

PLANE MEETS PLOW: THE CURIOUS END OF TOTAL S.A. CEO CHRISTOPHE DE MARGERIE



[Photo tweeted by @Enel_Aire, post time stamped 2014-10-21 at 09:45 (time zone unknown)]

Forgive my skepticism about the accident Monday night that took the life of Christophe de Margerie. CEO of French oil and gas company Total S.A. We've been told by enough analysts that several target countries, including Russia, are under siege, though these experts don't refer to this openly as asymmetric warfare. The recent and ongoing drop in petroleum prices threatens cash inflows to those countries whose economies rely on oil revenues – Russia and Iran among them. The death of an oil industry executive isn't unexpected given the amount of money in play; people die daily

for far less cash.

Not as much as Moscow, mind you, but we get snow where I live in flyover country USA. Any time between mid-October and mid-April we can expect some frozen precipitation. A blizzard in October isn't unheard of – we had one 17 years ago this week, in fact. I've lived with six months of snow per year for most of my life.

Which is why the photo here of the crash site looks sketchy to me.

Early reports indicated the plane carrying de Margerie hit or was hit by a snowplow driven by a drunken operator, in poor visibility. It's not clear exactly which hit the other based on different accounts across the internet. A Russian reconstruction video furnished to Le Figaro shows the plane's wing clipping a vehicle upon landing – but the video exerts more effort on the fire and smoke than it does on the initial impact. Note in this second video of the plane after the crash during daylight hours that the wing which hit the plow as characterized in the video is missing.

At least one article claimed debris was spread 200 meters by the plane after impact. Perhaps the wing was in that debris, but it's not reflected in the Russian reconstruction video. A more recent report said the snowplow was parked on the runway.

Ultimately, what we see is a plane that flipped over – either tipped over by the force of a plow, or flipped over after impact.

And no snow. This particular photo is rather pixelated, but it doesn't reflect reduced visibility due to snowfall. There's no snow in the second video link above, though visibility

has worsened.

Moscow, RU LOCAL WEATHER			
	High	Low	precip
014	2°	-7°	0 mm
014	2°	-2°	10 mm
014	3°	-5°	1 mm

accuweather.com

Other photos from the site similarly reflect no snow. Almanac data from the 48-72 hours before and after the crash reflects temperatures dropping below freezing, but 1 mm to 11 mm of unspecified precipitation between Monday and Tuesday in Moscow depending on the weather site consulted. There had been some snow, the first of the season, on Sunday night local time, but almanac data doesn't reflect the same amount falling on Monday evening, nor does the almanac data shown in the graphic here report the precipitation on the correct date. (The 10 mm on Monday matches the photo of Sunday's first snowfall, not the images published of the airport and crash site late Monday night/Tuesday.)

Could there have been a vehicle on the tarmac treating the surface with de-icer? Sure – but why didn't the various accounts report just that? Not one report out I've seen in the last 24 hours has suggested runway icing was a problem.

Could the driver have been drunk? Hell yeah – it's Russia, where alcoholism is extremely common and too often deadly. But the driver's lawyer has said the driver was not under the influence as he takes a prescription heart medicine which does not mix with alcohol. Yet more reports indicate the dispatchers may have erred in their instructions, or were themselves under the influence.

Given the tensions between the west and Russia about Ukraine, and the subsequent likely attempts to unsettle Russia's economy via oil price volatility, and given Total Oil's position as fourth largest petroleum company, my hinky

meter is stuck somewhere between *Suspicious* and *Disbelieving* as to the real cause of the CEO's death.

Whether this tragic event was an accident or deliberate malfeasance, the question I'd like answered is *cui bono*? Who or what benefited the most from de Margerie's untimely demise?

He was characterized as "staunch defender of Russia and its energy policies amid the conflict with Ukraine," and a critic "of Western sanctions against Iran and Russia."

De Margerie's last speech in front of Russia's Foreign Investment Advisory Council during the day Monday was very pro-Russian, pro-oil development and anti-sanction. This is consistent with the CEO's comments in September when Total's joint venture with Russia's Lukoil was halted due to the sanctions. In August, Margerie had expressed commitment to Yamal LNG, a joint venture development project between France's Total and Russia's OAO Novatek:

"I am doing everything," to make progress, Chief Executive Officer Christophe de Margerie said in an interview on Yamal LNG. "There no reason to think that it won't happen."

One might reasonably assume the west had a beef with de Margerie, especially if there were any indications he encouraged work undermining sanctions intended to punish Russia for its incursion on Ukraine.

An additional risk factor for de Margerie was Total's relationship with Iran; the firm had a long history with Iran, having developed its South Pars gas field prior to sanctions in 2009. Margerie kept Total's foot in Iran's door, meeting with Iranian president Hassan Rouhani at Davos this year. The CEO hoped to position Total to benefit once sanctions against Iran relaxed. This stance could certainly annoy a few key entities quite a bit.

After an initial outpouring of condolences and florid eulogies for a larger-than-life industry leader, other skeptics have emerged. Russian tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda suggests the crash was the work of Ukrainian special forces. A more measured France 24 says the facts about the accident are “highly contradictory.”

Given the lack of clarity about:

- actual atmospheric and ground conditions at the time of the crash;
 - the condition of the snowplow driver;
 - the dispatcher(s) who instructed the snowplow driver and cleared de Margerie’s plane to take off;
 - the possibility that the pilot may have made any errors contributing to the accident;
 - the likelihood de Margerie had annoyed one or more powerful entities with his in-your-face approach to oil and gas development;
- skepticism about Monday’s crash and de Margerie’s subsequent death is warranted.