



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

**COTER-VII/010**

**145th plenary session, 30 June-2 July 2021**

## **OPINION**

### **The future of regional airports – Challenges and opportunities**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- points out the particularly worrying situation of regional airports (i.e. airports that are not airports hubs and whose main catchment area is not the capital); faced with sharp drops in revenues (-68.8% in 2020) and in air traffic (up to 95%), 193 airports were facing insolvency in October 2020; calls on the European Commission to classify airports;
- reminds the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy, aiming at a 90% reduction in transport CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 2050; provides recommendations to airports to mitigate their emission (e.g. incentivise new fuel, modulate airline's charges) and stresses the role of local and regional authorities, which often own or manage regional airports;
- stresses the need to deepen integration between transport modes, particularly air and rail (e.g. by introducing combined air-rail tickets); in the long term, it should be considered whether stopping short-distance flights is appropriate;
- recognises that regions' development depends to a large extent on the quality of their connectivity; regional airports play a prominent role in EU territorial cohesion, even more so in the case of archipelagos, sparsely populated, peripheral, outermost or less developed regions, when they lack other convenient and environmentally friendly means of transport; they also form an especially crucial element of critical infrastructure, vital for the security of a country and its citizens;
- calls on the European Commission to develop more flexible and effective public aid rules to provide regional airports with financial assistance in line with the relevant ERDF and RRF provisions in peripheral, island or outermost or less developed regions where a more efficient and sustainable alternative does not exist; small regional airports, not in competition with other airports and with an annual traffic of up to 1 million passengers should be exempted from state aid notification;
- urges the allocation of EU funds to the development of safety, security, innovation and digitalisation of airports as well as of research and development in particular towards noise and emissions reduction; public investments in regional airports should comply with the objectives of the European Green Deal and the principle "no harm for the environment."

Rapporteur

Władysław Ortyl (ECR/PL), President of the Podkarpackie Region

**Opinion of the Commission for European Committee of the Regions –  
The future of regional airports – Challenges and opportunities**

**I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

*The state of play of regional airports*

1. underlines that there is no commonly agreed definition at EU level for the term "regional airport". For the purpose of this opinion, it is understood that this term refers to airports that are not airport hubs and whose main catchment area is not the capital of the country concerned. The term should, however, be clarified by the European Commission on the basis of criteria such as the type of connections offered, the number of passengers and the number of connections to other airports. Therefore, the Committee calls on the European Commission to establish criteria defining the different categories of regional airports (those in specific peripheral, island, outermost or less developed regions), and the funding rules and competition policy that should be applied to these categories;
2. points out that the aviation sector has been one of the worst affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the situation facing regional airports is particularly worrying. More than 6 000 routes which were served from Europe's airports in 2019 were still not restored nine months into the COVID-19 crisis<sup>1</sup>. Smaller regional airports have recorded the greatest decline in direct flight connections, particularly in passenger flights. For example, Treviso (Italy) lost 95% of its connections, Vaasa (Finland) 91%, Quimper (France) 87%, and Burgas (Bulgaria) 82%, however, Europe's major cargo airports, e.g. Liège (Belgium) saw an increase in cargo flights of 10.7%;
3. notes that, according to estimates by organisations such as Eurocontrol<sup>2</sup>, in 2020 airlines, airports and air navigation service providers made net losses of EUR 56.2 billion, passenger numbers fell by 1.7 billion, the number of flights was down by 6.1 million (often falling by 50% at best) and there were 191 000 direct job losses in Europe. ACI estimates<sup>3</sup> that the sudden drop in passenger traffic significantly reduced the revenues of European airports in 2020 by about EUR 33.6 billion (-68.8%); Eurocontrol predicted that in the most optimistic scenario, air traffic would return to 2019 levels in 2024, and in the worst-case scenario in 2029;
4. notes that, according to ACI Europe's analysis, in the medium-term, airports may lose a further EUR 25 billion in revenues in 2021 compared to 2019;
5. highlights that the sharp drop in revenues has put some airports in such a difficult position that they risk insolvency without external support. In October 2020, as many as 193 airports in

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<sup>1</sup> Airports Council International (ACI) – Airport Industry Connectivity Report.

<sup>2</sup> EUROCONTROL Think Paper #8 – Impact of COVID-19 on European Aviation in 2020 and Outlook 2021.

<sup>3</sup> ACI Advisory Bulletin: The impact of COVID-19 on the airport business, 8 December 2020.

