

ATC Farm-out must be prohibited

Mark Zee

14 April, 2021

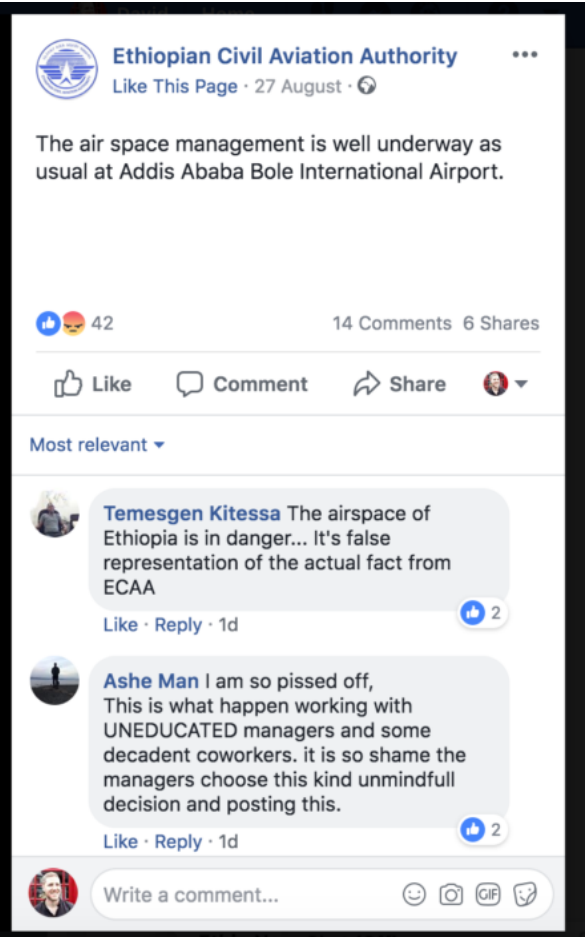
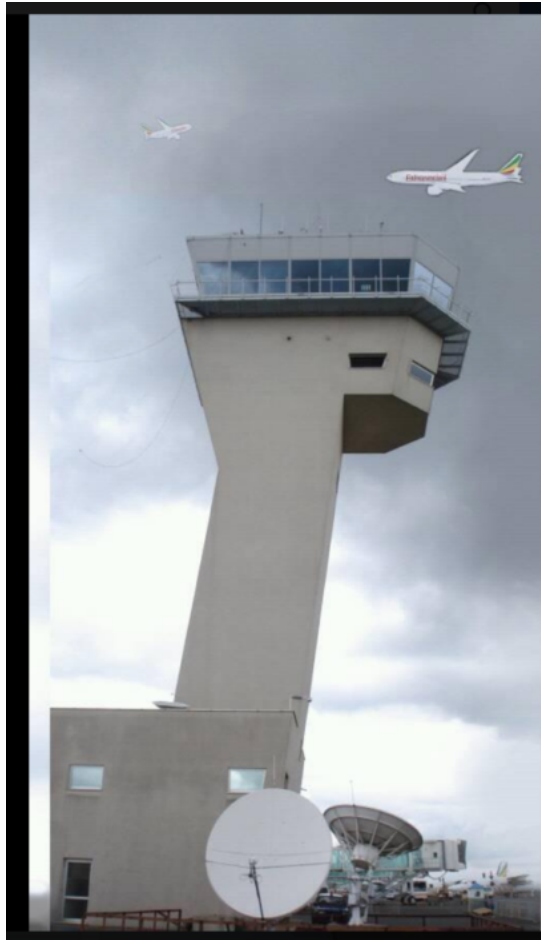


If you're overflying the Tirana FIR tonight, the Air Traffic Controller in whose hands the safety of your flight rests will be one of these three: a **Turkish controller**, who has just been drafted in and who has never seen the airspace before; or an **Albanian controller** who has been forced to work under huge duress, while colleagues remain in prison.

And if you think there will be a NOTAM to tell you about any of this, you're mistaken. Albania does not want you to know.

There are a plethora of troubling issues in the ongoing Albanian ATC dispute. Arresting workers for organizing industrial action is draconian and aggressive, and an approach discarded by nations that have moved beyond totalitarian regimes of the past. But the issue that presents the greatest risk to aircraft operations is the **farm-out of ATC service**: a practice whereby the ATC authority recruits foreign, untrained controllers in an attempt to break a strike.

