

# Air Crash Calls Minister's Future into Question

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April 02, 2012



Levitin is appreciated for his loyalty and ability to get along with people.

"Minister of Catastrophe!" screams the Internet petition established within hours of Monday morning's tragedy in Tyumen.

There follows a list of dozens of deadly disasters suffered by aircraft, trains and ships over the eight-year period since Igor Levitin became transportation minister in 2004.

Levitin is not an aviator but a railway man. He spent large chunks of a military career that spanned the 1970s and 1980s in railway units. After leaving military service in 1994, he went into business, and also served on the Irkutsk regional Duma, before being called in to reform the Transportation Ministry in 2004.

The eight years since have been boom years for a man in the business of moving things and people. Multibillion-dollar road, rail and airport building projects are planned to link

the country's far-flung parts together, the car market is well on its way to becoming the largest in Europe, and airline passenger turnover has grown on average 9.8 percent a year since 2000 — a significantly high rate.

But it has also been an era of tragedy. Russia has suffered 749 fatalities in civil aviation since 2004, according to Air-safety.net. More people died in aviation accidents in Russia in 2011 than in any other country in the world.

Disasters on the waterways — like the sinking of the Bulgaria cruise ship on the Volga in 2011 and the 2009 bombing of the Nevsky Express between Moscow and St. Petersburg — mean the numbers killed on Russia's planes, trains and waterways are nearer 1,000. And that's not counting the 28,000 people killed in 2011 alone on Russia's roads.

For Andrei Rozhkov, an aviation analyst at Metropol, safety — especially aviation safety — is Levitin's greatest failure.

"We've seen some good progress on things like rail access to Russian ports. But with air safety there are very bad results," he said. "Of course you can't call him an effective minister."

"The main thing that needs doing is enforcement of the rules. Russian aviation law is strict enough, but there have been instances of corruption around smaller airlines that mean they have not necessarily met safety norms," he said.

The environmental group fighting the controversial Moscow-St. Petersburg highway route through the Khimki forest began gathering signatures for his dismissal more than a year ago, blaming him for forcing the road through and claiming he was set to benefit personally from the \$8 billion project via a complex system of offshore companies.

The renewed petition launched Sunday by the same group, which had gathered 5,873 signatures as of 6:54 p.m. Monday evening, but may ultimately be no more successful.

"Simply, the influential group he is a part of still protects him from the ire of both the public and other figures in government," said Alexei Mukhin, a Kremlin-watcher at Moscow's Center for Political Information. "And the authorities are inclined to ignore public opinion as long as it thinks it can, anyway."

Another reason for his longevity is President-elect Vladimir Putin's prioritizing of loyalty over efficiency — as well as Levitin's canny ability to get on with all sides in Russia's notoriously faction-based political scene.

"He is not a very public figure, and as such, he is considered capable of maintaining relations with different clans," said Nikolai Petrov, a Kremlin-watcher at the Moscow Carnegie Center. That is evidenced by his regular appearance in lists of potential candidates to replace troublesome regional governors.

The consensus, however, seems to be that his time could be running out. "I'd say the idea that he is not a very efficient minister and could leave the government is pretty much right," Petrov said.

The consensus seems to be that he is the most likely candidate for retirement in the expected

Cabinet reshuffle following Putin's inauguration as president in May, but where he would go is not clear.

Levitin was mentioned as a potential successor to former Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, and more recently his name was linked to the Moscow region governorship (a job that ended up going to Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu).

Levitin's rumored links to contractors working on infrastructure projects introduces another web of interests with a hand in his career prospects, Petrov warned.

Another option would be a position at a state corporation, where he could continue his career as a civil servant-cum-businessman.

Rozhkov put his money on "someone close to Putin" with the energy to more vigorously enforce aviation rules. "In everything else, the ministry seems to be doing a reasonable job."

Levitin was in Baku on Monday, meeting the Azerbaijani president for the Transportation Ministry. Repeated calls to the ministry went unanswered Monday.

His deputy Valery Okulov and Alexander Neradko, the head of the Federal Air Transportation Agency, Rosaviatsia, the ministry subdivision responsible for airline regulation, were dispatched to the crash site in Tyumen.

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