

Buckle up, turbulence ahead

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Opinion

Despite the growth of Europe's aviation sector, disruptive technologies, carbon emissions and lack of capacity will provide challenges for the new European Commission and Parliament



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Since the creation of the EU's internal aviation market in 1992, there has been a revolution in air travel within Europe. According to European Commission figures, in 1993 360 million people passed through Europe's airports. By 2015 this figure had jumped to 918 million. The sector supports 8.8 million jobs and contributes over €621bn to the EU economy. Aviation is also important for SMEs and tourism. For every €1 spent in the aviation sector, €3 is generated for the economy and for every new job in aviation, three more are created in related industries.

Despite its growth, the sector is also facing many challenges. European Regions Airline Association

(ERA) Director General Montserrat Barriga says, “The European air traffic management (ATM) system is currently creaking from a lack of capacity, growing delays, increased emissions and excessive costs.”

Though EU Member States have set new air traffic performance targets, Barriga believes these do not incentivise Europe’s air navigation services to improve performance or provide the extra airspace it desperately needs. According to Barriga, “It will reward those that perform poorly and, in the process, frustrate those [air navigation services] that have delivered.” The ERA is calling for the next Commission to urgently set new ambitious and sustainable performance targets for the ATM system.

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Similarly, with a new Parliament being elected, Airlines for Europe, (A4E) Managing Director Thomas Reynaert, says, “the incoming new EU leadership will be decisive in shaping the future of air travel in Europe.” A4E, which represents Europe’s largest airlines, is also worried about the current political climate where the free movement of people is being questioned.

“At a time when there is doubt over the benefits of European integration and with growing concerns about mobility, connectivity and sustainability, A4E is issuing an urgent call for EU political leaders to make aviation policy a key priority for the next five years.”

“This urgency cannot be ignored and be left to wishful thinking,” he added. More clearly needs to be done to optimise the use of European airspace and ensure that passengers’ travel plans are not disrupted. Another key priority is the implementation of the Single European Sky initiative by Member States. Reynaert believes it will deliver an immediate 10 percent reduction in CO2 emissions.

“The European air traffic management (ATM) system is currently creaking from a lack of capacity, growing delays, increased emissions and excessive costs” **European Regions Airline Association (ERA) Director General, Montserrat Barriga**

With air passenger numbers expected to increase, he wants the EU and Members States to act now. “Wishful thinking will not enable the more than 2 billion passengers projected to be flying in Europe in 2040 to benefit from efficient air navigation services,” he added.

The completion of the single market in a sustainable manner - as well as the industry’s move away from fossil fuels - are his members’ top priorities. Reynaert stresses that A4E is committed to “working constructively with all stakeholders involved to deliver a future aviation market which is safe, efficient, competitive and sustainable.”

Along with improvements in ATM, Airlines International Representation in Europe (AIRE) Director

General Sylviane Lust underlined how airport charges represent a very high percentage of an airline's operating costs and are constantly increasing.

She pointed out that the airport sector was missing a proper legal framework to address the significant market power that airports have, adding, "due to the inherent lack of competition in this sub-sector, we consider that the only effective legal tool would be a robust European economic regulation of airports."

In Europe, where air traffic control is managed at a national level, the Commission recognises there is a growing problem with flight delays. In a recent report it compared air traffic management in the US to Europe and found that, in 2017 despite the US dealing with almost 50 percent more flights (15.3m in the US versus 10.4m in Europe), the total number of delayed flights in Europe was 387,000 vs 258,000 in the US.

The Civil Air Navigation Services Organisation's (CANSO) Director for European Affairs Tanja Groboteck accepts that there is a problem. "CANSO and its air navigation service provider (ANSP) members are working hard to improve flight efficiency and reduce delays across Europe."

"The incoming new EU leadership will be decisive in shaping the future of air travel in Europe" **Airlines for Europe (A4E) Managing Director, Thomas Reynaert**

CANSO, which represents air traffic controllers globally, is introducing a number of measures to improve air traffic flow management and ensure available capacity is used effectively, such as 'collaborative decision-making', which involves airlines, airports, and ATM systems sharing information and coordinating actions.

Groboteck said, "ANSPs are also taking a more Europe-wide, rather than a national approach to managing traffic; and introducing 'free-route airspace' which allows planes to fly the most optimal, carbon-efficient routes."

She also believes new technologies such as digitisation, automation and artificial intelligence can help improve airspace efficiency and capacity.

