

Russia Imposes Stringent Controls on Officials' Foreign Travel

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Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency

Top Russian officials — including lawmakers, governors and senior managers of state-owned companies — have been placed under strict foreign travel restrictions by the Kremlin since the start of the Ukraine war in an apparent attempt to head off defections and hinder the work of foreign intelligence services.

The system of controls on leaving the country was described to The Moscow Times by 10 former and current officials, including an old acquaintance of President Vladimir Putin, who all requested anonymity to speak freely.

While previous media reports have indicated foreign travel has become harder for officials since the invasion of Ukraine, this is the first time the scheme's details have been reported.

“No one can go anywhere without individual permission,” a senior Russian government

official told The Moscow Times.

Blocking officials from taking holidays or personal trips abroad appears to be a part of Russia's deepening isolation since the invasion of Ukraine and reflects the growing fears — and possibly even paranoia — in the Kremlin toward the risks posed by foreign spies and turncoats.

These measures are an effort “to prevent officials from defecting,” said Kremlin critic Gennady Gudkov, a former Soviet KGB officer and ex-State Duma deputy.

According to current and former officials who spoke to The Moscow Times, the restrictions are implemented in several ways.

One is the collection of foreign passports from selected officials and employees of state companies by the Federal Security Service (FSB), a practice outlined in an investigation by U.S.-funded media outlet Current Time that was [published](#) earlier this month.

A longtime Kremlin official confirmed the existence of such a practice to The Moscow Times.

However, depriving officials of their passports is apparently not the only method used to control foreign travel.

In addition, the FSB maintains a database of officials, governors and other state employees who must obtain permission in order to leave the country, the Kremlin official, a government official and two former officials told The Moscow Times.

"The database has what are called checkboxes. In order to leave, they must be unticked in advance," said the government official.

Before the Ukraine war, this permission had to be obtained from an immediate superior.

Since the conflict began, however, the practice has become considerably stricter.

Senior officials must now obtain so-called “double approval” for any foreign travel — from both their immediate superior and their superior's boss.

This means it is not uncommon for the matter of a foreign trip to be handled by Kremlin chief of staff Anton Vaino or even Putin himself, the Kremlin official, a government official and the longtime acquaintance of Putin told The Moscow Times.

"Despite the ongoing conflict, sometimes Putin himself has to look at all these lists and figure out who is going abroad for what purpose," the longtime acquaintance of Putin said.

Many believe that the decision to curtail the freedom of movement of top officials in this way could only have been made in the Kremlin.

“This decision was made at the very top of the Russian leadership,” a senior member of the Russian parliament told The Moscow Times.

“Putin together with the FSB and members of the Security Council.”

He added that he believed it amounted to an unofficial restriction on all state employees.

While it is difficult to gauge how many requests to go abroad have been granted — or refused — the heightened restrictions suggest foreign trips are now the exception rather than the rule for the upper tier of Russia's bureaucracy.

“Formally, the borders are open, but officials are being pressured... a significant number of people have already been forbidden to travel abroad,” said the government official.

In one incident four months after the invasion of Ukraine, a high-ranking Russian official was preparing to travel to a foreign resort from a Moscow airport.

Despite having taken many work trips and holidays abroad in recent years, an associate of the official told The Moscow Times that the border guard checked information on the computer, looked at the official attentively and asked him to wait. After an hour, he was told he was not allowed to travel.

"Kindly return to your duties," he was told, the official's associate said.

And it appears that even officials who apply for permission to travel abroad in advance are frequently turned down.

There were many examples of canceled foreign holiday plans over the Christmas and New Year period this year, another Kremlin official, another government official and a top manager at a major state-owned energy company told The Moscow Times.

“There were cases when very high-profile people were told: ‘No, no vacation. Holiday at work,’” said the top manager at the state-owned company.

Some officials said they were uncomfortable with the current situation — noting in particular the lack of clarity on who exactly the new rules cover.

“It's very unnerving,” said one Russian government official.

Many wealthy officials also believed to be unhappy with being forced to forego the foreign holidays to which they have become accustomed in recent decades.

There is even a widespread belief that a complete ban on officials traveling abroad could be imposed as early as this year, three officials told The Moscow Times.

Several steps in that direction have already been taken this year.

In January, the State Duma, the lower house of Russia's parliament, passed an amendment obliging all deputies to inform the relevant committee in advance of foreign travel.

And the head of mercenary company Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, last month submitted a letter urging lawmakers to pass legislation banning any officials from traveling abroad during the so-called “special military operation” — the Kremlin's preferred term for its war in Ukraine.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov [said](#) last month that a travel ban was not being discussed in the Kremlin but that they were aware of Prigozhin's proposal.

Unofficial bans on foreign travel for local officials currently [exist](#) in the Vologda, Ulyanovsk and Tambov regions, as well as in the republics of Mari El, Chuvashia and North Ossetia, according to local media reports.

Despite the stringent rules, some exceptions for top officials to go abroad are still granted.

In two high-profile cases — that of former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin and ex-Putin adviser Anatoly Chubais — Putin granted permission for them to leave the country, according to Putin's longtime associate, the Kremlin official and an ex-government official.

Kudrin, an ally of Putin and the then-head of the Audit Chamber, traveled to Israel at least [twice](#) in 2022. News of the trip provoked a political backlash, with one Communist Party deputy [asking](#) the FSB to check Kudrin's compliance with state secrecy laws.

Chubais, post-Soviet Russia's "privatization tsar," [resigned](#) as a Kremlin special envoy in response to the invasion and left Russia in March.

"Both of them were only able to leave after Putin personally gave his permission," the Kremlin official said.

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And there is some evidence that the Russian security services are taking a greater interest in those officials who do travel abroad on their return.

The employee of a state-owned company — who is not subject to the strict travel restrictions — told The Moscow Times she was questioned by an FSB officer after a December visit to a Russia-allied neighboring country.

"The officer wanted to know whether I had been approached by the secret services [there]... whether I had been asked to sign papers condemning our president's policies and also why I went abroad in the first place," she told The Moscow Times.

Such increased interest is unsurprising because officials who leave the country are seen as a security threat by the Kremlin, according to Andrei Soldatov, a Russian investigative journalist and an expert on Russian spies.

Greater freedoms to travel abroad for top Russian officials appear unlikely as long as the war in Ukraine continues and Russia remains locked in confrontation with Western countries.

"An iron curtain for those associated with the state is... in place," said the senior Russian government official.

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