The same scenario occurred in the Ethiopian ATC strike of 2018. The Ethiopia CAA recruited stop-gap controllers from Kenya, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and other countries, and at the same time, launched a PR campaign declaring that "everything is operating normally", including this bizarre attempt at Photoshopping a duo of Ethiopian Airlines aircraft onto an image of Addis Tower.



In the Ethiopian case, the cover-up belied the fact that the Air Traffic Control service was in tatters – many ATCO's were in prison, many were fired, and the idea that a busload of controllers from Sudan could somehow safely replace the local controllers was tantamount to attempted manslaughter on the part of the Civil Aviation Authority. Safety was well down the pecking order of motivating factors – commerce, politics, and thinly-veiled vengeance came first.

In Tirana, tonight, the situation is almost identical. Three Albanian controllers are in prison, and those at work in the Tirana ACC are there only because they have been forced onto position by their government. Albcontrol has clearly signalled its intent to draft in Turkish controllers to replace the unhappy domestic ones.

This tactic carries a profound danger that at first glance may not be obvious. If we cross to the other side of the microphone, and look at pilots, we could argue that a 737-rated pilot could fly from Adelaide to Melbourne as easily as they could fly from Dublin to London, and apart from some company procedures and airport familiarisations, that would be largely true. If a group of airline pilots go on strike, management could therefore replace them with a group of other airline pilots with the same type rating – who would earn the moniker of Strikebreaker (or worse). A deeply unpopular move, which happens from time to time, but not one that carries the same risk as attempting to do this with controllers.

Why? Because safe Air Traffic Control is predicated on deeply-learned local familiarity with the airspace, the terrain, the boundaries, and above all, how the traffic flows. This is why it takes six months, on average, for a controller trained in one country to re-qualify in another. For a newly-qualifying controller, that time line is closer to two years.

“OK, where are the mountains again?” is not a question you'd want to know was being asked on the floor of an Approach Control unit. But that is precisely the level of vague airspace acquaintance that a drafted-in controller, even one with thirty years experience in another unit, would have. It is simply not possible to provide a safe ATC service with a weeks training. Even more importantly, the normal time

required is based on the training relationship between student and trainer being supportive and co-operative. With the resentment that a Strike breaking controller would face, that cooperation would be entirely absent: the atmosphere will be hostile.

And so, it is a fundamental breach of trust for a sovereign nation to provide ATC service to foreign aircraft under the guise of “operations normal”, when such a catastrophically misguided attempt has been made to solve the dispute.

The relationship between the ATC provider (the state), and the customer (the foreign aircraft), is an extremely unusual one. There is no written contract, no KPI's, no audit of quality. There is nothing other than a sacrosanct, inherent commitment to safely separate aircraft, crew, and passengers flying over the state. International convention, not corporate agreement, dictates this foundational principle.

And so, **international convention must make it clear to countries and ATC authorities alike, that the practice of farming out ATC to untrained, unfamiliar controllers from other countries as a strike-breaking tactic is absolutely unacceptable.** Countries must find ways of solving domestic disputes without subjecting uninvolved, unaware pilots and passengers to high-risk scenarios such as this.

Organizations and agencies like CANSO, ICAO, and in this case, EASA, must ensure that this flawed and covertly dangerous pseudo-solution is placed firmly back under the rock it crawled out from.

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.



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.

The screenshot shows the SafeAirspace.net website interface. At the top left is the 'SAFE AIRSPACE' logo. To its right is the title 'Conflict Zone & Risk Database' with the subtitle 'All current warnings, in one place'. Below the title are three tabs: 'Updates' (highlighted in green), 'Alerts', and a search bar labeled 'Type a country'. To the right of the search bar are three risk level filters: 'Level 1' (red dot), 'Level 2' (orange dot), and 'Level 3' (yellow dot). The main content area on the left displays three alerts for Albania, all dated '14 Apr'. Each alert has a yellow header with the word 'Albania'. The first alert states: 'New warning for Albanian airspace.' The second and third alerts state: 'New IFATCA Press Release: Pilots should exercise extreme caution while operating in Albanian airspace (the LAAA/Tirana FIR) due to a heightened risk of degraded ATC services.' and 'New IFALPA Safety Bulletin: Pilots should exercise extreme caution while operating in Albanian airspace (the LAAA/Tirana FIR) due to a heightened risk of degraded ATC services.' respectively. On the right side of the interface is a world map with several countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia highlighted in yellow, orange, and red, indicating different risk levels.

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