

Pilot Freed After Migrant Hunts

By [Natalya Krainova](#)

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Rudenko, center, with Sadovnichy behind him, exiting the courtroom during a break in the hearing on Tuesday. **Nozim Kalandarov**

In a timely pre-election triumph for the Kremlin, Tajik authorities on Tuesday bowed to pressure from Moscow, releasing from prison a Russian pilot jailed on murky charges earlier this month.

The face-saving ruling by the Khatlon region court upheld the verdict for Vladimir Sadovnichy and fellow pilot Alexei Rudenko, an Estonian national, both of whom were convicted of smuggling and illegal border crossing.

But the ruling slashed their sentences from 8 1/2 years to six months, which they had already served in pretrial detention, Interfax reported.

The court also suspended a related probe against Rolkan Investmens Ltd., which owns the two An-72 planes the men were piloting before their arrest, "in connection with the emergence of new evidence."

With less than two weeks to go before the State Duma elections, the Kremlin did not miss the chance to claim the victory for itself. Natalya Timakova, spokeswoman for President Dmitry Medvedev, announced Tuesday that "the president was in control of the situation."

"Under his orders, Russian officials met with the Tajik government, and everything was done to protect the rights of a Russian citizen," Timakova said, Interfax reported.

A source at the Foreign Ministry touted the ruling as a "great success" and a "triumph of justice."

Outside the courtroom, Sadovnichy thanked the president, the government and "everybody who was rooting for us."

"I understood that Russia was with me," he said.

Sadovnichy will arrive home within the next few days, said Dmitry Kabayev, spokesman for the Russian Embassy in Tajikistan.

The two pilots were arrested in March during a refueling stop in Tajikistan on their way to Moscow from Afghanistan. Tajik officials said they had no right to be in the country, and that a spare, non-working engine they had with them was contraband.

Most observers denounced the trial as a sham, possibly intended by Dushanbe to impress the local populace or to pressure Moscow into releasing a relative of President Emomali Rakhmon, jailed in Russia on drug-trafficking charges. Speculation also swirled that Tajik authorities simply wanted the An-72 planes, which they confiscated.

Russian officials made no public comment on the case for months, but launched a wide-scale campaign against Tajikistan in the weeks leading to the trial.

After the pilots were sentenced, migration officials swept up Tajik migrants in several Russian cities, including Moscow. The Kremlin denied the connection between the roundups and the case, but insiders confirmed the link in numerous comments to media.

More than 500 Tajiks continue to await deportation, for which the Federal Migration Service has no money, said Karomat Sharipov of the Tajik Migrant Labor group.

He urged an "amnesty" for them as a form of "symmetrical response," Gazeta.ru [reported](#). Migration officials had no comment on the proposal.

Igor Lebedev, a Duma lawmaker with the Liberal Democrats, said the hunt for Tajik migrants "will end tomorrow," calling it "a normal form of economic warfare with political undertones, practiced worldwide," Interfax reported.

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