The Moscow Times
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Tajiks Accuse Russian Pilot of Smuggling

October 26, 2011



A Russian pilot faces up to 13 years in prison on charges of smuggling and illegal border crossing in Tajikistan in a trial that an analyst said might become a bargaining chip in bilateral relations.

Pilot Vladimir Sadovnichy was detained with fellow pilot Alexei Rudenko of Estonia at the Dushanbe airport on March 12 after the airport granted a request for an unscheduled landing, Kommersant reported Wednesday.

The pilots, employed by a company called Rolkan Investmens Ltd., were flying two planes through Tajik airspace on flights from Kabul, Afghanistan, to Moscow.

Tajik air controllers ordered the planes to return to Kabul, saying they lacked documents authorizing their route through Tajik airspace. But the pilots replied that they lacked sufficient fuel to return and asked to land.

The pilots spent two months under arrest at a Dushanbe hotel on suspicion of illegal border

crossing, violating international flight rules and smuggling a spare plane engine, and then were placed in a pretrial detention center.

Alexander Sukhorukov, a friend of Sadovnichy, told Kommersant that officials at the military airport where the planes had departed from in Kabul would not have allowed the flights without the proper clearances.

The trial of the pilots at a Dushanbe court started on Oct. 6, and the verdict is expected in early November.

A representative of the Russian Embassy in Dushanbe is attending the trial, and the embassy is keeping in close contact with the Tajik Foreign Ministry and the national security services about the case, embassy spokesman Alexei Stepanov told The Moscow Times. He refused to elaborate, citing the ongoing trial.

Andrei Grozin, an analyst with the Institute of CIS Countries think tank, told Kommersant that Sadovnichy's arrest might be linked to the planned signing next spring of agreements on a Russian military base in Tajikistan and bilateral economic cooperation, among other agreements.

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