

## Second mystery Russian aircraft in a week departs from Venezuela

BY TIM JOHNSON

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A Russian-owned freight airliner took off from Venezuela Friday afternoon, the latest of two mystery flights this week that have raised questions about Russia's role in the unfolding crisis.

A Boeing 757 registered to a newly established Moscow air freight company, spelled intermittently as Erofey, Yerofei and Erofei, left an airport near Caracas in the early afternoon and headed on a trans-Atlantic route.

Two commercial flight tracking services, [Radarbox24](#) and [flightradar24](#), showed the flight approximating the journey it took three days earlier when it left Moscow, flew to Dubai, on to Casablanca in Morocco and the Cape Verde Islands in the Atlantic before arriving at Simon Bolivar International Airport near Caracas.

What was aboard the aircraft was unknown, but [a Russian media outlet, Novaya Gazeta, reported Thursday](#) that Russia may be helping embattled Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro remove 20 tons of gold out of his country for fear he may not hang onto power.

Another passenger jet, chartered from the Russian company Nordwind, landed at the main airport near Caracas on Monday evening and returned to Moscow two days later.

The mystery flights draw attention to the broader issue of how Russia has become a patron to Maduro, partly to poke a stick at the United States but also to protect about \$17 billion in investments and credits the Russian state and Russian companies have made to Venezuela's shattered oil sector.

Some analysts saw in the flights echoes of what has transpired in the final days of other authoritarian rulers around the globe.

"Historically, what dictators do when they believe they are about to lose power, or worry about it, they basically take everything they can carry and they spirit it out of the country to some safe place," said R. Evan Ellis, a Latin America expert at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute.

Ellis said he didn't know what was aboard the two aircraft but that the flights are an indication that Russia may be assisting Maduro's government in moving assets.

"The presumption is that it is gold. I don't know what else you would want to move," Ellis said.

Erofey, the Moscow air freight company, which [also does business as E-Cargo](#), began operations last July out of Moscow's Domodedovo Airport. Russian aviation publications said its chief executive had run aircraft manufacturing operations in Russia, and that the Boeing 757 was [once operated by United Airlines and later converted to cargo use](#).

Russia struck up warm relations with Venezuela under Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chávez, a charismatic populist who governed from 1999 until his death in 2013, when Maduro took the helm.

"Chávez was endlessly traveling to Russia," said Maxim Trudolyubov, editor of the Russia File blog at the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute, a think tank in Washington.

Amid the sharp unraveling of Venezuela's economy, Maduro began his second term as president on Jan. 10. But the United States and about 20 other countries denied him recognition, saying his re-election was not free and fair, and threw support behind National Assembly President Juan Guaidó as interim president.

Spokesmen for Russian President Vladimir Putin have been sharply critical of U.S. policy, saying it amounts to a coup against Maduro. Unstated is the Russian desire for Venezuela to make payments on outstanding loans.

"They are concerned about those loans and whether they will be paid back, and they have no guarantees that they will be paid back if the opposition takes power," said [Mikael Wigell](#), an expert on Russian relations with Latin America at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs in Helsinki.

Wigell noted the unconfirmed social media reports that the earlier flight on the Nordwind chartered aircraft brought Russian mercenaries to defend the Maduro regime.

"The Kremlin would deny that but the Kremlin does work through private mercenaries," Wigell said, adding that "the Maduro regime doesn't entirely trust its own armed forces anymore."

One former National Security Council official, Jose Cardenas, said Putin's support for Maduro seeks to "create instability, and distract and tax United States resources in the United States' own sphere of influence."

Cardenas said Russia may seek to prolong the political crisis in Venezuela but will eventually pull up stakes rather than defend Maduro at greater cost.

"They don't have the resources or long-term strategic capacity to take a stand in Venezuela," Cardenas said. "Russia is not going to bleed for Venezuelan oil."

Putin has outsourced much of Russia's dealings with Venezuela to Igor Sechin, a close ally who is a former deputy prime minister and serves currently as chief executive of Rosneft, the major oil company with stakes in two offshore gas projects and five onshore oil projects in Venezuela. The company also has \$6.5 billion in loans to the country to be repaid in oil.

"Sechin used to be a KGB interpreter during the Angolan war," said Pedro Burelli, a former member of the board of the Venezuelan state oil company and a frequent visitor to Moscow. Sechin, fluent in Portuguese, later learned Spanish, he added.

Sechin last was in Caracas in late November, when he flew in to [rebuke Maduro over delays in making shipments of oil](#) to repay outstanding loans, Reuters reported at the time.

*Kevin G. Hall contributed to this report.*