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St. Petersburg's Pulkovo Airport Eyes Opening Up to Foreign Budget Airlines

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Low-cost international airlines could soon fly in and out of St. Petersburg more freely after an easing of restrictions announced by Russian officials, Russian media have reported.

No other Russian city allows so-called "seventh freedom flights," which allow international carriers to operate flights outside their country of registration. St. Petersburg's Pulkovo Airport projects that the permissions will help boost its annual passenger traffic from its current 20 million to 35 million by 2025.

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Deputy Prime Minister Maxim Akimov endorsed Pulkovo's proposal Tuesday, adding that the proposal should first undergo a five-year trial period.

"The seventh freedom is unprecedented for Russia," Interfax quoted Akimov's spokesperson

as telling reporters.

By obtaining this permission, St. Petersburg will be opened up to low-cost foreign airlines, said Leonid Sergeyev, who heads Pulkovo's managing company Northern Capital Gateway.

For example, airBaltic would be able to fly passengers directly between St. Petersburg and Stockholm without first making a stopover in Latvia, the country where it is headquartered.

At the end of the five-year pilot project, Akimov reportedly said the routes "could be either handed to Russian airlines or stay with the foreigners."

President Vladimir Putin was reported this summer to have backed the airport's proposal to obtain so-called Open Skies status, which grants foreign airlines freedoms in Russian airspace. If the Transport Ministry approves Pulkovo's proposal, St. Petersburg will become the fifth Russian city to be granted Open Skies status.

Russia's domestic airlines have opposed Pulkovo's move, citing increased competition.

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