

Czechs See Russian Tourist Numbers Tumble as Ukraine Crisis Bites

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Fewer Russians are visiting Czech attractions like the Karlštejn castle.

PRAGUE — The crisis in Russia's relations with the West has hit Czech tourism, with the number of spend-happy Russian visitors dropping 14 percent in the third quarter, data showed on Friday.

Some travel agencies and hotels in the main tourism hot spots, as well as the national airline, report even bigger falls since the crisis with Moscow over Ukraine intensified in the spring, and the Russian ruble hit heavy turbulence.

Foreign tourists are an important source of revenue for the Czech Republic, bringing in 4.3 billion euros (\$5.3 billion) in 2012, the latest year for which official data is available.

Russians traditionally favor the Czech Republic, popular since the communist era, and make up the second-largest group of tourists after visitors from neighboring Germany.

"We saw a dip in May, which normally is a strong month. That was a sign something is going on," said Angela Fedorenko, a co-owner of Prager, a travel agency that specializes in bringing foreigners, mostly Russians, to Prague.

"Now, honestly, the situation is really bad. The drop is huge," she said, putting the fall-off at about 50-60 percent.

The Czech Statistical Bureau said the overall number of Russian tourists fell 14 percent year-on-year in the third quarter to 180,000, based on hotel data. However, this was counter-balanced by an increase in German, Polish and Slovak tourists, meaning that total arrivals rose 4 percent.

"The trend is that rich [Russians] keep coming, but the middle class is either worried or does not have enough money," Fedorenko said.

The crisis over Ukraine has exacerbated Russia's economic woes, with the ruble falling more than a fifth against a basket of currencies since the start of the year, making foreign travel less attractive for Russians.

Czech national carrier Czech Airlines, partially owned by Korean Air, had bet on the Russian market as part of its struggle to overcome losses in past years, but has suffered declines on both its Russian and Ukrainian routes this year.

"While in the first quarter there had been almost no year-on-year change, we can see a significant drop since April," said CSA spokesman Daniel Sabik.

Traffic to Russia fell 23 percent in September, while to Ukraine it was down 61 percent, he said.

"It means a drop in revenue by hundreds of millions of crowns and of course also [has] a negative impact on the company's results," he said.

Other European nations have reported similar falls, with ski resorts in Austria and Switzerland bracing for a sharp decline in Russian tourists over the coming months.

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