

On October 20, 2019, the flights between the capitals of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan was stopped. Now you can fly from Dushanbe to Bishkek and back only via third countries.

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The national of Tajikistan **Parviz Alidodkhonov** has worked in Bishkek-based University of Central Asia for over 10 years. Once a month, or even more often, university instructors have to travel between campuses located in various states - Naryn in Kyrgyzstan, Khorog in Tajikistan and Tekeli in Kazakhstan.

It's Parviz's responsibility, among others, to organise such flights. The direct flight Bishkek-Dushanbe, according to him, has been a relief. It was easier for him to visit his relatives in Tajikistan.

"The direct flight saved time and money. One-way ticket cost 110 dollars. Now you can go to Dushanbe via Almaty, but the cost of flight is at least 50 per cent more," Alidodkhonov said.

The last flight Bishkek-Dushanbe-Bishkek was made by Avia Traffic Company, the only airline that made this flight, at the end of September 2019. After that, no other flights were made. According to the airline management, it was done "due to the unprofitability of the route."



Photo courtesy of Parviz Alidodkhonov

After this route was cancelled, a group of Tajik journalists encountered many difficulties to get from Dushanbe to Bishkek for participation in a regional event. As there was no direct route between the two countries, they had to buy tickets via Almaty.

"However, the flight from Dushanbe to Almaty was not announced on time. The representatives of Air Astana didn't even go out to passengers to apologise and tell the reason. We had to find information ourselves and learned that the flight was delayed. After seven hours of waiting, our flight was postponed to the next day," journalist **Manzuma Firuz** said.

As a result, they arrived at Almaty only the next day and they missed their flight to Bishkek, so they had to take a taxi to come to Kyrgyzstan.

“In the 21st century, we had to travel two days instead of a two-hour flight between the capitals of the two neighbouring countries,” Firuz said.

Direct flights

The flights between Dushanbe and Bishkek have been available since early 2000s, but they have been repeatedly suspended and renewed.

On October 30, 2015, at 9:50 p.m. Bishkek time, the first airplane of Tajik airlines landed in Bishkek after another break in flights. And by early November, another air carrier of Tajikistan, Somon Air, joined the Tajik Air airline. To attract passengers, the former airline reduced the ticket price twice - the return ticket cost 110 dollars.

In the long run, the route was going to be prolonged to Germany’s Frankfurt am Main. The flight was supposed to open until the end of 2015. Expecting the increase in passengers, the flight was supposed to be operated up to four times a week.

These flights were a good opportunity for specialists often traveling between Bishkek and Dushanbe and for those who have relatives in the neighbouring country.

50-year-old entrepreneur of Tajikistan, **Shogunbek Kutbiddinov**, said he could see his mother and brothers often due to cheap air tickets. He has been the citizen of Kyrgyzstan for 25 years. In the past, he came to Bishkek to find a job and decided to stay here. But almost all his relatives live in Tajikistan.

However, there was no expected increase in passengers. Since 2015, four airlines - Tajikistan-based Tajik Air and Somon Air and Kyrgyzstan-based Air Manas and Avia Traffic Company - were operating flights between Bishkek and Dushanbe. The latter was the only airline that continued flights on this route until October 2019.

“Not a charity”

The distance between Bishkek and Dushanbe is 1,022 kilometres. With the average course speed, a passenger Boeing passes this distance for a little over than an hour. It was the most comfortable and quickest way to get from one capital to another.

Now, due to stopovers, the distance of the flight increases a few times along with the time and cost of the flight.

“It’s very uncomfortable to fly via Almaty or Tashkent. In fact, you have to pay a double price. Moreover, the flight takes a lot of time,” said **Kakhramon Bakozoda**, an executive director of Zerkalo Centre for Sociological Studies of Dushanbe, who has to fly to Bishkek often for business purposes.

However, the management of Avia Traffic Company said that the flight could not become profitable for four years.

