

Airlines Push for Passenger Blacklist

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Backed by the Federal Air Transportation Agency, Aeroflot has proposed blacklisting passengers for bad behavior on board.

Ill-tempered air travelers might want to think twice before throwing a fit at 35,000 feet on Aeroflot. If the airline gets its way, they could be blacklisted.

After a series of air tragedies, domestic airlines have banded together to take aim at the passenger nobody wants to sit beside — the abusive troublemaker who has perhaps had too much to drink and might put the flight at risk.

Led by flagship carrier Aeroflot, the airlines want to start compiling blacklists of both passengers and pilots who have violated flight-safety rules.

The blacklists would bring airlines more in line with the policies implemented by carriers in other countries, a State Duma deputy said Wednesday. But some industry insiders warned that the lists could be used to settle personal scores.

Airlines take a risk in carrying unruly passengers, said Roman Gusarov, an editor of aviation portal Avia.ru. But if "today we make a blacklist of these people, tomorrow it will be a blacklist of opposition-minded passengers," he said.

The idea to create the blacklists was first voiced by Aeroflot CEO Vitaly Savelyev on Monday, and he found support Tuesday from two senior Duma deputies, Yevgeny Moskichyov, head of the Duma's transportation committee, and Andrei Andreyev, head of the Duma's air transportation subcommittee. Alexander Neradko, head of the Federal Air Transportation Agency, has called for the Duma to approve legislation enforcing the blacklists.

The Federal Air Transportation Agency already keeps a blacklist of pilots who have been stripped of their licenses for flight-safety violations like drinking alcohol or taking drugs before flights, Neradko's aide Sergei Izvolsky said Wednesday. The list is posted on the agency's website and regularly used by airlines, he said by telephone.

Airlines, however, are not allowed to maintain a database on passengers. The legislation that covers air travel, the Air Code, says airlines can "unilaterally terminate a contract to carry a passenger and freight" but cannot refuse to sell a ticket.

In practice, this means that an airline can refuse to honor a return ticket held by a passenger who violated flight-safety rules during a previous segment of the trip, but the airline cannot refuse to sell the passenger a new ticket, said Yaroslav Nilov, a Liberal Democratic Party deputy.

Nilov is the co-author of a bill submitted to the Duma in early April that would allow airlines not to sell tickets to passengers who violated flight-safety rules at least once in the five years preceding the purchase of the current ticket.

Many European carriers maintain official passenger blacklists, while Russian airlines keep unofficial ones that only permit flight attendants to pay "extra attention" to certain passengers during flights, Nilov said by telephone.

A blacklist is better than a fine, because the authorities would have to impose the fine at the end of the flight, while "nobody wants to get involved with the passenger but instead wants to get rid of him as soon as possible and get some rest," Nilov said.

He acknowledged that the introduction of a blacklist could encourage corrupt airline staff to accept money to remove the names of passengers, but he said such cases would be rare because of the high risk of negative publicity.

Blacklisting pilots, however, would be "excessive" because airlines already have the right to choose who they want to hire and background checks can expose applicants' air-safety records, he said.

The airlines that support the blacklists said any resulting pilot shortage would be covered with recruits from Belarus, Ukraine and other former Soviet republics.

But in a sign of the controversy that this initiative might cause, Nilov said rules should be put in place to give priority to ethnic Russian applicants with a good knowledge of the Russian language.

Nationalist sentiments aren't the only issue that the airlines would encounter. The bureaucracy is complicated for these kinds of hires, said Miroslav Boichuk, president of the Cockpit Personnel Association of Russia, a trade union. He recalled an instance when a pilot from Belarus, whose country is in a union with Russia, had to obtain special security clearance to fly for a Russian airline.

Russia already suffers from a lack of pilots, even though airlines are willing to pay qualified candidates up to \$120,000 a year, a princely sum here. The country's two pilot schools churn out around 300 pilots a year, while the demand is for 800 pilots a year, Transportation Minister Igor Levitin said in 2011.

Boichuk backed the passenger blacklist — he said abusive passengers are rare — but cautioned that airline bosses could use a pilot blacklist as leverage against pilots.

Many airlines in other countries have blacklists or have used them at different times.

In the United States, the Transportation Security Administration has a "no fly" list of suspected terrorists, while some airlines have informal lists of passengers they consider disruptive or who have made fraudulent ticket purchases.

In February, Shanghai-based Spring Airlines set up a list of passengers to whom the private carrier "declines to provide service" for flight safety-rule violations. Lawyers and consumer rights activists have said the blacklist violates the law and damages the dignity of passengers.

Azerbaijan Airlines allows people to search its website to see whether their name is on its list of unwanted passengers.

In Europe, passengers are sometimes blacklisted at the request of countries that name them *persona non grata* for political reasons but not for violating flight safety.

Last month, Lufthansa Airlines, Brussels Airlines and EasyJet canceled several dozen tickets of passengers who had bought tickets to Tel Aviv to protest Israel's presence on territory claimed by the Palestinians.

In Russia, airlines are looking to bolster passenger confidence after the country was ranked as the most deadly place in the world to fly in 2011, with nine crashes claiming 140 lives. Several more fatal crashes have occurred this year, including a brand-new Superjet that slammed into an Indonesian mountain during a demonstration flight last week, killing all 45 people on board.

Among the flight violations in recent months, the captain and a flight attendant of a Magadan-Moscow flight operated by Yakutia Airlines were pulled off the plane for smoking marijuana before takeoff in October, the Federal Air Transportation Agency said.

In 2010, a city councilman from the Leningrad region, Alexei Beketov, started a drunk brawl on a Paris-bound flight and threw a plastic container at a female flight attendant.

In 2009, Aeroflot pilot Alexander Cheplevsky was removed from a plane after passengers accused him of drunkenness, citing his blurred speech, red face and unsteadiness on his feet. Aeroflot later said the pilot was not drunk but had possibly suffered a stroke.

Also in 2009, German authorities barred an S7 airline pilot from operating a flight from Frankfurt after preflight testing found traces of alcohol in his blood.

Investigators found alcohol in the blood of the captain of an Aeroflot-Nord Boeing 737 that crashed in September 2008 near Perm, killing all 88 people on board. But they said the pilot's poor training was the reason for the crash. Aeroflot-Nord is a subsidiary of Aeroflot.

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