

Consolidated position of the European business associations in Russia on the resumption of business travel by air

As the European business associations operating in Russia with a total of more than 4000 member companies, we appeal to the European Commission and the Government of the Russian Federation to rapidly and comprehensively resume business travel by air between Russia and the countries of the European Union, which is central to economic exchange. This will act as a second, almost free economic stimulus package and generate urgently needed economic growth. A global economy needs global travel by managers and technicians. Europe benefits from this as a location for trade and investment, and Russia in modernizing its economy.

With COVID-19 infection rates rising in many countries and regions and uncertainty about how quickly a reliable vaccine will be available for mass global use, governments and societies everywhere are struggling to strike a sustainable balance between health care, economic and social stability.

Hundreds of billions of euros are invested into government programs to recover the economies that were severely damaged by the anti-Corona measures. These funds must be repaid and generated, which requires significant economic growth. This cannot be achieved in the long term either in the EU or Russia without resuming business travel as usual.

Especially highly technological and digitalized economic areas such as the European Union and Russia have the possibilities and resources to use modern technologies to grant business people and technicians the freedom to travel without neglecting the health protection of the population.

Therefore, we propose the following measures to be implemented between Russia and the European Union:

1. **Opening of borders for highly qualified and technical specialists, people with business and work visas**, temporary residence permits and for their family members.
2. **Introduction of COVID-19 express tests** upon arrival and departure at airports. The test costs at the airport are paid by the business travelers. Alternatively, a negative conventional COVID-19 test not older than two working days must be presented at check-in (this cost should be reimbursable by companies employing business travelers).
3. **Cancellation of compulsory self-isolation in case of a negative COVID-19 test result.** As soon as a negative COVID-19 test result is available, business travelers should be allowed to move around the country freely and carry out their work.

4. **Multiple entry to Russia for highly qualified specialists (HQS) and their families** without the obligation to receive approval for their entry from the responsible authorities.
5. **Extension of the flight schedule for designated airlines** from EU/EFTA countries and Russia for a number of important airports on both sides of the border.

The majority of export-oriented European companies cannot send their managers, technicians, fitters or sales staff to their Russian customers or suppliers. Machines and equipment are not maintained, repaired or put into operation on time. At the same time, fewer new businesses are being acquired. This has already led to a massive decline in sales and threatens the existence of several medium-sized companies.

In recent months, the Russian government and some national EU governments have been supporting the creation of travel opportunities at least for a small group of managers and technicians from European companies active in Russia. For example, since mid-June a total of fifteen Lufthansa flights (Frankfurt-Moscow-Frankfurt) have returned more than 540 managers, technicians and their families from more than 250 companies to Russia. Each of these flights and each passenger requires individual authorization. Preparation and processing therefore require an enormous amount of bureaucracy, which in case of the Lufthansa flights is completed by the German Embassy, the German-Russian Chamber Commerce (AHK) and numerous Russian authorities. The same assistance has been provided by the Association of European Businesses (AEB) and other European chambers and associations to their members, involving direct dialogue with the Russian government and various ministries. Taking into account the amount of efforts the current procedure implies for all involved sides including various government bodies, there is an urgent need for a both unified and simplified solution.

We suggest expanding existing rapid-test capacities while carefully following hygiene and distance regulations at airports in both countries. For example, at Frankfurt am Main Airport, it is already possible to perform 10 000 COVID tests per day. Cost-effective SARS-CoV-2 antibody tests allow diagnosis within 15 minutes.

The closure of borders between Russia and the European Union since March has already led to lasting damage in economic exchange. Companies are forced to postpone or cancel important investment decisions. Frequent, sometimes short-term changes in testing strategies, quarantine regulations and travel warnings force companies that are already affected by the crisis to an immense additional planning and information effort.

Video conferences, virtual means of communication and telephone calls can partly replace personal meetings, but not completely. In a business culture characterized by personal relationships of trust such as the Russian one, the border closure for European business travelers since March represents a strong competitive disadvantage for European companies in Russia.



A recently published study by the American Harvard University shows how closely and directly business travel and economic growth are linked. The Harvard researchers have determined that global GDP would fall by almost five percent if business travel from Germany alone were to be permanently eliminated. Extrapolated to the entire EU, the decline would be in a clear double-digit range. The continuation of the current travel restrictions is a horror scenario for the global economy.

Before the pandemic, business travel accounted for around one third of the global air travel passenger volume. The EU countries and Russia are using many billions of taxpayers' money to support airlines during the corona crisis. They can and should also promote the recovery of the affected airlines by making business travel possible again on a larger scale and on a permanent basis.

As the European business associations and business representatives active in Russia, we strongly appeal to the Russian government and the European Commission to resume air traffic for business travelers, including highly qualified foreign specialists and their family members, and to open the borders for this purpose. The volume of passengers will be only a fraction of what has been made possible for tourists in recent months.

In order to effectively combat COVID-19, a strong and healthy economy is needed in addition to good hygiene measures and responsible actions by society. Companies themselves have the greatest interest in not exposing their employees to irresponsible risks. Companies are happy to bear the costs of rapid tests at the airport.

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