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Drone Alerts Are Disrupting Flights Across Russia. Foreign Airlines Keep Flying Anyway.

By James Beardsworth

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Passengers at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport. **Yelena Melnikova / Moskva News Agency**

When Vasiliy's Air Serbia flight from Belgrade descended into Moscow, passengers suddenly faced an unexplained delay. After circling multiple times over the Russian capital, the plane eventually landed half an hour behind schedule.

Vasiliy later learned that Sheremetyevo Airport had temporarily restricted takeoffs and landings after a series of Ukrainian drone threats.

"We monitored the news from Serbia and took a chance," he told The Moscow Times, asking to be identified by a pseudonym so he could speak freely.

Repeated flight restrictions across Russia in recent weeks — a knock-on effect of Ukrainian aerial attacks and Russia's air defense response — have left passengers scrambling to make

connections and airlines diverting aircraft and rearranging crew schedules, analysts and airline staff told The Moscow Times.

That includes the roughly 60 foreign airlines from 37 countries that still serve Russia.

Despite the repeated disruptions, analysts say the routes remain lucrative for some carriers because Western sanctions have left Russian travelers with fewer ways to fly abroad and the airlines that still serve them with less competition.

“At the moment, almost no airlines from continental Europe fly to Russia,” said Serbian aviation expert Petar Vojinovic. “Air Serbia benefits from the strength of its route network and the strategic position of its Belgrade hub.”

After Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Kyiv’s Western allies hit Russia’s aviation sector with sanctions, closed their airspace to Russian carriers and restricted Moscow's access to international aircraft, parts and maintenance.

In response, Russian carriers shifted more of their capacity to domestic flights while expanding international service to countries that did not impose sanctions, like Turkey, Middle Eastern countries and Serbia, said Oleksandr Laneckij, director of the Lithuania-based aviation consultancy Friendly Avia Support.

The cost of delays

Vasiliy’s Air Serbia flight was among hundreds of flights disrupted across Russia over the past month.

Airports across Russia imposed restrictions on takeoffs and landings 73 times at 28 airports from Nov. 16 to 22, nearly twice as often as in the same week a year earlier, according to the aviation platform RunAvia’s tally of notices from civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia.

The pace of this month’s disruptions has eased slightly since October, when around half of all flights operated by major Russian and international airlines were delayed, RunAvia said.

Most delays are caused by what Moscow calls the “carpet” plan, which is activated when an unidentified object enters Russian airspace. Under the procedure, take-offs and landings are suspended, while aircraft already in the air may be instructed to circle, divert or leave the affected area until the threat is cleared.

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This can sometimes take hours. On Oct. 13, a massive Ukrainian drone attack left flights to and from Moscow's major four airports grounded simultaneously for seven hours, leaving stranded passengers potentially vulnerable, Andrei Patrakov of RunAvia wrote.

"Terminals with glass facades and aircraft with passengers on the apron are the most vulnerable points during an attack. It is no coincidence that at Sheremetyevo, people were advised to stay away from windows. The era of airport terminals with glass roofs has come to an end," he wrote.

Passengers have also reported makeshift efforts by the authorities to keep travelers safe inside the terminal.

"There's now a net stretched across the security screening area at Pulkovo, presumably to catch debris from the ceiling in the event of an attack on passengers," one passenger who flew from St. Petersburg's Pulkovo Airport to Kaliningrad in October told The Moscow Times.

For the many passengers traveling through hubs such as Istanbul, Belgrade and Dubai, a delay in Russia can mean missing an onward flight.

For an international airline, this can mean having an aircraft and its crew stuck in Russia until the crew has had enough rest to fly again, the pilot said.

"International companies often don't have a spare crew in Russia," the pilot said. "So if the delays are too long, staff must go to a hotel and rest for a minimum of 10 hours, meanwhile passengers will be waiting for them in the terminal."

Airlines also have to plan for aircraft spending longer in the air or landing at an alternate airport. That can mean carrying extra fuel or making an additional stop to refuel on the return journey, Laneckij said.

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The wider disruptions as a result of Moscow's war in Ukraine has led to low morale among cabin crew, one cabin crew member of Russian flag carrier Aeroflot told The Moscow Times.

"Airline crew are not enthusiastic about going to Russia. First, there are concerns around safety, and secondly, you don't know when you'll be back," a pilot whose airline still flies to Russia told The Moscow Times. He requested anonymity to speak freely about his employer's operations.

Safety risks

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky sent a warning shot to those carriers still operating in Russia in early September, amid an intensifying Ukrainian drone and missile campaign targeting Russian refineries, data centers and distribution warehouses.

"Every airline that uses Russian airspace, every insurer, everyone who still uses key Russian airports: the Russian sky is becoming completely dangerous," Zelensky said.

In early October, falling debris from a drone attack caused a fire at Sochi's airport. Less than a week later, flight restrictions were introduced at 31 airports across the country in a single day. On Oct. 23, an air raid alert at Sheremetyevo, Russia's largest airport, forced passengers to be evacuated and directed to shelters.

Matthew Borie of Osprey Flight Solutions, a British firm that advises airlines on flight safety, said the high volume of commercial traffic in western Russia still poses a risk as Ukraine launches drones and missiles deep into the country.

"For western Russian airspace, from St. Petersburg all the way south down to the Black Sea, Osprey assesses flying in this area as having an extreme risk," he said.

This risk can be mitigated depending on the time of day and the direction in which the plane is traveling, Borie added.

The European Union Aviation Safety Agency recommends that operators covered by its advisory avoid Russian airspace west of 60 degrees east at all altitudes. The advisory, which runs through Jan. 31, 2027, warns that air defense crews could misidentify civilian aircraft and target them by mistake.

The dangers have gone beyond the hypothetical. In December 2024, an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger jet crashed near Aktau, Kazakhstan, killing 38 people, after it had been damaged by Russian air defenses while flying over southern Russia.

The then-head of Russian aviation, Dmitry Yadrov, said the "carpet" plan had been activated shortly before the crash, but the results of the preliminary investigation by the Kazakh authorities found that the crew onboard were never informed about it.

Borie warned that as Ukraine advances its missile technology, the risk of a similar incident could grow.

"In the last year, Ukraine has begun launching the FP-5 flamingo cruise missile," he said. "This is much larger than a traditional drone. It can fly at 20 kilometers in altitude, and it flies at closer to 800 kilometers per hour, so it more closely resembles the size and altitude profile of an airliner."

Yet analysts said the commercial incentive for airlines remains too strong for them to stop serving Russia.

"You've got to remember these airlines are the outlet to the rest of the world for the Russian population and a significant proportion of that population can afford to travel abroad," Borie said, "so there is a lot of money to be made by continuing to fly in and out."

Mack Tubridy contributed reporting.

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