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Estonia and Allies Denounce 'Reckless' Russian Air Incursion

By AFP

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A MiG-31 fighter jet. **Wikicommons**

Three Russian MiG-31 fighters violated Estonian airspace over the Gulf of Finland on Friday, Estonia said, triggering complaints of a dangerous new provocation from the EU and NATO but a denial from Moscow.

Italian F-35 fighters attached to NATO's air defense support mission in the Baltic states were scrambled to intercept the Russian jets and warn them off, Estonian and Italian officials said, with alliance chief Mark Rutte praising the "quick and decisive response."

Sweden and Finland also scrambled rapid reaction aircraft, a spokesman for the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) told reporters.

Estonia immediately called for urgent talks with NATO allies, less than two weeks after Poland did the same after claiming an incursion by a wave of Russian drones.

The military alliance told AFP in Brussels that the talks could take place "at the start of next week."

The alleged Russian incursion came with tensions high on NATO's eastern border, after Warsaw last week complained that around 20 Russian drones overflew its territory — though the Kremlin denied targeting Poland.

"Three Russian fighter MiG-31 entered Estonian airspace in the Vaindloo Island area without permission, and remained there for approximately 12 minutes," the Estonian defense forces said.

"The fighter jets did not have flight plans, and their transponders were switched off. At the time of the airspace violation, the fighter jets did not have two-way radio communication with Estonian air traffic control."

NATO spokesperson Allison Hart called the event "yet another example of reckless Russian behavior and NATO's ability to respond."

In response, Russia's Defense Ministry said the MiGs were on a "scheduled flight" from Karelia, on the border with Finland, to an airfield in its Kaliningrad exclave, which is surrounded by Lithuania and Poland.

"During the flight, the Russian aircraft did not deviate from the agreed-upon route and did not violate Estonian airspace," a statement read, adding that the flight was over "neutral waters of the Baltic Sea, more than three kilometers from the island of Vaindloo."

'No accident'

Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal's announcement "to request NATO Article 4 consultations" over the "unacceptable" violation is the second time in under two weeks that a member country has invoked the clause.

Article 4 states that a NATO member can convene urgent talks when it feels its "territorial integrity, political independence or security" are at risk.

Warsaw invoked Article 4 after it shot down what it said were Russian drones on September 9. Romania complained of a similar incursion days later.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky — whose country is at war with Russia — on Friday accused Russia of deliberately expanding its "destabilizing activity" with the series of airspace violations in Poland, Romania and Estonia.

"As threats escalate, so too will our pressure," added European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, who earlier in the day had presented for EU member state approval a 19th package of sanctions targeting Moscow over the Ukraine war.

Italy assumed command of the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission — Operation Baltic Eagle III — on Aug. 1, with the Italian air force's F-35 aircraft taking responsibility for surveillance of Baltic airspace.

Russia has often tested Western air defenses as its invasion of Ukraine grinds on, but Estonia complained that the sorties have become more provocative in recent months.

"Russia has already violated Estonia's airspace four times this year, which in itself is unacceptable. But today's incursion... is unprecedentedly brazen," Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna said.

Readiness tested

"Russia's increasingly extensive testing of boundaries and growing aggressiveness must be met with a swift increase in political and economic pressure," he said.

Tsahkna said Russia's charge d'affaires in Estonia had been summoned to the foreign ministry to receive a formal complaint.

Earlier this month, Estonia complained that a Russian MI-8 helicopter had violated its airspace, also near the island of Vaindloo.

According to the Estonian defense forces, the helicopter entered the country's airspace for about four minutes without making contact with air traffic control.

It also did not have a flight plan, its transponder was turned off and it did not communicate with Estonian air traffic control. Similar incidents occurred on May 13 and June 22.

Last week, Poland and its Italian and Dutch NATO allies scrambled jets to intercept what it said was around 20 Russian drones prowling its airspace. Some of them were shot down.

The U.K., Germany and France announced plans to reinforce joint air patrols with more jets based on NATO's eastern flank.

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