“For example, aviation fuel in Tajikistan is one of the most expensive in Central Asia. And the airport is one of the most expensive in the region. It’s even harder in winter – anti-icing, bad weather conditions. The procedure is long and not cheap. We cannot reach the break-even point during a year. I’m not speaking about any profits. After all, we are not a charity to operate flights at a loss,” **Georgy Yeremenko**, deputy general manager of the airline, said.



Georgy Yeremenko. Photo: CABAR.asia

According to Avia Traffic Company, the handling of one aircraft at the airport of Dushanbe costs 10 thousand dollars in average. For comparison, at Manas airport the costs are around four thousand dollars.

Their requests to the management of Dushanbe airport regarding discounts, according to Yeremenko, remained unanswered. Moreover, in the last four years it was obvious that there would be no increase in the passenger flow despite the fact that other airlines stopped their flights on this route.

“There are direct passengers, but they are enough only for 1 flight per week. In winter time, the flight was done once in two weeks. [...] The average annual load on this route was 56 per cent. Our planes were half empty. It was fine for the first two years, and then we faced a decline. However, we used to make both ends meet. But 2019 was a real nightmare,” Yeremenko said.

However, according to passengers, the flight Bishkek-Dushanbe is in high demand. They said they never saw half-empty planes on this route, not to mention the cancellation of flights due to no load. They assured that summer flights could not contain all those wishing to fly.

Tajik journalist **Khursand Khurramov** based in Bishkek said the regular flight between the capitals of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is in high demand today.

“According to the National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyzstan, 1,865 students attend universities of the Kyrgyz Republic. Moreover, a lot of Tajik families live here and visit Tajikistan from time to time. The lack of direct flight creates problems for this category of citizens,” Khurramov said.



Photo courtesy of Khursand Khurramov

If we combine the number of flights and the passenger flow, we'll find it that the total passenger flow decreased by 2.5 times and the average number of passengers per flight increased by 1.5 times.

However, the airline said that even the average number for 2019 - 114 passengers - is not sufficient. The airplane that operates this flight is designed for 148 passengers.

According to Georgy Yeremenko, all available boards are distributed along more profitable routes. Instead of unprofitable flights to Dushanbe, the airline increased the number of flights to Osh. The passenger flow is bigger, and there are fewer difficulties as it is a domestic flight.

