

RUSSIAN OCCUPATION EXTENDS TO GEORGIAN SKIES: WESTERN-SANCTIONED AIRLINES LAUNCH FLIGHTS TO SUKHUMI

On May 1, Russia **commenced** direct, regular flights to occupied Abkhazia. According to the Russian news agency RIA Novosti, UVT Aero operated its first flight from Moscow's Vnukovo Airport to Sukhumi two days ahead of schedule "due to high demand."



Sokhumi Airport, Abkhazia – May 1, 2025. © RIA Novosti / Pelageya Tikhonova

Flights between Russia and occupied Abkhazia violate both international aviation regulations and the Georgian Constitution:



GEORGIAN LAW ON OCCUPATION — ARTICLE 6:

All international air traffic, as well as any economic activity requiring a license, permit, or registration under Georgian legislation, is **prohibited** in the occupied territories.



At a May 1 **press briefing**, Levan Davitashvili¹ was asked about the initiation of direct flights between Russia and the occupied region. He **responded** that the government's stance is "unambiguous" and that it "condemns the airport's operation in violation of international norms, as confirmed by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)."

1. Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia since February 9, 2022, and Vice Prime Minister since July 12, 2021.

Despite this statement, the government’s position has not been reflected in any tangible actions or decisions.

The Russian Federation’s decision to launch flights to Abkhazia did not come as a surprise. Moscow has been openly discussing this move for years, with multiple public statements signaling its intentions.

If Georgian Dream genuinely “condemns” the violation of international norms, it is essential to assess what measures it has taken, what it has neglected, and what it should have done to prevent flights to Sokhumi, beyond Davitashvili’s verbal condemnation.

Key developments leading up to the current situation include:

2023 / oct 27	The Russian company “Инфраструктурное развитие” (Infrastructure Development) began renovating Sokhumi Airport, under a “public-private partnership” agreement with the de facto Abkhaz authorities.
2024 / Jul 8	As of July 8, 2024, plans were announced to launch flights from Sokhumi to seven Russian cities: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Sochi, Krasnodar, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, and Kazan. Negotiations were ongoing with Russian airlines iFly and NordStar to operate the primary routes. The airport’s reopening was scheduled no later than March 31, 2025, with expectations that tourist traffic would increase by at least 50% in the first year.
2024 / Sep 26	Kirill Polyakov, Vice-Governor of St. Petersburg in charge of transport, announced via Telegram that direct flights from St. Petersburg to Sukhumi were planned. The airport’s full operational status was expected by December 31, 2024.
2024 / Feb 07	Reuters reported that regular flights to Sukhumi were scheduled to begin in May 2025.
2025 / Feb 07	In early February, Sukhumi Airport received its first test flight from Moscow in over 30 years.
2025 / Feb 27	Sergei Kiriyyenko, First Deputy Head of the Russian Presidential Administration, officially confirmed the decision to initiate direct, regular flights to occupied Abkhazia.
2025 / Apr 12	Rosaviatsiya granted iFly and NordStar permission to operate flights from Moscow and Krasnoyarsk. iFly may operate up to 14 flights per week between Moscow and Sukhumi, while NordStar may operate 7 flights weekly from Moscow and 3 from Krasnoyarsk.
2025 / Apr 30	The Russian Ministry of Transport confirmed that aviation authorities are coordinating additional flights from various Russian cities via the airlines Северный ветер (North Wind) and Аэрофлот (Aeroflot).

2024 / Apr 30	iFly plans to operate flights from Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport to Sukhumi between May 30 and October 25.
2024 / May 8	Airline Иkap will operate weekly flights from Nizhny Novgorod to Sokhumi.

Despite Georgian Dream representatives' statements, no concrete steps have been taken to prevent Moscow's latest illegal move in the occupied territories. Yet several measures were clearly within the **government's capacity but were not pursued**. A brief, non-exhaustive list includes:

ACTIONS

THAT WERE

EXPECTED,

WERE NOT TAKEN.