Europe were facing insolvency in the coming months<sup>4</sup>. These are mainly regional airports serving local communities. Together, they account for 277 000 jobs and generate EUR 12.4 billion of GDP. Their bankruptcy would have a dramatic impact on employment and the economies of the regions where they are located;

### *Linking aviation to the European Green Deal*

6. notes that the European Commission has set out its vision for the decarbonisation of aviation in its Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy<sup>5</sup>, the result of which should be a 90% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions relating to transport by 2050. Aviation and airports have to help meet the European Union's decarbonisation objectives. The European Green Deal emphasises that air quality should be improved near airports by tackling the emissions of pollutants by aeroplanes and airport operations, including by gradually increasing the share of alternative fuels that are climate-neutral, becoming multimodal mobility hubs and creating zero-emission airports. Regional airports could be ideal pioneers of green innovation, as their inherent characteristics include being smaller, more flexible, and more adaptable to newer, greener types of aircraft;
7. stresses that, owing to the additional costs of island location, building infrastructure to convert to zero-emission airports on islands will be much more costly than the same type of project in a region on the mainland; calls on the Member States to ensure specific financial support for regional authorities and/or companies to promote the shift towards zero-emissions airports on islands;
8. notes that airports are unevenly distributed across Member States and regions. In some regions, like the Benelux countries, Germany or Northern Italy, they are very densely distributed, in others, like Central Eastern Europe, relatively very few regional airports are operating. This encapsulates a broader problem of inequity in the access to transport, both for citizens living and businesses based outside the centrally located areas of the European Union; Steps should therefore be taken to reduce these disparities and reduce the number of regions without a regional airport;
9. notes that aviation is the second biggest source of transport-related greenhouse gas emissions after road transport and also has an impact on the climate through the release of non-CO<sub>2</sub> elements (e.g. water vapour and sulphate at high altitudes). These effects are estimated to be as significant as those of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions alone<sup>6</sup>. Despite the fact that fuel efficiency has improved recently, the environmental benefits have been offset by a steady growth in air traffic (increasing by 60% between 2005 and 2017 and projected to triple by 2050). The very sharp fall in traffic density associated with the COVID-19 crisis is expected to be temporary;

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<sup>4</sup> Airports Council International (ACI) forecast, 27 October 2020 – Europe: Airports Council International Europe | ACI EUROPE – Media (aci-europe.org).

<sup>5</sup> Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy.

<sup>6</sup> Study by the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), November 2020.

10. would like to point out at the same time that, according to a policy brief from the European University Institute (EUI)<sup>7</sup>, airports can directly influence, through their operations, only about 2% of overall global emissions from aviation;
11. underlines that the White Paper, which was revised in 2011 and is a key document for EU transport policy, aims to reduce European transport's dependence on oil imports, improve its efficiency and to lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The document also stresses the importance of intermodality and co-modality through the efficient use of different modes of transport, on their own and in combination with other modes, leading to an optimal and sustainable use of natural resources; stresses, in this context, the need for a continuous exchange of experience between Member States and local and regional authorities on deepening integration between transport modes, particularly air and rail, for example with regard to introducing combined air-rail tickets, or checking in and registering baggage at the railway station, even before arriving at the airport; in the long term, it should be considered whether stopping short-distance flights and replacing them with investments in rail connections and in high-speed trains is appropriate;
12. Stresses that in order to facilitate inter-modality and co-modality, attractive train connections, including high speed and freight trains to airports need to be systematically constructed in the near future, and as a service to the passengers, airlines, train and bus companies should be required to sell joint tickets, enabling passengers to purchase one ticket for a combined trip; questions in relation to missed connections need to be dealt within the passengers' rights regulation;
13. stresses the positive impact of aviation on the economic development of regions, including the tourism sector; highlights its 2020 opinion entitled *Towards more sustainable tourism for EU cities and regions*, which calls for ways to increase the connectivity of Europe's cities and regions, by supporting the less polluting options and improving inter-modality in line with the ultimate objective of the European Green Deal;
14. recommends to assess the experiences made during the pandemic and to evaluate the impact of the reduced air traffic on the environment and the climate, but also on the economic development of regions and cities, providing evidence for further discussions and decisions in relation to future, sustainable tourism strategies and the future of regional airports;
15. In order to mitigate their emissions, airports can modulate the airport charges paid by airlines based on environmental criteria, for example, by reducing airport charges for aircraft producing less noise and emitting fewer air pollutants. They can also favour airlines with higher load factors, to reduce emissions per passenger. Moreover, airports can use incentives to support new fuel use or noise reduction, by prohibiting take-offs after a certain hour in the evening, or by introducing night bans for planes other than the latest generation. Finally, they can introduce slot limitations on the basis of plane types and other objectives;

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<sup>7</sup> Policy brief 2021/02, January 2021.

