

The Ukraine Crisis Will Turn Minsk Into a Regional Airline Hub?

The suspension of air traffic between Ukraine and Russia on 25 October has created a new opportunity for Belarus.

The national air carrier, Belavia, and the national aviation authorities reacted quickly by increasing aircraft capacity on the routes between Minsk and Kyiv and negotiating with Kiev over the opening of new routes to Ukraine.

Belarus already has experience in profiting from many sanctions and trade wars, which Russia has waged against Europe and its new allies in the post-Soviet space. It looks like the government of Belarus is hoping to gain not only short-term benefits out of the Ukraine-Russia airline conflict.

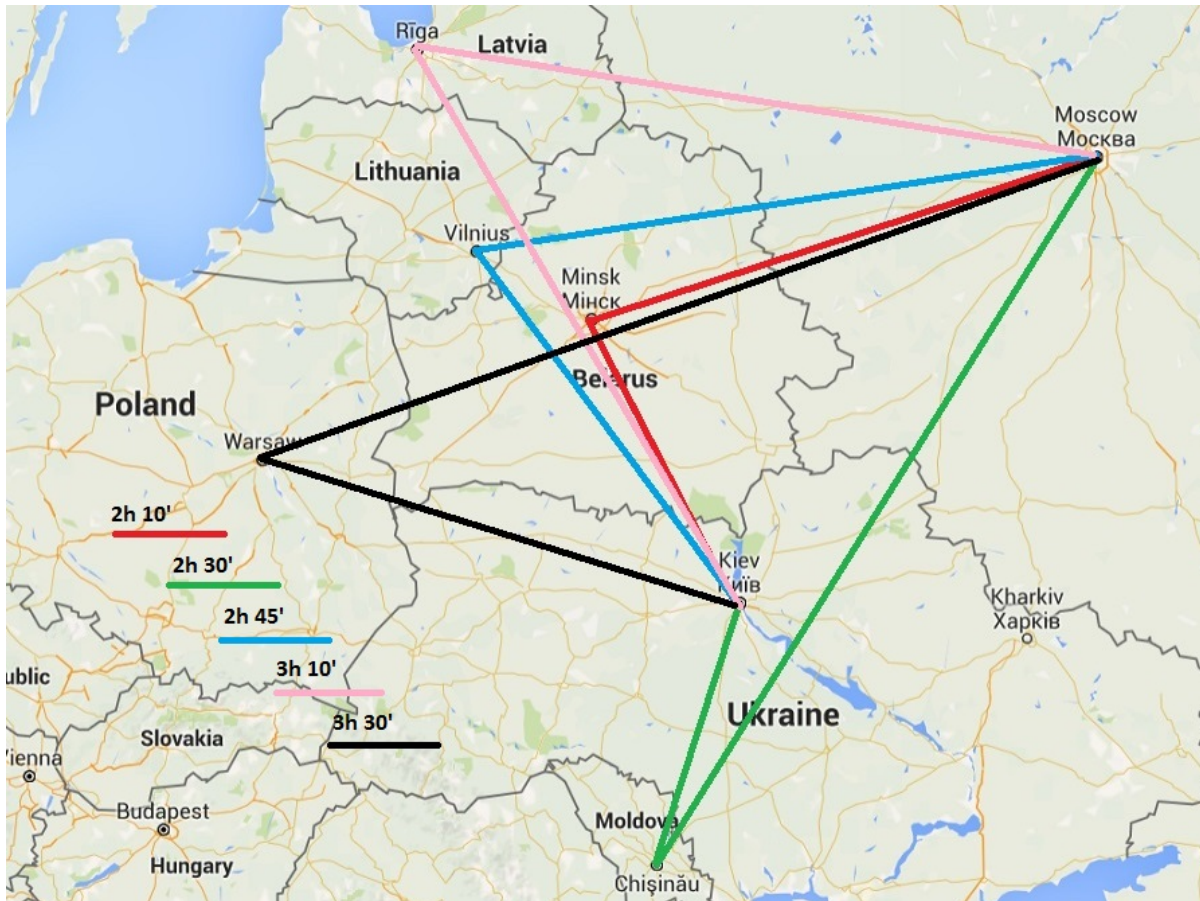
Minsk as a Preferred Transit Hub

On 17 September, Ukraine introduced sanctions against twenty-five Russian airlines in punishment for their flights to annexed Crimea. In retaliation, on 29 September the Russian aviation authorities banned five Ukrainian airlines from flying to and from Russia. As a result, when the winter timetable kicked in on 25 October, all air traffic between Ukraine and Russia stopped.

It is estimated that over 70,000 passengers flew routes between Russia and Ukraine each month. Now, they will have to use other means of transportation such as trains, or reach

their destination through a transit airport in a third country.