In response to the airport renovation that began in 2023, Tbilisi could have taken preventive actions against all Russian airlines using Georgian airspace.

When airlines that fly to Tbilisi, Batumi, or Kutaisi also announced plans to fly to Sokhumi, Tbilisi could have suspended their permits for violating the Law on Occupation.

As a strategic partner of the EU and the US, Georgia could have worked since 2023 to ensure the inclusion of all companies involved in the development of strategic infrastructure in the occupied territories on international sanctions lists.

Tbilisi had several mechanisms of direct influence on the Russian Federation, preventing the restoration of the Sukhumi airport; however, it did not make a single effective decision in this regard. Unfortunately, Georgia lacks many such levers.

Georgian government representatives could have officially protested this agreement on all international platforms — the UN, ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organization), the European Union, etc. The Georgian government's engagement with these international organizations is mandatory under international law, and traditionally, issues related to the occupation have been resolved in Georgia's favor.

Georgia could impose sanctions on operating Russian companies.

Georgia could initiate international sanctions against the companies operating at Sokhumi Airport and their founders.

Both Russian airlines, UVT Aero and NordStar Airlines, which operate flights from Moscow and Krasnoyarsk to Sukhumi, are sanctioned by the West. Specifically, NordStar Airlines is under sanctions from the United States State Department, while UVT Aero is **sanctioned** by the European Union. The US State Department imposed sanctions on the company back in 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Despite having banned these airlines from flying from Moscow to Tbilisi, the Georgian government has now allowed them to operate in the occupied territories.

It is noteworthy that all of this is happening despite bold statements by Georgian Dream leaders, such as:

2023 / Sep 08	“We have clearly explained that not a single sanctioned airline or plane will fly or fly to Georgia. We also adhere to discipline here and work absolutely cleanly and transparently.” ²
2023 / May 22	“A company, board, or aircraft that is sanctioned cannot be represented in Georgia.” ³
2024 / Mar 01	“Airlines that are on the sanctioned list cannot and do not operate in Georgia, and also they cannot use ships that are on the sanctioned list.” ⁴

It is precisely due to a policy of bypassing international sanctions and appeasement that these two airlines were the first to take the initiative to fly to Sukhumi.

There are many practical levers that Georgian Dream did not utilize, primarily due to its desire to preserve ties with Russia. The party had an opportunity to leverage the fact that Russian companies maintain numerous commercial interests in Georgia, not limited to the aviation sector. Accordingly, using available legal tools, action should have been taken against all US- and EU-sanctioned companies operating in Georgia, particularly in defense of the country’s national security interests.

It is worth highlighting that in August 2023, the US State Department **responded** to the transfer of Sokhumi Airport to Russia. Spokesman Matthew Miller emphasized that the US considers Sokhumi Airport part of Georgian airspace. This unambiguous American position should have become one of the main levers for applying sanctions and various international punitive measures against all Russian companies operating in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali.

The only “direct” resistance from the Georgian Dream side came from Deputy Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Mariam Kvrivishvili in 2023, who **stated**: “We want to clearly state our position that no company or ship that will be sanctioned will operate in Georgia.” Though framed as a principled boundary, the statement turned out to be hollow. In reality, US-sanctioned **airlines** such as **Ural Airlines, Pobeda Airlines, Red Wings Airlines, and NordStar Airlines** continue to operate flights between Russia and Georgia.


The absurdity of these statements is reinforced by other glaring contradictions. For example, in 2023, the Georgian government “refused” to renew the license of EU-sanctioned airline UVT Aero. However, the same airline now operates flights in Georgia as usual, including new routes to the occupied territories.

2. **Irakli Gharibashvili**, Prime Minister of Georgia, Newshub Georgia,
3. **Lasha Khutsishvili**, Minister of Finance of Georgia, Commersant
4. **Mariam Kvrivishvili**, Deputy Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, Business Insider Georgia

TBILISI—SUKHUMI

(PLANNED ROUTE)

MAY31, 2025

**Georgian Airways**
3hr

[Learn more](#)

09:00

Sat 31 May

Tbilisi

Tbilisi International Airport, T...


