Council of the European Union

NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Council
Subject:	AOB for the meeting of the Transport, Telecommunication and Energy Council on 5 June 2025
	Air traffic congestion
	- Information from the Commission

European Air Traffic Growth: Capacity Challenges and Solutions

Information from the Commission[1]

Air traffic in Europe is currently growing at over 5% a year, responding to citizens' desire to travel and delivering clear benefits to European businesses and the economy.

However, the air traffic control system is increasingly struggling to manage this growing demand, resulting in mounting delays, cancellations and compensation claims, as well as increased environmental impact and diminishing public trust in its reliability.

In Summer 2024, with a daily average of 34,000 flights, European air traffic delays were severe, only 65% of flights arrived according to schedule. With up to 4,500,000 passengers and an average of 36,000 flights expected every day in Summer 2025, delays are expected to worsen.

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[1] Presentation by Eurocontrol

Air traffic control systems in many countries are now reaching - or are at - maximum capacity and will not be able to manage additional traffic loads that would result from strong traffic growth, combined with expansion of military requirements, bad weather, managing major events or mitigating industrial actions. Such issues would cause bottlenecks and major additional delays across Europe as a whole, impacting summer holiday travel and putting substantial additional pressure on air traffic controllers.

Close coordination has been underway for many months between the European Commission and EUROCONTROL as well as ongoing planning between the EUROCONTROL Network Manager, airlines, airports, air navigation service providers and the military. However, resolving the issue also requires political will at the national level as each country is responsible for providing adequate air traffic services and making the necessary investments to support these services.

EUROCONTROL has raised this matter to its 42 Director Generals of Civil Aviation and contacted formally those whose countries are expected to experience high delays, outlining country-specific actions needed to address capacity shortages in the immediate term. While essentially 7 Member States are causing 80% of the delays in the EU, re-routing the traffic would require additional capacity in other areas of the network and therefore involve all players. Your support and that of your national air navigation service provider is crucial to ensure that these actions are implemented in our common interest. Problems in any part of the European network affect all other areas.

To address congestion for the next few years, two streams of actions are required:

1. Increasing the number of air traffic controllers and facilitating flexibility of the existing air traffic controller population: additional staffing is needed in a number of countries across Europe and recruitment, where not already underway, needs to be started as soon as possible to ensure that more controllers are trained and available by 2030. In addition, action needs taken to ensure controllers can be used more flexibly by improving training and rostering.
2. Redesigning airspace to maximise efficiency across the entire network: technical work needs to be done between the countries concerned and the Network Manager especially in the central parts of Europe, where traffic is at its most dense.

However, this will not be enough to manage the situation with the challenges we will face in the longer term. By 2035, 80% of the air traffic control units in Europe are likely to reach saturation, causing delays at up to six times the levels seen today. To address this longer-term issue, the efforts made in the short term must be combined with a 3rd area of action:

3. Investing in development and implementation of new technologies, introducing more automation and AI support for air traffic controllers as foreseen by the ATM Master Plan, will provide the system with additional capacity. Political commitment and cross-border cooperation is essential to ensure the coordinated roll-out of these technologies.

If addressed by all Member States with the support of the European Commission and EUROCONTROL, these three priorities can ensure we maintain a safe and efficient European network that allows citizens to travel confidently while supporting economic growth.

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