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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ministry Mulls Hiring Foreign Pilots

By Roland Oliphant

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Russia is one of the fastest-growing air travel markets in the world, but it also has one of the worst safety records. **Maxim Stulov**

The Transportation Ministry is considering throwing the doors open to foreign airline pilots in a bid to tackle a growing shortage of qualified fliers in the Russian skies.

The country is short about 1000 pilots, according to the ministry, and some officials believe allowing airlines to hire foreign fliers – hitherto prohibited for national security reasons – could help ease the shortage.

Airlines welcomed the initiative last week.

Transaero said that its own flight department is staffed in "full accordance with the carrier's flight plans," but that the domestic aviation industry requires about 800 new pilots annually.

"[We believe] it necessary to support local carriers by allowing them to hire foreigners as pilots with CIS passport holders to be the first among them," the company said in e-mailed

comments.

State-owned Aeroflot, the country's largest airline, told Vedomosti on Friday that previous appeals for permission to hire Russian-speaking CIS citizens had been ignored.

Aeroflot reportedly increased salaries for pilots to 200,000 rubles a month last year. In a bid to recruit talent, the national carrier promised hiring bonuses to reimburse any losses new employees would face from quitting their previous employer on short notice.

Rapid growth in the global aviation sector means qualified pilots are at a premium everywhere.

Russia is one of the fastest growing air travel markets in the world, but it also has one of the worst safety records. In 2011 it registered more deaths in air crashes than any other country. Most of those crashes have been blamed on human error.

The deficit has also led to rapid wage inflation among qualified fliers.

"Any deficit leads to a monopoly producing high prices," Transportation Minister Maxim Sokolov told Vedomosti. "In this case, salaries for flight crew," he added.

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Lufthansa is seeking to capitalize on the planned expansion of Moscow by establishing a hub for Star Alliance airlines at Vnukovo Airport.

"A lot of government departments are going to be moving down there. It means we will have that area of the city covered," regional director for Russia and the CIS Ronald Shulz said late last week.

Domodedovo hosts Oneworld airlines S7 and British Airways, while Aeroflot-hub Sheremetyevo serves most SkyTeam airlines. "Being at Vnukovo gives us the opportunity to do something similar," Shulz said.

Lufthansa, which has the largest presence of any foreign airline in Russia, moved several flights from Domodedovo to less crowded Vnukovo earlier this year.

Lufthansa will cease flying to Rostov-on-Don from this winter because it is already served by Austrian Airlines, another member of the Lufthansa group — which includes Austrian Airlines, Swiss International, Brussels Airlines and budget carrier German Wings.

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