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Vim Avia Faces EU Ban After Tarmac Altercation

By The Moscow Times

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A Russian airline may find itself banned from European airspace after an altercation between staff and French safety inspectors last month, a source in the Transportation Ministry told Interfax on Friday.

Vim Avia has accused inspectors working for the EU's Safety Assessment of Foreign Aircraft program of "abuse of authority" and damaging the company's reputation over the incident in Paris on Sept. 26, which ended with police being called and one of the airline's planes being grounded.

According to the airline's version of events, inspectors issued "vague" and unhelpful observations before declaring the aircraft unsafe, but refused to clarify the alleged problems so that the crew could address them.

Tempers apparently flared when the plane, chartered by the UN to fly peacekeepers between

Paris and Beirut, was grounded.

In a statement released Friday, the Domodedovo-based airline said police were called to the scene, but found "no wrongdoing" on the part of the crew.

A source at the Transportation Ministry told Interfax on Friday that the incident was "under investigation," and that the European inspectors had turned up serious operational violations.

If the SAFA program's findings are upheld, Vim Avia could find itself added to an EU blacklist of airlines forbidden from operating in European skies, the source said, adding that three other Russian airlines, which he refused to name, could also face a ban.

Vim Avia is Russia's largest charter airline and one of the top-ten domestic carriers in terms of passenger numbers. It operates a fleet of 11 Boeing 737-200s, according to the company's web site.

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