

Rule Lifted for Private Pilots

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A small but devoted army of amateur pilots will be able to take to the sky with an hour's notice starting Monday instead of waiting 24 hours to get permission from federal authorities.

The change might seem small, but aviation authorities call it a revolution for the air industry that promises to help kick-start private aviation by bringing it closer to Western norms.

“We are getting close to Western standards where you can just get into your plane like you do with a car and fly,” said Vadim Katerinich, a flight instructor at the Jonathan Livingston flight club near the city of Ruza in the Moscow region.

For many years, pilots like Katerinich had to wait for 24 hours before the authorities would grant them permission to fly. Now all they will have to do is send their flight request to the web site of the Federal Air Transportation Agency, ivprf.ru, and wait for up to an hour to receive approval, agency officials said. The site will also provide pilots with information in connection with their flight plans, including the official federal weather forecasts.

"The new rules will bring new drive to the development of amateur and business aviation," said Alexander Neradko, head of the Federal Air Transportation Agency.

"You will be able to bypass bureaucrats to send your information," Neradko said, speaking at a news conference Friday.

According to the new rules, the Russian sky will be divided into three zones — A, C and G — with the first zone reserved for commercial and military aircraft and the other two open to private aircraft.

While the C zone will still require 24-hour advance notice, the G — or "golf" — zone will be open to pilots on an hour's notice. The G zone varies from an altitude of 300 meters in the Rostov region to 4,500 meters in East Siberia, aviation officials said.

The sky above Moscow will remain closed because the city hosts a number of landmarks and strategically important facilities, Neradko said.

But the Federal Air Transportation Agency has promised to cut the number of no-fly zones around the country gradually. Starting Monday, the number of no-fly zones will be cut from 85 to 59.

The agency also said the number of air routes reserved for commercial airlines only would be sliced by 75 percent from the current 2,209.

Amid the easing of the rules, the agency will toughen control over unsanctioned flights, Neradko said.

"Flying by notification order is not intended to be a flying disorder as some people probably wanted it to be," said Neradko, adding that his agency would seek harsher penalties for violations.

A current fine of 5,000 rubles (\$150) for aviation violations is "not effective," his agency said in a statement.

Some private pilots said they were tempted to break the rules because of the red tape involved in keeping them.

Andrei, a 31-year-old owner of a second-hand Cessna 150, said he often flew in the Moscow region without permission because he could not wait a whole day for a flight request to clear, given unpredictable weather conditions and other nuances in flying. "I just hope that we will have an opportunity to fly openly and legally," he said, asking that his last name not be used because he did not want to lose his license.

During Soviet times, student pilots learned to fly in sports clubs run by various branches of the Defense Ministry or sports organizations. But the right to own private property that followed the Soviet collapse has allowed celebrities and rich Russians to buy planes for pleasure flying. Today, the ranks of private pilots include prominent television host Leonid Yakubovich, former Gorky Park rocker Alexander Marshall and Mobile TeleSystems president Mikhail Shamolin.

Russia has about 3,000 private pilots, according to AOPA-Russia, a group that unites the owners of small planes.

More than 1,800 small private planes are registered with the Federal Air Transportation Agency.

Neradko said that while the new rules would provide significant support to private aviation, he did not expect the number of pilots to grow quickly, partly because of the cost of flight school, which he said runs at up to \$30,000 a year.

Russia has 33 licensed flight schools that train private pilots.

Another difficulty in flying is not the cost of the planes — second-hand models can sell for \$30,000 or less — but the problem with their certification. Foreign-made planes like Piper or Cessna are still classified by state aviation bodies as a “single-made copy of an aerial vehicle” and must go through an annual certification process that costs up to \$5,000, said Alexander Mikhailov, a senior member of AOPA-Russia.

Mikhailov, an owner of several small planes, voiced caution about the new rules, saying he first needed to try them out. “It is a big step forward, but I have to go through them myself,” he said.

He was echoed by Katerinich, the flight instructor. “The famous saying goes, 'We wanted to make it better, but it turned out the same as before,'" he said, referring to a phrase popularized by former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin.

He said private pilots would still need to fight bureaucracy in the sky. “This is the same as on Kutuzovsky Prospekt," he said. "When a senior official is flying, the air traffic controller radios everyone to land to give him the way.”

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