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## **AFTER CANCELLATIONS AND DELAYS, UZBEKISTAN AND TAJIKISTAN REOPEN AIR LINK**

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The very first direct commercial flight in 25 years from Uzbekistan to Tajikistan landed in Dushanbe on Tuesday. For a one-hour flight, it represented a significant mark of progress in relations between Tashkent and Dushanbe.

The Uzbekistan Airways flight carried 29 passengers, according to RFE/RL which also reported that the Uzbek national carrier plans to fly the route twice a week using its Airbus A-320 planes. According to Air Transport World, Uzbekistan Airways A-320 planes are configured to carry up to 150 passengers.

The first flight between the neighboring countries has been delayed several times since the reopening of the air route was announced in early December 2016. A month earlier, Tajik authorities had said that a government-to-government agreement that was being negotiated with Uzbekistan was close to completion.

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The issue of direct, regular flights between Dushanbe and Tashkent had come up several times in the past quarter-century but as Uzbekistan-Tajikistan relations soured □ over serious disagreements regarding borders and water □ it always seemed like a far-fetched possibility. Late Uzbek President Islam Karimov didnt help the relationship much; for example, obliquely threatening Tajikistan with a war over water in 2012. But following his death in late summer last year, his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, made quick moves to signal his intentions to build a different kind of regional relationship.

Within a month of Karimovs passing, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov was in Dushanbe visiting with President Emomali Rahmon. According to Asia-Plus, in an interview with Tajik television Komilov said it was time to renew long-interrupted ties.

Intentions, however, werent quite enough. Tajik national carrier Somon Air announced that it had scheduled a test flight for February 10, with regular service to begin on February 20. EurasiaNet reported that ticket prices on February 1 were about \$300 round trip. But it was not to be. The test flight was successful but the day regular service was to resume Somon Air announced that the Uzbek government had decided at the last moment not to allow the flight, RFE/RL reported. It wasnt immediately clear whether the problem was one of politics or bureaucracy □ likely a mix of both.

Uzbekistan Airways reportedly claimed that Somon Air had filed the paperwork for the flight on February 19, the day before it was to take off. They also said the Tajik airline had filed a request

for a charter flight, not regular scheduled flights.

The commercial director of Somon Air, Alisher Rustamov, was sacked, with the airline saying an internal investigation essentially supported the Uzbek carriers claims with regard to a badly handled paperwork process.

Then it was announced that Uzbekistan Airways would fly the first flight on April 4. But that flight was canceled, according to Trend because so few tickets were sold, and rescheduled for April 11.

The successful flight is a milestone but there will be significant work to be done to make the route popular and profitable. As EurasiaNet pointed out, a taxi from Dushanbe to the Uzbek border costs about \$15 dollars and a car to Tashkent about \$20. The trip, under \$40, involves about nine hours of driving, plus the trouble of crossing the border. A well-priced flight would be attractive.

As of April 11, a seat on the planned twice-weekly, Tuesday and Saturday, Tashkent-Dushanbe flight (one-way) costs between \$153.50 and \$235.50 (depending on cabin choice) on Uzbekistan Airways.

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Kaynak/Source: