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Dutch Fighter Jets Intercept Russian Plane Over Baltic Sea

By The Moscow Times

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The Russian Air Force (RuAF) new Su-34 Fullback strike aircraft is seen in this Oct. 31, 2014 photo released by the Norwegian Air Force.

Two Dutch F16 fighter jets, part of a NATO force patrolling the skies above the Baltic states, intercepted a Russian Ilyushin transport aircraft flying near Estonian and Lithuanian airspace, the Netherlands said Thursday.

After the interception, which took place late on Wednesday, the Ilyushin flew off in the direction of the Russian city of Kaliningrad, the Dutch Defense Ministry said in a statement.

The exclave of Kaliningrad is sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania, both NATO members as are the other two Baltic states Estonia and Latvia.

The Dutch Defense Ministry said in a statement the Ilyushin had been flying in international airspace but had been intercepted when it approached the airspace of the two countries

without filing a flight plan.

It said the plane did not intrude into their airspace as an earlier ministry statement had said.

Russia's defense ministry also made clear the plane had remained in international airspace.

"The flight was made on a fixed route over the neutral waters of the Baltic Sea in accordance with international rules on the use of airspace," the state-owned RIA Novosti news agency quoted the ministry as saying.

Last month, NATO said it had conducted more than 100 intercepts of Russian aircraft this year, about three times as many as in 2013, amid sharply increased tensions between the West and Moscow over the Ukraine crisis.

The Western military alliance has recently reported increased levels of Russian military activity in the skies above the Baltic Sea. Last month, Norway scrambled F-16s to track four Russian bombers.

President Vladimir Putin has committed to reinvigorating Russia's armed forces, which had been undermined by the economic troubles that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. He denies any aggression towards NATO.

Members of the U.S.-led NATO alliance have stepped up their vigilance since the Ukraine crisis erupted earlier this year.

On Thursday the defense ministers of Britain, the three Baltic states and four Nordic countries — NATO members Norway and Denmark and neutral Finland and Sweden — agreed to step up cooperation on intelligence and air force training to counter Moscow's increased activity in northern Europe.

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