



Crash spotlights derelict Russian airports

Military airfields like the Smolensk strip where a Polish plane crashed Saturday lack up-to-date equipment.



By Maria Antonova — Special to GlobalPost
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MOSCOW, Russia — On Monday investigators honed in on pilot error as the most likely cause of the [Saturday plane crash](#) that killed Polish President Lech Kaczynski, but questions remained about the crew's decision to land in Smolensk — home of a derelict airport that has spotlighted for the world Russia's aging infrastructure.

The plane came down too soon, officials said over the weekend, hitting the ground almost a mile away from Smolensk North, a military airfield that has historically been used as a base for a fleet of Ilyushin cargo planes and by the Smolensk aircraft factory for flight testing. Last October, however, the military fleet was relocated and it is not clear how actively the field was used in the months before 96 people perished on their way to a ceremony marking 70 years since the massacre of Polish officers by Soviet troops in the nearby Katyn forest.

The small airfield is far from an international airport with up-to-date equipment. "It's a military airfield in poor condition," said Vitaly Shelkovnikov, a flight safety consultant who served as deputy transportation minister in the 1990s. Unlike most civilian airports in Russia, Smolensk North does not have an Instrument Landing System and is equipped with just one radio transmitter. Therefore the crew on incoming flights must track and report on altitude. But it is unclear how the Polish crew communicated with air traffic controllers at Smolensk North, who only speak Russian.

Pavel Plyusnin, the air traffic controller who communicated with the plane, [told the website LifeNews](#) that the plane crashed on its first attempt to land, after the crew was advised to go to a different airfield. The captain said he would attempt to land once, and comply with the recommendation if he failed, according to the report. The plane crashed after the crew stopped communicating, Plyusnin said.

Air traffic controllers are not required to communicate in English unless the airport is certified as an international airport, said Shelkovnikov. If a foreign crew is landing at an unknown airfield, or one without international certification, Russian flight rules require it to have a Russian-speaking navigator, he said. Even if the Polish captain had some knowledge of Russian, communicating in a foreign language only added to the stress he was under, he said. It was unclear who in the crew spoke Russian.

Most airfields in Russia are in a sorry state, and military airfields are worse than civilian ones, which have started to receive government funding for restoration. But most transportation infrastructure programs have been cut during the current economic crisis in favor of social measures, such as increasing pensions. Even among civilian airfields, 52 percent don't have landing lights, and 41 percent are not even paved, according to [a report](#) compiled by Renaissance Capital in 2008.

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Only two airports in the country, Domodedovo and Sheremetyevo, both in Moscow, are certified as third category by the International Civil Aviation Organization, which means the airport has equipment letting planes land safely even in zero visibility conditions.

“Outfitting airports with equipment to pass such certification is prohibitively expensive,” said Miroslav Boichuk, who heads the labor union of Russian pilots. “It is done out of economic sensibility.”

An experienced pilot would have no problem landing a plane relying only on visual cues, Boichuk said, but on Saturday fog had reduced visibility in Smolensk to 400 meters (about a quarter of a mile) — significantly worse than the minimum visibility of 1,000 meters required for landing at such an airfield, experts said.

“Most military fields have 1,000 meters set as minimum visibility for landing,” Boichuk said. “They should have stopped and gone to a different field.”

A chorus of media reports over the weekend painted a picture of a stubborn crew, which “attempted to land four times” despite inadequate visibility conditions. The reports, now discredited, led experts and veteran pilots to speculate that the crew was pressured by the Polish president to land in order to meet a busy schedule.

Poland's general prosecutor said on Monday there is no proof the captain was pressured into attempting to land. Except for a military flight in time of war, international flight rules do not allow anyone other than the captain to make such a decision, said Boichuk. While the plane's cockpit recorder has been recovered, conversations in the passenger cabin are not recorded.

[Kaczynski reportedly threatened](#) to demote a military pilot when the pilot decided not to land in Tbilisi, Georgia, in August 2008, landing instead in Azerbaijan. But the pilot got a medal instead for putting safety first, the defense minister of Poland said.

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