Air transport: creation of the Single European Sky

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PURPOSE : the communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on the creation of a single European sky. CONTENT : this communication outlines the main objectives of a single European sky which include airport delays, air traffic congestion, air traffic management and the impact of air traffic on the environment. The creation of a single sky requires quite specific measures, as reflected in many other areas of Community activity where measures are taken to ensure that all players operate in a common framework, where compatiblity between different systems is provided by common rules or where financial solidarity is organised to guarantee simultaneous implementation of common objectives. The functioning of the internal market - especially the common air transport policy, as defined in Article 71 of the Treaty and put into effect in particular by the opening up of national markets - justifies similar measures in the area of air traffic. The Commission's responsibility cannot be restricted to developing research projects to improve air traffic management which are then applied in fragmented airspace. In addition, the Commission takes the view that the creation of a single European sky cannot just be through common technical and operational solutions; collective management of airspace is needed in the interests of all its users, which must make for substantial reorganisation of its structures and use. This reorganisation must be along the following lines: - sectors must be subdivided and routes established regardless of frontier. This will enable the use of airspace to be organised along the lines of efficiency; - the division of airspace between the civil and military uses must take account of the new geopolitical realities and form part of a consistent and efficient framework. The way cooperation between the military and the civil sectors is currently organised does not tie in with the smooth running of airspace. Nor does the subdivision of zones reserved for military use take account of the collective interest of the COmmunity. The European Union has already shown that it can manage the relation between civil and military use of technology and this experience may be of use in this new context. With regard to delays, the average delay is 20 minutes and this can stretch up to several hours at peak periods. This situation angers passengers and frustrates the airlines. It also creates costs to the economy, for example, given that the total economic cost of delays linked to the congestion of airspace is of the order of EUR 5 billion and that these delays amount to about half of all delays, the damage could be put at EUR 10 billion a year. Responsibility for these delays is, of course, shared, and although operators and airports both account for a quarter of delays half of them are due to the saturation of airspace : - delays caused by operators are essentially operational and logistic, but these delays can be compounded by the commercial strategy of airlines which tend to concentrate certain flights at certain airports and at certain times of the day in order to facilitate connections; - in airports, apart from the rare operating incidents the principal cause of delays is the saturation of infrastructure, expansion of which often clashes with environmental constraints; - saturation of airspace is due to the need to ensure flight safety. Furthermore, the reform of air traffic control is a priority. The Community must assume its responsibilities by bringing its management of the airways in line with its economic and political integration. Europe cannot keep the frontiers in the sky that it has managed to eliminate on the ground; it must allow the freedom of movement of persons, goods, services beyond such frontiers. This would not be interpreted as undermining EUROCONTROL, but rather as the will of the Commission to highlight the complementarity of the Community's political goals and the specific responsibilities of EUROCONTROL to help meet the objectives of the Community while recognising the rights of the countries which are not members of the European Community. In addition, the issue of congestion of airspace calls for measures other than technical ones in the short term in order to prevent any further crises. In conclusion, the Commission will report within 6 months on the progress of implementation of the measures proposed in this communication.