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Aeroflot Still Flying Abroad Despite Russia's International Travel Ban – Vedomosti

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Russia grounded nearly all international flights in late March to slow the coronavirus. **Roman Pimenov / TASS**

Russia's flagship carrier Aeroflot has been secretly flying passengers abroad for nearly a month despite state-mandated grounded flights due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Vedomosti business daily reported Wednesday.

Russia grounded nearly all international flights in late March to slow the coronavirus, allowing only special flights evacuating Russians from abroad and other government-authorized flights. Aeroflot has suspended ticket sales for international flights until Aug. 1, when it said there would be more clarity about when Russia would lift its ban.

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Aeroflot has been operating flights to New York, Paris, London, Frankfurt, Seoul and Tel Aviv since at least early June, Vedomosti cited unnamed employees of three airlines including Aeroflot as saying.

"These flights are officially registered as cargo, but tickets are sold with permission from Rosaviatsia [Russia's Federal Air Transport Agency]," two Aeroflot representatives were quoted as saying.

Demand for the semi-legal flights is high despite a lack of advertising, Vedomosti reported, adding that passengers learn about them through word of mouth.

Tickets go on sale less than a week before the flights and are exponentially more expensive than similar flights within Russia. The flights are said to return empty.

Vedomosti's sources say that Aeroflot sells tickets to passengers who hold EU citizenship or permanent residency.

Thousands of Russians thought to be either dual nationals or those with permanent residency have reportedly traveled abroad despite border closures imposed at the height of the coronavirus crisis in April. The European Union, which reopens outside borders next Wednesday, is reportedly considering an initial ban on Russian, American and Brazilian travelers because of their countries' high Covid-19 caseloads.

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Aeroflot has recently begun flying to some of the locations twice a week and added Barcelona, Rome and Nice to its roster, according to Vedomosti.

Data from flight tracking websites corroborates Vedomosti's findings, showing aircraft that can accommodate up to 400 passengers. Aeroflot and Rosaviatsia did not comment on the story.

Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin ordered Rosaviatsia and Rospotrebnadzor this month to explore options for resuming international flights. An unnamed Rosaviatsia source told the Kommersant business daily Wednesday that Russia is considering reopening international flights by starting with post-Soviet countries.

Russia has reported almost 614,000 coronavirus infections and more than 8,600 deaths as of Thursday.

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