# Future of regional airports and air services in the EU

2011/2196(INI) - 10/05/2012 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the future of regional airports and air services in the EU.

The resolution notes that regional aviation, like other modes of transport, is a key enabler in citizens' mobility. Europe's airports provide a large network of 150 000 city pairs. It also 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.

**A considerable number of regional airports are confronted by an airline with a virtual monopoly** which can exploit this position to exert pressure by making more and more demands on the airport concerned and on local and/or regional authorities, inter alia with regard to airport charges and aviation safety levies. The resolution notes that the financial and sovereign debt crisis has substantially changed the conditions for airport financing in the EU, especially at 'non-hub' airports.

Parliament makes the following recommendations:

**Economics of regional air services**: the resolution 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.

**Strengthening existing links**: Members 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.

**Support on the basis of a cost benefit analysis**: Parliament 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 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).

**Tourism**: the resolution 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.

**Charter airlines and low-cost carriers**: regional airports are becoming more and more important for **charter airlines as well as for low-cost carriers.** Members express 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.

**'One bag rule'**: Parliament is also concerned by 'one-bag' rule and other restrictions to the cabin baggage allowance imposed by certain airlines. It takes 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. Members 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.

**Goods transport**: the resolution 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 resolution 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 resolution 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.

Parliament 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.