



Editor's Note

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COMMERCIAL AIRCRAFT MUST NOT BECOME PAWNS IN A DIGITAL CHESS GAME

The sharp increase in GPS jamming incidents across Eastern Europe and other conflict zones since 2022 is being considered a new tactic of hybrid warfare by Russia.

The frequent use of these disruptions has prompted defense and aviation authorities, such as the EU Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) and the International Air Transport Association (IATA), to convene special workshops in 2024 to address the escalating threat.

The latest incident occurred just as we went to press for this issue when a plane carrying European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was hit by suspected Russian GPS jamming over Bulgaria on Sunday, September 1. The aircraft's GPS navigation system suddenly failed, reportedly due to suspected Russian interference. The interference happened as the plane was approaching Plovdiv International Airport.

Von der Leyen was on a regional defense tour and the aircraft was able to land safely at Plovdiv Airport. No passengers were harmed. The aircraft used ground-based navigation aids to land, and the flight did not need to be diverted. However, the navigation system was disabled by the interference, forcing the pilots to use backup methods, which some reports suggest included paper charts.

European and Bulgarian officials say they suspect the incident was caused by "blatant interference by Russia." The Kremlin was asked about the allegation by media and denied involvement. They said the information was "incorrect."

The European Commission confirmed that "GPS jamming" disrupted the flight just before landing, forcing the pilots to switch to paper charts and terrestrial navigation tools. Bulgarian authorities suspect the disruption came from Russian electronic warfare systems, part of a broader rise in satellite signal jamming

across Eastern Europe since 2022.

Von der Leyen was on a four-day tour of EU member states on the bloc's eastern-most region, including Poland, Bulgaria and Romania, to address concerns about Russian hybrid threats. During the trip, she referred to Russian President Vladimir Putin as a "predator" who must be kept in check. The European Commission stated that the incident would reinforce its commitment to boosting defense capabilities and supporting Ukraine. In response, Italy is reportedly considering keeping state flight paths secret.

GPS jamming incidents have become increasingly common in airspace near Russia and its ally Belarus since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Multiple European nations have reported such electronic jamming activities.

In June the EASA and the IATA published a comprehensive plan to mitigate the risks stemming from global navigation satellite system (GNSS) interference. The plan was part of the conclusions of a jointly-hosted workshop on the topic of GNSS interference.


EASA said after the workshop that given the continued rise in frequency of incidents of interference with GNSS signals, a broader and more coordinated approach will be needed. It suggested focusing on four key areas: improved information gathering, stronger prevention and mitigation measures, more effective use of infrastructure and airspace management, and enhanced coordination and preparedness among relevant agencies.

Reported incidents of interference with GNSS signals, also referred to as jamming and spoofing, have been increasing across Eastern Europe and the Middle East in recent years. Similar incidents have been reported in other locations globally. The initial response focused only on containing those GNSS

interference incidents.

"GNSS disruptions are evolving in terms of both frequency and complexity. We are no longer just containing GNSS interference — we must build resilience. The evolving nature of the threat demands a dynamic and ambitious action plan," said Jesper Rasmussen, EASA flight standards director. "Through collaboration with partners in the European Union and IATA, and by supporting the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), we are committed to keeping aviation safe, secure, and navigable."

Nick Careen, IATA senior vice president, operations, safety and security, said, "The number of global positioning system (GPS) signal loss events increased by 220% between 2021 and 2024 according to IATA's data from the Global Aviation Data Management Flight Data eXchange (GADM FDX). And with continued geopolitical tensions, it is difficult to see this trend reversing in the near term. IATA and EASA are working together to reinforce the redundancies that are built into the system, to keep flying safe. The next step is for ICAO to move these solutions forward with global alignment on standards, guidance, and reporting. This must command a high priority at the ICAO Assembly later this year. To stay ahead of the threat, aviation must act together and without delay."

The incident with von der Leyen underscores the growing concerns over civilian aviation vulnerability amid modern geopolitical tensions. EASA has warned GPS disruption has worsened dramatically since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with thousands of flights affected. Though Russia denies involvement, it is hard to ignore the pattern. As von der Leyen continues her tour, the European Commission says it will accelerate its efforts to counter hybrid threats. 

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