16. insists that a condition for public investments in regional airports (through European funding or state aid schemes) should comply with the objectives of the European Green Deal and the principle "no harm for the environment";
17. welcomes the European Commission's increased efforts to cut aviation emissions and Member States' support for the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA);

### ***The importance of regional airports***

18. draws attention to the fact that, in 2018, aviation in Europe accounted for 25.9% of global passenger traffic. This directly and indirectly provided over 13.5 million jobs and contributed USD 991 billion to the economy. It is estimated that some 1.7 million people are directly employed by airport operators and institutions/companies that work with airports<sup>8</sup>;
19. stresses that regional airports are key to ensuring the accessibility of transport in regions that are far from the principal transport hubs, are relatively underdeveloped economically and are peripheral or island regions, and thus make an important contribution to economic development and job creation in these regions. They provide momentum for development that helps meet the objectives of cohesion policy in its spatial, economic and social dimensions;
20. notes that regional airports also provide professional and comprehensive ground handling services for aircraft in the General Aviation (GA) sector, which plays an important role, particularly with regard to aviation training;
21. wishes to point out that regional airports form an especially crucial element of critical infrastructure, vital for the security of a country and its citizens. They play a crucial role for air ambulance services (emergency or planned), for fire monitoring and firefighting flights, and also in emergencies (natural and other disasters, floods), thus helping to ensure the smooth functioning of rescue services, public administration, institutions and businesses;

### ***Sustainable development of a region depends on its accessibility***

22. furthermore, recognises that the rate at which regions develop depends to a large extent on the quality of their connectivity, and that regional airports play a prominent role in EU territorial cohesion, even more so in the case of archipelagos, where regional airports are essential for the internal cohesion of regions that do not have alternatives such as railways or roads, and in the case of sparsely populated, peripheral and outermost or less developed regions, when they lack other convenient and environmentally friendly means of transport;
23. reiterates that territorial cohesion is an objective of the European Union, recognised by the Lisbon Treaty as the third dimension of the cohesion objective, alongside economic and social cohesion;

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<sup>8</sup> Air Transport Action Group, Aviation Benefits Beyond Borders, October 2020.

24. welcomes, in this respect, the agreement on the future Regulation on the European Regional Development Fund, which, in line with the European Committee of the Regions' recommendations in its opinion on the ERDF<sup>9</sup>, recognises the specific situation of remote regions and regional airport. The Regulation excludes EU investment in airport infrastructure except for remote regions and existing regional airports, provided that the investment supports targeted measures to mitigate environmental impact, ensuring security and safety;

### ***The future of regional airports***

25. believes that now is the moment to assess the relevance of regional airports in Europe. The assessment needs to consider their role in relation to their connectivity for their citizens, the regional economic development, including tourism and the transport of goods, take into account the experience and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and their contribution to the EU's ambitious climate policy;
26. expects coordinated action by the European Commission, the Member States, regions, the research community and business with a view to propose a new comprehensive transport system in Europe, maintaining the aviation mode of transport and putting it on a path to sustainable growth. These measures should lead to a more resilient aviation sector in crisis events, closer connections between it and other transport modes, particularly rail, and its inclusion in efforts to meet the obligations arising from the Paris Agreement;
27. stresses the importance of striking a balance between compliance with the environmental requirements aimed at decarbonising the aviation sector and the dependence of certain peripheral, island or outermost regions on their regional airports, for which there are no viable alternatives;

### ***State and EU aid***

28. considers that, as a first step, Member States could be required by the European Commission to present short- and long-term strategic plans for regional airports, including the development of dedicated support instruments to mitigate the climate impact of the aviation industry and support its ecological transition;
29. notes that under the European Commission guidelines on State aid rules and public service obligations, and rules applicable to the air transport sector during the COVID-19 outbreak, Member States can support, under certain conditions, companies affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including regional airports;
30. stresses, however, that regional airports, particularly those located on islands and sparsely populated, peripheral and outermost or less developed regions, are to a large extent structurally unable to cover capital and operating costs and therefore need additional resources. Such

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<sup>9</sup> COTER-VI-046, opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on the *European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund*.

airports operate at a competitive disadvantage which prevents them from compensating for fixed costs due to the narrow scope of their activities;

31. calls on the European Commission, therefore, to develop, as part of the legislative process, even more flexible and more effective public aid rules that enable Member States to provide regional airports with the financial assistance in line with the relevant ERDF and RRF provisions for investment in regional airports located in peripheral, island or outermost or less developed regions where a more efficient and sustainable alternative (for instance, rail) does not exist;
32. suggests also that Member States should be able to apply a comprehensive approach to regional airports with regard to environmental requirements, taking account of the measures taken both by regional airports themselves and by the stakeholders that directly work with them locally;

