

Airlines Face Visa Woes

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Just two days before a Moscow-imposed ultimatum, some European airlines do not have Russian visas for their crews, while those who obtained them complained that the procedure is cumbersome and expensive.

Because of a spat over a visa facilitation agreement with the European Union, Moscow has said it will demand visas from Nov. 1 onward for aircrews from 11 EU countries, including Italy, Portugal, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland and the Baltic states.

Representatives of Italy's Alitalia and Portugal's TAP told a Foreign Ministry briefing Tuesday that they were not ready for the looming deadline.

Answering a question by Andrei Karlov, head of the ministry's consular department, an Alitalia representative said her airline could not finish the paperwork in time, Interfax reported.

A TAP representative suggested that the Foreign Ministry had not responded to visa

applications made during the last weeks.

"Since Oct. 10, not one of our applications has been confirmed," the unspecified airline official was quoted as saying.

It was not immediately clear whether and how this would affect flights. Alitalia did not respond to calls and an e-mail to its corporate headquarters in Rome late Tuesday. TAP could also not be reached for comment.

Other airlines, including Latvia's Air Baltic, Belgium's Brussels Airlines and Czech Airlines said they have visas.

But Brussels Airlines said the new procedures were unsatisfactory. "It is complicated and causes high costs," company spokeswoman Wencke Lemmes said by e-mail. She added that the airline hoped that an agreement would be reached soon.

The rules require airlines to send collective application forms to the Transportation Ministry, which forwards them to the Foreign Ministry, Karlov said, according to Interfax.

The spat escalated after Brussels refused to accept Moscow's demand to grant visa-free travel to holders of non-diplomatic passports for government officials as part of a far-reaching visa facilitation agreement. In response, Moscow announced that it would no longer honor a moratorium on air crew visas after Oct. 31.

The Russian move only affects countries that have no bilateral agreement with Moscow over air crew visas.

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