Challenges facing single European sky are 'political' in nature

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Marian-Jean Marinescu calls for member states, associations and stakeholders to find common ground for discussion.

The free circulation of persons and goods is by far the most valuable achievement of the European Union. Unfortunately, this accomplishment is only partially valid in the sky. People and goods can now fly all over Europe, but not on the shortest routes. This translates into longer flights, significant delays, higher fuel consumption, a considerable environmental footprint, all leading to an unnecessary financial burden for both passengers and the industry.

There have been countless discussions over these past years about a borderless European sky and the actions needed to accomplish it. Although it has shown great promise, the second package of the single European sky (SES) has not met all expectations. The member states' failure to fulfil the 2012 deadline for establishing functional airspace blocs (FABs) is proof of that.

In an article published earlier this year, I mentioned some of the main problems identified in
implementing the SES, as well as the action paths the European commission could pursue to tackle and solve these stringent issues. I suggested a new legislation, based on a more centralised approach, instead of infringements; clear paths to implement the SES, including stepping over the FABs concept.

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In the SES II+ proposal published this summer, the European commission acknowledged the need to further improve the performance scheme, and I welcome the fact that the commission shows commitment towards a customer-oriented focus. As representatives of the European citizens, it is our responsibility to make sure that the SES is completed, for their benefit and in the best possible conditions. On the other hand, it is not encouraging seeing that some member states are reluctant to cooperate, thus delaying the full rollout of the SES and maintaining the status quo, despite the current organisation of Europe's air navigation being against the best interests of their citizens.

I think that we have to be open and admit that the obstacles in implementing the SES are not technical, but political and social in their nature. We have the required technical developments, and there are assessments showing what action is needed to reach our goal. Even at its current level, which is not ambitious enough in my opinion, the progress achieved with regard to FABs shows that the technical solutions are already there and that they could easily be implemented. There are no reasons of concern about safety either. Combined, the implementation of the SES II package and the efforts made by all industry stakeholders secure a high level of safety. And let us not forget about SES air traffic management research (SESAR), whose deployment should start in 2014. If SESAR is deployed on the actual traffic control architecture, it will be a big waste of money, money taken from national budgets. So, instead of keeping the money in the citizens' pockets by decreasing the costs and the tickets' prices through SES, we would take the money from the citizens, through buying unnecessary equipment.

Politically, it may be difficult to accept the control of a national airspace by an external air traffic control system. But this will happen for sure in the future. Why wait for it to happen tomorrow and not today? In order to have a functional single European sky, we need to reach a political agreement. Otherwise, Europe's industry will continue to lag behind, and all the problems resulting from not having a comprehensive approach will persist, affecting people and the industry, irrespective of whether they are in favour or against the proposal.

On 16 September, I attended the informal meeting of EU transport ministers on the single European sky, held in Vilnius. Those showing reluctance towards the SES II+ proposal channelled their arguments in two directions: requests for more time to implement the SES II package and matters related to the organisation of national administration. My opinion is that we have to focus on the main scope, direct routes and a new traffic control organisation, based on efficiency and not on national borders. There were opinions in this line, supporting the main objectives of SES: improving air safety, increasing air space capacity, and reducing the cost of travelling together with its negative environmental impact.

This is encouraging. It is our duty, the European parliament's, the council's, and of all relevant stakeholders, to work together in finding the best compromise, for the benefit of the European citizens. Maybe the commission's proposal is not perfect, maybe the opinions of all stakeholders, associations, and governments are not perfect either, but we do have common goals and a common ground for discussion.
About the author

Marian-Jean Marinescu is parliament’s rapporteur on the implementation of the single European sky

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