

Under The Radar

While the media landscape is preoccupied by COVID-19, politics and business grinds on. 'Under the Radar' provides a concise overview and thoughtful analysis of critical stories currently being overlooked.



MH17 moves closer to Putin's doorstep

What happened?

A joint investigation between UK open-source investigation site Bellingcat, Russian reporters at theinsider.com, and Kevin Hall of US-based McClatchy Newspapers revealed that Colonel General Andrey Ivanovich Burlaka of the Russian FSB Border Service is implicated in the destruction of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH-17 in 2014. The downing of MH-17 came as Russian-backed proxy forces in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine were locked in a furious battle with the Ukrainian Army following Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea.

Burlaka is the highest-ranking official implicated in the tragedy which killed 298 innocent civilians. The Malaysian Airlines Boeing 777 was found to have been shot down by a Russian-made Buk missile system, which previous Bellingcat investigations have shown was manoeuvred into eastern Ukraine from Russia on the day of the incident, and spirited back out immediately afterward. A Dutch investigation into the killings subsequently confirmed the Buk missile system originated from the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade of the Russian Federation, based in Kursk, near the Ukraine border. The Russian government has repeatedly denied any involvement in the killings, claiming instead that the Ukrainian army downed the plane in an errant attempt to strike a Russian aircraft.

However, on the day of the crash Igor Girkin, leader of the Russian-backed Donbass separatists, boasted on Russian social media that his troops had downed a Ukrainian Antonov aircraft.

What does it mean?

The implication of Burlaka brings the MH-17 tragedy one step closer to the doorstep of one Vladimir Vladimirovitch Putin, President (4 Life) of the Russian Federation. The Kremlin is (gasp) denying Burlaka's involvement, with Putin's spokesman telling the BBC: "We do not know what you are talking about." The revelation also provides more ammunition for the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team tasked with investigating the tragedy, an investigation that is very much still ongoing. Last November, the JIT announced it would be broadening its criminal investigation into the downing of MH-17.

And while the intercepted voice recordings relied on by Bellingcat and others to implicate Burlaka don't cite him by name, independent voice analysis of those recordings suggests that the voice of 'Vladimir Ivanovich' on the tapes - previously identified by Dutch investigators as the man who gave the order to fire the Buk missile system - is indeed the voice of Burlaka. Another voice on the recordings is Vladislav Surkov, who was at the time an advisor to Putin. But with so much time and effort having gone into denying any involvement in MH-17, it is likely no new evidence - however compelling - will change the Kremlin line. Stonewall city, here we come.

Ofcom director poached by Facebook

What happened?

A senior Ofcom director, who has been drawing up new rules for the organisation to regulate the internet, has been poached by one of the tech giants. Tony Close has worked at Ofcom for 17 years, rising to Director of Content Standards, Licensing and Enforcement, responsible for setting and enforcing content standards for television, radio and on-demand services. Close was one of several directors working on an online regulation project, with ministers expected to make Ofcom the internet regulator. But Close resigned last week to become Facebook's director of content regulation where he will be responsible for ensuring the company does not fall foul of the regulatory system, and for pushing back against restrictions that Facebook deems unworkable.

What does it mean?

Close's move to Facebook has sparked controversy and concern, not least at Ofcom. His colleagues are said to be shocked, as Close was integral to the team that has been building the online regulations from the ground up. He was privy to all their planning and thinking as well as being one of the executives who was in discussions with the government to appoint Ofcom the UK's first internet watchdog. This will naturally sting.

While a spokesperson for Ofcom has said that there are "robust measures in place to manage any potential conflicts of interest", a top regulator effectively defecting may have implications for the watchdog's future as the internet regulator. As Damian Collins MP, the former chairman of the culture select committee said, "parliament must insist on a proper regulator with teeth who can set standards for the platforms and hold them to account." Now that Facebook has one of Ofcom's executives working against them, can the watchdog really be trusted with such a responsibility?

