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Half a Million Russians Shut Out of Turkey After Virus Restricts Travel Again

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Russia will drastically cut flights to and from Turkey, a top destination for Russians, from April 15-June 1 due to rising Covid-19 cases. **Pixabay**

Russia restricted travel to Turkey this week, leaving more than half a million Russians scrambling to reimburse tickets to the popular tourist destination and find alternative vacation spots.

Flights to and from Turkey will be drastically reduced from April 15-June 1 due to rising coronavirus cases in Turkey, a senior Russian government official announced Monday. Flights to Tanzania will also be suspended over cases of Covid-19 and malaria, affecting slightly under 10,000 Russian tourists.

Besides the health concerns, Russia's decision came two days after Turkey's president met his Ukrainian counterpart as political tensions between Moscow and Ankara brew. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday discussed military deals with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy as Kiev seeks to shore up Western support amid Russia's troop buildup on its eastern borders.

The Kremlin denied Monday evening that Russia limited travel to and from Turkey in retaliation against Zelenskiy's visit to Istanbul. But a senior Russian lawmaker on Tuesday morning linked the flight restrictions directly to Erdogan's support for Ukraine, calling them "a test for patriotism, regardless of vacation plans."

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Avoiding visiting Turkey "would be our society's truly powerful response to the irresponsible statements of a national leader who invites Russians to vacation in hopes of their unconditional love for the warm sea," senator Konstantin Kosachev wrote on Facebook.

The Russian Association of Tour Operators (ATOR) said Tuesday that the tourism sector will take a hit of more than $422,000 from 533,200 canceled flight bookings alone.

"The scale and consequence of this blow [...] can only be compared with the March 2020 border closures," ATOR said in a statement on its website.

Turkey and Tanzania were among the first countries to resume direct flights with Russia last August despite the still-raging pandemic. Around 2.1 million Russians traveled to Turkey and 50,000 to Tanzania in 2020, according to the business news site The Bell.

The Russian government ordered its Federal Tourism Agency to draft a package of measures to soften the financial blow from the flight restrictions. But experts forecast that tour operators already ravaged by the pandemic will be left in even deeper financial holes from refunding tickets and rescheduling flights to later, more expensive dates.

Industry experts also cast doubt on regional authorities' assertions that popular resorts in southern Russia will be able to handle the unexpected influx of domestic tourists.

"If you try sending those who planned to vacation in Turkey [to southern Russia], there will be a big price skew and services will deteriorate," said Mikhail Maltsev, who heads Russia's Urals Tourism Association.

"This can have long-term negative consequences," Maltsev told the Znak.com news site.

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