

First Direct Flight from Russia Lands in Georgia After 4-Year Hiatus

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Demonstrators protesting against the resumption of air links with Russia outside the Tbilisi Airport as the first direct flight from Moscow to Tbilisi is about to land. **Vano Shlamov / AFP**

The first direct flight from Russia landed in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi on Friday four years after Moscow banned air travel with the South Caucasus nation.

The flight was met with protests against Georgia's perceived return to the Russian sphere of influence amid its war in Ukraine.

“Russian plane, go f*ck yourself,” read a large placard held outside Tbilisi International Airport, a reference to the [now-famous phrase](#) said by a Ukrainian soldier to an invading Russian warship last year.

Footage shared by the exiled Russian broadcaster Dozhd showed protesters carrying Georgian and Ukrainian flags, as well as signs condemning “occupant” and “terrorist” Russia.

Tbilisi-based journalists [reported](#) detentions at the protest site.

The southern Russia-based Azimut Airline flight landed in Tbilisi less than 10 days after Russian President Vladimir Putin [lifted](#) a flight ban and visa regime with Georgia.

Moscow had banned air travel with Georgia in 2019 following anti-Russian rallies in Tbilisi.

Embed:

Protesters are not let close to the entrance. They are unfolding big banners so that they are visible from far. pic.twitter.com/qDLvSZ6vbT

— Mariam Nikuradze (@mari_nikuradze) [May 19, 2023](#)

In 2008, the countries fought a brief but bloody war that resulted in an ongoing Russian military presence in 20% of Georgian territory.

The South Caucasus country has been a major destination for Russians fleeing political repression and mobilization in the months following the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Friday's flight aboard the Russian-made Sukhoi Superjet 100 was said to have [carried](#) around 70 people.

Georgian police closed the arrivals hall and sealed off the entire Tbilisi International Airport, according to Dozhd.

Georgian journalists were seen asking the flight's passengers for their purpose of visit and whether they recognized Russia's occupation of Georgia's breakaway statelets in an exchange some Russian media decried as an "attack."

Related article: [Lifting of Russia Flight, Visa Restrictions Deepens Georgia's Geopolitical Dilemma](#)

Georgia's ceremonial pro-Western President Salome Zurbishvili called the Russian flight's arrival "[unwelcome](#)."

The country's prime minister and government, who hold executive power in the parliamentary republic, have been accused of forging closer ties with the Kremlin in recent years.

Georgian NGOs said the restoration of Moscow-Tbilisi flights was "direct sabotage" of the country's status as a candidate for European Union membership.

Georgia's civil aviation authority meanwhile said direct flights between southern Russia's Sochi and Tbilisi, as well as between Moscow and the Georgian city of Kutaisi, are expected to start in June.

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