

Bill Allowing Foreign Pilots Is in the Works

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Executives say bringing in more pilots will improve safety and lower costs. **Vladimir Filonov**

The Transportation Ministry is drawing up a bill to allow Russian airlines to employ foreign pilots in a bid to tackle a chronic shortage of qualified fliers, Deputy Transportation Minister Valery Okulov said Thursday.

Amendments to the Aviation Code, which still have to be "negotiated with our colleagues in the unions," could be sent to the State Duma by the end of the year, he said.

"The government is doing all it can to promote the development of regional routes and increase air traffic ... and the shortage of pilots is seriously slowing that down," Okulov told reporters at a news briefing.

Russian airlines carried 64.1 million passengers in 2011, a 12.6 percent increase from 2010. Industry executives say they expect that growth to continue in coming years as regional

centers become wealthier and the number of interregional routes grows.

Okulov said the shortage of qualified pilots directly affects safety because it leads to overwork and exhaustion.

"Practically all air crashes are the result of elementary errors in procedure," he said.

Airline executives welcomed the move, which they have been urging for some time. They say the artificial shortage has driven wage inflation to "absurd" levels, affecting their costs and pushing up ticket prices.

"Pilots retire, they go to foreign companies, they find different work, are laid off for various reasons. We have a deficit of 2,100 people a year on average," said Dmitry Stolyarov, first deputy general director of Transaero.

There are about 14,200 qualified pilots working in Russia, and about 700 leave the industry annually he said, though he said Transaero currently has no shortage.

Other CIS countries, including Kazakhstan, already allow the hiring of foreign pilots, and a glut of qualified air-crew personnel in Europe means there is a pool of talent waiting to be tapped, he said.

Aeroflot deputy general director Igor Chalik also welcomed the move, saying that the national flagship carrier suffers from a particularly acute shortage of senior pilots, especially captains.

But Okulov dismissed an earlier suggestion from Aeroflot general director Vitaly Saveliev to create a blacklist of poorly performing pilots.

"There will be no kind of formal blacklist. No such document is envisaged," he said, adding that airlines should ask for references from previous employers if they wanted to avoid hiring unscrupulous staff members.

While foreign pilots may soon be flying Russia-flagged aircraft, there has been no discussion of allowing foreign airlines to operate on domestic routes in Russia, said Okulov.

"And I doubt there will be," he added.

That directly contradicts comments by Federal Anti-Monopoly Service chief Igor Artemyev, who said last week that the government was considering allowing foreign budget airlines to fly domestic routes.

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