

Belarus: Politics, Piracy or Airspace Risk?

Chris Shieff, Rebecca Lougheed & Mark Zee

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Several countries and aviation bodies have urged airlines and operators to **avoid the airspace of Belarus** following the country's interception of an international flight bound for Lithuania and forced to land in Minsk.

Is there any cause for additional concern? Or was this a one-off event that poses no additional threat to airspace safety?

Here's what happened:

- On Saturday, a Polish registered Ryanair 737-800 was operating a commercial flight between Athens and the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius. Toward the end of the flight while overflying the UMMV/Minsk FIR, **ATC suddenly instructed the flight to divert to UMMS/Minsk** due to a security threat onboard.
- They were **not allowed to exit Belarusian airspace** despite being closer to EYVI/Vilnius at the time.
- There are unconfirmed reports it was **escorted to Minsk by a fighter aircraft**.
- Believing the threat to be genuine **the crew squawked 7700 and made an emergency landing** where all passengers were subjected to additional security screening. One passenger of particular political interest to Belarusian authorities was **arrested and detained**.
- **No bomb was found** and the flight was cleared to depart seven hours later. It continued on to Vilnius (minus the arrested passenger).



Track of the Diverted Aircraft

Operational impact and airspace risk

The forced landing of this flight was politically motivated, and the crew were misled into believing that there was a credible security threat against the aircraft. Understandably, this is of major concern to civil aviation.

The perspective that OPSGROUP takes on any aviation-related incident or situation, is formed solely through the lens of **operational impact to our members**; in other words, “**what does this mean for the flight we want to operate tomorrow**”. If I am a pilot planning to operate a flight through the Minsk FIR tomorrow, am I subject to heightened risk of any kind?

Purely from this standpoint, we view this as a one-off incident, that is not likely to recur. We do not consider there to be additional risk to aircraft flying through the Minsk FIR.

But it's still a major incident ...

That does not mean that we are downplaying the magnitude of this event. The conventions and agreements that protect civil aviation are and should continue to be sacrosanct. **Aviation itself here has been hijacked**, not just this Ryanair aircraft: a dictator-led state has used the civil aviation system for its own nefarious, political purposes.

And as we have seen from the EU ban on Belarus related flights announced this week, the political response has been swift and strong.

But again, purely from an operational perspective, we must differentiate between **political sanctions** and **genuine airspace risk warnings**. The Belarus response is heavily weighted to the former, not the latter.

What aviation authorities are now saying

ICAO has issued brief statements online expressing concern, but are waiting for the circumstances of the incident to be investigated further.

EASA has published a Safety Information Bulletin saying that both EU and Third Country Operators should avoid the UMMV/Minsk FIR. However, EASA says it does not believe the safety concern relating to the incident comprises an “unsafe condition” that would warrant a Safety Directive which would force airlines to comply.

Latvia and **Lithuania** have banned all flights to/from their airports if overflying the UMMV/Minsk FIR. **The UK, France, and Canada** have all published Notams advising operators not to overfly the airspace of Belarus, and it seems highly likely that more countries will issue warnings in the coming days.

For an up-to-date list of these warnings and advisories, you can check the **SafeAirspace.net page for Belarus** here. SafeAirspace is a Conflict Zone & Risk Database, and we maintain this warning system to alert operators to tangible, credible threat information that should impact their flight planning decisions. **To repeat - we do not consider there to be additional risk to aircraft flying through the Minsk FIR following this recent incident.** However, with SafeAirspace.net we simply want to ensure that operators have a single source for all official risk warnings and advisories issued about individual countries, and it's for that reason we have listed Belarus on the site.

How unprecedented is this?

It's not a routine event for a country to force an overflying aircraft to land, but it's also not as rare as you might think. Usually, a forced landing and/or fighter intercept occurs because of unpaid navigation charges, or the lack of an overflight permit. Each country publishes intercept procedures, so that pilots know how to respond to a military interception.

Indonesia is well known for this, and it doesn't usually make headline news, but it did in 2019 when they forced an Ethiopian Airlines aircraft to land in Bantam. In 2016, **Iran** forced a Fly Dubai aircraft to land in Iran, following confusion about its flight plan. **Peru** is also known for forcing enroute aircraft to land because of issues with overflight permits.

Politically motivated interceptions are also not without precedent. In 1985, the Interception of EgyptAir 2843 followed US intelligence received reports that four Palestine Liberation Front Terrorists, responsible for hijacking a cruise ship, were located at an airfield near Cairo, and that **Egypt** was planning on flying them out to Tunis aboard an EgyptAir airliner. The flight was expected to route over international waters, close to a US Navy ship, and so the US coordinated with local ATC to ensure the aircraft was refused landing at both Tunis and Athens, and a pair of Tomcats were sent up to force the airliner to divert to a NATO base in **Italy**. Once on the ground the hijackers were removed and detained.

