

## Prepare for lift off

Written by Marian-Jean Marinescu on 21 June 2019 in Opinion  
Opinion

The solutions to tackling capacity issues in Europe's aviation sector have already been identified; the next step must be urgent implementation, says Marian-Jean Marinescu



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The most critical challenge the aviation industry is facing is lack of capacity, both in the air and on the ground. Last year's data on flight delays and the problems facing passengers show the urgent need to update the EU's Air Traffic Management (ATM) system.

The European Commission's proposed aviation strategy included two pages on implementing the Single European Sky (SES). As I said at the time, it would have been enough to say that the Commission will make efforts to facilitate the negotiation of the SES2+ file currently blocked in the Council. Nothing has happened since; the file remains blocked.

In spite of the promises, the Council and Commission did not move. Recognising this stalemate over SES and realising that nothing would happen, in 2016 I proposed the Pilot Project “The future architecture of the European airspace”, which was approved by the European Parliament.

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It required much effort, but after a year’s delay, I convinced the Commission to begin. SESAR, in collaboration with the Network Manager, delivered the Airspace Architecture Study (AAS) in March this year. In autumn 2018, the Commission established the ‘Wise Persons Group’ (WPG). Based on the study’s preliminary conclusions, the WPG organised a wide-ranging consultation covering all stakeholders.

The results were delivered to Commissioner Violeta Bulc on 15 April, and stated that “the airspace architecture study proposes a progressive transition strategy towards the Single European Airspace System (SEAS) in three five-year periods, while building on known good practices and quick wins, as well as existing initiatives such as SESAR. The aim is to enable progressively additional capacity in order to cope with the significant growth in traffic, while maintaining safety, improving flight efficiency and reducing environmental impact.”

To initiate the transition to a SEAS, it made the following three recommendations; launch an airspace reconfiguration programme supported by an operational excellence programme to achieve quick wins; realise the defragmentation of European skies through virtualisation and the free flow of data among trusted users; create a legal and financial framework that rewards early movers.

“Regional airport development is the solution to lack of capacity on the ground, as the main hubs become congested and building new infrastructure is increasingly difficult”

The AAS is proposing a transition strategy until 2025 that will solve real problems, particularly in the summer period. It predicts an increase in capacity of more than 20 percent. Its airspace optimisation design was developed using the methodology and criteria described in the European Route Network Improvement Plan.

The definition of the sector groups was based on an optimised airspace structure, integrating all the airspace components including Free Route Aerospace (FRA), route network, supporting sectorisation and multiple route options. It can also be adapted to evolving future military requirements.

The study also points out that the total number of sectors resulting from the redesign is slightly less than the number of sectors operated simultaneously today. With these sectors, the traffic increases up to 2025 can be handled at a delay per flight of approximately 0.45-0.5 minutes per flight. The measures to be introduced after 2025 will increase airspace capacity by more than 50 percent by 2035.

The measures envisaged by AAS for the transition strategy up to 2025 can be based on current EU legislation, (EU) 2019/123, which lays down detailed rules for implementing ATM network functions. Article 3 of the mentioned regulation states that “Operational stakeholders and the Network Manager, within the limits of their respective responsibilities, shall plan, design, operate and monitor the network components ... 1 in accordance with the Network Strategy Plan and the Network Operations Plan ... and the achievement of the local and Union-wide performance targets as set out in the performance scheme.”

The WPG endorsed the AAS proposals and provided ten recommendations for implementation. The study states that some of these can be implemented without changes to the existing legislative or regulatory framework. Where that is the case, we advocate acting expeditiously.

*“Last year’s data on flight delays and the problems facing passengers show the urgent need to update the EU’s Air Traffic Management system”*

The WPG also proposed an indicative roadmap for how the recommendations may be implemented. It recommends that the European Commission take the lead and responsibility for advancing this. Both AAS and WPG Report were presented to the Commission and, in my opinion, a rapid response is required.

The Commission has, at this moment, all the tools it needs to start the measures for significantly improving the response to traffic increases. Indeed, I believe that there is no obstacle for the Commission in providing a clear mandate to the Network Manager to implement the recommendations of both AAS and WPG Reports.

I think that regional airport development is the solution to lack of capacity on the ground, as the main hubs become congested and building new infrastructure increasingly difficult. The regional airports can take over some of the intra-European flights and will bring big benefits for European mobility. The European Commission should take a look at the regional airport regulations in order to improve the conditions for local administrations aid.

## **About the author**

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