

Battle Over Minsk-Moscow Air Route Escalates

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Belarusian national airline Belavia has threatened to stop Aeroflot's flights between Moscow and Minsk, after the Russian Transport Ministry said it intended to ban Belavia from flying to Russia's regions, Gazeta.ru reported Friday.

Belavia currently flies to Kaliningrad, St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg and had planned to open routes to Sochi and Novosibirsk this summer. But the airline received a letter Thursday from the Transportation Ministry saying that all flights except those to Moscow would be banned.

The tit-for-tat is a continuation of a spat that started March 27, when Russian authorities withdrew permission for a Belavia flight to land in Moscow over a conflict regarding the number of flights each country's airlines should be afforded per day on the route. Russia was seeking to increase the amount of daily flights to Minsk, while Belarus insisted that the countries maintain an agreement to keep the number even for each side.

If Belavia — Belarus's largest airline by number of routes — is not allowed to fly to Russia's

regions, then the number of flights between Minsk and Moscow is likely to decrease and Aeroflot will not be undertaking them, Belavia spokesman Igor Cherginyets told Gazeta.ru.

"It will probably be necessary to reduce the number of flights between Minsk and Moscow to two per day," he said, down from the current four. "From our side, Belavia will make them and from the Russian side, S7 and Utair [will]. But Aeroflot will not be able to carry out these flights."

A spokesperson for Aeroflot, which currently has three flights per day on the route, expressed surprise at the statement, telling Gazeta.ru that Belavia is "not legally eligible" to make such a decision. It is for Russian air authorities to decide which Russian airlines fly where, not a Belarusian air company, the spokesperson said.

The Russian Transport Ministry told Gazeta.ru that it would not comment on the statement by Belavia. Belarusian transport authorities are yet to comment.

Belavia said it intends to take the issue to court, since under Russia and Belarus's current aviation agreement, authorities must provide clear and serious justification for revoking permission from an airline to fly certain routes, RIA-Novosti reported Friday.

"There are not such grounds," the company said in a statement. "We insist on full compliance with all points of the intergovernmental agreement, just as we are doing."

Cherginyets believes the decision to block Belavia's flights was due to Aeroflot's desire to corner the market on flights to his country.

"We link the situation exclusively to Aeroflot's wish to seize the Belarusian market, eliminating us as a competitor," he told Gazeta.ru.

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