

Lifting of Russia Flight, Visa Restrictions Deepens Georgia's Geopolitical Dilemma

By [Mack Tubridy](#) and [Pyotr Kozlov](#)

May 16, 2023



Tbilisi, Georgia. **Antoine Boureau / Hans Lucas via Reuters Connect**

Russia's surprise move to restore visa-free access for Georgian citizens and direct flights between the two countries signals a continued warming of relations between Tbilisi and Moscow, potentially at the cost of Georgia's integration with the West, analysts and Russian government officials told *The Moscow Times*.

Some observers have described the decision as a "gift" from the Kremlin to an obsequious Georgian government, especially as Tbilisi has sought to maintain a neutral stance toward the war in Ukraine over the past year.

"This includes the delicacy of public statements to the Kremlin, non-adherence to anti-Russian sanctions, refusal to supply arms to Kyiv and a number of other things," a source close to the Russian government told *The Moscow Times* on condition of anonymity.

“It seems to me that this is a pat on the back from our side. It's like, ‘Well done, keep it up’,” another Russian government official said.

Georgia, a small Black Sea state wedged between Turkey and Russia, has not joined Western countries in sanctioning Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine, with officials in Tbilisi warning of the crippling economic effects of such a move.

At the same time, Georgia applied for European Union membership days after the invasion, and the country has been a refuge to tens of thousands of anti-war Russians.

Archil Sikharulidze, a Tbilisi-based political analyst, sees the decision to lift visa requirements as a strategic move by Russia.

“Visa-free travel and direct flights are not so much in the interest of the Georgian people as [they are] in the interest of the Russian government,” said Sikharulidze, who argued that the decision should have been made years ago given the economic benefits for both countries.

Bidzina Lebanidze, a senior policy analyst at the Georgian Institute of Politics, said that Russia may now be seeking to further drive a wedge between Georgia and the West — putting Tbilisi’s delicate balancing act to the test.

“It's a dilemma for Georgia,” he said. “Russia is a big neighbor and market, and it shares a lot of societal ties with Georgia. It’s always economically beneficial for a small country like Georgia to have a more constructive and diversified relationship with Russia. But there are security risks involved.”

In 2000, Russia revoked visa-free travel for Georgian citizens, and diplomatic relations between the two states were severed after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.

President Vladimir Putin banned flights to Georgia altogether following anti-government and anti-Kremlin protests in Tbilisi in 2019.

The ruling Georgian Dream party has sought to reduce tensions with Moscow since coming to power in 2012, while at the same time balancing its ties with both Russia and the West. This strategy has drawn criticism from Georgia’s beleaguered domestic opposition — and, increasingly, from the West.

Tbilisi reacted positively to Moscow’s decision when it was announced last week, with Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili [saying](#) that “anything and any decision that facilitates the life, movement and business of our citizens is, of course, positive and welcome.”

But Georgia’s pro-EU President Salome Zurbashvili, whose powers are mostly ceremonial, [condemned](#) the move as “unacceptable” as long as Russia “continues its aggression on Ukraine and occupies Georgian territory,” referring to the breakaway statelets of Abkhazia and South Ossetia where Moscow maintains a military presence.

On Monday, a small group of [protesters](#) gathered outside the Georgian parliament to rally against to the flight ban lifting — but there has otherwise been little visible opposition to the move from ordinary citizens.

By Tuesday, Georgian aviation authorities had already granted permission to two airlines – one Georgian and one Russian – to operate flights between Russia and Georgia starting later this week.

An EU spokesperson [described](#) this decision as “very regrettable,” adding that “it raises concerns in terms of Georgia’s EU path and commitment to align with EU decisions.”

Ukraine’s foreign ministry also [accused](#) Georgia of “welcoming” Russian airlines at a time when “the world is isolating Russia to force it to stop the war.”

Related article: [Is Georgia’s Ruling Party Really Pro-Russian?](#)

Washington and Brussels have issued warnings to Georgia about complying with international sanctions on Russia, which Tbilisi insists that it is following.

They have also called on Tbilisi to distance itself from Moscow and build stronger ties with the West, as Georgia has for the past two decades sought integration with the EU and NATO — something [polls](#) say is supported by the vast majority of Georgians.

Officials from the South Caucasus nation argue they are pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy strategy — maintaining amicable relations with both Russia and the West given a lack of security guarantees from either side.

Yet the current Georgian government has issued increasingly anti-Western rhetoric over the past year, claiming that Ukraine and its Western allies are attempting to draw Georgia into conflict with Russia. And in March, Georgian Dream unsuccessfully tried passing a controversial “foreign agents” bill that critics said bore similarities with Russian laws used to crack down on the political opposition and muzzle independent media.

Meanwhile, Georgia has become a major destination for Russians fleeing the effects of war and political repression, especially following the Kremlin’s announcement of a partial mobilization in September.

More than 1.2 million Russian citizens [entered](#) Georgia between March and November last year, according to government data, equivalent to around one-third of the country’s population of 3.7 million. However, the share of those who settled in the country long-term is unclear.

Following Moscow’s announcement to restore air travel with Georgia, President Zurabishvili [revived](#) early calls to reinstate a visa regime with Russia, citing “domestic challenges” sparked by the arrivals of tens of thousands of Russians. Her proposal is unlikely to be put into action, however, as Georgian Dream officials see such a move as unnecessary and harmful.

U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan similarly [suggested](#) that the Kremlin could use the restoration of flights to interfere in Georgia’s domestic politics, arguing that it therefore poses a security risk.

“We have seen that Putin does use the presence of Russians in a country to sometimes interfere in that country,” Degnan said at a press briefing, a departure from statements she

made in September when she [insisted](#) that Georgia welcome Russians fleeing repression at home.

However, some believe these claims to be exaggerated.

“This expectation that tomorrow we'll have a huge influx of Russians to Georgia and Georgians to Russia is totally misleading,” said political analyst Sikharulidze. “Everyone who wanted to come from Russia to Georgia and vice-versa has probably already done so.”

Still, Sikharulidze believes that the lifted travel restrictions are not enough to signal a willingness on Moscow's part to make serious efforts toward diplomatic normalization.

“I don't think the direct flights and visa-free [travel] are serious issues. Everyone knows this should have been done a long time ago,” he said.

“The Russian elite still think they can push and punish Georgia. And this is the biggest mistake that Russia always makes.”

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/05/16/lifting-of-russia-flight-visa-restrictions-deepens-georgia-s-geopolitical-dilemma-a81163>