This may well be just the start of a new era in revolving door politics. Unlike many industries at present, the tech titans have money to burn, and will not think twice about buying inside knowledge and poaching regulators. Indeed Facebook, with their global revenues of \$70 Billion in 2019, are hardly going to struggle to better Close's £213,000 salary at Ofcom.

On an optimistic note, Close's move to Facebook could bring the company closer into the fold, and actually serve to benefit online regulation. The company has a difficult relationship with the UK government - and almost every government for that matter. Perhaps Close, with his connections and decades of experience in the sector, would strengthen ties between the government and the tech community by improving the channels of communication. Then again, the same was said of Nick Clegg when he joined Facebook, and little appears to have changed.

Succession?

What happened?

Beleaguered Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro has appointed Tareck El-Aissami, a Venezuelan with links to Iran, as his new Minister of Petroleum.

El-Aissami has no experience in the sector, much like his predecessor who was removed from the post after failing to increase oil output.

Some industry analysts suggest that the appointment signals closer relations with Iran. Since US sanctions were introduced, the Iranian government has provided Venezuela with workers and supplies in a bid to increase oil production.

What does it mean?

This is a last-ditch attempt from Maduro to kickstart economic growth by actually producing and selling barrels from the world's largest oil reserves.

US sanctions are crippling the economy and have forced Russia and China to stop purchasing Venezuelan oil in order to avoid facing similar sanctions. This has left a void for Iran to step into. However, they themselves are contending with paralysing sanctions, as well as a public health crisis. Iranian support alone will not stimulate the economy.

It is possible that Maduro will bow to internal pressure from PdVSA, Venezuela's state-owned oil company, and begin to offload barrels to buyers in the private sector. This would, however, go against Chavist principles - and history has rarely been kind to socialist regimes introducing elements of a free market economy.

Maduro is also experiencing increasing social pressure. Recent petrol shortages have crippled the farming sector, leading to severe food shortages and a rise in looting. With millions of refugees returning to the country, this is an increasingly volatile situation.

So how will this play out? It's possible that Iran will try to install El-Aissami as Maduro's successor. After all, rising social unrest, an increasingly nervous PdVSA, and El-Aissami's power base within intelligence circles make for a dangerous concoction.

But Iran and El-Aissami would face strong opposition from an international coalition led by the United States, who have backed Juan Guaidó - the former leader of the General Assembly who claimed the Venezuelan Presidency in January 2019.

Guaidó's momentum has since stalled, after he struggled to make gains in a political system where Chavism is deeply entrenched. But if Iran tries to install their preferred leader, it could spark international outrage and bolster Guaidó's claim to the Presidency.

What Trafalgar Is Reading

On Biden and the Tara Reade allegation, do our normal standards apply?

[The Washington Post](#)

“The verdict ends up resting too much on one’s subjective evaluation of the accuser’s credibility, and such evaluations are inevitably colored by one’s prior opinion of the accused.”

- Megan McArdle on the allegations against Joe Biden, and the predicament Democrats find themselves in.

The Trump Administration Is Suddenly Pretending That It Didn’t Blow Up the Iran Nuclear Deal

[Slate Magazine](#)

“So Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has stepped up the pressure, and in a way that has made observers around the world drop their jaws or scratch their heads.”

- Fred Kaplin on why Mike Pompeo’s latest move is a political shot in the foot.

But if you must read about Coronavirus

‘Life Has to Go On’: How Sweden Has Faced the Virus Without a Lockdown

[The New York Times](#)

“Trust is high in Sweden — in government, institutions and fellow Swedes. When the government defied conventional wisdom and refused to order a wholesale lockdown to “flatten the curve” of the coronavirus epidemic, public health officials pointed to trust as a central justification.”

- Thomas Erdbrink and Christina Anderson explain how Sweden has managed to control COVID-19 without a lockdown, with a far lower death rate than Britain and France.



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