Special Report: Crimea and Simferopol FIR

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Crimea & Simferopol FIR
Following the recent events in Ukraine and Crimea, we received a high volume of requests for information on the airspace and current situation. The information below is a majority extract from our International Ops Notice 03/14 published on 05APR.

SUMMARY

Effective April 2014 a significant number of changes will affect Airports and Airspace in the Crimean Peninsula.

BACKGROUND – What happened?

Following the removal of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych on 21 February, Russia moved to take control of Crimea, an autonomous republic that until now has been part of Ukraine. While the referendum that ceded authority is disputed internationally, Crimea is now under de facto control of Russia, creating a political standoff with Europe and the US that has led to a complicated airspace situation.

AIRSPACE AND AIRPORTS INVOLVED

- **Simferopol FIR** A large and significant FIR covering busy Black Sea routes, with a predominant east/west flow, with ATC service provided from Simferopol Airport.
- **Simferopol Airport** A large airport in the centre of Crimea with International and Domestic Air Service, with TWR/APP
- **Sevastopol Airport** A smaller civil, domestic airport beside the town of Sevastopol in the southwest of Crimea, with TWR.
- **Zavodskoe Airport** Another smaller domestic airport beside Simferopol, with an AFIS Unit.
- **Kerch Airport** Used only by general aviation, currently bankrupt.

Some History – MARCH DEVELOPMENTS

- **13 March** Russian troops took control of the Towers, Airports, and ATC Centre. Simferopol and Sevastopol closed to civil traffic. ATC Service from Simferopol was terminated.
- **14 March** ATC Service for the Simferopol FIR is now provided by other ATC Centres in Ukraine. Odesa took control of the western portion (Sectors 3,4,5) and Dnipropetrovsk the eastern portion (Sectors 1,2)
- **16 March** Referendum held in Crimea, result determines wish to join Russia.

Current Status – CHANGES SINCE RUSSIAN CONTROL OF CRIMEA

- **24 March** Rouble adopted as official currency of Crimea
- **24 March** Russian Passports issued to existing population. Russian Visa required to enter for

non-Ukrainians/Crimeans

- **31 March** Clocks move forward 2 hours, Crimea is now on Moscow time
- **03 April** Simferopol ACC re-opens, providing ATC Service in the Simferopol FIR
- **03 April** Permit now required to enter Airspace over Crimea, according to NOTAM from Russia

Simferopol ACC

The Simferopol FIR is normally controlled from an Area Control Centre located at Simferopol Airport. It was closed on 13 March (picture taken same day) when Russia took control of facilities in the peninsula, and service for the FIR was provided using remote radar data by Ukrainian controllers from Odesa and Dnipropetrovsk.

At 10am on 3 April Simferopol ACC was reopened, managed by a new service provider called "Krymaeronavigatsiya". The controllers in the centre are mostly the same controllers that operated Simferopol ACC for the Ukrainian National Authority.

To reactivate control of the airspace from Simferopol, Russia issued several NOTAMs on 28 March which were subsequently disputed by Ukraine and Eurocontrol. This has led to an unsafe situation leading to an ICAO letter and recommendation to avoid the Simferopol FIR until the situation is resolved.

NEW ICAO CODES

URFB Sevastopol Belbek (was UKFB)
URFF Simferopol (was UKFF)
URFV Simferopol FIR/ACC (was URFV)

* *Issued by Russia, not (yet) recognised outside Russia.*

Aircraft Reports

Since the re-opening of Simferopol ACC on 03 APR, Eurocontrol has rejected FPL's containing routings through the Simferopol FIR with the exception of the **L851** airway which runs along the southern part of the FIR.

Traffic operating through the Simferopol FIR on Friday 04APR reported issues with "Joint Authority":

B747 enroute Europe-ME:
"*Instruction from Bucharest ACC to contact Odessa on 134.675*
On initial contact with them, they advised us to comply only to their instructions!
Then Simferopol ACC calls on 121.5 and advised to switch on 120.4.
Also they advised us to comply only to their instructions!
Both performed radio check to see if the aircraft is still on frequencies Both provide instructions (position report), fortunately the same."

