

Aviation strategy is flying high

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Opinion

The Aviation Strategy may not yet have resolved all the issues for the sector, but it has laid the essential groundwork for future success, writes Violeta Bulc



Violeta Bulc | *Photo credit: Bea Uhart*

The years since the launch of the Aviation Strategy for Europe in 2015 have been beneficial for European aviation. Air transport in Europe is safer than ever before and offers better connectivity for the travelling public. It is a perfect time to look back on what our Strategy has achieved and to take a fresh look at present and future challenges.

When we launched our Strategy, we had two clear objectives: a clear roadmap and predictability for the industry on our priorities. From the outset we wanted to be inclusive, for the aviation sector as well as with all stakeholders.

Almost four years later, the Strategy has clearly not resolved all the sector's problems. However, we have delivered on some of the key components of a regulatory framework.

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First, we have revised the legal framework regulating aviation safety, with rules that provide certainty and will be fit for the future, including a clear legal framework for drones.

Second, we have shown how Europe can make a difference at a global level in the fight against climate change by promoting the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA).

We have finalised negotiations with Qatar, Tunisia, Armenia and China, negotiations with the ASEAN region and Japan are nearing completion, while those with Turkey, Azerbaijan and Oman continue.

We continue to enjoy the benefits of existing agreements with the US, Canada, Switzerland, Israel, Jordan, Georgia, Morocco and Moldova. They have meant both an additional 500 flights connecting Europe to the world as well as lower airfares.

To strengthen cooperation with local authorities and industry and facilitate the exchange of information and implement agreements, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) has opened international offices in Washington, Beijing, Montreal and Singapore.

“Air transport in Europe is safer than ever before and offers better connectivity for the travelling public”

We have also adopted new rules to create a level playing field for EU airlines to compete with non-EU carriers. There is still a lot to do. Since we designed the Strategy, air traffic has grown by 20 percent.

The task of increasing capacity in the air and on the ground is now pressing; sadly summer 2019 is likely to have similar, perhaps greater, disruption than summer 2018.

We need greater infrastructure investment at national level, and we are currently investigating how to make our airport charges, slot allocation and broader internal market rules more efficient to encourage the 3Cs: capacity, competition and connectivity.

I will pursue these topics until the end of my mandate. We also need to overcome Air Traffic Management (ATM) constraints.

The results of the Airspace Architecture Study highlighted the importance of large-scale ATM data sharing in a more digitised system. We agreed on performance targets for the next five years with

the Member States, which is a milestone in addressing delays, avoidable CO2 emissions and costs for passengers.

The Commission also asked an expert group for their views on how best to offer additional flexible, scalable and sustainable ATM capacity while ensuring resilience, safety and security.

Their advice has engaged stakeholders and we will sustain discussions aiming for widespread buy-in. This would send an important signal to the incoming European Parliament and Commission on the importance of implementing the recommendations.

“But it is not enough; for the future of the planet, we simply have to make aviation more sustainable”

Of course, many challenges remain; I highlight two in particular. First, technology and digitisation. Data is transforming how EU citizens want to travel. Given the speed at which digital technologies advance, industry needs to embrace this. Second, sustainability and decarbonisation.

We all know that aviation emissions are growing rapidly, both internationally and in the EU. As other sectors rapidly decarbonise, pressure on air transport will mount; public acceptance will be essential for aviation to continue to flourish.

CO2 emissions from flying are currently twice as high as they were in the 1990s. The recent Aviation Environment Report indicated relative improvements, for example in noise and fuel consumption. However, aviation’s overall negative impact on climate, noise and air quality continues to grow as air traffic volumes increase.

The EU’s toolkit for addressing emissions includes ATM, R&D, innovation, and alternative fuels. Our Single European Sky policy aims to triple capacity, halve ATM costs and reduce environmental impact by 10 percent. Market-based measures can also help cap and reduce emissions - this is why we signed up to CORSIA.

New aircraft noise standards came into force in 2018, while aeroplane CO2 and engine particulate matter standards will follow in 2020. NOx emissions standards are also in place. We really are tackling environmental impact head-on.

But it is not enough; for the future of the planet, we simply have to make aviation more sustainable. I hear some voices calling for an environmental tax. However, taxation is a national competence.

The energy tax directive only provides a harmonised framework and the Council to date has rejected the Commission’s reform proposals.

It will be for the incoming Commission to decide whether or not taxation is the right way to reduce aviation’s environmental footprint. Personally, I simply recommend keeping our eyes fixed on the target - cleaner aviation and at the same time keeping an open mind on how to do it.

About the author

Violeta Bulc is European Commissioner for Transport

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