Future of regional airports and air services in the EU

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The Committee on Transport and Tourism adopted the own-initiative report by Philip BRADBOURN (ECR, UK) on the future of regional airports and air services in the EU.

The report notes that regional aviation, like other modes of transport, is a key enabler in citizens' mobility. It stresses that improved connectivity and efficient inter-modal mobility can contribute considerably to better access to the regions, to business, tourism and the development of related services, and to the spread of economic prosperity.

The committee makes the following recommendations:

Economics of regional air services: the report underlines the **need for a public service obligation for air services of economic and public interest,** especially those connecting remote regions, islands and the outermost regions, in order to ensure their full accessibility and territorial integration. Members believe that such services would not be economically viable without public money.

They believe that it is **desirable to avoid a proliferation of regional airports**, and note that the development of regional airports should be targeted in order to avoid the creation of unused or not efficiently used airport infrastructures which would result in an economic burden for the authorities responsible. They maintain, on the contrary, that **existing links should be strengthened,** especially in areas (islands, for example) suffering from geographical handicaps.

The Commission is asked to review Decision 2012/21/EU on the application of Article 106(2), by means of which the threshold for which an airport can receive state aid without having to notify the Commission was decreased to 200 000 passengers per year, bearing in mind the Community Guidelines (2005/C312 /01) which state that an airport can become cost-efficient with a traffic of over 500 000 passengers per year.

The committee takes the view that national and regional authorities should properly support regional airports, on account of the latter's environmental and economic impact. Regional airports should also be subject to local and regional consultation, and – on the basis of cost-benefit analyses – be considered **eligible to apply for financing under EU funds**, as well as other EU-funded financial engineering instruments within the new programming framework. The Commission is asked to:

- take into consideration the opportunities offered by regional airports as part of the European central transport network;

- take a balanced approach in future revisions of aviation guidelines in order to provide for a socially and economically viable development of regional air services,

- in supporting the development of regional airports and the construction of new regional airports (especially in countries whose national airports are situated in remote areas), to pay particular regard to the balanced territorial development of regions corresponding to levels I and II of the Nomenclature of Territorial Statistical Units (NUTS).

The report stresses that adequate development of regional airports contributes to parallel development of the **tourist system**, which is a vitally important area for many European regions. It calls on the Commission to take account of the specific nature and problems of these seasonal regional airports when adopting new legislation for the sector.

Regional airports are becoming more and more important for **charter airlines as well as for low-cost carriers.** Members expresses concern that certain practices of low-cost airlines, which often operate from regional airports, lead to poorer quality of service for passengers and a deterioration in working conditions.

They call on the Commission to **guarantee the correct application of European and national legislation on airlines' social conditions and terms of employment**, so that staff employed at a regional airport do not become victims of social dumping and so that fair competition and a level playing field can be ensured in the aviation sector.

Members are also concerned by 'one-bag' rule and other restrictions to the cabin baggage allowance imposed by certain airlines. They take the view that these practices represent a breach of competition law, and believe that these restrictions may constitute an abuse of a carrier's position. They call, therefore, on Member States to set **common upper limits** to be imposed on airlines with regard to such restrictions and consider that any checks relating to luggage weight restrictions and size should be made before arrival at the departure gate.

The report also considers that **goods transport** is a positive factor for regional airports which can further development and jobs, not least through the establishment of related ground services and of businesses linked to regional airports. It calls on the Commission to draw up a strategy that will promote goods transport and facilitate cooperation between neighbouring regional airports. Members urge Member State authorities to propose plans to develop existing regional airports and make them more efficient.

Environment and innovation: Members are of the opinion that there is plenty of spare capacity to be utilised at many regional airports and that, by using that spare capacity, congestion and stacking at major airports can be reduced and the environmental impact limited. They also highlight the role of regional airports in acting as a mainspring for the development of innovation clusters by diminishing location costs for start-ups, especially in geographically remote regions.

The report calls on Member States and regional and local authorities to take account of, in addition to economic and financial considerations, **environmental, territorial, geological and meteorological factors,** and of other rational criteria when deciding where to locate airports and whenever regional airport facilities need to be renovated or expanded. It underlines, at the same time, the importance of **using and modernising existing structures before building new ones.**

The Commission and Member States are urged to speed up the development of the Joint Undertaking to **develop the new generation European air traffic management system (SESAR)**, the Clean Sky initiative and the enforcement of Single European Sky legislation as a matter of urgency.

Congestion and multimodality: noting that recent studies state that European regions are losing direct links to some of the most congested airports, the report suggests that the scope of any future studies be extended to regional airports. In the interim, it encourages the Member States and the Commission to **promote connections between regional airports and main airports in the Member States,** helping to boost the economy in the areas around regional airports whiles also offering one solution to the problem of air-traffic congestion in Europe.

Members urge all parties and institutions involved in the **revision of Regulation (EEC) No 95/93** (as amended by Regulation (EC) No 793/2004) to focus on delivering new capacity at airports rather than

pricing regional air services out of the market. They consider it essential for regional airports to have access to hubs, and take the view that this must be considered during the revision of Regulation (EEC) No 95/93.

Regional airports situated away from urban centres are often not adequately connected to the transport network on the ground. Members call for Member States to **develop their intermodal policies** and to invest in these strategically important intermodal connections, for example connections with the rail network. They believe that the **network development plans of the rail and road sector** should take the location of airports into account, with the aim of including airports in the ground transport networks being built. They note the need to **develop regional airport networks** based on integrated connections with the major airports in order to improve the mobility of people and to streamline goods transport.

The trans-European transport network (TEN-T): Members believe that, as part of the TEN-T, regional airports could play a leading role in the creation of a wider European Common Aviation Area covering 1 billion people in the EU and neighbouring countries, in line with the Commission communication. Stressing that the role played by regional airports is vital for territorial cohesion and social and economic development in the regions, they call for regional airports to be taken into account in the future trans-European transport network policy. The report also emphasises that regional airports in trans-border regions, which are located in close proximity to each other, should demonstrate cooperation and coordination in the use of existing capacities as a precondition for EU co-financing by TEN-T, cohesion and regional funds.

The committee goes on to make a series of recommendations aiming to **improve security, transparency and accessibility** with regard to regional airports. With regard to the latter, Members call on the companies responsible for the management of regional airports to make the necessary structural alterations to accommodate disabled people, so as to enable them to access the various airport areas without assistance and to use all services without difficulty.