The CANSO Director also wants the EU to play its part in improving ATM systems by developing a strategic approach for shaping the European ATM system so that it can meet future industry challenges. However, she stresses, "It is vital the EU involves the industry and local regulators when developing these ideas into realistic plans."

Another contributing factor towards growing delays has been the poor industrial relations within the ATM sector. According to EUROCONTROL the intergovernmental agency that deals with ATM systems in Europe - in 2018 39,000 flights, around 30 percent of the total en-route delays in May alone, were caused by strikes. PriceWaterhouseCoopers calculated the economic cost of ATC strikes in the EU between 2010-2017 was €13.4bn.

"Amid protectionism and political fragmentation, the EU must continue to champion free trade in Europe and beyond" **Airbus CEO Guillaume Faury**

European Air Traffic Controllers' Union (ATCEUC) president Volker Dick, says to reduce delays, "All the stakeholders including staff representatives have to be around the table to share their expertise and

experience so common positions and solutions can be reached.”

He continues, “Social dialogue is vital, it is the foundation for improving our members’ and other staff organisations’ involvement in a more collaborative and productive environment.”

According to the union leader, people working in ATM will see significant and fundamental changes in the coming years, including the introduction of ‘disruptive’ technologies. However, despite innovations, he stresses that, “this is a human skill-based industry, requiring high levels of competence from its staff, and will become even more demanding. Therefore, preparing staff for these future challenges will be of primary concern.”

Dick also points out that “a more data-oriented industry will demand closer cooperation on a daily basis.” He ultimately believes, if properly conducted, good working relations could be the foundation for building an “undisrupted flow of air traffic” over Europe.

It is not only ATM systems that will see the introduction of major technological innovations. Airbus CEO Guillaume Faury points out that the aerospace industry “stands on the cusp of a technological revolution: digital technology, autonomous flight, artificial intelligence and electrification will transform the way aircraft are designed, manufactured, flown and maintained.”

The head of Europe’s largest aviation manufacturing company wants to see European aerospace take the lead in this digital revolution, and the transition to a more sustainable aviation sector.

Faury said, “The EU’s flagship innovation programmes are well placed to nurture the radical technologies that will allow Europe to reaffirm its aerospace leadership for decades to come.” “To prosper in this changing world, Airbus needs the support of the EU now more than ever.”

But with US President Donald Trump threatening a trade war with the EU and the ongoing WTO dispute with Boeing, he warned, “Amid protectionism and political fragmentation, the EU must continue to champion free trade in Europe and beyond.”

As Europe’s biggest exporter of aerospace products, Faury is calling on the EU to recognise the geopolitical environment in which the global aviation industry trades. “The sector’s strategic significance means the EU’s ability to project a strong, united voice has a direct bearing on Europe’s future.”

Meanwhile Aerospace and Defence Industries Association of Europe (ASD) secretary general Jan Pie, wants to see the EU establish a civil aeronautical industry strategy “To spur all European actors into action regarding the challenges that face the sector.”

Also recognising the current political challenges in the EU, Pie calls for a post-Brexit agreement that will consider the highly integrated nature of manufacturing. He also wants the EU to support innovation to deliver environmental sustainability, growth and job creation through flagship programmes such as Clean Sky and SESAR Joint Undertaking.

The EU also needs to raise safety levels across Europe and develop a strategy to support skills in aeronautics, stresses Pie. “As a key component of Europe’s economy, this high-tech sector needs the support of the EU more than ever to provide a comprehensive approach.”

However, the aviation sector will need to react to the growing concerns surrounding the climate crisis. As Transport & Environment Aviation Manager Andrew Murphy points out, “with emissions having grown 26 percent over the past five years, faster than any other sector, aviation is Europe’s biggest climate change failure.”

The environmental campaigner is calling on the EU and the aviation sector to reset its climate change policies. “We’ve seen an upsurge in citizens demanding stronger measures to cut aircraft emissions, starting with taxing kerosene, which airlines are currently exempt from paying.” Transport & Environment is calling on newly-elected MEPs, “To channel this demand into action ... This starts with treating aviation like any other sector - one that needs to bring its emissions to zero. The drive to cut emissions has to come from the EU, with support for new fuels and effective carbon pricing.”

He added, “The previous Parliament too often put its hopes in the archaic and ineffective global process known as the International Civil Aviation Organization, but we can’t afford to waste yet another five years.”

About the author

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