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Up to 200 Foreign Pilots Could Fly Domestic Skies

By Alexander Bratersky

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Regional jets like this Yak-40 could soon be flown by foreign pilots if the authorities approve relevant legislation.

Transportation Minister Maxim Sokolov has called on Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to speed up legislation that would allow foreign pilots to work in Russian airlines, despite strong opposition from the unions.

Sokolov, who took part in a meeting dedicated to regional aviation development chaired by Medvedev on Wednesday at the prime minister's suburban residence, said the draft of the legislation on foreign pilots would allow Russian companies to hire a total of up to 200 foreign pilots annually. He added that Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets supported the proposed legislation.

"We are asking to speed up the decision about this issue and organizing the necessary approvals, and having [the legislation] sent to the State Duma," Sokolov said, Interfax

reported.

Medvedev is also a leader of the ruling United Russia party, which has a majority in the lower house of parliament.

While Medvedev said on television Wednesday that aviation companies "need to be consulted" before the decision on foreign pilots would be finalized, aviation expert Roman Gusarov from Avia.ru think tank said the law would likely be passed.

This is because provisions to invite foreign pilots were already included in a government road map approved by Medvedev to improve the standards of Russian aviation.

With Russian passenger flow growing 16 to 17 percent annually, according to industry experts, the country's aviation industry requires about 800 new pilots per year.

Transportation Minister Sokolov said that since an average salary of $10,000 per month paid to pilots here by major airlines is competitive, the country will be able to attract pilots from the countries of the former Soviet Union, Europe and Americas.

But however, pilot unions and some conservative-leaning aviation experts have expressed strong opposition to the move.

"Instead of supporting our own state, we will rely on foreign pilots who will be like instant coffee — not the real thing," said Magomed Tolboyev, a former test pilot and member of the presidential consulting body.

But Gusarov from Avia.ru said the core of foreign pilots would come from the former Soviet Union. He said Russian companies would look for Soviet-trained pilots, 40 to 45 years of age, to make them chief pilots. "But I don't think that it will save the situation," Gusarov said.

The situation is more difficult on the regional level, where smaller carriers are experiencing difficulties not only with pilots but also with acquiring new regional jets.

Only 4.76 million passengers were transported by regional companies, compared with 33.4 million passengers flown by major Russian carriers within the country last year.

Medvedev said the government would spend 3.5 billion rubles ($116 million) in subsidies to carriers for routes between the Far East, Siberia and the European part of the country.

The costs of local flights are high. A round-trip ticket from Moscow to Irkutsk in eastern Siberia can be compared to a similar ticket from Moscow to London.

Medvedev said that part of the problem is the cost of maintenance of airport infrastructure in far flung regions, which is significantly higher than more frequently used regional hubs.

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