Ukrainian and Russian passengers have several options for indirect air travel, including Chisinau (Moldova), Vilnius (Lithuania), Riga (Latvia), Warsaw (Poland) and even Istanbul (Turkey). However, Minsk has a number of advantages over most if not all of them.



First, travel time. The combined time in the air for travel from Kyiv to Moscow via Minsk is roughly 2 hours and 10 minutes. The second-best route, via Chisinau, is 20 minutes longer. Even when one counts the stopover time, Minsk remains the best option.

Second, the formalities. Ukrainians travelling to Russia via Belarus will pass border and customs controls in Minsk airport and not at Moscow and other Russian airports. It may be an advantage given the tense relations between the two countries.

Sanctions Wars as an Opportunity for Minsk

Belarus has already profited from another case where air travel was disrupted and partially ceased. In August 2008, in the aftermath of Russian military aggression against Georgia, the two countries severed air links. Regular service only resumed in August 2010.

During that time, the [Belarusian national airline Belavia](#) increased the frequency of flights between Minsk and Tbilisi from three flights per week to daily services. Some Georgians nicknamed this route a “lifeline” as it became one of the best options for Georgians to travel to Russia, where they have family and business projects.

Even after direct flights between Georgia and Russia were gradually restored in 2010 and fully normalised in 2014, Belavia maintained the daily flight frequency between Minsk and Tbilisi and introduced flights to Batumi (now twice a week) and Kutaisi during the summer.

Belarus has always been a winner in its neighbours' sanctions wars

There is another reason for the continued popularity of the Minsk transit route among Georgians. Belarus has visa-free regimes with both Russia and Georgia, while Georgians need visas to travel to Russia. Many Georgians, who cannot or do not want to apply for a Russian visa, travel to Belarus. There, they [take advantage](#) of the absence of passport controls on Belarus' eastern border and travel illegally to Russia by rail or road.

Besides air transit, Belarus has on previous occasions managed to profit from the numerous other sanctions and trade wars in

which other post-Soviet states have become involved. In 2006, Minsk refused to join Russia's ban on the importation of [Georgian wine and mineral water](#). Due to the absence of customs controls, Belarus became an important transit route for smuggling these drinks into Russia.

More recently, Belarus became the primary beneficiary of the [food embargo](#) which Russia introduced against Western nations in August 2014. This success was partially down to the hard work of Belarusian producers as well as the inventiveness of local smugglers.

Belavia is Ready for Additional Traffic

The Belarusian authorities quickly reacted to the mutual Russian – Ukrainian travel ban. On 1 October deputy minister for transport Jauhien Rahachou announced that Belavia and [Minsk National Airport](#) were “fully ready” to receive transit passengers going to Ukraine. “We would like to avoid making any fuss about it”.

Belavia now has 14 flights per week to Kyiv. Its code-sharing partner, Ukraine International Airlines, doubled the number of its flights to Minsk to fourteen in an effort to catch up with the growing demand.

Belavia is also trying to negotiate an increase in flight frequency to Ukraine. The most immediate plans include the launching of a third daily flight to Kyiv. In the meantime, Belavia has responded to the changing situation by allocating higher-capacity planes on the route to Kyiv. “When we saw that the occupancy of our aircraft was increasing, we decided to replace the 50-seat CRJ-200 aircraft with the 148-seat Boeing 737-300”, said Ihar Charhiniec, Belavia's deputy director.

On 25 October, Belavia opened a new route to Odessa, starting immediately with daily flights. This was a long-planned enlargement of Belavia's network not related to the air traffic ban. Regardless, the new destination is destined for success because of the new circumstances.

Flights between Minsk and Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhya, Kharkiv and Lviv are considered

The other part of the transit link also looks good. Belavia has seven daily flights to Moscow and three daily flights to Saint-Petersburg. It flies twice a day to Kaliningrad and several times a week to Krasnodar and Sochi. Russia's national airline Aeroflot operates five daily flights to Minsk from Moscow.

The number of flights between Belarus and Ukraine may further increase quickly. Currently, the two countries' airlines and aviation authorities are negotiating the opening of new routes linking Minsk with Zaporizhzhya and Kharkiv in Ukraine. Other possible options include Dnipropetrovsk and Lviv. Belavia will have to share these routes with its Ukrainian colleagues.

The reopening of limited air traffic between Kyiv and Moscow remains a possibility. Nevertheless, Belavia and Minsk National Airport are determined to profit from another round of crises in Russian – Ukrainian relations. Uladzimir Koscin, the head of the Belarusian department for aviation, forecasts a 5%-7% increase in passenger flow through Minsk airport.

However, Minsk airport, which was renovated with Chinese money in 2014, remains seriously underused. Despite this new opportunity, it has little chance of becoming a regional transport hub until the Belarusian government radically improves its image to lure foreign tourists and businessmen to the country.