New warning for Albanian airspace

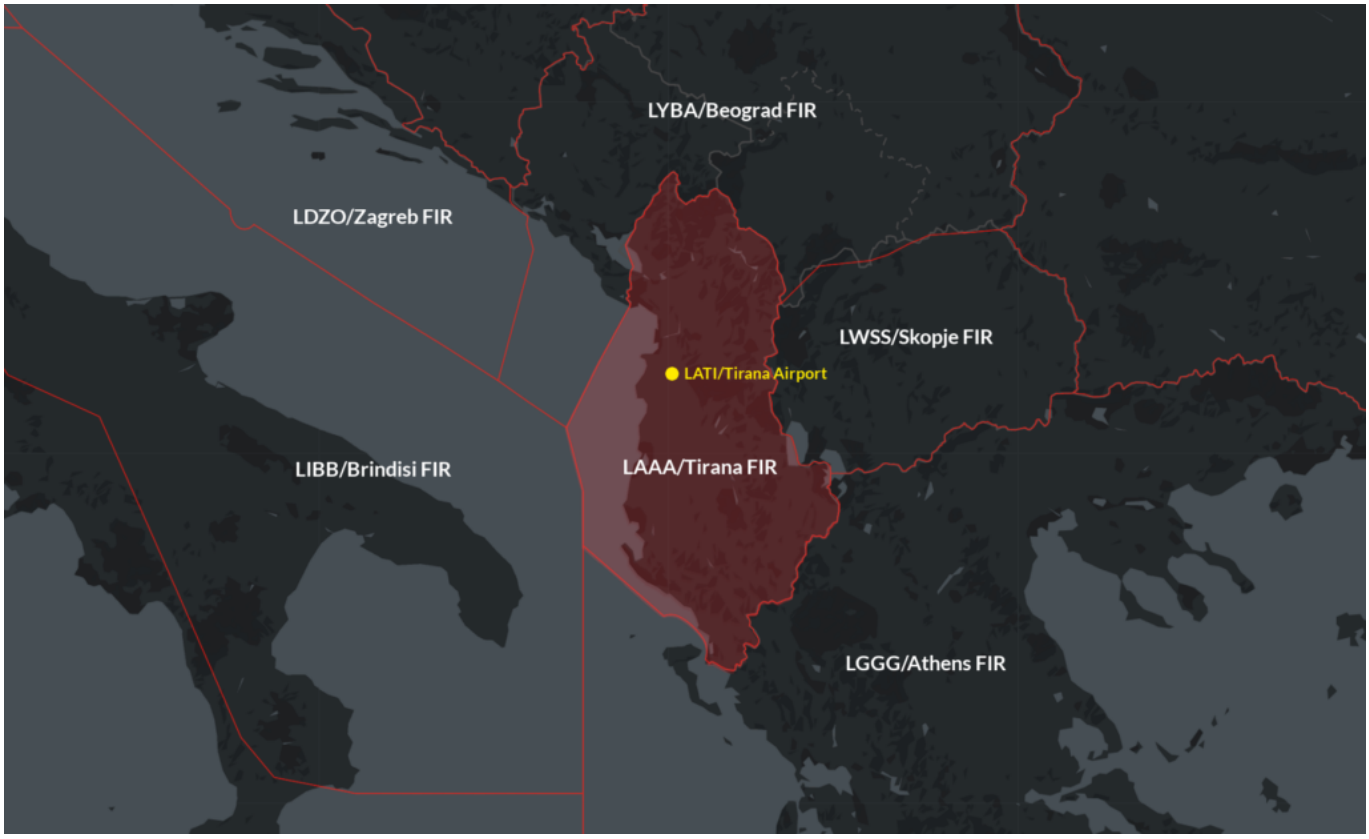
David Mumford
14 April, 2021



On April 8, Albanian airspace (the LAAA/Tirana FIR) along with LATI/Tirana Airport was **forced to close**, after a number of local air traffic controllers declared themselves temporarily unfit to work. Several international organisations, including IFALPA and IFATCA, have since issued statements warning pilots to **exercise extreme caution while operating in Albanian airspace due to a heightened risk of degraded ATC services**.

Why? Two reasons:

1. **Local controllers** are now back at work but under significant duress, having been threatened with being fired (or worse – being arrested and jailed) if they do not declare themselves fit for duty.
2. **Foreign controllers** have reportedly been brought in to replace some local controllers who were arrested, despite the fact that they are not trained or rated on any of the local positions.



What happened?

Mid-2020

- Albcontrol (the National Air Traffic Agency) cut the salary of the controllers by up to 70%.

Early April 2021

- Some controllers declared themselves temporarily unfit to work due to stress caused by these pay cuts. They were fired by Albcontrol.

April 6

- A large number of local controllers (estimated at around 60-70% of ATCOs) declared themselves temporarily unfit to work due to stress, in line with the EASA regulations and the international standards. *What these regulations essentially say is that being 'fit for work' is a personal assessment by the controller to avoid undue pressure from management to perform safety critical tasks when unfit for duty.*

April 7

- LATI/Tirana Airport issues closed at 1000z due to lack of ATC staff. Albanian airspace (the LAAA/Tirana FIR) closed at 1800z. Both stayed closed until 0659z on April 9, with a few exceptions when they reopened for short periods of time to allow humanitarian and medevac flights to operate.
- Albania's government sent troops and police to clear the "protesting" controllers out of the

tower and their offices. About two dozen controllers were questioned by police. Three were arrested, charged with ‘abuse of office’. Two remain in jail; the third is under house arrest.

