

How Russia Nearly Banned Boeing 737 Airliners

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The short-haul 737 is one of the world's most popular planes. According to news agency RBC, Russian airlines operate 194 of them.

For a few hours on Thursday, Russian aviation authorities appeared to have banned Boeing 737 short-haul airliners.

The surprise move by the Interstate Aviation Committee (IAC) — a body that investigates air accidents in a clutch of former Soviet states — could have caused havoc, grounding nearly 200 planes, putting half of Russia's airlines out of business, and curtailing air travel inside Russia, the world's largest country.

Within hours, it had unravelled. Russia's Federal Air Transport Agency, Rosaviatsia, said no decision had been taken to enforce a ban. But before it did so, industry insiders said the move was corporate revenge, and it emerged that it might not even affect Russian airlines, since 85 percent of their planes are registered in places like Ireland and the Bermuda Islands.

Boeing's 737 line of aircraft are some of the world's most popular planes. According to news agency RBC, Russian airlines operate 194 of them — making up around one-fifth of their total fleet.

On Thursday afternoon, the IAC published on its website a letter to Russian and U.S. aviation authorities saying it had found problems with Boeing's altitude-control system. It said that since U.S. regulators had failed to address the IAC's concerns, it would withdraw the airworthiness certificate for all 737 models.

Russian media immediately began counting aircraft: Aeroflot, the country's flag carrier, has 12 Boeing 737s; S7, one of the country's biggest airlines, has 13; UTair, another major carrier, has 50; all 12 of the jets flown by Pobeda, Aeroflot's low-cost subsidiary, are 737s, RBC said, citing data from Rosaviatsia.

A source close to Aeroflot told the agency: “If they withdraw the license to use the Boeing 737, half of Russia's airlines will stop flying.” Since the aircraft is widely used for internal flights, the move would slash air travel between Russian cities.

It would not be the first decision by authorities in Moscow to negatively impact Russians, though most recent moves have been political. Bans on a range of food imports from the West in response to sanctions last year caused a sharp rise in food prices. Hundreds of thousands of passengers will be affected by the closure of Russian airspace to Ukrainian planes last month, which followed Kiev's blacklisting of Russian airlines.

Representatives of Rosaviatsia, Boeing and even an IAC official said on Thursday the commission's letter had caught them by surprise. In theory, a recommendation by the IAC should be automatically enacted. But by evening, Rosaviatsia released a press release saying that the commission lacked the authority to ground a class of airplanes, and no such decision had been taken.

The IAC appeared to be responding to concerns raised by Rosaviatsia following an accident in November 2013, when a Boeing 737-500 operated by Tatarstan Airlines crashed onto a runway in Kazan in central Russia, killing 50 people.

On Friday, the IAC issued a press release saying that Rosaviatsia appeared to have dropped its earlier worries about safety, and had risked the lives of “more than 20 million passengers” by allowing planes of the Boeing 737 family to keep flying.

But another, less flattering theory was doing the rounds. Officials and aviation industry insiders told media the IAC's decision was retribution for the demise of Transaero, Russia's second-largest airline, which collapsed this fall after two rescue plans involving buyouts by the company's competitors were abandoned.

Media reports said Tatyana Anodina, the head of the IAC, is the mother of Alexander Pleshakov, who with his wife Olga ran the company and were major shareholders. Anodina also owned a 3 percent stake in the company, and until the summer sat on its board, according to online newspaper Gazeta.ru.

“This is revenge for Transaero,” one aviation industry source told Gazeta.ru. The letter to the

aviation authorities was published on Nov. 5, the anniversary Transaero's first charter flight in 1991. Anodina has not commented on the affair.

Even if a ban on Boeing 737s was adopted by Russian aviation officials, it could be hard to enforce, since almost all foreign-made planes operated by Russian airlines are registered abroad.

Pobeda, a lowcoster run by Aeroflot, announced to the Interfax news agency on Thursday that its entire fleet of Boeing 737s were registered in the Bermuda Islands, and would continue to fly unimpeded by Russian regulatory action.

A group of deputies on Thursday submitted legislation demanding that aircraft used in Russia be reregistered in the country. In an explanatory note to the bill, they said only about 15 percent of passenger flights run by Russian companies used planes that fall under the scope of Russian aviation authorities, according to the RIA Novosti news agency.

Vladimir Tasun, the head of the Russian Association of Air Transport Operators, told TASS on Friday that any ban would likely affect only the six Boeing 737 aircraft registered in the country.

But in the event, the IAC backed down. After a meeting with Russian air authorities, carriers and Boeing on Friday, Rosaviatsia chief Alexander Neradko told TASS the commission had retracted its letter.

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