

ARE E.U. SANCTIONS WORKING AGAINST RUSSIAN AVIATION?



When Ursula von der Leyen appeared in public shortly after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, she had a clear message for all Russian airlines.

In order to "hold the country's leadership to account", according to the E.U. Commission President, the supply of spare parts for Western aircraft, components for Russian aircraft programs, and other technology is being cut off. This achieves "a huge effect with relatively little effort," said Ursula von der Leyen. Now it becomes clear that the hope was obviously wrong.

An analysis of air traffic data over Russia now shows that activity in the sky has not really decreased so far. A comparison of flight movements from April 2022, shortly after the sanctions came into force, with the movements from the end of March 2023 shows no significant differences. The only thing that Russian air traffic control has reduced compared to the first days of the war is the safe distance that aircraft have to keep to the Ukrainian border.

Ineffective sanctions?

It is true that civil air traffic over the country has declined compared to the times before the war. That is due to the fact that direct air traffic between Europe and North America to Russia has disappeared since then because airlines from Europe are not allowed to fly to Russia, nor are Russian companies allowed to serve Western destinations. In addition, Western lines can no longer fly over the country and have to take much longer routes in the direction of East Asia or India.

However, according to data from the flight monitoring portal Flightradar24, traffic within Russia has not been affected so far. The connections between the Arab states, India, China, or states in Asia like Thailand that did not participate in the sanctions are almost even greater than before the war began. "Despite the sanctions, Russian airlines were able to continue and flew even more in the second half of 2022 than before Covid," wondered Guillaume Faury, head of the world's largest aircraft manufacturer Airbus.

Brand new jets as a spare parts store

The hope was different. "As three-quarters of Russia's current commercial aviation fleet is manufactured in the E.U., U.S., or Canada, over time, the ban is likely to render a significant part of Russia's civil aviation fleet inoperable, even on domestic flights," according to the E.U. year ago old statement. Because at that time, a good half of all passenger planes in the West belonged to leasing companies, so the operating license would expire. And what still flew would soon run out of spare parts.

At first, it worked. The lease planes stayed on the ground. And although Russian airlines apparently stocked up on spare parts in anticipation of a war of aggression and its aftermath, they soon began cannibalizing brand-new jets for spares as well.

But as in other fields, the West underestimated Russia's creativity. For example, President Vladimir Putin quickly approved the expropriation of Western-owned aircraft and re-registration in Russia. And spare parts can be obtained through unofficial channels or third countries such as Kazakhstan, Turkey, or Uzbekistan. In this way, the industry can hold out for at least another ten years.

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