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With Crash, Russia Has Deadliest Airspace

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Emergency workers searching the wreckage of a Yak-42 plane carrying the Lokomotiv Yaroslavl ice hockey team near the Yaroslavl airport Wednesday.

In the worst sports-related disaster in decades, one of Russia's best ice hockey teams, Lokomotiv Yaroslavl, was decimated Wednesday in a plane crash that killed at least 43 people.

The crash also sealed Russia's position as the most dangerous place to travel by plane in 2011, with the country surpassing even the Democratic Republic of Congo in the number of aircraft-related fatalities.

Lokomotiv's chartered Yak-42 jet, which had a crew of eight and carried 37 passengers, including natives of Canada, Latvia, Belarus, Sweden, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, crashed moments after takeoff from Yaroslavl's Tunoshna Airport.

The triple-engine passenger jet struggled to gain altitude as it took off around 4 p.m. and

struck an aerial beacon, hitting the ground beyond the runway and bursting into flames on impact, Yaroslavl Governor Sergei Vakhrukov said.

Photos from the site showed parts of the wreckage strewn in the Tunoshonka River, a small tributary of the Volga.

Two people, Lokomotiv winger Alexander Galimov and flight attendant Alexander Sizov, survived the crash and were hospitalized with severe burns, officials said. Several reports said Galimov died in the hospital hours later, but Gazeta.ru denied this late Wednesday, citing hospital sources.

The team's Canadian coach, Brad McCrimmon, 52, a former defender for Detroit Red Wings, was among those killed. Other foreigners who died in the crash included Kazakh-born German Robert Dietrich, Slovak legend Pavol Demitra, Swedish goalkeeper Liv Stefan, Latvian Karlis Skrastins, and three Czechs: Karel Rachunek, Josef Vasicek and Jan Marek, the Emergency Situations Ministry said.

Initial news reports said Belarussian-born defender Ruslan Salei did not take the flight, but the Emergency Situations Ministry later listed him among the fatalities.

Lokomotiv was heading to Minsk to play the local Dinamo team on Thursday in a match of the 2011-12 season of the Kontinental Hockey League, which unites teams from Russia, the post-Soviet republics of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Latvia, and Slovakia.

Another league game in Ufa, between home side Salavat Yulayev and Atlant Mytishchi, was canceled mid-match after news about the crash broke. A broadcast on Rossia-1 television showed fans leaving in tears after a moment of silence and a standing ovation in honor of the dead.

In Yaroslavl, some 3,000 fans came to the team's headquarters with a banner reading, “Thank You, Guys,” Interfax said. Bells clanged at a nearby church.

As of late Wednesday, 35 bodies had been recovered, emergency officials said. The rescue operation was to continue overnight, a local transportation prosecutor told Baltinfo.ru. There were no immediate reports on whether any bodies had been identified.

The Investigative Committee indicated that it believed the crash had been caused by safety violations but voiced no details as it opened a criminal case.

An unidentified official at the Tunoshna Airport told Interfax that an unspecified technical malfunction was to blame, but did not elaborate.

The 73-seat aircraft, in use since 1993, was operated by the Moscow-based Yak Service. The company, also founded in 1993, could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

The European Aviation Safety Agency ranked Yak Service in 2009 — the latest year for which statistics are available — as the least safe of 35 Russian airlines flying to Europe, according to Aviation Explorer, an air industry web site.

The Yaroslavl crash is the ninth for Yak-42s around the world since they went into mass

production in 1980. The last jet, a replacement for the Tu-134, was built in 2002, but more than 170 planes remain in operation worldwide.

State Duma Deputy Robert Shlegel wrote on Twitter that Russia's hockey federation head Vladislav Tretyak told him after the crash, with tears in his eyes, "Our national team also flies a Yak-42." Tretyak said hours later that the team would stop using Yak-42s, Rusnovosti.ru reported.

No government order was given Wednesday to ground Yak-42s, unlike after fatal crashes involving An-24 and Tu-134 aircraft earlier this year.

Both members of the ruling tandem dispatched senior officials to the crash site. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin sent Transportation Minister Igor Levitin, while President Dmitry Medvedev sent his deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov, who was already in Yaroslavl for an international political forum that opened Wednesday.

Medvedev, who expressed his condolences, still intends to come to the forum Thursday as scheduled, but organizers have canceled all planned entertainment events, Interfax reported.

Lokomotiv, owned by Russian Railways, was the second runner-up for last season's Gagarin Cup, the prime trophy of the Kontinental Hockey League. It is also one of two teams that have won the Russian championship three times since 1996, the other being Metallurg Magnitogorsk. They are only bested by Kazan's Ak Bars, which has four victories under its belt.

The team, established in 1949 and known as Torpedo between 1965 and 2000, played in the lower leagues in Soviet times but rose to prominence in the past two decades. It won the Russian championship in the 1996-97, 2001-02 and 2002-03 seasons, the last two under Czech coach Vladimir Vujtek.

Lokomotiv's roster of star players in post-Soviet times has included Andrei "The Tank" Kovalenko, Yegor Podomatsky and Alexei Yashin, who played for the team during the 2004-05 NHL lockout.

With the Yaroslavl crash, Russia has become the most dangerous country to travel by plane. A total of 119 people have been killed in seven crashes this year, while the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo places second with 106 dead in three crashes, including one by Georgian Airlines, according to a data base maintained by Aviation-safety.net.

By comparison, 108 people were killed in crashes in Russia between January and August 2010, including 96 when the Polish presidential jet went down near Smolensk's Katyn forest, killing President Lech Kaczynski and many other top Polish officials. Aviation-safety.net lists two plane crashes with fatalities over that period, and the count for the full year stood at four incidents and 120 dead.

The Yaroslavl tragedy is also one of the deadliest incidents in history involving high-profile sports teams.

The most well-known local crash took place in 1979, when 17 players and staff members with Pakhtakor Tashkent, at the time one of Soviet Union's prime football teams, also died while

flying, in a morbid coincidence, to a match with Dinamo Minsk.

Pakhtakor, whose jet collided mid-air with another jet, had its lineup boosted with volunteers from other Soviet teams and was guaranteed three years in the top league after the crash, but it never regained its glory. It was unclear Wednesday whether any star volunteers would step forward for Lokomotiv Yaroslavl.

In 1950, a plane with 11 Russian ice hockey players and eight others crashed near the city of Sverdlovsk, now known as Yekaterinburg. The team, flying in a military Li-2 plane, was heading to Chelyabinsk for a match.

Internationally, the most well-known crash involving a sports team occurred when a jet carrying the Manchester United football club went down while taking off in Munich in 1958, killing 23 people, including eight players.

In 1949, a plane carrying the Torino football squad, known as Il Grande Torino, crashed into the hill of Superga near Turin, Italy, killing all 31 people on board, including 18 players.

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