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## Foreign pilots working in Canada are not being vetted

A foreign pilot entering Canada with an appropriate work permit must obtain a 'foreign licence validation certificate' before they can fly for a Canadian carrier. This is supposed to indicate that his or her foreign flight crew licences have been validated by the regulator. But nothing could be further from the truth.



Sunwing pilot Miroslav Gronych, a 37-year-old Slovakian national, is accused of having care and control of an aircraft while impaired and with having a blood-alcohol level above .08. (SUPPLIED PHOTO)

By **GREG MCCONNELL**

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As winter sets in many Canadians are longing for a break from the cold on some southern beach.

But after a Slovakian pilot working for the holiday charter airline Sunwing was charged earlier this month with being impaired in the cockpit before take off, no one could blame sun seekers for having doubts and even concerns about making the trip.

It is possible the pilot in question had been disciplined for similar behaviour back home. He might even have had his licence to fly suspended. It is also possible he has an unblemished record.

Because Canada's aviation safety regulator, Transport Canada, isn't checking we just don't know much about the pilots who are routinely brought from other countries to work for Canadian air operators. This places Canada offside with the practices of other countries who follow much stricter practices.

For example, the International Civil Aviation Organization that Canada belongs to requires the licencing authority — that would be Transport Canada — to “confirm the validity of the other Contracting State's licence before issuing the authorization.” Instead of meeting this international requirement, Canada leaves it up to the airline to verify the validity of the foreign licence and medical clearances.

The Americans do not permit the validation of foreign licences for commercial purposes at all. Foreign licenced pilots in the United States are required to obtain appropriately issued FAA pilot licences and medical certificates and have the legal right to work in the United States.

European countries meet the international requirement of checking themselves instead of giving that responsibility to an airline company as Canada does.

It is true that a foreign pilot entering Canada with an appropriate work permit must obtain a “foreign licence validation certificate” or FLVC from Transport Canada before they can fly for a Canadian carrier. This is supposed to indicate that his or her foreign flight crew licences have been validated by the regulator.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact, Transport Canada specifically instructs its inspection staff not to check. Instead, they are directed to rely upon assurances from the Canadian airline that the foreign pilots they want to hire have clean records, are licenced by the foreign country, are fit to fly, and have all of the requirements to meet Canadian pilot standards.

To quote from the regulator's instruction to its inspection staff:

(Transport Canada) Licencing staff are not required to request licence verification unless there are concerns over the authenticity or validity of the documents present. It is the responsibility of the air operator to verify that each licence holder is properly qualified and holds an appropriate and valid licence and medical certificate.”

The only problem with this approach is that national aviation authorities around the world talk to each other but rarely do they release personal details about the pilots it licences to companies or individuals. So, it is virtually impossible for a company like Sunwing to verify anything about the foreign pilots they bring to Canada.

Transport Canada has adopted a “see nothing, say nothing” policy that could have serious if not deadly consequences for Canadian travellers, in direct violation of international standards that require Transport Canada to validate the licences of foreign pilots.

Canadians have every right to be surprised.

Even though Transport Canada has some information about Foreign Licence Validation Certificates on its website, what is posted has been scrubbed clean of the direction to its inspection staff to accept the word of the airline without verification that everything is in order with the foreign pilot in question.

Transport Canada once conducted the kinds of checks that are needed to verify that foreign pilots are licenced, qualified and medically fit to fly to Canadian standards. But cuts to safety budgets and inspection staff make that a distant memory.

Transport Minister Marc Garneau is rightly concerned. This Sunwing flight could have ended tragically. The workshop with industry stakeholders he is planning for the spring as a result of this incident is one modest initiative.

But, what’s really needed is for Transport Canada to step up to its public interest responsibilities and legal safety obligations.

*Greg McConnell is national chair of the Canadian Federal Pilots Association, which represents the licenced pilots who work for Transport Canada as aviation inspectors.*

***Correction - February 6, 2017:*** This article was edited from a previous version that misstated the ethnicity of Sunwing pilot Miroslav Gronych.

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