April 8

- Several reports emerged that the Albanian Government had brought in Turkish controllers to replace the local ones. No official announcement was made, so their status as to training and local ratings is unknown.

April 9

- LATI/Tirana Airport and Albanian airspace reopened at 0659z.
- The Albanian Government issued an order officially recognising foreign ATCO licenses, allowing for foreign air traffic controllers to take over in emergency situations in Albania – an attempt to justify its actions the previous day and establish legal authority for the foreign controllers already installed.
- Local controllers returned to work (except those still in jail/under house arrest) and were forced to sign a “fit for work” declaration.

What’s been the response?

The international response has been **unequivocally damning**, with IFALPA, IFATCA and ATCEUC all issuing several statements denouncing the action of the Albanian authorities (both the government and Albcontrol).

IFALPA have published a Safety Bulletin advising pilots to exercise extreme caution while operating within Albanian airspace, providing more detail in a Press Release calling on the Albanian authorities to adhere to international regulations. **IFATCA** have published similar info here, and **ATCEUC** has also issued a statement which can be found here.

Advice to operators

Reminiscent of the Ethiopian ATC strike and subsequent cover-up by the authorities in 2018, the action of the Albanian authorities should be seen for what it is – **a terrible misjudgement, creating a safety risk across Albanian airspace**.

IFATCA define it best, in their April 10 press release –

“The International Convention on Civil Aviation prohibits an air traffic controller from exercising the privileges of their licences and related ratings at any time when they are aware of any decrease in their medical fitness which might render them unable to safely and properly exercise these privileges. It is considered unsafe to have a person perform air traffic control that is physically or mentally impaired in any way, or unqualified and untrained for the position.

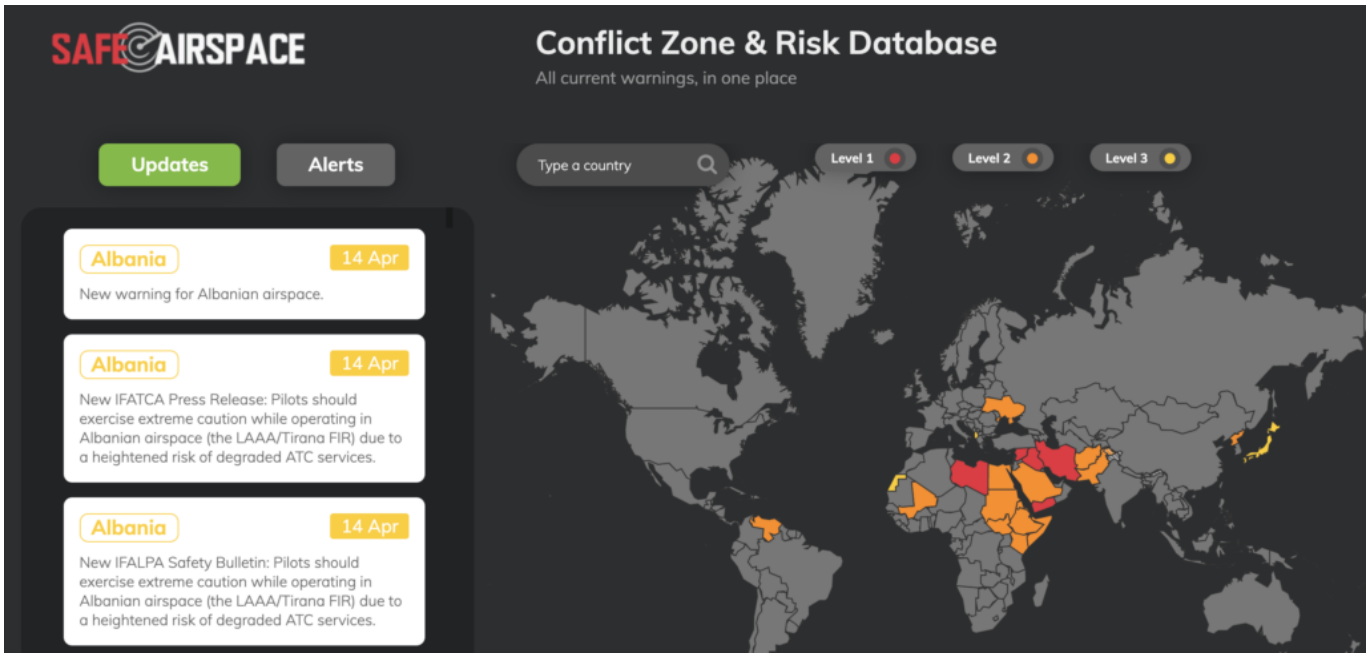
It is the obligation of the Service Provider to provide a safe and functional workplace environment that supports the personnel to perform these complex safety roles free from distraction and duress.

The Albanian authorities continue to have disregard for the safety critical nature of these roles…

Albanian authorities have taken an irresponsible gamble on safety and stability of the air traffic services over their territory and the Network by attempting to continue operations with unlicensed and unqualified

staff to operate, masquerading as a safe and functional service."

At SafeAirspace.net we are now listing Albania as **"Level 3 – Caution"** following these events. Pilots should exercise extreme caution while operating in Albanian airspace (the LAAA/Tirana FIR) due to a heightened risk of degraded ATC services.



Further reading:

- IFALPA April 13 Statement
- IFATCA April 8 Statement and April 10 Statement
- ATCEUC Press Releases on April 7, April 8 and April 10
- IFATSEA April 11 Press Release