

News From Russia: What You Missed Over the Weekend

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EPA / TASS

Religious split

The spiritual head of Orthodox Christians worldwide formally [granted](#) independence to the Ukrainian church, marking a historic split from Russia which Ukrainian leaders see as vital to the country's security.

The decree granting “autocephaly,” or Tomos, was handed to the head of the Ukrainian church at a ceremony the next day, completing the process of recognition by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Russia bitterly opposes the split, comparing it to the Great Schism of 1054 that divided western and eastern Christianity.

Spying for scopes

The Russian Foreign Ministry said the United States had [detained](#) Russian citizen Dmitry Makarenko in the Pacific Northern Mariana Islands a day after Moscow arrested former U.S.

Marine Paul Whelan on suspicion of espionage.

Papers filed in a Florida district court show federal prosecutors accused Makarenko in 2017 of conspiring with another man to export defense articles including night-vision scopes from the United States to Russia without U.S. approval.

Makarenko, who was listed as a resident of the Pacific port city of Vladivostok, was declared a fugitive from U.S. justice in Jan. 2018. His alleged accomplice Vladimir Nevidomy, a resident of Hallandale Beach, Florida, pleaded guilty in June 2018 and was sentenced to 26 months in prison, the court papers showed.

Syrian talks

The top military commanders from Russia and the United States spoke by phone to [discuss](#) Syria as Washington prepares to withdraw its troops from the country.

Russia's General Staff chief Valery Gerasimov and chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford "reaffirmed the importance of maintaining ... communication," according to a Russian Defense Ministry statement.

Pirates

The maritime and river transport agency Rosmorrechflot has [said](#) pirates kidnapped six Russian sailors of a Panama-flagged container ship near Benin in West Africa on Jan. 1.

Up to nine armed pirates crashed into the MSC Mandy, which was drifting in the Gulf of Guinea, and plundered 24 crew members before leaving the ship with the captured sailors.

Nixed invitation

NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine has rescinded an invitation for his sanctioned Russian counterpart Dmitry Rogozin to visit the United States in an effort to "be [accommodating](#)" to U.S. senators who had opposed the invite.

The U.S. space agency initially postponed Rogozin's visit but then "decided it was best to withdraw the invitation entirely" as criticism mounted, [according](#) to The Washington Post.

Uncivil engineers

At least three Chinese students were reportedly injured in a brawl over furniture arrangements with Afghan students at the Moscow State University of Civil Engineering (MGSU) campus.

University officials launched a "disciplinary investigation" and police have interrogated those involved in the fight, the MGSU press service [told](#) the state-run RIA Novosti news agency.

Rape suspect

A Nigerian national has [reportedly](#) been detained on suspicion of rape and robbery in the Urals city of Ufa.

Investigators [say](#) the 23-year-old allegedly raped a 41-year-old woman in her apartment and stole her cellphones, a tablet computer and the ruble equivalent of \$80 on Dec. 31.

BTS setback

A cinema in Chechnya has [suspended](#) ticket sales of popular South Korean boy band BTS' concert documentary scheduled to premiere worldwide on Jan. 26.

The disruption following social media [pressure](#) came two weeks after the premiere was [canceled](#) in neighboring Dagestan in Russia's Muslim-majority southern region.

Midnight mass

Russian Orthodox Christians marked Christmas by attending a special midnight mass held in churches and cathedrals across Russia starting in the late hours of Jan. 6 and ending early in the morning of Jan. 7.

President Vladimir Putin attended the service in St. Petersburg's Transfiguration Cathedral, where he was baptized, while head of the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill led the mass in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow.

Includes reporting from Reuters.

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