In 1977, **Lebanon** accused Israel of 'Air Piracy' after they forced a Lebanese Middle East Airlines aircraft to land in **Israel**. The aircraft was en-route from Beirut to Baghdad, when it was intercepted by two Israeli fighters and diverted to an Israeli military air base in Haifa. Israeli intelligence thought the aircraft was carrying leaders of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. In fact, it did not have them onboard but had been chartered by Iraqi airlines following a delay by one of their own aircraft. The crew and passengers were all forcibly removed from the aircraft and interrogated, according to reports, but were released and able to depart some two hours later.

Bottom line

For now, our guidance to crews and aircraft operators is to follow whatever your national aviation authority prescribes in the first instance – and we may expect to see a US FAA KICZ Notam on the way in similar fashion to the EU ban announced this week.

Outside that, it's your choice as to whether to operate through Belarussian airspace, or not – but be aware of the difference between **politically motivated sanctions** (even if that motivation is highly justifiable) and **genuine airspace risk**.

In rushing to respond to this unusual hijacking of civil aviation protocols, we must be careful not to create another hijack in turn - the trustworthiness of conflict zone and airspace risk warnings.

Greece-ing the Turkey: The Aegean Dispute

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The dispute between Turkey and Greece is one we have mentioned before. Not because it was having a particularly big impact on aviation operations, but because of the vaguely amusing Notam battle they have been waging against each other for the last few years.

But what appears to be a rather silly conflict actually has a more serious side to it, so we thought we would take a little look at what is going on.

What are they arguing over?

This dispute is about what disputes always seem to be about – who owns some bit of land, or in this case, a Continental Shelf (so a bit of land that is submerged under several miles of Eastern Mediterranean Sea). Turkey want it because it is a treasure chest of energy resources, while Greece want it because, well, they reckon it was always theirs.

The dispute goes a bit “higher” than the continental shelf though. Like those annoying neighbours who keep pushing their fence backwards into your garden, so **Greece have decided that their airspace extends not the usual 6nm** (based off territorial waters), but 10nm. Turkey refuse to recognise those extra 4nm as Greek. Nor do ICAO who have a 1948 statute saying airspace must coincide with territorial water boundaries.

So we would say that's one:nil to Turkey, except for Greece's point that they actually laid claim to those extra 4nm way back in 1931 before ICAO came along with their statute. Plus, this isn't the only area Turkey has had disputes over, so maybe Greece have a bit of a point.

But do we care, or can we just let them keep bickering?

Well, the permanent Notam battle can be ignored with a simple filter that removes the likes of these from your Notam package:

However, that is not the only repercussion. Actually, all this makes for some messy airspace controlling because it impacts FIRs and with that, who controls military flight activity. This has led to a bunch of provocations from both sides, with them regularly sending military aircraft into the 4nm disputed bit just to annoy the other side. And this is a problem, because it often escalates with retaliations. In 1996, **Turkey claimed one of their aircraft had been shot down by a Greek fighter jet**, and in 2014 the number of Turkish incursions into Greek airspace rose to nearly 1,500.

Tensions flared up again in 2020 when Turkey finalised their purchase of Russian S-400 mobile surface-to-air missile system. Now, this wasn't specifically aimed at Greece, but it did go against NATO and US orders, resulting in big sanctions against Turkey.

Greece spent 2020 developing stronger defensive ties with their neighbouring countries, and at the start of this year, placed an order for 18 French Rafale fighter jets to pad out their Air Force.

A bit of a jam

Deliberate GPS Jamming is also a major issue in the Eastern Mediterranean and across Turkish airspace, adding to the list of threats commercial aircraft have to consider.

So is this a conflict to watch?

2020 was a tense year between the two nations, and 2021 seems unlikely to see much de-escalation. While direct conflict between the two will likely be prevented by neighbouring countries and the EU and NATO, the dispute is still simmering away.

For commercial flight operations, **the impact remains primarily in the Notam world**, but attention does need to be paid to **any temporary prohibited or restricted airspaces which might pop up** because of increased military activity in the region.

Additionally, Turkey is a large country and their airspace provides a major overflight route between Asia, the Middle East and Western Europe. Having **an awareness of the political tensions between the two countries is important**, particularly if routing to or from Greece, or carrying Greek nationals onboard, since this might compound your problems if you have to divert into a Turkish airport.