### *The place of aviation in the new EU financial perspective for 2021-2027*

33. calls on the European Commission, in the context of cohesion policy for 2021-2027 and in accordance with the abovementioned restrictions, to permit investment funding to provide aid for regional airports, funding that directly supports processes relating to decarbonisation and the low-carbon circular economy model;
34. also calls on the European Commission to introduce new rules on state aid for small regional airports not in competition with other airports and with an average annual traffic of up to 1 million passengers, exempting them from the obligation to provide notification of public aid for investment (where they are unable to generate 25% of their own contribution) and operating aid;
35. urges the European Commission to allocate adequate European funds to the development of infrastructure for safety and security, and for the use of innovative technologies and digitalisation of airports, helping to meet the objectives of the European Green Deal;
36. considers that, with a view to creating a greener air transport system, it is essential to ensure that European funds support the introduction and application of results of research and development work relating in particular to the reduction of noise levels and emissions of aircraft engines through the use of alternative fuels;
37. stresses that the Recovery and Resilience Facility<sup>[1]</sup><sup>10</sup> foresees intervention fields relating to "security, safety and air traffic management systems for existing airports" and " support to airports in outermost regions" under the condition that these measures "fully respect the climate and environmental standards and priorities of the Union and the principle of "do no significant harm" within the meaning of Article 17 of Regulation (EU) 2020/852". Member States, in cooperation with the European Commission, should therefore carefully assess the extent of possible support for regional airports under the national recovery and resilience plans;

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<sup>10</sup> Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021.



38. furthermore, expects that the European Commission will ensure that regional airports in the outermost regions are encouraged to make use of EU funding under the country/regional programmes to be introduced in the new EU financial perspective for 2021-2027 for investments related to environmental protection or accompanied by investment necessary to mitigate or reduce its negative environmental impact;

***Role of local and regional authorities***

39. stresses that local and regional authorities are responsible for planning and implementing public transport services on their territories, as well as for promoting regional economic development. A significant number of local and regional authorities own or operate regional airports, provide the necessary infrastructure and other services relevant for their functioning, and contribute to their financing sometimes considerably;
40. underlines that the role of local and regional authorities should be to continuously seek to improve mobility patterns and to choose the most appropriate transport modes, including considerations of pros and cons of access to regional airports. To this end, with regard to climate- neutral transport, support should be provided for projects in particular for collective, but also individual mobility with low or zero emissions, infrastructure for non-motorised traffic, innovative charging stations for public transport vehicles and the integration of collective transport. In particular, where possible, attention should be paid to the need to guarantee residents rail connections to airports, which also leads to lower emissions in the economy;
41. notes that local and regional authorities, in cooperation with the aviation industry, play a key role in developing joint regional communication campaigns to raise public awareness on flight safety, environmentally friendly innovation used in aircraft and airport safety, but also the benefits of multimodality based on air, rail, road and maritime transport;
42. is of the view that airport operators must revise their development strategies without delay, in order not only to adapt them in the context of the changing aviation market as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but above all to take into account the need to invest in sustainable development and the contribution of climate-neutral transport;
43. points out that the 2021-2030 disability strategy adopted by the European Commission in March 2021 refers to the need to integrate the rights of persons with disabilities into all policies and areas, and therefore transport too; stresses, in this regard, how important it is for regional airport operators to fully adapt such airports to support people with disabilities in order to enable them to have unlimited access to all services on offer;

***Swift and coordinated action is the key to economic recovery***

44. calls on the European Commission to put in place solutions that would facilitate the free movement of persons within the European Union during the pandemic. Uniform rules, such as the EU Digital COVID Certificate, will undoubtedly help to restore mobility, including by air transport and the tourism sector closely associated with it, but they must not in any way be

discriminatory for passengers and their introduction should not only burden regional airports, including financially;

Brussels, 1 July 2021

The President  
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary-General  
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Bližkovský

## II. PROCEDURE

<b>Title</b>	The future of regional airports – Challenges and opportunities
<b>Reference documents</b>	–
<b>Legal basis</b>	Art. 307 TFUE
<b>Procedural basis</b>	Rule 41(b)(ii) of the CoR Rules of Procedure
<b>Date of Council/EP referral/ Date of Commission letter</b>	–
<b>Date of Bureau/President's decision</b>	7 December 2020
<b>Commission responsible</b>	Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER)
<b>Rapporteur</b>	Wladyslaw Ortyl (PL/ECR), President of the Podkarpackie Region
<b>Analysis</b>	11 February 2021
<b>Discussed in commission</b>	26 February 2021
<b>Date adopted by commission</b>	23 April 2021
<b>Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)</b>	majority
<b>Date adopted in plenary</b>	1 July 2021
<b>Previous Committee opinions</b>	
<b>Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation</b>	–