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Weekly Wrap: Space Monkeys and Free Vodka

By Unfair Observer

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Russia suffered its first casualty in Syria this week, only the Defense Ministry said he was a victim of unrequited love. Vadim Kostenko, 19, came home from Latakia in a zinc coffin, the army confirming his death only after everybody else and their grandma reported it. The army also said he hanged himself because he was dumped by his girlfriend (she denied it).

Kostenko hanged himself in an unorthodox fashion: Relatives say his face was smashed in, his head had an extra hole, and his knees were "ground away." The Defense Ministry adamantly refused to do another forensic check and said any claims of foul play are "insinuations."

So your boy comes back from a war zone ground to a pulp — of course he hanged himself over a girl. It's true if an official says it. Just like it's true that the Russian army was not involved in the annexation of Crimea. Just like there was nobody fighting in the Donbass but people's militias with weaponry so expensive the Ukrainian army would have to pawn the kidneys of the entire nation to afford the same. Just like Russia is bombing the Islamic State in Syria

and not the moderate enemies of Assad, and geography be damned. Just like the Russian elections are free and the courts are fair.

The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. What do you mean you don't trust Russian officials?

Privacy Over Property

The fight for integrity was also raging at home this week, but luckily, the Kremlin was up to par. The scandal broke out in the Chelyabinsk region in the Urals, where a local deputy governor was recorded on tape demanding that a local company hand over two four-wheel drives — free of charge — because the governor needed them to "drive around the f--king region."

The office of the governor is indeed struggling: It used to have a helicopter for the boss to fly around in, but the previous head honcho got the boot and the copter was auctioned off because it was deemed too obnoxious even by Russian standards. The solution — extort some cars from people who have them — raised some eyebrows as well, so the Kremlin weighed in.

The only problem here, however, is that somebody recorded the conversation, violating the official's privacy, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. When asked if he saw anything wrong with the official's demand, he said no, he did not.

And that sort of makes my amusement at that trooper's "suicide" in Syria stupid, in retrospect. If integrity is not obstructing an extorting official, then of course, truth is calling a mutilated body a hangman.

Oh, and I have some seeds for a money tree to sell you.

The Ape Planet

In news so different it might as well have come from another planet, the Russian space agency said it is training four monkeys to go to Mars. By 2017, the macaques will be able to solve mathematical problems and ready to go where only Matt Damon dares to tread, researchers promised. Pack leader Klyopa is already learning how to handle a spaceship joystick.

And really, this is great news, because it indicates a serious, rather than ambitious approach — you know, the usual pledges to colonize Mars by 2018 and Uranus by 2025 that Russian officials and Western space companies are so fond of.

Doing space research on animals is an old and sensible practice; long before Gagarin, there were the mongrels Belka and Strelka, and the United States was chucking monkeys into orbit in the 1950s like they expected to hit a space banana plantation.

Of course, now it's mostly countries like Iran that give monkeys space tickets — the Iranian ambassador even offered interviews with one primate who made it home back in 2013. But let's not be nitpicky.

This is a good idea, but it won't fly — not really, not in today's Russia. Lawmakers would take offense with the un-Russian, unpatriotic choice of animal (and presumably demand a bear

in space). Builders will steal one monkey and three-armed suits will be produced for the rest; and because of budget cuts, Klyopa's cadre will eventually be replaced with a bunch of cockroaches sent into low Earth orbit for a one-way trip. You know how it goes.

Sorry to rain on your parade, Klyopa. Master that joystick, but don't get your hopes too high.

The Happy Car Crash

But it's not all disheartening news from Russia — spit in the face of those who say it is and call it "insinuations," like the Defense Ministry does. For example, in the Saratov region, a truck loaded with 20,000 bottles of vodka turned over on the highway — leaving most of the cargo intact.

Locals immediately mounted a rescue expedition that resulted in a weeklong village-wide drinking binge that will most likely simmer on for a while. It is a lot of vodka.

So, see, miracles do happen. Not for the truck driver, of course, but if he has an ounce of wits left, he would at least have stocked up on the lost merchandise, so there's always a silver lining. And just think of the village's joy — it may be the best thing that happened to it since the poleaxe-wielding streltsy kicked out the Tatars and founded a fort there.

May a vodka truck crash on your street too. It helps in dealing with the governors and the spokesmen of this world.

Unfair Observer is the pen name of a Russian journalist that The Moscow Times has invited to observe the most brain-dead weekly developments in Russia.

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