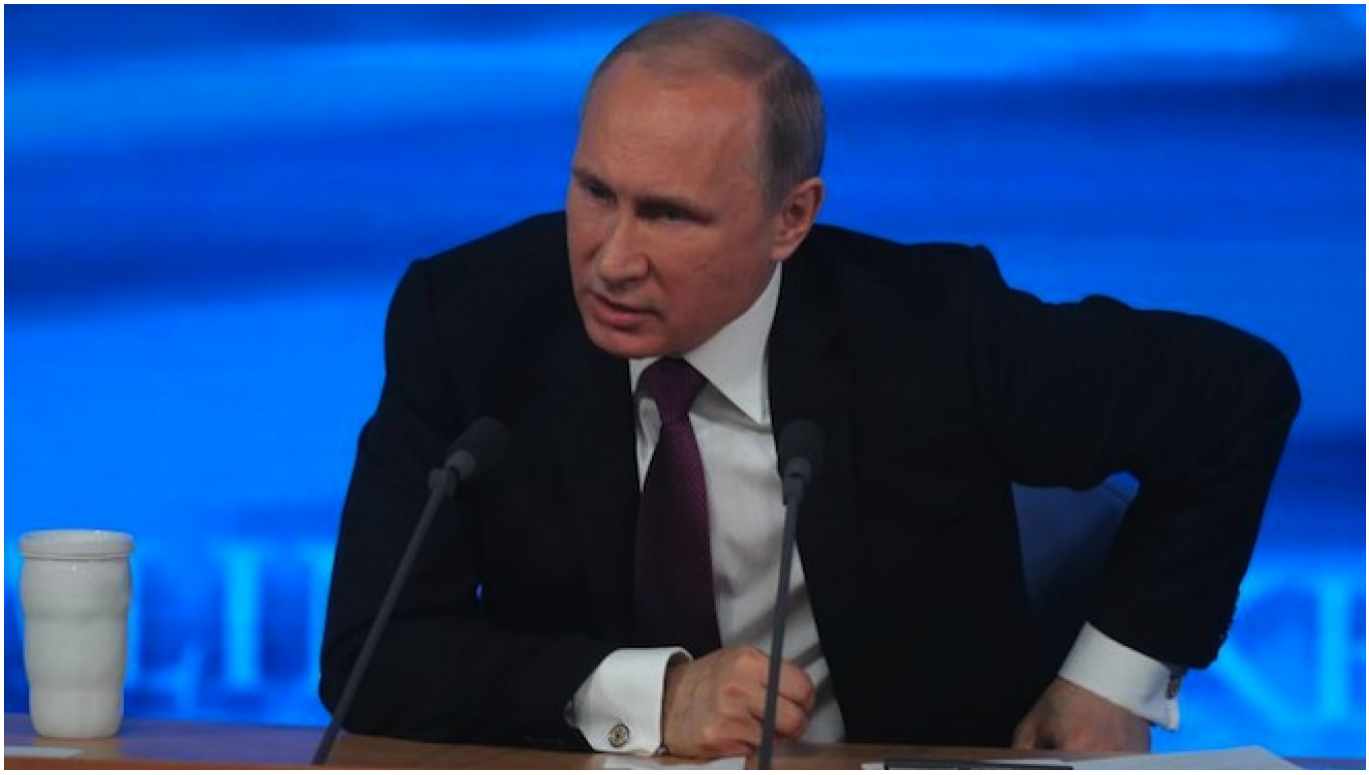
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Russian Tourists to Be Repatriated From Egypt on Putin's Orders

By Eva Hartog

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Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed on Friday to suspend air traffic with Egypt on the advice of the head of the Federal Security Service, his spokesman Dmitry Peskov told the Interfax news agency.

“Putin has instructed the government to work out a way to implement the recommendations and secure the repatriation of Russian citizens,” Peskov was cited as saying Friday.

The announcement follows an earlier statement by the head of Russia's Federal Security Service, Alexander Bortnikov, following a meeting with the National Anti-Terrorism Committee in which he advised Russia to suspend all flights to Egypt until further information became known on the causes of the Sinai plane crash, the report said.

The St. Petersburg-bound Airbus A321 crashed on Saturday in Egypt's Sinai peninsula shortly after taking off from the Sharm el-Sheikh resort, killing 224 people, in Russia's largest ever air disaster.

The advice and subsequent order from Putin seemed to mark a change in the Kremlin's policy, after Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev insisted it was too early to draw any conclusions on what caused the crash at a government meeting on Thursday.

But Peskov said the flight ban did not signify any such U-turn and denied it was evidence the Kremlin considered the crash to have been caused by a terrorist attack, a separate Interfax news agency reported.

"As previously, no theory [on the causes of the crash] can dominate, because there isn't any clear convincing evidence pointing towards this one version [of a terrorist attack,]" he was cited as telling journalists on Friday following the announcement.

Head of Russia's federal tourism agency Rosturism Oleg Safonov said there were around 45,000 Russian tourists in Egypt — most of whom were vacationing in the beach resort of Hurghada and Sharm el-Sheikh, the TASS news agency reported.

Britain earlier this week banned all non-essential flights to Sharm el-Sheikh, saying the crash had likely been caused by an explosive device on board the aircraft. U.S. President Barack Obama on Thursday also said Washington was taking the theory of a terrorist attack having caused the crash "very seriously."

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