The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Inquiry Into Oil Exec's Deadly Jet Crash Handed Over to France

By Peter Spinella

February 26, 2015



Vladimir Martynenko, the plow's driver

Russia has handed over to France the results of a preliminary investigation into the cause of a jet crash that killed a French oil executive in October, and the findings indicate that two of the key suspects may have been intoxicated at the time.

The jet slammed into a snowplow in the middle of a runway at Vnukovo Airport, killing four people including Christophe de Margerie, CEO of the world's fourth-largest oil company, Total.

The plow's driver, Vladimir Martynenko, and his supervisor, Vladimir Ledenev, both tested positive for alcohol in their blood two hours after the crash, the Interfax news agency reported Wednesday.

Investigators have established that Martynenko was behaving awkwardly and had gotten lost

on the runway just before the incident, the news report said. Ledenev also failed to report to air-traffic controllers that the whereabouts of the vehicle had been unknown for 15 minutes prior to the jet's ill-fated takeoff attempt.

The driver, his supervisor and three air-traffic controllers each face seven years in prison for transportation violations resulting in the deaths of two or more people, according to the Kommersant newspaper.

Blood Alcohol Levels

Martynenko had a blood alcohol level of 0.06, and Ledenev — who wasn't driving — had a level of 0.02, Kommersant reported. Martynenko's level is permissible for civilian motorists in the U.S. or U.K., but Russia has a zero-tolerance policy for alcohol consumption prior to driving a vehicle.

Whether either man was intoxicated at the time of the incident remains to be determined, but alcohol impairment is being considered as factor that may have influenced the workers' behavior.

Martynenko's lawyer Alexander Karabanov has insisted that his client wasn't drunk during the incident because he abstains from alcohol due to a chronic heart condition. The lawyer said Thursday that his client is willing to take a lie-detector test.

"Martynenko didn't drink. He is sure of this and ready to confirm it with a lie detector," Karabanov told the Interfax news agency. If the test results come back clean, he said, his client should be removed from state custody and placed under house arrest.

Handing Case Over to Paris

Russian Prosecutor General Yury Chaika handed over case materials to France during a meeting with French Justice Minister Christiane Taubira, Interfax reported Thursday.

The officials also signed a two-year deal to cooperate on any investigations that concern both countries' interests, the news report said.

France's Total oil company has worked in Russia for the past two decades, and the deceased executive de Margerie had close ties with the government.

A month after de Margerie's death, President Vladimir Putin awarded him an Order of Honor for his "major contribution to Russian-French economic and cultural relations," Reuters quoted the Kremlin as saying.

Putin's spokesman was cited as saying the president and de Margerie had a close working relationship. De Margerie was a vocal opponent of Western economic sanctions on Russia.

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