

# Severe weather and lack of preparation cause chaos in Moscow airports

By David Firestone  
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Unusually prolonged and intense freezing rain storms paralyzed Domodedovo and Sheremetyevo, the two largest Moscow airports, last week, causing cancellation, delay, and the rerouting of hundreds of flights. Thousands of passengers were left stranded in the airports, some spending several days waiting for their flights, leading to protests and other outbursts of public anger.

Although many European and American airports experienced extensive delays in recent weeks in connection with inclement weather, the consequences for thousands of travelers in Moscow have been particularly severe due to the continued neglect of basic infrastructure. Public services are unprepared to handle not only major disasters, but also such regular natural phenomena as freezing rain. Regulatory agencies are plagued by corruption and the lack of oversight.

During the night of December 27-28, travelers at Sheremetyevo terminal E “mutinied” by blocking the security checkpoint, chanting “Disgrace!” and demanding to speak to Aeroflot representatives. The police intervened after some of the passengers tried to enter the departure hall without passing through security.

Fights broke out among some passengers anxious to reach their planes on time. In one incident on Tuesday in Sheremetyevo, several employees of airline company Aeroflot were beaten by angry travelers, according to the airline.

The situation was exacerbated by a power outage that affected much of the Moscow region, as well as a shortage of deicing fluid, used to remove ice from airplane wings, which particularly affected Sheremetyevo.

The problems began with a power outage in Domodedovo on Sunday morning as a result of trees

falling on power lines. Although power was restored that evening, it was not until Tuesday that airport facilities resumed regular functioning. However, the resulting delays and disorder continued through Thursday.

After the power outage, airport officials began to ask passengers to leave the airport. But the power outage meant that they could not travel by the usual electric trains. To facilitate evacuation, local authorities sent dozens of buses to deliver them to key locations in Moscow and the metropolitan area. The buses continued on Monday, with taxi companies exploiting the crisis to raise fares sharply.

Conditions in the airports were chaotic. Passengers waited for hours in line to register, hours more to go through security checkpoints, and many more hours and even days at the gates. Terminals were overfilled, and travelers slept on idle conveyer belts and registration counters. Baggage was commonly delivered to destinations days earlier or later than its owners.

One of the most common complaints was the complete absence of reliable information about flights. Airport flight information screens were constantly changing. Flights would disappear from the screen and reappear several hours later. Airport and airline officials were mostly inaccessible. Periodically, they would move about the terminals escorted by teams of policemen. When accosted by desperate passengers, they could only answer that they knew nothing, because their own management had no answers.

Local and national emergency services supplied stranded travelers with food and water, but many had trouble gaining access to even these limited provisions.

Among the many complaints registered by passengers were: they had access to drinking water only once per

day; they received croissants instead of promised dinner vouchers; hotels provided rooms only to passengers with small children and business class passengers; and airport food services refused to accept the food vouchers, charged customers several times more than usual, and ran out of food.

One flight had passengers wait in their seats in the plane for six hours without food or drinking water.

Bulat Nigmatulin, first deputy general director of the Institute of Natural Monopolies and former minister of nuclear energy, explained in an interview with *Radio Liberty* how the relaxation of electric energy regulations over recent years has made the electric power system more vulnerable to power outages than it had previously been. He suggested that airport management had likely allowed safety norms to be ignored, and that current electric power system inspection practices are grossly inadequate for the purpose of disaster prevention.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin scrambled to defend the government and put on a show of determined action. This consisted mainly of the demand that airport, airline, and electric power workers who service the airports give up plans to celebrate the New Year holiday in order to ensure the continued regular functioning of the airports. He also forbade government officials responsible for power supply in affected areas from going on vacation until receiving express permission.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev assigned Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika to launch investigations into the administration of the airports. These are simply token gestures aimed at placating massive public anger.

The power outage also left about 400,000 residents of Moscow and the surrounding region without electricity. As of Sunday, more than 3,000 were still waiting for the resumption of their power supply—according to official announcements. Hundreds of mobile phone network base stations in the Moscow region remained out of service for several days.

Thousands of people also went without water and gas utilities—and therefore without heat. This is during a week when low temperatures reached 9° Fahrenheit.

According to bloggers, the official figures are grossly understated, with dozens of small and medium-sized towns going without electricity, gas, and water during

the week.

Elsewhere in Russia, 12 people died in the crash of a military transport plane near Tula on Wednesday. The precise cause of the crash has not yet been determined, but ice on the wings has been cited as the most likely explanation. In other words, they were also casualties of inadequate transportation safety measures.

In Tiksi in northeastern Siberia, thousands were left without heat for several days when gas supply lines burst. According to local residents, this happens there every winter. Tiksi is located beyond the Arctic Circle, where average daily temperatures in December range between -13° and -26° F.

Under Russian law, airline passengers do not have the right to demand compensation for inconvenience experienced as a result of delayed flights if the cause of the delay falls within *force majeure* contract clauses.

However, the Russian consumer protection agency has asserted that travelers forced to wait in airports have the right to demand compensation from the airlines. The agency's head, Gennady Onischenko, has argued that airlines should not be allowed to resort to the *force majeure* clauses, asserting that “the chief *force majeure* here is the airlines' attitude toward passengers and lack of professionalism.”

In fact, the government is equally to blame for failing to regulate and to provide for adequate emergency prevention measures. Rospotrebnadzor has initiated administrative proceedings against Aeroflot. Several other airlines are also being investigated for violations.

Despite the warnings issued from the government, those responsible for the transportation collapse—including government officials themselves—will not be held accountable. The protracted and severe decay of social infrastructure and the resulting disasters are a recurrent reminder of the failure of modern Russian capitalism to provide for basic human needs.

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