The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Reopening the Skies to Russian Flights Would Be a Mistake

By Jason Corcoran

March 05, 2025



An airplane landing at Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport. **Moskva News Agency**

The U.S. is reportedly considering reopening its airspace for direct Russian flights, a move that would throw a lifeline to Putin's war economy and a ticket back to Western luxury for the elites. If Aeroflot, the Kremlin's flagship carrier, regains access to American airspace, the EU would likely be pressured to follow suit, unraveling sanctions across the board.

That would be a strategic blunder — one that undermines sanctions, rewards aggression, and weakens Western leverage at a moment when Ukraine needs it most.

Since 2022, Western sanctions have crippled Russia's aviation industry. Airlines have been barred from purchasing new aircraft, leasing Western jets and even servicing their aging fleets.

The result? Russian carriers are operating stripped-down, cannibalized planes held together

with black-market parts. It is a miracle that there has not been a seriously catastrophic accident.

Russian and U.S. diplomats held talks in Istanbul on Feb. 28 on restoring regular operations at their embassies, as well as the possible restoration of direct flights between the two countries. The discussions, which lasted over six hours, were held at the U.S. Consul General's residence and came days after U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met in Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. released its own summary of the Istanbul talks, describing them as "constructive". However, it notably did not reference Russia's appeal to restore direct air travel.

Shares in Aeroflot, which was the only Russian airline to operate direct flights to the U.S. before 2022, jumped sharply in price following the news.

Airline industry executives have been quick to react to the new possibility of skies being reopened for Russia. Willie Walsh, the director general of the International Air Transport Association and former British Airways boss, said on Feb. 26 that Western airlines "quickly" be using Russian airspace again if a ceasefire is implemented.

Related article: Kremlin Accountability for MH17 Is Essential for a Credible Peace

Three years ago, I broke a story for the Irish Independent revealing that the EU had set a strict deadline to terminate all leasing contracts with Russian airlines. This came just days after Europe shut its skies to Russian carriers in response to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022.

The report correctly predicted that Moscow would refuse to return the 500 leased aircraft, triggering billions in insurance claims and a legal battle over their fate. Lessors in Dublin, the global base for aviation leasing, sued insurers worldwide for over $8 billion after most of those planes were seized in Russia and placed on the Kremlin's airline register.

Despite the staggering losses incurred, leasing firms will not hesitate to cut deals with Russian airlines if the skies are reopened. Commerce moves fast and, for the right price, principles tend to disappear.

Reopening the skies would be a financial lifeline for Russian airlines — and a relief for ordinary Russians, who have been paying a steep premium to reach Europe via Istanbul and Dubai.

Many, especially those fleeing mobilization, have borne the brunt of soaring airfare costs. Direct flights would make travel cheaper and easier but at the cost of undermining sanctions and giving the Kremlin a win. Is it really worth the trade-off?

Russian airlines, once integrated into global aviation, have been largely cut off from international partnerships, codeshares, and Western leasing companies. This isolation has hurt revenue and forced Russia to rely on a shrinking domestic market.

With Western planes inaccessible, Russia has been scrambling to ramp up production of

domestic aircraft like the Sukhoi Superjet and the MC-21. However, these planes still rely on Western components, making large-scale production difficult in the face of sanctions.

Sanctions were meant to squeeze the Kremlin's war machine. Lifting them now would hand Putin another propaganda victory while doing little to change the lives of ordinary Russians still trapped under his rule.

Trump has made no secret of his admiration for Putin or his disdain for Ukraine. He has repeatedly suggested that Ukraine should "make a deal" and even floated the idea of handing over territory to Russia. It is easy to see how lifting flight restrictions could become part of a broader push to reset relations with Moscow at Ukraine's expense.

The consequences would be immediate. Once the U.S. lifts its airspace ban, the EU would face immense pressure to follow suit.

European airlines, eager to return to the lucrative Russian market, would lobby hard to reopen routes to Moscow and St Petersburg. That, in turn, would undermine the entire sanctions regime.

At the same time, avoiding Russian airspace has already made flights between Europe and Asia significantly longer. Airlines have to fly further south over areas like Turkey, Central Asia, China and Mongolia. British Airways, Finnair, KLM and Lufthansa have had to add one to three hours to journeys as a result.

That means higher fuel costs, longer shifts for pilots and crew and more expensive tickets for passengers. The financial strain on airlines would only increase pressure to roll back restrictions, further eroding Western resolve.

Related article: Trump Is Rolling Out the Red Carpet for Russian Oligarchs

If Russian jets are once again flying freely to Western capitals, why not ease other restrictions? Why not let Aeroflot buy new Boeing and Airbus planes? Why not normalize business ties with Russian companies, reconnect Kremlin's banks back to the SWIFT payment system, bring back Visa and Mastercard and unfreeze Russia's $350 billion in foreign exchange reserves?

This is how economic pressure erodes. Not with a dramatic reversal, but through small, incremental rollbacks that slowly chip away at its effectiveness. Putin would seize on such a move as proof that the West is tired, divided and ready to move on from Ukraine. His war machine would get a financial boost, while Ukraine would be left even more vulnerable.

As the Trump administration appears ready to ease sanctions, the West's message to Moscow must be clear: There is no return to normal while Russian troops are occupying and bombing Ukrainian land. Reopening the skies isn't just a bad idea - it's a betrayal of everything the West has fought to defend.

Lifting flight bans would be a colossal mistake, undermining sanctions, emboldening the Kremlin, and leaving Ukraine more isolated than ever at a moment when it needs unwavering support.

This is not just about travel. It is about whether the West has the resolve to keep economic pressure on a regime waging war in Europe. The aviation sanctions are working — draining Russia's hard currency reserves, isolating its economy and forcing it to turn to China and India for spare parts. Reopening Western airspace would undo that leverage overnight.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/03/05/reopening-the-skies-to-russian-flights-would-be-a-mistake-a88250