

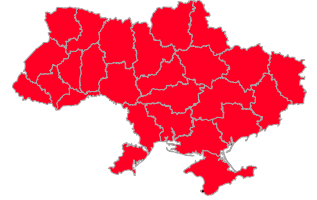
Transport

Overflights Plummet -- Air Service Ticks Up



Lee Reaney

Ukraine loses millions of dollars in overflight fees as passenger planes fly around Ukraine. Of interest to travelers, takeoffs and landings picked up last year.

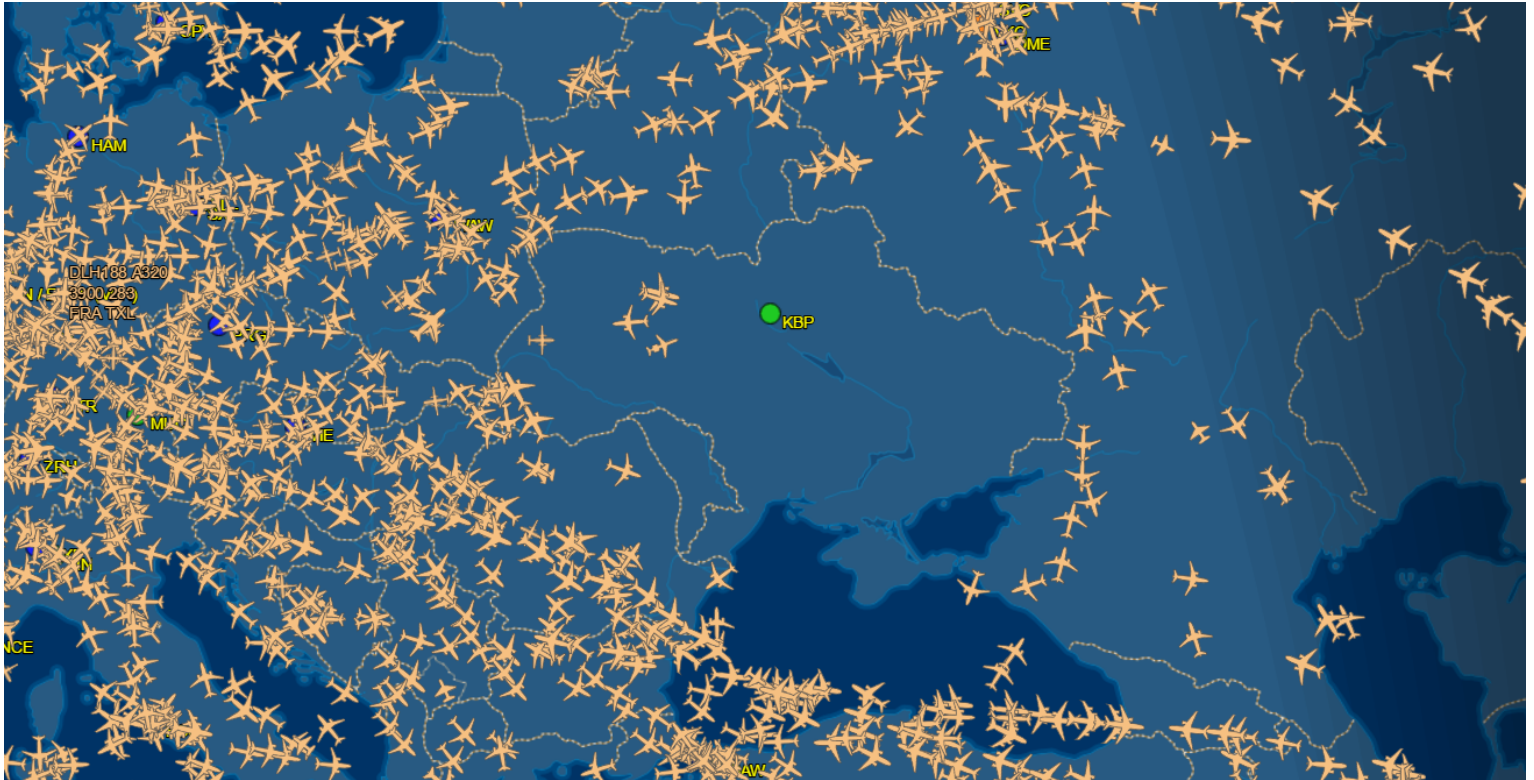


KYIV – On maps that digitally track flights crossing Europe, most of Ukraine’s airspace looks like North Korea’s – a black hole.

That is a legacy -- hidden, but costly -- of the July 17, 2014 shoot down of Malaysia Airlines 17 over eastern Ukraine. A Russian-made missile hit the fully loaded commercial jet at 33,000 feet, killing all 298 people on board.

Immediately, airlines and air traffic control agencies ordered pilots to give wide berth to eastern Ukraine and to Russian-occupied Crimea.

The impact can be seen in this screen grab taken Wednesday from the Flightradar24.com website.



