Pilot fatigue flies in Europe unabated

New report shows pilots' experience of fatigue risk management unchanged since 2023

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Microsleeps in the cockpit, insufficient rest to prevent cumulative fatigue, extending flight duties beyond legal maximums: pilots report that the same deficiencies identified three years ago persist across European airlines – as a newly published report 'A fatigue survey of European Pilots - 2026' reveals.

Prepared by the aviation consultancy Baines Simmons and based on survey data from 7,200 European pilots, the report demonstrates that fatigue continues to be underreported across the industry, that airlines' reporting systems are often seen as neither effective nor trusted, and that a substantial share of pilots fly fatigued because of fear of a punitive reaction from their airline. Pilots experience fatigue risk management particularly negatively at low-cost and ACMI/wet-lease operators, while the report also highlights a need for (more) effective oversight by national aviation authorities. Ireland and Malta consistently feature in the bottom two (or three) ranks on most of the survey dimensions analysed in the report – and did so already in 2023. By contrast, Finland and the Netherlands sit well above other countries.

More than three in four pilots (76.8%) experienced at least one microsleep whilst operating an aircraft in the past four weeks, and 38.8% report that they usually or always lacked sufficient rest to prevent cumulative fatigue. Yet when asked what they usually do when they are unfit to fly due to fatigue, only 37.2% said they actually report unfit/fatigued, while 24.2% confirmed that they do not report and fly fatigued anyway. Furthermore, in their free-text comments, 38.2% of pilots report fear of punishment or retaliatory response from management to submitting a fatigue report, while others say they have been flying fatigued because of concern that management would respond negatively (46.9%), or they did not want to draw attention to themselves (44%).

"*If we are serious about managing the safety risks related to pilot fatigue, the numbers we see in this report – and the lack of any meaningful improvement over the past three years – are a clear wake-up call for airlines, authorities and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) that something must change in the way Europe deals with pilot fatigue,*" says **ECA President Capt. Tanja Harter**.

"*This 'fear factor' raises questions about the corporate safety culture at certain airlines and the impact this can have on safety, because no pilot should be flying when fatigued*," says **ECA Board Director Capt. Coen George**. "*When pilots are concerned about their career when reporting fatigue, they simply won't do so anymore. While this may keep an airline's fatigue statistics clean for the next authority inspection, it pushes the risk right back into the cockpit. And it makes the airline become blind as to the real extent of safety risks it carries and it needs to mitigate.*"

The report also identifies continued pressure around 'Commander's Discretion' (CD) which normally permits flight-duty extensions in exceptional circumstances. However, 38.3% of pilots

used it at least once in the past four weeks, and 15.2% did so twice or more. Furthermore, concerns about possible negative consequences when *refusing* to use CD have increased. A total of 69.1% of pilots expressed varying degrees of concern if they were to refuse to extend a flight duty, compared to 65.8% in 2023. Concern was highest among pilots at low-cost and ACMI/wet-lease operators and among airlines holding AOCs in Ireland and Malta, while it was lowest in Germany and the Netherlands.

"*Being pushed by your airline to extend a flight duty, to make up for delays or overly optimistic planning, or being reprimanded when refusing to extend are well-known phenomena at certain airlines. We have alerted aviation authorities multiple times about such pressures – which are clearly detrimental to our safety margins – but we still wait to see meaningful action to stop this,*" says **Capt. Coen George**. "*This is even more relevant as we know what the problems are and where they are concentrated.*"

Noting that the data shows that "*the implementation of safety culture and non-punitive CD process differs across AOC countries and operator types*", the report also stresses that "*the variation in the concern relating to refusing to use Commander's Discretion indicates a weakness in safety culture*". – While Europe has introduced the principle of Just Culture in aviation regulation as early as 2014, the report indicates that, at least when it comes to fatigue management, there seems to be a clear lack of commitment to safety culture principles with a number of European operators.

"*This survey captures how European pilots experience fatigue risk management in practice. It reflects pilots' first-hand accounts rather than a direct measure of risk or safety outcomes, which must be assessed through additional means, but the consistency of the findings over three years and the variation between countries and operator types show where operators and authorities can focus their efforts*," says **Ian Holder, Managing Director of Baines Simmons**. "*The results from countries such as Finland and the Netherlands show that a stronger reporting culture is achievable, and we hope this report supports continued improvement in aviation safety across Europe.*"

"*What matters now is that this report triggers changes in the way airlines manage their fatigue risks and national authorities oversee their operators,*" says **Capt. Tanja Harter**. "*This cannot be simply left to us – the pilots – to manage, while we are on the flight deck and expected to bring our passengers safely to their destination. This report provides all the data needed to repair Europe's broken fatigue reporting, to strengthen EASA regulations to ensure airlines proactively manage their fatigue risks, and to enforce once and for all the requirement for non-punitive fatigue reporting and use of Commander's Discretion to extend a flight. Waiting for another three years to discover that nothing has changed, is simply not an option. We place high hopes into EASA to take the lead on this. The problems are identified, solutions are there, and we as the European pilot community are ready to contribute. What is needed now is the political will to act.*"

The Baines Simmons report comes at a time when EASA is finalising its 'Best Intervention Strategy on Aircrew Fatigue', setting out its priorities for the coming years. EASA's own scientific research has already provided recommendations for amendments to its Flight Time Limitation regulations. The report also confirms the trends identified in EASA's recent 'Article 89' report (on the safety impact of socio-economic factors) which found that aircrew fatigue was the '*clearest and most internally consistent signal across the evidence base'*, with fatigue being the fastest growing and largest safety-precursor in the ECR occurrence database, present in almost 60% of safety-precursor related occurrences (2024).

– ENDS –

Note to editors:

Technical Notes: The Baines Simmons report is based on data collected through a European-wide, ECA promoted survey among airline pilots, running from 4 Aug.–7 Sept. 2026, after a first such report in Sept. 2023. Most questions used a 4-week 'look-back' period, thereby capturing the recent experience of pilots across Europe during the busy summer period. Participation in the online survey was voluntary, whilst the questions – which had been designed in collaboration between ECA and Baines Simmons – were mostly mandatory. The survey measures pilots' own experience; it is not a measure of risk or safety outcomes. The analysis contained within the report was undertaken by Baines Simmons, as was the drawing of conclusions and recommendations. It aims to facilitate ongoing enhancements in fatigue risk management at European airlines, as well as strengthening the safety oversight of both national and European authorities, while supporting EASA's goal of promoting best practices and standardisation among European nations. The report does not name or assess any individual operator.

About ECA: ECA is the representative body of over 44,000 pilots from across Europe, striving for the highest levels of aviation safety and fostering social rights and quality employment for pilots in Europe.

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