly plane crash definitely cast a dark cloud on the celebrations. For many newspapers including The Moscow Times, the off-time lasted a few days longer than the official holiday stretch.

In a round-up of the top 10 news themes over that period, one of the most prominent spots goes to the attempts to grasp the finer points of the law that banned U.S. citizens from adopting Russian orphans.

President Vladimir Putin on Dec. 28 signed off on the bill that introduced the restriction, evoking a statement of "deep regret" from the U.S. State Department later in the day.

Effective from Jan. 1, the measure is part of Russia's lightning response to the Magnitsky Act that President Barack Obama signed earlier last month. The U.S. legislation seeks to punish Russian officials suspected of committing human rights violations.

The Foreign Ministry blamed the adoptions ban on the lethal mistreatment of several Russian orphans at the hands of American adopters. It said at least 19 Russian orphans had died since 1996 after crossing the ocean, describing the number as the "tip of the iceberg."

Russia on Jan. 1 also tore up an agreement with the United States that allowed diplomats to check on American adoptive families. The U.S. has become home for more than 60,000 Russian children over the past 20 years, according to the U.S. State Department.

The changes bred a fair amount of misunderstanding, causing Russian officials to explain over the next few days how they saw the issue going forward.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Americans would still be able to take home orphans in adoptions that were backed by court decisions last year.

The Foreign Ministry said the diplomatic supervision agreement would stay in force this year to comply with the terms of its termination.

Another news that gained wide coverage here and abroad was about French actor Gerard Depardieu, who got a Russian passport after protesting against the plan in his home country to slap an ultra high tax on the super rich like himself. In a move that may have pleased the actor's fans here, Putin in a decree bestowed Russian citizenship on Depardieu on Jan. 3. The two had dinner in Putin's Novo-Ogaryovo home outside Moscow a couple of days later.

As the story unfolded, Depardieu called Russia a "great democracy" and flew to Saransk, the capital of the Mordovia Republic, where the local governor gave him a present: an apartment. Some commentators, such as Sberbank CEO German Gref, noted that Depardieu's choice attested to the high quality of the country's tax system.

Critics suspected foul play on the part of the government. Vladimir Gridin, chairman of the Yabloko party's Mordovia branch, released an open letter to Depardieu, where he asserted that the decision to give him a Russian passport sought to deflect attention from the discussion of the anti-adoption law. Gridin also asked the actor about his thoughts on the law.

The fatal crash of the Tu-204 airliner on Dec. 29 not only sent the holiday break off to a bad start, but also corroborated the dangers of flying Russian aircraft or with a Russian crew.

The Red Wings plane overshot the runway at Vnukovo Airport, rammed through a fence and rolled out onto Kievskoye Shosse, where it caught fire and fell apart. The death toll from the accident stands at five. All eight people onboard at the time were crew members.

The Interstate Aviation Committee is investigating the crash, whose preliminary cause is reported to be a pilot error.

Transaero, the country's second-biggest passenger airline, announced Friday it had suspended flights by its Tu-214 aircraft, similar to the one that crashed, replacing them with Boeings. The decision is in force until the authorities announce the results of the investigation into the accident.

The corruption scandal at the Defense Ministry also produced some news in the period. The most prominent figure in the investigation of suspected fraud, former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, has twice reported for questioning as a witness — and both times he refused to speak. After the last such appearance, on Friday, investigators threatened his status in the case could be changed to 'suspect.'

As if in a damage control effort, the government demonstrated its high defense achievements by showing off a new nuclear-powered submarine. The Yury Dolgoruky entered into service in the Northern Fleet last week as the first of the latest class of submarines that will be key to Russia's nuclear deterrent over decades to come. Seven more of these Borei-class submarines are scheduled to join the Navy by the end of 2020.

There was a handful of other news over the period.

A senior prison doctor who was the only remaining defendant in the death of Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky was fully acquitted by a jury Dec. 28. Dmitry Kratov, former deputy head of Butyrka prison in charge of medical affairs, was found not guilty of negligence by Moscow's Tverskoi District Court.

On Jan. 10, police removed a banner on the bridge opposite the Kremlin that featured the ruling United Russia party's logo alongside the phrase "extremist organizations of Russia." The banner also showed the logos of several banned organizations, such as radical National Bolshevik Party, the far right National Unity movement, the black Islamist flag and even the star of Satan.

Rosneft has appointed a young son of Russia's ambassador in China as its chief representative in the country, a news report said Friday. Sergei Razov, 24 years old, will take charge of Rosneft's office in China, where the company's joint venture looks to build a refinery and gas stations, Vedomosti reported. In addition, China is buying an impressive amount of crude from Rosneft under a 20-year contract.

A Cambodian court ruled to hold businessman Sergei Polonsky in jail indefinitely as police are investigating his New Year's celebrations in the Southeast Asian country. Polonsky's Twitter account carried a statement saying he got in trouble after shooting fireworks on an uninhabited island and the failure to produce his ID during a subsequent check by the military. Police documents said, however, that Polonsky, who was detained Dec. 30, threatened the captain of a boat that picked him and his friends at the island to take them to the mainland, and ordered some of the crew to jump overboard, the Phnom Penh Post reported.

Four State Duma deputies on Dec. 28 threatened to ban foreigners from state television if they utter discrediting remarks about the country. The proposal was made in a letter to Vladimir Pozner, ostensibly to punish the popular Channel One show host after he argued that the Duma made a laughing stock of the country by voting for the adoption ban. Born

in France, Pozner holds U.S. and French citizenship.

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- [Depardieu Weighs In on Russian Politics](#)
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