



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# Plane crash in Russia—a reflection of the insoluble problems in the aviation sector



Putin's lead negotiator in the negotiations with Ukraine, Vladimir Medinsky, travelled to the latest round of talks in Istanbul in an old-timer, the government **aircraft** Ilyushin 62, whose production was discontinued 35 years ago.

This long-haul **aircraft**, a former star of the Soviet aviation industry, has been in service since the early 1970s.

But its advanced age is certainly no obstacle for the Russian government to continue to maintain it properly and put it in the service of the highest state officials.

Less fortunate were the 48 passengers of the Russian company Angara Airlines who died in an **accident** in Russia's far east, near the border with China, on the same day that Mr Medinsky travelled to Turkey for negotiations.

They were flying in an even older aircraft, an Antonov 24, manufactured in 1976.

An investigation in the forests of Russia's far east will reveal the cause of the Antonov crash, but there is little chance that this disaster will be a wake-up call and halt the years-long dangerous slide of Russian civil aviation towards ever greater risks.

## A large part of the fleet is ripe for grounding

The condition of the Russian civil aviation fleet has deteriorated rapidly since the start of the invasion of Ukraine. Due to Western sanctions, the proper maintenance of aircraft is an unsolvable problem for Russian airlines.

In the last three and a half years, since the supply of spare parts from the West has been blocked, they have tried almost every way to keep the fleet in the air.

One of the most commonly used ways - supplying parts via intermediaries that circumvent the sanctions - is becoming less and less possible due to the constant

tightening of EU and US sanctions against third countries whose companies are involved in violating the sanctions.

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The installation of unauthorised parts threatens the safety of air traffic even more, and the so-called "cannibalisation", i.e., the removal of parts from decommissioned aircraft and their installation in flying aircraft, has gone beyond its scope.

All of this means that a large part of the Russian airline fleet is ripe for grounding.

Sergei Chemezov, the head of the state-owned defence conglomerate Rostec, **said** last April that up to a third of aircraft made by Western manufacturers will have to be phased out over the next five years.

Aircraft from Western manufacturers - Boeing and Airbus - make up a large part of the entire Russian civilian fleet; there are about 700 in Russian airlines, and another 150 are Russian-made (Sukhoi).

Even more important is the fact that 90% of passengers on Russian airlines' routes are carried by European and American aircraft.

## Failure of domestic production

Russia has also failed with its intention to replace Western sanctions in this sector with domestic production. The plan **established** in 2022, following Russia's attack on Ukraine, to produce just over a thousand civilian aircraft by 2030 is simply not feasible.

While the plan was for several types of aircraft to be produced by Russian factories, they would have to source most of the parts - engines, electrical systems, and fuel systems - from Western manufacturers, and that is

impossible under the sanctions regime.

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An alternative channel to alleviate the crisis in this sector - China - is also unfeasible, as the Chinese manufacturer is focusing sales of its new C-919 narrow-body aircraft only on the domestic market.

All of this leads to a catastrophic safety record for the Russian aviation sector. In 2023 alone, there were more than 80 safety **incidents**, i.e., three times as many as in the previous year.

This week's tragedy involving an old plane in the tundra in eastern Russia was preceded by a long series of incidents in which technical reasons were the most likely cause. The trend of a drastic increase in the number of incidents in Russia is in direct contrast to the steadily decreasing number of accidents worldwide.

## As long as the sanctions continue, there will be no recovery

Moscow has tried to use the period of rapprochement with the new presidential administration in Washington to ease the sanctions regime, particularly in the area of air traffic.

Last April, the head of Russian diplomacy, Sergei Lavrov, **attempted** to include the lifting of sanctions against the flights of the largest Russian airline, Aeroflot, to the USA in the overall peace plan for Ukraine, which was on the table at the time.



*Russian lobbying in the USA has, at least so far, not yielded any results, partly due to strong resistance from the Europeans - Sergei Lavrov*

Simultaneously, Moscow received signals from American officials suggesting that it could attempt to alleviate one of the most significant sanctions. The head of the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia, Robert Agee, lobbied in the Russian media at the time for the lifting of sanctions against Russia on air transport, presenting this not as an economic issue but as a "humanitarian" one.

However, this Russian lobbying in the USA has, at least so far, not yielded any results, partly due to strong resistance from the Europeans. In the meantime, Brussels has not only tightened secondary sanctions against the supply of aircraft parts to Russian companies but has also pointed out the safety risks if Russian aircraft were to fly over its airspace.

The increasingly poor state of Russian civil air traffic is now reflected in a sharp decline in passenger numbers. According to Ukrainian **sources**, this is primarily due to reduced security, not only of aircraft but also of airports, which are frequently attacked by Ukrainian drones.

But there is also the commercial side, i.e., the drastic increase in ticket prices due to increasingly expensive maintenance (lack of parts and purchases from contraband) and the downsizing of the fleet.

The Russian aviation sector is in a vicious circle leading to a real collapse, for which the country's leadership has not found a solution for three and a half years.

The forecasts for the near future, i.e., the next three to five years, are even gloomier, as the resources of the existing fleet are running out, and there are no signs that sanctions could be eased and supplies from the West restored.