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Ukrainian Pilot Faces Graver Charges Over Deaths of Russian Journalists

By Jennifer Monaghan

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A man takes a picture of Ukrainian military pilot Nadezhda Savchenko as she is seen during a video link on a screen installed inside a court building during a hearing in Moscow, Russia, July 1, 2015.

Investigators in Moscow have reclassified the charges against jailed Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko, whom they now accuse of direct involvement in the deaths of two Russian journalists last year, the Interfax news agency reported Tuesday.

Savchenko, 34, previously faced charges of complicity in the deaths of Igor Kornelyuk and Anton Voloshin, employees of state-owned television channel Rossia who were killed in eastern Ukraine during a mortar attack last June. Investigators said earlier that Savchenko, a pilot in the Ukrainian army, had provided the coordinates for the attack.

But reading out a final list of charges against Savchenko, Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said prosecutors were now pursuing her on grounds of direct involvement in the killings, Interfax reported.

Lawyers for Savchenko confirmed to Interfax that the charges were now more serious.

“[It looks like] they consider her to be a direct participant in the murders. That is to say that she herself determined who to kill and how, and that she had something to do with the shelling,” lawyer Nikolai Polozov was quoted as saying.

The Investigative Committee also denied Savchenko the right to a trial by jury and rejected her defense counsel's petitions to close the case against her on the grounds of a lack of evidence, Polozov told Interfax on Monday.

Investigators have instead concluded their investigation and forwarded their case to prosecutors to confirm the indictment and transfer the case to a court, Markin was quoted as saying by Interfax.

Savchenko is also charged with having illegally entered Russia. Markin said the pilot had crossed the Ukraine-Russia border without the necessary documents shortly after the shelling.

Savchenko and her lawyers insist the pilot was brought into Russia against her will after being taken captive by pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. In December, she went on an 80-day hunger strike to protest her ongoing detention in a Moscow jail. She partially stopped the hunger strike in March, her lawyer Mark Feigin said on Twitter, after her weight plummeted and she developed health problems.

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