11:00

Sat 31 May

Moscow

Vnukovo Airport, VKO

Москва — Сухум
3ч 50м в пути

**ЮВТ Аэро**
3ч 50м в полёте

[Подробнее](#)

14:30

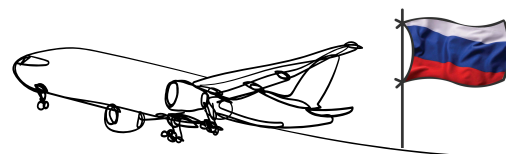
31 мая, сб

Москва

Внуково, VKO

18:20

Сухум



On May 31, for instance, a traveler can **fly** from Tbilisi to Sokhumi by purchasing a Georgian Airways ticket for a 9:00 a.m. Tbilisi–Moscow flight, then transferring to a UVT Aero flight departing Moscow at 2:30 p.m., arriving in Sokhumi within hours. It’s important to remember that UVT Aero, an internationally sanctioned airline that flies to Sokhumi in violation of Georgia’s law on occupation, continues to operate flights to the rest of Georgia.

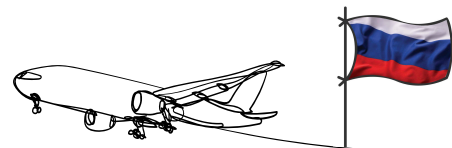
The Georgian Dream is playing a sort of “blue whale”⁵ game with the Georgian population, gradually conditioning the public to legitimize the enemy. The process is structured as follows:

- TASK 1** Don’t irritate Russia.
- TASK 2** Seat Gavrilov in the Speaker of Parliament’s chair.
- TASK 3** Treat discussion of the occupation as a “sensitive topic.”
- TASK 4** Erase the Russian trace from the April 9 tragedy and label it “foreign force” instead of Russia.
- TASK 5** Rename the “occupation line” to the “dividing line.”
- TASK 6** Allow sanctioned Russian airlines to fly to occupied Sukhumi.
- TASK 7** Punish patriots; befriend the occupier.

In this process, the “final task” will be to move Georgian statehood into Russia’s isolationist orbit, and consequently, to mark its end.

5. Blue Whale” refers to a dangerous online “challenge” game that manipulated participants, often teenagers, into completing harmful tasks over time, culminating in self-destruction. Here, it’s used metaphorically to describe a slow, manipulative descent into harm.

**REFER TO THE LIST OF AIRLINES OPERATING BETWEEN
RUSSIA AND GEORGIA, ALONG WITH THEIR SANCTIONS STATUS:**



№	Airline	Country	Direction (From Russia)	EU Sanc- tions	US Sanc- tions	Note
1	UVT Aero	Russia	Kazan – Tbilisi/Batumi	+		License not renewed in 2023, but still operates
2	Georgian Airways	Georgia	Tbilisi – Moscow			Georgian company
3	Pobeda Airlines	Russia	Moscow – Tbilisi/Batumi		+	Aeroflot subsidiary
4	FlyOne	Moldova	Chisinau – Tbilisi			No known sanctions affiliation
5	Azimuth Airlines	Russia	Moscow/Rostov – Tbilisi	+		Banned in EU airspace
6	Ural Airlines	Russia	Yekaterinburg – Tbilisi/Batumi	+	+	Under serious sanctions, still operates
7	Red Wings Airlines	Russia	Moscow – Tbilisi	+	+	Associated with “Pocrex”
8	AJet (AnadoluJet)	Turkey	Ankara/Istanbul – Tbilisi			Subsidiary of Turkish Airlines
9	NordStar Airlines	Russia	Krasnoyarsk – Tbilisi/Sukhumi		+	Operates in occupied territory as well
10	AZAL (AZ Airlines)	Azerbaijan	Baku – Tbilisi/Batumi/Kutaisi			Regional partner
11	iFly Airlines	Russia	Moscow – Tbilisi/Sukhumi	+	+	Began flights in 2025, including to occupied territory