CL601 enroute LOWW/Vienna-URKK/Krasnodar
We were passed onto Odessa Radar and checked in with them. We were then told to maintain our altitude and also warned NOT to get in contact with Simferopol as it is not a legal ATC station.
We were also given another frequency in case we lost comms with Odessa.
We were contacted on 121.5, the emergency frequency by Simferopol advising us to contact them on their

frequency numerous times. We decided as a crew to stay with Odessa. We were then passed onto Rostov control and continued the flight with no incident.

ANALYSIS

At present, there is effectively a stand off between Russia and Ukraine over recognititon of who is the rightful Authority to manage the airspace over Crimea. Russia has determined that it is Simferopol ACC, and is providing full service for the airspace from the existing ATC Centre. Ukraine, through Eurocontrol, determined that it should continue to provide service from remote sites, and therefore asserts its authority over the airspace.

The result, is that two Authorities are both stating claim over what has become Disputed Airspace, in a very similar situation to that in Northern Cyprus. So, who is right? There is no correct answer. The political situation is complex at present, and it difficult to determine what the future will bring.

Purely on a practical analysis however, it can be said with relative certainty, that Crimea will remain under Russian control, and it is likely to be a matter of time before Russian managed operation of Simferopol ACC is accepted internationally, either on a safety case or a relaxing of political stance.
Until such time, operation within the Simferopol FIR is operationally possible but carries with it the risks associated with Disputed Airspace.

Questions and Answers

What's happening?
Russia has claimed territorial control over Crimea, leading to the reopening of Simferopol ACC after a three week closure, and the same claim over airspace. Ukraine, under a new government, has defied the move, issuing its own NOTAMs to declare Russia's move invalid.

Can we enter the Simferopol FIR?
In short, Yes. The airspace is not closed. However, it's probably not a good idea, if you can avoid it. Two countries have claimed authority over the running of ATC – Russia and Ukraine, and there is no clear winner. For some operators there will be no choice but to enter, so see below for advice.

Can I file a flight plan to enter the Simferopol FIR?
Yes, if you're outside Europe. However, any FPL filed within the IFPS Region (ie. Eurocontrol) will be rejected if it contains a routing through the Simferopol FIR.

What if we decide to enter the airspace? Are there any sanctions or restrictions?
No, there aren't any legal or diplomatic sanctions preventing this, only Flight Planning restrictions from Eurocontrol. On the first day that Simferopol ACC was open, 145 flights were handled through the FIR, primarily non-European operators. If you do enter, we recommend:

- Two VHF sets – one on Simferopol frequency, one on Odesa or Dnipropetrovsk frequency
- Contact and remain in contact with both controllers, as long as possible
- Fly standard levels, do not request a level change
- Monitor TCAS
- Consider any instruction to change level or routing carefully, and coordinate with both ATC's.

Is this is the same situation as Ercan (Cyprus) ?
Kind of. Since 1974 there has been Disputed Airspace over the northern part of Cyprus, and two stations vie for control of the airsapce – Ercan and Nicosia. However, there are a couple of important differences. First, ICAO has declared it's recognition only of Nicosia, this is not the case in Crimea, where ICAO has only said it's unsafe at present, so avoid. Second, there are clear instructions for crossing that airspace – for

Crimea, at present, there are no procedures – again, only an advice to avoid.

Do I need a permit to enter Simferopol FIR?
Not at present, but this could change fast. Officially, Russia has declared the FIR to fall under the same rules as the rest of Russia, which means that a permit should be required to enter the airspace. However, there are two complicating factors.

1. A number of "Non-Sovereign routes" run through the Black Sea that Russia does not require a permit for (as the next sector is Rostov-on-Don airspace), requiring only advance notification to UUUWZDZX. Simferopol FIR would likely follow the same logic, though this has not been published.