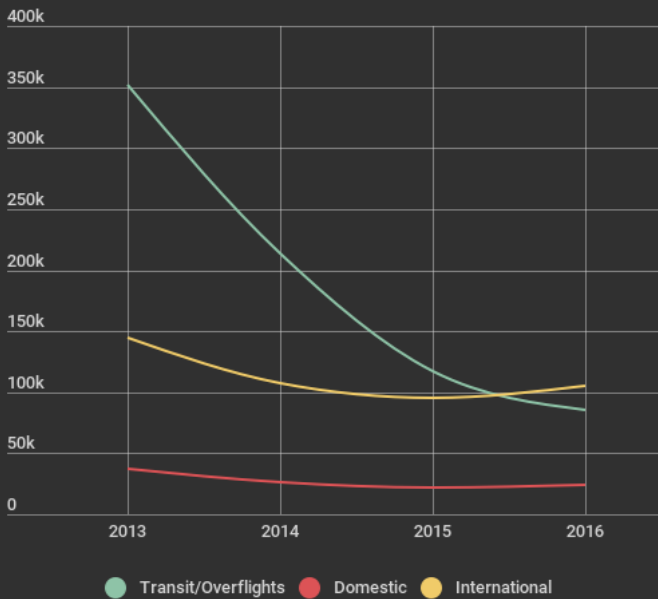
Millions of Dollars Lost

While overflights are largely invisible to the general public, they generate millions of dollars that in turn fund national air traffic control agencies. Controlling the airspace over Europe’s largest country, the agency pulled in about \$20 million a year in overflight fees – through 2013. Then, Ukraine overflights plummeted by 76 percent in four years -- from 352,056 in 2013 to 85,705 last year.

“The share of the overflights in UKSATSE revenues has decreased, from 70 percent to 25 percent,” said Natalie Illnitska, spokeswoman for UkrSATSE, Ukraine’s air traffic control organization.

She blamed the fall on the “temporary occupation” of Crimea, the general closure of airspace near and over the eastern conflict zone, the downing of MH17 in July 2014, and the reciprocal flight ban imposed in Oct. 2015 by the Ukrainian and Russian governments.

Structure of Flights Over Ukrainian Airspace



Hover over each dot to see the total number of flights over Ukrainian airspace each year.

Source: UkrSATSE

Andrew Sweeney

infogr.am

No Impact on Air Safety

She said the fall in revenue to the air traffic control agency had no impact on air safety in Ukraine. Until the crisis, the agency had been of the best funded in Ukraine.

“UkrSATSE has implemented effective anti-crisis operational and financial measures, which enable the provision of the air navigation services at the required high safety level,” the spokeswoman said.

Since 2013, Ukraine has lost revenue from almost 270,000 overflights a year.

Takeoffs and Landings Up in Ukraine

While many airlines have redlined Ukraine for overflights, passenger planes actually landing and taking off in Ukraine increased last year.

Echoing a wider, horseshoe-shaped recovery of Ukraine’s economy last year, air traffic control figures show that international flights increased last year by 9 percent over 2015 and domestic flights by 11 percent.

2014 Bans

Both the U.S. Federal Aviation Agency and the European Organization for the Safety of Air Navigation, Eurocontrol, banned flights to Crimea in 2014 after Russia’s annexation. Eurocontrol said it did not recognize Russia’s unilateral declaration of air traffic control over Ukrainian airspace, which was made without Ukraine’s consent.

A few months later, after the MH17 shoot down, Eurocontrol recommended a ban on commercial flights over much of eastern Ukraine. Air France, Lufthansa, and Turkish Airlines halted overflights east of Kyiv. At the time, Brian Flynn, a senior Eurocontrol official, predicted that the decision would affect around 350 flights daily, including 150 international ones.

The historic volume of overflights will only return when peace returns to the East, not a foreseeable event.

Ukraine Pursues Open Skies

To increase actual air service, Ukraine is working to sign Common Aviation Area agreements. It signed such ‘open skies’ agreements with the US in 2015, with Poland, Italy, Lithuania, and Estonia in 2016.

Now, Ukraine hopes to sign a broad CAA with the European Union.

The agreements grant airlines rights to launch international flights without negotiations with national governments. Taking advantage of this, LOT Polish Airlines became the fastest growing airline serving Ukraine last year, recording a 40.7% increase in traffic.



Airlines also are learning their geography. From the air, western Ukraine's city of Lviv is almost equidistant from Venice and Donetsk -- about 1,260 km either way. Yet Flightradar24 shots of Ukraine show regular air traffic on European routes to the west of the city, but largely empty skies to the east.

Adapting to the situation, LOT, Turkish Airlines, Wizz Air and Ukraine International Airlines have announced substantial expansion of service to Ukrainian airports this year. Ryanair, the Dublin-based discount airline, is expected to start Ukraine service this fall.

"Constant work with the airlines aimed at increasing the volume of use of Ukrainian airspace means we can forecast a positive dynamic of air traffic for 2017," Illnitska said.

For comments or news tips, please contact UBJ Reporter Lee Reaney at lee.reaney@theubj.com (mailto:lee.reaney@theubj.com).

Slider: Almost three years after Russia's annexation of Crimea, much of Ukraine's airspace remains empty, compared to its European neighbors (Credit: Flightradar24.com)

Infographic: Overflights of Ukraine have plummeted since 2013. Last year, domestic and international flight volumes started to recover. (Credit: Andrew Sweeney)

Photo: A LOT Polish Airlines Embraer 170 takes off. Seating 70 passengers, this commuter jet easily makes the 90-minute hop from Kyiv to Warsaw, the kind of regional traffic that is starting to grow from Ukraine's five major commercial airports (Credit: LOT)

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