

# Local Pilots Fear Foreign Competitors

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Pilots on Tuesday reacted with dismay to a decree presented for public scrutiny by the Economic Development Ministry that proposes to allow Russian airlines to collectively hire up to 200 foreign pilots per year through 2018 to compensate for a domestic shortage.

A source in Aeroflot told Kommersant that there was a shortage of about 1,000 pilots there, that the company's biggest problem was a lack of personnel and that it was ready to consume the whole quota by itself.

Pilots said the ministry's effort to resolve the problem was fraught with obstacles, including language issues and security threats.

"Have we forgotten what happened on September 11, 2011? Who was flying the planes? They were foreigners," said a member of the managing board of Cockpit Personnel Association of Russia, who is a former pilot. He declined to give his name because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

Qualified pilots from Europe and America will not come to work in Russia, he added, because they have no reason to abandon the good salary and benefits packages they now get at major Western airlines.

A source at Sheremetyevo's flight personnel labor union told Kommersant that the decree was designed to facilitate hiring pilots from former CIS countries who could come to Russia and work for a higher salary.

But pilot associations in those countries, which are not facing such a deficit, want to prevent a similar rule from being implemented on their turf and at the same time limit defections.

"We are taking measures to protect our national market from hiring foreign pilots, because we have enough people to fly planes at home, and we try to do everything possible to keep the staff from leaving the country," said Alexei Kapustinsky, managing director of the Ukrainian Airline Pilots' Association.

But some pilots might consider leaving for a new job, he said. "The situation with the largest Ukrainian airlines, such as Aerosvit and Donbassaero, which suddenly stopped flying, has led to a large number of pilots losing their jobs," Kapustinsky said.

Executives at major Russian airlines — which have been lobbying for the right to hire foreign pilots — believe their offering is competitive.

"Transaero offers high salaries and has a good benefits package. Highly qualified pilots not only from the former CIS countries but from Europe as well ask to be considered for positions," said the company's chief, Olga Pleshakova, at an online conference organized by Gazeta.ru earlier this year.

She also said that although 200 foreign pilots were not enough to fill empty cockpit seats at all airlines, it would provide some relief. Transaero's main criterion for choosing flight staff, however, is not their nationality but their level of professionalism, she added.

Increasing passenger traffic — all major carriers have seen double-digit growth over the last 12 months — exacerbates the pilot deficit in Russia.

But industry veterans say the situation could have been prevented if aviation authorities and airlines had acted in time.

"Why did the airlines start to buy planes without having prepared enough pilots in advance to fly them? Why isn't anyone taking responsibility?" said the source at the Cockpit Personnel Association.

Hiring foreign pilots is an easy way out for the airlines, since they do not have to spend time and money training domestic flight school graduates, he added.

Interested parties are free to review and comment on the ministry's draft decree by July 18. It will then be sent to the Cabinet for approval.

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