URRV FIR (Rostov) Non- Sovereign Routes
GAMAN G277 BANUT
OLENA R230 LAMET A277 BANUT
BANUT A277 LAMET R230 OLENA
BANUT B147 TISOM
SOBLO B143 IDLER

2. The second factor is that the confusion at present is allowing leniency for overflight permits. However, if the situation is resolved with Russia being recognised as the sole controlling Authority, then flights over Crimean landmass will absolutely require a permit to overfly.

What about the Airports in Crimea? Is Simferopol open?
Yes, Simferopol is open to civil traffic, and a permit is required from the Russian Authorities. The process follows the same procedure as in the rest of Russia, with local Crimean approval, and also Federal approval required. Sevastopol is lesser used in any case, but may be available.

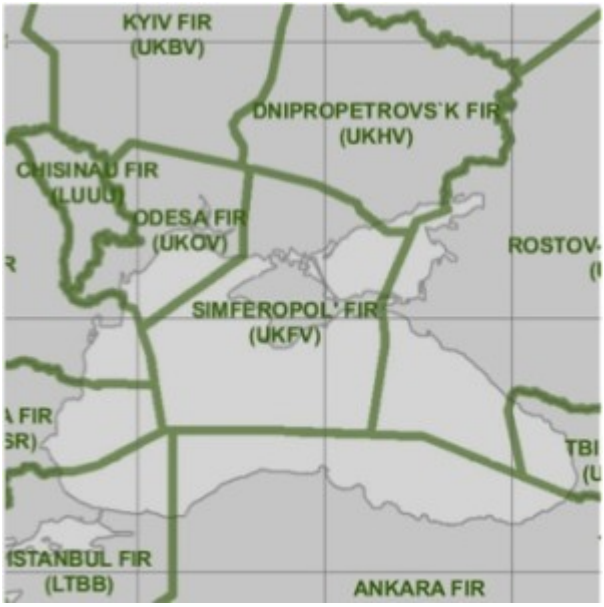
Is there any security risk in overflying Crimea?
No. The situation on the ground in Crimea is very stable, and there is no determined risk of any ground-air strikes or anything affecting security of flight.

Is there a safety risk in overflying Crimea, or entering the Simferopol FIR?
At the moment, yes. There is a risk level, although relatively minimal, due to the potential for confusion as to the correct controlling authority. The risk is highest near the airspace boundaries with other Ukrainian sectors. There is likely to also be an increased volume of traffic speaking Russian and therefore reducing situational awareness for international crews overflying.

So, is Simferopol an "Illegal" ATC Station?
No. Their authority is questioned by Europe, but they are fully trained, valid controllers, with ICAO recognised licenses. It's worth remembering that although Simferopol is currently declared "illegal" by some adjacent sectors, they are the same controllers that were operating that airspace just three weeks ago, and have done so for decades. If you are in there, you should at least be talking to them, not least because they will have control of conflicting westbound Russian traffic that will not be in contact with other sectors.

What happens westbound from Russia?
If you are entering Simferopol FIR from Rostov-na-Donu FIR, you will be transferred in a normal fashion to Simferopol ACC on the usual (historic) frequencies. Once approaching the boundary with Odessa or Dnipro you should make contact at least 10 minutes in advance.

Is there any co-ordination between Simferopol and Odesa, or Dnipropetrvosk ATC ?
We're uncertain, but we believe flight information is being exchanged in terms of boundary estimates and OLDI interchange. However, verbal communications are not likely cooperative at the moment, given the disputed control of the airspace.

When will this be resolved?
Hard to say, and the question that everyone is asking. The Ukraine NOTAMS are valid until 14APR, but that indicates little. A long term avoidance of the Simferopol FIR is unlikely due to commercial pressure. At a minimum, the airspace south of the landmass, ie. L850 and south, could be expected to be made available in the event of an ongoing standoff.

Airspace Map Crimea and Simferopol FIR