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Passengers Say They Were Kicked Off U.S. Plane for Speaking Russian

By The Moscow Times

May 29, 2013



WASHINGTON — A group of Russian-Americans is seeking compensation from a U.S. budget airline after they were kicked off a flight from San Diego to Las Vegas last week for speaking Russian, their lawyer said.

"They were on a flight, speaking to each other ... in Russian, and about five minutes before the plane took off, someone came over and kicked them off the flight," said lawyer Daniel Petrov, whose sister, Sana Bitman, was one of the six passengers asked to leave the Spirit Airlines flight.

"They never got an explanation," Petrov said in an interview Tuesday.

The Russian speakers were on their way to Las Vegas to attend a wedding.

But Spirit Airlines spokeswoman Misty Pinson said the decision to remove the passengers was

made because they had been "loud and disruptive," not because they were speaking in Russian.

"Our preliminary review shows that the customers were asked to deplane for loud and disruptive behavior," she said.

The airline is conducting a complete review of the incident and "reaching out to the customers," she added.

Petrov, however, said that the group was speaking more softly than the other passengers on the plane and that they were never warned to be quiet or face being kicked off the plane.

"Spirit said they warned them over the loudspeaker. But no one heard, and if they had warned them over the loudspeaker, what would they have said: 'You people speaking Russian, stop?'" Petrov said.

"No one came up to them and said anything, ever. The only thing that was different between them and everyone else is that they were speaking Russian," he said.

Spirit refunded the group's airfares and offered to put them on a different flight to Las Vegas, but the new flight didn't fit into their schedule, Petrov said.

The group is trying to reach an out-of-court settlement with the airline, which Petrov says violated a section of California law that forbids discrimination based on, among other criteria, national origin. Each passenger would be entitled to at least $4,000 plus legal fees, Petrov said, adding that his clients will sue if they cannot reach a settlement.

He said the passengers were not trying to create an international incident but simply seeking justice under California law.

"We're not trying to make this a big deal because they're Russian," Petrov said. "What we're saying is the U.S. is a melting pot and you're not supposed to discriminate. We believe the airline did, and under California law, they're liable."

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