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Alcohol Cited in 2008 Russian Crash

By **ANDREW E. KRAMER**

MOSCOW — A pilot's drunkenness was a contributing cause of a [commercial airline crash in Russia in 2008](#), Russian prosecutors said Monday, reaching a conclusion extraordinarily rare in airline crash investigations.

Russia's aviation safety authorities had reported a year ago that the pilot of the Boeing 737 operated by a domestic subsidiary of Aeroflot, the national airline, had alcohol in his blood at the time of the accident. It was left undecided whether the alcohol had played a role in the crash, which killed all 88 people aboard.

As the jet descended through thick clouds, the pilot, Capt. Rodion Medvedev, became disoriented and lost control, the Investigative Committee of the Prosecutor General's Office said in a statement carried by Interfax on Monday.

His disorientation was the cause of the crash, it said, and in turn was the result of "a mentally unstable condition stemming from the presence of alcohol in his body." Initial reports suggested engine failure as a cause.

Paul Hayes, the director of [Ascend](#), a London-based aviation consultancy that maintains a database of thousands of accidents dating back decades, said that pilot drunkenness is rarely cited by the authorities as a cause of crashes. "It is so rare, it is truly exceptional," he said.

Commercial pilots are from time to time caught trying to fly drunk, and alcohol is sometimes cited as a possible cause of a crash early in an investigation because the remains of pilots become naturally infused with alcohol as they decompose; usually alcohol is eventually ruled out, Mr. Hayes said.

In one of the more definitive cases, the [National Transportation Safety Board](#) in the United States concluded that the American pilot of a Japan Air Lines DC-8 cargo airplane was

drunk when he **crashed** during takeoff from Anchorage on Jan. 13, 1977, killing all five crew members aboard. A taxi driver had seen the man obviously staggering in the airport before the departure.

On Jan. 1, 1978, an Air India Boeing 747 crashed shortly after takeoff from Mumbai, killing 190 passengers and 23 crew members. An Indian investigation blamed cockpit instruments; later in civil lawsuits in the United States, a federal court in Washington State found the pilot had been drinking at a **New Year's Eve** party, Mr. Hayes said.

In Russia, Miroslav Y. Boychuk, president of the Russian Pilots Union, said that the prosecutor's statement on Monday was the first concluding that Captain Medvedev was drunk, and that this was the first such conclusion in a Russian commercial airline crash investigation he could recall.

Aeroflot has a safety record rivaling many Western carriers.

Mr. Boychuk said that no witnesses had come forward saying the pilot had been drinking before the flight, operated by Aeroflot Nord, left Moscow for Perm and went down on Sept. 14, 2008.

He said his group would study the autopsy findings when they became available, and contest the prosecutor's position if the results were ambiguous. He said specific piloting errors as the plane approached the Perm airport had already been identified as the cause of the accident, and in response there were changes to pilot training unrelated to the issue of sobriety.

"Such a tragedy should never be repeated," he said.