

Expert: Russian jet was 'screaming down' on descent



Russian investigators check debris from at the site of the crashed MetroJet plane in Sinai, Egypt, on Sunday (Photo: Khaled Elfiqi, epa)

Whether the crash of a Russian airliner in Egypt's Sinai peninsula shortly after takeoff on Saturday was accidental or intentional isn't known but experts say the plane, an Airbus A321, was relatively safe.

The crash killed all 224 people on board. Egyptian officials on Saturday ruled out the possibility it was shot down.

Even relatively new types of aircraft such as the A321 could have safety glitches. Investigators will check maintenance records and flight recorders to see what went wrong, said Steven Marks, an aviation lawyer in Miami at the law firm of Podhurst Orseck.

The plane's rate of descent, 6,000 feet per minute is much steeper than the gliding at 2,000 to 2,500 feet per minute that a pilot would attempt even if he'd lost both engines.

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Russian official: Jet broke apart 'at high altitude'

“You want to reduce your descent rate to give yourself more time to find more airports to deal with it,” said Marks. “He was screaming down to the earth. There was a major control problem.”

Airbus issued a statement saying it would contribute technical information to the investigation for what caused the accident. The A321-200 was built in 1997 and has flown 56,000 hours on nearly 21,000 flights, the manufacturer said. About 6,500 planes from the A320 family, which is roughly comparable to the Boeing 737, are flying around the world among 300 airlines.

"The concerns and sympathy of the Airbus employees go to all those affected by this tragic accident," Airbus said in the statement. "At this time no further factual information is available."

A Boeing study of crashes from 1959 through 2014 found that the A321 family of planes had 22 hull losses, 12 of which involved fatalities.

That rate of 0.14 hull losses per million departures was below the 0.73 average rate for all major aircraft studied. For comparison, the Boeing 737 has a hull-loss rate of 0.1 per million departures.

Marks, who has represented families in Russian crashes and flights dealing with Airbus aircraft such as Air France flight 447 over the Atlantic, said Russia historically has had a worse safety record than other developed countries such as the U.S. and Europe.

“They tend to be less stringent when it comes to maintenance and the pilots aren’t as scrutinized as other developed countries,” Marks said.

A general rule for pilots in a crisis is to aviate, navigate and communicate, Marks said. Because the pilot communicated a technical problem, he probably thought he could manage it, Marks said.

“That tells you that he thought, even though he was dealing with an emergency, that he could deal with it, and he might need help,” Marks said. “I don’t think it was catastrophic, like a bomb.”



The area in Egypt's Sinai peninsula where a Russian passenger plane with at least 200 people on board crashed on Oct. 31. (Photo: Mapbox)