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Lokomotiv's Air Carrier Loses License

By Alexander Bratersky

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Transportation Minister Igor Levitin reiterated Wednesday that no “external factor” contributed to the crash. The minister, who has held the job since 2004, is regularly criticized for deadly incident **Sergei Nikolayev**

The airline operating the Yak-42 jet that crashed earlier this month, killing most of the Yaroslavl Lokomotiv hockey team, lost its license on Wednesday.

The Federal Air Transportation Agency, which took away the license, said it based its decision on a check into Yak-Service's operations and took the Yaroslavl crash into account. But it cited no violations.

Yak-Service had specialized in charter flights for VIPs. Before the crash, its fleet included four Yak-40 planes and one Yak-42. One of its clients reportedly was Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov, who is now leading a government crackdown on small airlines.

Forty-four people were killed when the Yak-42 carrying Lokomotiv Yaroslavl hit a navigational beacon just beyond the end of the runway and crashed into a small river after

failing to pick up enough speed during takeoff.

The only survivor, flight attendant Alexander Sizov, has recovered enough to meet with investigators, his doctors said Wednesday, Interfax reported. No date for questioning was given.

As investigators were looking into the incident, Transportation Minister Igor Levitin reiterated Wednesday that no "external factor" contributed to the crash.

The jet crashed on the opening day of a political summit in Yaroslavl, when the airport was crammed with incoming planes. This prompted speculation that the Yak-42 might have been rushed into taking off despite mechanical problems or that it did not have enough runway because of parked private jets.

"The plane took off on schedule, the runway was free, and there were no external factors to aggravate the pilots' actions," Levitin said on Vesti FM radio, indirectly confirming media reports that the crash was due to a pilot error.

Levitin reported about his ministry's performance to the State Duma on Tuesday and did not mention the Lokomotiv incident during his lengthy speech, prompting angry remarks from lawmakers, Rusnovosti.ru said.

The minister, who has held the job since 2004, is regularly criticized for deadly incidents that plague the country's decrepit transportation infrastructure. The ruling United Russia party backed down on a plan to request his dismissal during a Duma speech this week, citing no reasons.

Levitin said on Vesti FM that he "is not avoiding responsibility." He explained that he was working to improve transportation safety, which he said requires both an influx of investment and an update of legislation.

Meanwhile, St. Petersburg-based blogger Leto06 reported on her LiveJournal page that one of the Lokomotiv crash victims, team captain Ivan Tkachenko, was a longtime anonymous donor to charity, giving sums ranging up to 500,000 rubles ($15,000) for expensive operations for children. He sent his last text message confirming a donation just 15 minutes before boarding his last flight, she said.

The Interstate Aviation Committee wrapped up on Tuesday its probe into the December crash of a Dagestani Airlines jet at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport, blaming pilot error.

Two people were killed when the Tu-154M rammed into a hill during a hard landing. The committee said on its web site that the crew mishandled the engines, causing two of the three to switch off in flight, and failed to properly execute an emergency landing afterward.

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