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# Russian airlines cannot return to the international market for years



Flying with one of the Russian airlines today means entering a plane that has been hijacked, and is probably installed with smuggled spare parts.

A large number of planes from the Russian airlines fleet have been crippled by international sanctions, which were imposed on the industry at the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine just over a year ago.

Their safety has long been questionable, and their ownership the result of international crime, which makes them unusable under the strict conditions of global civil air traffic control.

Inside Russia, that system of rules and controls does not exist. This is why internal transport still works, for those who have no other transport options and are prepared to take a security risk.

Even if the Russian invasion of Ukraine ends today, the return of Russian companies to the international air traffic market would take years, and possibly never to the extent and manner in which they participated before the invasion of Ukraine.

## Risky flights over Russia

The first consequence of stopping Russian aggression against Ukraine for international air traffic would be the opening of its airspace for overflights by international companies.

For a long time, large Western airlines and their associations have been lobbying their governments to ease sanctions in this area, given that they have been recording losses due to bypassing Russia on flights to Asia.

Their strong argument is that Asian carriers, particularly Indian and Chinese companies, have lower flight costs to Western Europe and the US because they fly over Russian territory, so they gained a significant advantage over Western competition overnight.

Airlines for America, an industry lobbying group, estimates that because of this unequal position, American companies lose a total of about \$2 billion per year.

However, the possible return of Western airlines to long-haul routes over Russian territory would be connected to another type of risk, which outweighs the financial benefits.

Russia under Putin has shown that it was willing to shoot down civilian planes, as it did in 2014 with the Malaysia Airlines plane when 298 people died.

Companies would not want to take the risk of hostage situations in Russia, in the event of an emergency or a forced landing, given previous cases of kidnapping Western citizens, such as basketball player and Olympic champion Brittney Griner.

## Exhausted aircraft maintenance resources

Russia's return to the international air traffic market is even less conceivable due to the state of its companies' fleets. It is rapidly collapsing because of the interrupted spare parts supply, and also because of Western sanctions.

Russian companies have survived because of flights on domestic routes, with about 90% of the total of 95 million passengers in the last year.

However, the people who flew on these lines put their lives on the line because of poor aircraft maintenance and the interruptions in the spare parts supply.

Almost every flight (about 95% of traffic) is carried out by Western-made planes. The two main manufacturers (Boeing and Airbus) stopped the supply of spare parts and software updates at the start of the aggression against Ukraine.

Russian companies rely on two ways of

maintaining their fleets - smuggling spare parts and the so-called "cannibalisation" of their own planes, where working parts are removed from other planes and installed in place of broken ones.

Both resources are limited and lead to accelerated technical deterioration. There are different estimates on how long this kind of "maintenance" can keep the fleet working without accidents, but none go beyond 6 to 12 months; up to 2 years, at the most. Needless to say, the consequence of cannibalisation is the rapid reduction of the fleet capable of flying.

Last December, the government in Moscow made a desperate decision and legalised the practice of cannibalisation of the air fleet, which had been widespread until then. But it simultaneously allowed the more dangerous practice of installing smuggled and non-original parts.

"When it became clear that even if you allow the installation of original spare parts, but with documents from third countries, then this is not enough. Russian regulators then took an even more desperate step: they allowed non-original spare parts, even with documentation from third countries, including Iran", said Andrei Patrakov, the founder of the flight safety company RunAvia.

In countries that still do not apply "hard" economic sanctions, such as Turkey - one of the biggest havens where Russian companies can still fly and perform maintenance - some important channels for servicing aircrafts are closed to Russian companies.

Under pressure from the US, several of Turkey's largest aircraft maintenance companies informed Russian clients at the end of March that they were suspending their servicing of Boeing and Airbus aircrafts.

## State piracy

The return of Russian companies to the world civil air traffic market, where they accounted for about 3% before the war, is unimaginable

because of organised state piracy, which the Kremlin has resorted to in response to Western sanctions.

In March last year, Vladimir Putin signed a law nationalising more than 500 civilian aircrafts owned by Western leasing companies, with a total value of more than \$10 billion.

The planes were re-registered in the Russian airplane registry, and thus, had a double registration, which is inadmissible in international civil traffic rules, and represents a security risk.

Leasing companies have been trying to recover their ownership since then, with little success, so most of their fleet remains in Russia, flying on domestic routes without adequate international insurance and rapid deterioration due to poor maintenance.

The re-entry of Russia into the international air traffic market seems impossible for many years ahead.

Decisions made in the Kremlin have made Russia's commercial aviation industry rogue, self-destructive, and a security risk.

Given that the recovery is tied to political decisions, the return of Russian companies to the international market is unthinkable as long as the current state leadership remains on the scene.

Even with the end of the aggression against Ukraine, the change of political leadership in Moscow, and the opening of the Russian aviation market, its companies will not be able to provide safe traffic for years.

Millions of Russian passengers will have to look for alternative carriers outside Russia if they want to travel legally and safely in the future.