The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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Aeroflot Is Stung by 2 Days of Flight Delays

By Andrew McChesney

October 01, 2012



This is not the first time that Sheremetyevo has found itself on the receiving end of Aeroflot's criticism.
Sergei Porter

Aeroflot said Tuesday that dozens of flights have been delayed at Sheremetyevo Airport over the past two days because of the abrupt closure of a runway for repair work, and it vowed to oust the airport's director.

But airport management said Aeroflot and other airlines had been notified in advance of the closure and said flights were taking off on schedule Tuesday despite the repairs, which started Monday and will last until Oct. 15.

The back-and-forth between the airport and its main tenant, both of which are majority-owned by the government, marks a sharp escalation in tensions after Aeroflot threatened last month to sue the airport over a power failure that it said also delayed flights.

Other domestic airlines have also experienced slight delays because of the runway repairs, but no long-haul flights or foreign airlines appear to have been affected.

Aeroflot said 76 flights were delayed 16 minutes to seven hours Monday after the shorter of the airport's two runways, which is used for short-haul flights, was shut down.

"Aeroflot puts complete responsibility for the flight delays on Sheremetyevo Airport management, which fully approved Aeroflot's April-October 2012 flight schedule," the airline said in a statement.

"Aeroflot was only officially notified about the unscheduled closure of the runway and the urgent need to adjust its flight schedule on Sept. 5, 2012, when most of the tickets for the flights had already been booked," it said, adding that it would file a lawsuit against the airport for the inconvenience to passengers and the cost of the disruption to its operations.

In a second statement later Tuesday, the airline said delays had continued into a second day —it did not give any figures —and pledged to seek a no-confidence vote in Sheremetyevo director Mikhail Vasilenko at the airport's next board meeting. Aeroflot owns a 9 percent stake in the airport, while the government has 83 percent and the rest is split between two state banks.

"The policies pursued by Vasilenko in relation to Aeroflot —the national airline and a key client of the airport —are absolutely destructive in nature," it said.

Aeroflot previously lashed out at Vasilenko after a power surge resulted in a loss of electricity to terminals D, E and F for several hours on Sept. 12. While the airport resorted to backup generators, Aeroflot said Tuesday that the power outage —which it blamed again on poor airport management — had delayed the departure of 30 flights.

The latest delays came after Aeroflot CEO Vitaly Savelyev tweeted reassuringly Monday: "A section of the runway at Sheremetyevo will be closed for repairs for two weeks from Oct. 1. We have made changes to the schedule, and our passengers won't be affected."

Aeroflot's first deputy CEO, Andrei Kalmykov, announced the large number of delays in a Twitter message of his own Tuesday: "76 of our flights were delayed over 24 hours because of 'planned' repairs to the runway!" He ended his message with a frowning emoticon.

One passenger complained to Kalmykov on Twitter that his flight to Prague had been delayed by 14 hours.

Aeroflot did not mention that flight, but it did list five others in its statement: to Yekaterinburg (delayed by 5 hours), Naberevnye Chelny (5 hours), Astrakhan (5 hours, 8 minutes), Vilnius (6 hours, 7 minutes) and Kharkiv (7 hours, 4 minutes).

Sheremetyevo management countered Tuesday that runway-related delays had been minimal and pointed the finger at Aeroflot for its late-leaving aircraft.

"We observed a series of short delays of eight to nine minutes that were directly related to the repair of Runway One yesterday, Oct. 1," it said in a statement.

The airport also said Aeroflot had asked on Aug. 30 to change the departure times for the five flights listed in its statement to avoid any problems with the runway closure.

It was not immediately possible to reconcile the discrepancy in information from the two sides. A call to the cell phone of an Aeroflot spokeswoman went unanswered Tuesday, while an airport spokeswoman asked that questions be submitted by e-mail. No reply had been received by the close of business.

The airport said in a Sept. 30 statement that the runway repairs would only affect flights operated by Aeroflot, Transaero, Vladivostok Avia and Donavia. Also, Ukraine's Aerosvit airline has transferred its roundtrip flights from Dnipropetrovsk to Sheremetyevo's cross-town rival, Vnukovo Airport, until Nov. 9, it said.

A spokeswoman for Donavia, a Rostov-on-Don-based subsidiary of Aeroflot, said by phone that the airline had changed its timetable in advance and that only two flights had been delayed Monday. She said she was unable to comment on whether Sheremetyevo had given the airline sufficient notice.

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