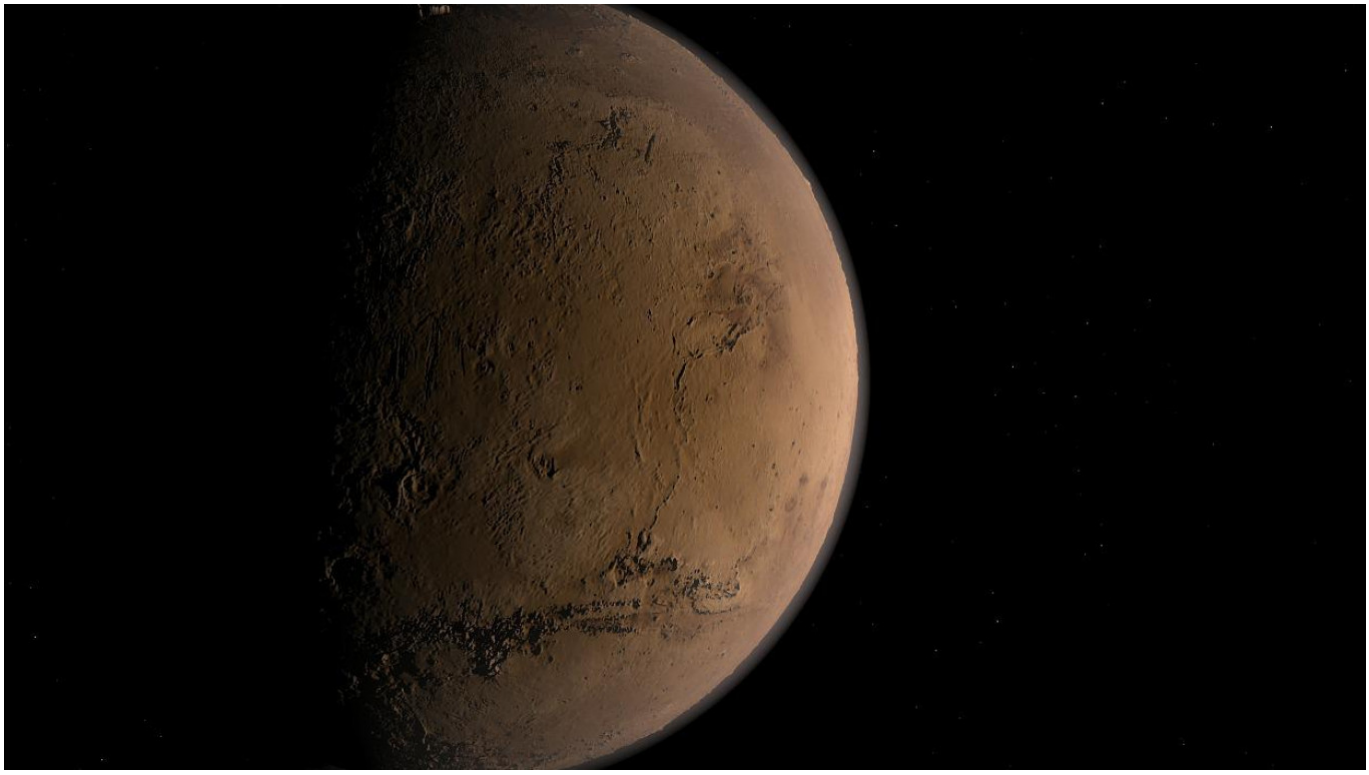
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Russian Scientists Throw Wet Blanket on U.S. Talk of Mars Colonization

By Matthew Bodner

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“We have set a clear goal vital to the next chapter of America's story,” U.S President Barack Obama wrote in an op-ed published by CNN on Oct. 11. “Sending humans to Mars by the 2030s and returning them safely to Earth,” he declared, echoing the famous words of President John F. Kennedy in the 1960s that propelled Americans to the Moon.

Not so fast, says the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). Such a voyage will not be technologically possible for another 40 to 50 years, according to Igor Mitrofanov, the head of nuclear planetology at RAS's Institute of Space Research. While the physics of sending a ship to Mars have been well demonstrated by the Americans, radiation will kill their astronauts, he said.

“A possible solution to the radiation problem that prevents further human spaceflight

[beyond the Moon] is to do a quick flight to Mars. If we can fly there in two weeks or a month, we can predict the level of background radiation," Mitrofanov said, referring to the potentially deadly and unpredictable emissions of radiation from the Sun.

Mitrofanov also questioned that astronauts can find any respite from radiation on Mars, as the planet has a weak magnetic field. The surface is also hit by deadly radiation from the Sun, unlike the Earth, which has a strong magnetic field to deflect the particles. "So we need a special machine on Mars to build a fallout shelter for the crew."

Luckily, NASA and various private organizations gunning for the Red Planet, like Elon Musk's SpaceX, are thinking about these things, too. Musk last month unveiled a vision of Mars colonization that will begin in the 2020s using large and fast transport ships, and construction of shelters on the Martian surface.

No Russian state agency or private company has offered a competing vision, though the private airline S7 is making a bid for the market Musk and other billionaires opened for private exploitation — commercial space launches. Read The Moscow Times' report on that story here.

This article was written by Matt Bodner of The Moscow Times.

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