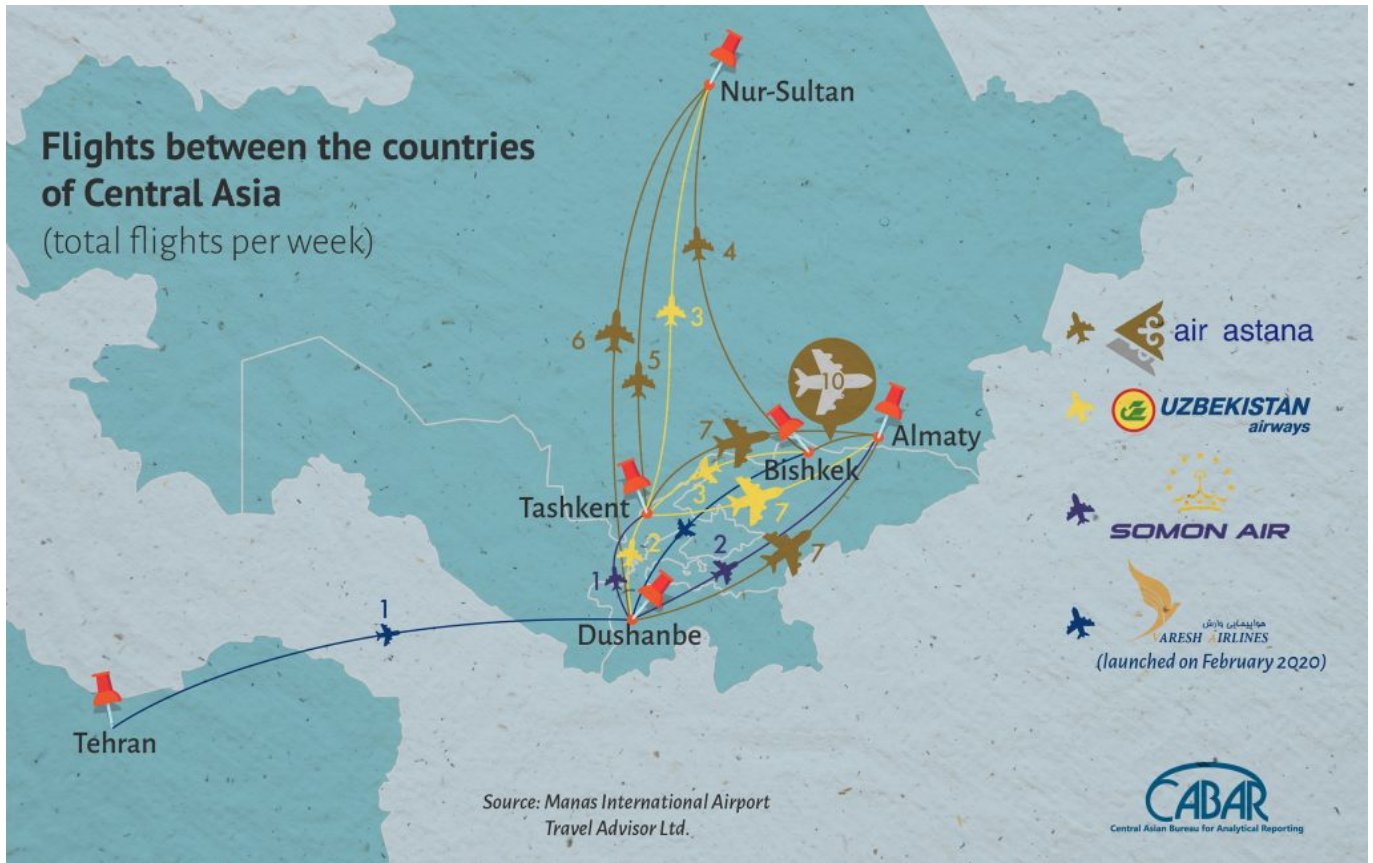
Routes in Central Asia

The airports of Almaty, Nur-Sultan and Tashkent have the most developed network of routes in Central Asia. Kazakhstan is actively developing its leader, Air Astana, and subsidises regular domestic and international flights. In 2019, the passenger flow in the airport of Almaty exceeded six million passengers, and in the Nursultan Nazarbayev airport was more than five million people.

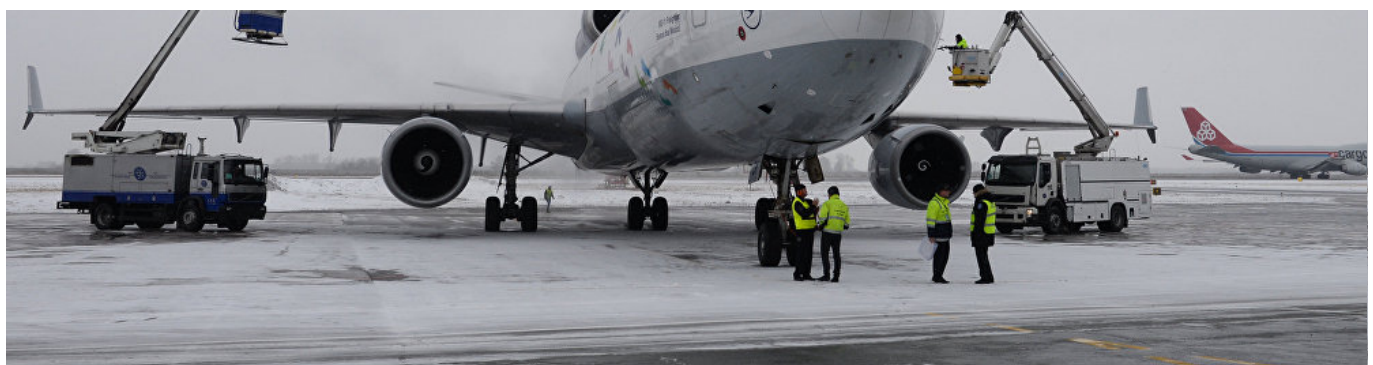
The airport of Tashkent is the third largest airport in the region, and by results of 2017, it

