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Aeroflot Cancels Over 60 Flights Amid Runway Uproar

By Andrew McChesney

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In the face of protracted flight delays, Aeroflot's CEO said Wednesday that more than 60 flights would be canceled through mid-October because of repair work on a runway at Sheremetyevo Airport.

Sheremetyevo's director, whom Aeroflot has vowed to oust, strongly defended his decision to close the shorter of the airport's two runways from Oct. 1 to 15, posting on his blog both a photograph of a stretch of runway strewn with cracks and correspondence with airlines that indicated the closure shouldn't have surprised Aeroflot.

A total of 76 Aeroflot flights were delayed 16 minutes to seven hours on Monday, while more than 70 flights left behind schedule Tuesday, Aeroflot said. It blamed the problem on the runway repairs.

"Passengers are writing, tweeting and complaining," Aeroflot CEO Vitaly Savelyev told

reporters.

"This is not our fault. We opposed the closure of the runway. For us, it was a surprise," he said. "Now, to avoid a collapse, we have canceled more than 60 flights through mid-October."

He declined to specify what financial losses the airline would sustain because of the canceled flights.

Asked by a reporter whether Aeroflot was going too far by demanding the dismissal of Sheremetyevo's director, Savelyev said, "Brutal or not, more than 70 of our flights were delayed yesterday, and that is the reality of the matter," RIA-Novosti reported.

Seething over the flight delays, Aeroflot announced Tuesday that it would seek the ouster of Sheremetyevo director Mikhail Vasilenko next Monday at an airport board meeting.

It also accuses him of mismanagement in connection with an airport power outage that it said delayed 30 flights last month.

Aeroflot is a minority shareholder in the airport, which is 83 percent held by the government. The airline is also controlled by the government.

Vasilenko fired back at Aeroflot on Wednesday, writing on his blog that he believed the airline shared his desire to prioritize passenger safety over flight schedules and profit.

He said a scheduled inspection of the runway on July 19 had found that urgent work was needed to repair damage caused by heavy use over the summer.

And he said he notified Aeroflot about the closure on Aug. 30, a week earlier than the airline says.

Savelyev said Wednesday that Aeroflot would have needed two months' notice.

In another twist, the organization that oversees the country's civilian airports said Wednesday that it had not approved a request from Sheremetyevo to close the runway for repairs, Interfax reported. It said it received the request on Aug. 30 and replied on Sept. 13 that the airport had to give the organization two months' notice before it could start repairs.

A copy of an Aug. 30 letter to Aeroflot posted on Vasilenko's blog shows that the airport had determined that the closure would affect only 22 flights, including 10 operated by Aeroflot.

The other affected airlines, including Transaero and Donavia, a subsidiary of Aeroflot, subsequently rescheduled their flights.

Vasilenko said he handled the situation in the same manner as any international airport would, and he posted a Feb. 4 advisory from London's Heathrow Airport that said 30 percent of flights had to be canceled because of poor weather and that listed which airlines would be affected.

"Aeroflot shows no fear," Vasilenko said. "Here's an interesting question: Would Aeroflot go to court against Heathrow Airport?"

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