

50 dead in plane crash in Russia

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All 50 passengers on board a Boeing 737-500 were killed on Sunday when the plane crashed in Kazan, the capital of the Russian republic of Tatarstan. The 23-year-old airliner started off from Moscow and crashed in good weather, apparently due to technical problems. In addition to six crew members and two children, the head of the Federal Security Service of the Republic of Tatarstan, as well as the 23-year-old son of the president of the republic, were on board. A Ukrainian and a British citizen were also among the victims.

The first attempt to land the aircraft failed for reasons that remain unknown. On the second landing attempt the aircraft crashed at a sharp angle to the runway and burst into flames. The fire was eventually extinguished after several hours. According to an airport spokesman, landing conditions were good despite light snowfall: "Visibility was 5,000 meters, the runway was dry. One could hardly imagine better conditions."

According to media reports the Boeing 737-500 had been in operation since 1990 and was involved in a serious accident in Brazil in 2001, which did not involve casualties. Since 2008 the plane had been operated by Tatarstan Airlines, which belongs to the government of the Republic of Tatarstan.

In postings online, a number of passengers who had flown on the aircraft noted serious technical problems during the flight. A journalist who had flown Saturday on the same aircraft reported on Russian television of "incredible vibrations" during the flight. On Twitter a former passenger commented: "This plane shook its passengers like a washing machine." Grigori Busarev, who had flown on the same jet Sunday morning from Kazan to Moscow wrote that the aircraft almost crashed during landing and had to make an emergency landing.

Following instructions from the Kremlin the authorities have pledged to hold an investigation into the causes of the disaster. For its part the government of

the Republic of Tatarstan held the crew responsible for the crash. The hypocritical expressions of grief by government officials, including President Vladimir Putin, and the proposed investigation are all aimed at concealing the real causes of the disaster.

The plane crash on Sunday is the latest in a long line of similar catastrophes which have their source in the ailing state of Russian infrastructure—a direct product of the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union.

In December last year, five people died when a plane at Moscow's Vnukovo airport overshot the runway. In May 2012, all 50 occupants were killed over Indonesia during a test flight of the Russian Sukhoi Superjet 100. A month earlier, 33 people died in a plane crash in Siberia. Forty-four members of Russia's leading professional ice hockey team, Lokomotiv Yaroslavl, were killed at the end of 2011 when their Yakovlev Yak 42 crashed shortly after takeoff.

The aviation infrastructure has been in an advanced state of decay since the collapse of the Soviet Union 22 years ago. The privatization of state-owned airlines and aviation facilities in the late 1990s, with the approval of the trade unions, has brought the airline industry in the country to the brink of collapse. Prior to the reintroduction of capitalism the Soviet Union produced about a quarter of the world's aircraft. By 2000, however, Russia produced just a dozen machines per year. The technological standards for aircraft production continue to remain far behind international standards.

Under conditions of an economic boom fueled by high oil prices the Russian government has invested heavily in aviation in an attempt to make Russian companies competitive on the international market. Government investment in the aerospace industry increased twenty-fold between 2005 and 2010. The country's largest air carrier, Aeroflot, which is majority owned by the state, grew rapidly during this period.

In 2011 Aeroflot doubled its net profits year on year to \$491 million. Between 2009 and 2013 Aeroflot rose to fifth place (from a rank of nine) in the list of the most profitable airlines in Europe prepared by *Airline Business* magazine. The revenue of the airline group has increased six-fold over the past 10 years.

With these figures, Aeroflot is indeed far ahead of most other Russian airlines. But the latter were also able to increase their profits in recent years, the same period that saw one disastrous plane crash after another.

While aviation companies have posted record profits, flight crews have been reduced and the aviation infrastructure continues to decay. The safety standards and infrastructure are among the worst in the world. In 2011, Russia took last place in the world ranking for air safety, trailing behind developing countries like Congo and Indonesia. While aircraft produced in the United States remain in operations for an average of 13 years, most Russian planes are expected to fly an average of 25 to 30 years. Those without access to a private jet take a considerable risk with every flight in a Russian plane.

As part of its comprehensive privatization of the economy in the summer of this year, the Putin government announced an opening up of the aircraft market to foreign low-cost carriers, together with the sell off of the state-owned majority stake in Aeroflot in 2020. These measures will only further worsen the already dismal state of the country's aviation infrastructure.



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