An Interrupted Flight. Why There Are No Flights between Bishkek and Dushanbe

provided services to more than three million passengers.



Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are the countries that have no direct routes between them in Central Asia. The former tries to keep Tajik airlines and does not allow foreign rivals in. In the beginning of last year, Kyrgyzstan announced the fifth freedom of air and the Open Skies policy. However, according to the ex-head of flying service of the Civil Aviation Agency of the Kyrgyz Republic, **Tolon Arpachiev**, there have been no results so far.



Kyrgyzstan "Opens Skies". What Does it Mean?

“We expected to have a lot of new flights, cheaper tickets, but no one has analysed the situation. We haven’t studied the economic situation. There were no results in a year – the tickets didn’t become cheaper, no new flights were added. I think it was a criminal law to the detriment of our civil aviation. Foreign airlines of Malaysia, South Korea or Tehran do not come to us because they have no passengers, cargo or mail for us,” Arpachiev said.

On February 3 this year, the Iranian Vares Airlines started to operate flights on Tehran-Dushanbe-Bishkek-Tehran route. The flights are scheduled on Mondays. However, neither Manas airport, nor travel operators know the price of Dushanbe-Bishkek ticket, and they don’t know how and where to buy these tickets.

The assumptions of experts regarding this route are not very optimistic:

“In my opinion, it will exist for two months. Or, until summer. The point is that the plane contains 200-250 passengers. One tonne of kerosene costs 999 dollars. Tajiks don’t fly here. Some 50 people would fly here from Tehran. There will be no load. In order to justify the flight, there must be at least 60-70 per cent load. They won’t work at a loss,” Tolon Arpachiev said.



Aziz Nabizoda. Photo: ozodi.tj

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Meanwhile, according to the Civil Aviation Agency of Tajikistan, the financial status of Tajik airlines has improved a little and they might renew their flights to Bishkek.

“In the short run, the relevant plane will be repaired and the airline [Tajik Air] will renew its flights to Bishkek. [...] And Somor Air is purchasing Embraer planes for short-haul flights. These airplanes contain up to 100 passengers and allow reducing costs on flights with low commercial loads,” deputy head of the agency **Aziz Nabizoda** said.

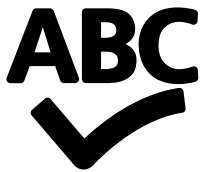
According to the Civil Aviation Agency of Kyrgyzstan, Somon Air filed a request for Dushanbe-Bishkek-Seoul flight and is waiting for permission to fly between Bishkek and Seoul.

“The talks are now on with the Chinese party. New founders of Air Manas purchased three new jets, made an advance payment, and are planning to operate this flight. We have assigned frequencies to them. I think they’ll start flights this summer,” head of the agency **Kurmanbek Akyshev** said.

According to him, the agency is ready to assign new frequencies to flights, but there is no demand. Private airlines that bear certain costs and are not funded by the government rely on economic efficiency, first of all, when choosing routes.

Until the end of March, all airlines should submit their applications to the civil aviation agency for the routes and frequencies they want to get. The spring-summer navigation season will start on March 29 and will last for 7 months. The schedule of flights operated by airlines available in Kyrgyzstan should be prepared by this time.

This article was prepared as part of the Giving Voice, Driving Change - from the Borderland to the Steppes Project.



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