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Lufthansa Steps Away From Domodedovo

By Howard Amos

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Lufthansa says it will save 15 minutes by flying from Vnukovo to Germany, and be closer to local customers. **Vladimir Filonov**

German airline Lufthansa will shift all its Moscow-Berlin flights in 2012 from Domodedovo to Vnukovo, in a major new addition to the state-controlled airport currently undergoing a management merger with Sheremetyevo.

The move is an unpleasant early New Year's gift for privately run Domodedovo, which has been under pressure throughout 2011 following a January suicide bombing, intimidation from state bodies and criticism from President Dmitry Medvedev.

Lufthansa said Thursday that it had selected Vnukovo Airport for the 12 weekly flights it operates between Moscow and Berlin, as well as two new daily flights between Moscow and Frankfurt.

The company said Vnukovo's new terminal and the 15 fewer minutes flying time to Germany motivated the move. They also cited the airport's proximity to central Moscow and Kaluga. A number of foreign companies, including Germany's Volkswagen, have factories in the Kaluga region.

From June 3 next year Vnukovo will host 26 of Lufthansa's 153 flights to and from Moscow.

Lufthansa spokesman Aage Dünhaupt told The Moscow Times that the flights from Vnukovo were targeting new customers and were simply meeting the requirements of "extra capacity."

But while Dünhaupt stressed that the company did not plan to completely abandon Domodedovo, experts said the announcement appeared to be a first step in that direction.

"Such a big company can't just move straightaway — it has to try it out first and see whether everything is in order," said Alexei Yekimovsky, editor of the Russian transport business directory. "It looks like a plan to move."

Lufthansa transferred all its flights from Sheremetyevo to Domodedovo in 2007 after repeated denials by the company's management that they were dropping Sheremetyevo.

Speaking at a news conference Thursday, Ronald Schultz, Lufthansa's Russia director, said the German airline intended to begin flying from Sheremetyevo again. "It would be logical to fly from three airports — we'll do this in a few years," he said, Interfax reported.

Domodedovo spokeswoman Yelena Selyanchenkova declined to comment on whether Lufthansa's move was linked to the pressure on Domodedovo from state organs, including a June police raid. She added that the decision was "normal" and that it was not unusual for airlines to operate out of multiple airports in the same city.

Domodedovo has not received an offer to join the ongoing management merger of Vnukovo and Sheremetyevo, the airport's owner, Dmitry Kamenshchik, said in July.

Nikita Melnikov, a transportation analyst at Aton, told The Moscow Times that Lufthansa's decision may also have been precipitated by a recent decline in quality at Domodedovo.

"Passenger traffic at the airport greatly exceeds the capacity at the moment," he said. "You can't be the best airport in Russia with such traffic."

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