



ACI EUROPE

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European airports celebrate 20th anniversary of EU enlargement showcasing key aviation benefits

Two decades after EU expansion, air connectivity and traffic data point to enhanced cohesion and integration on the back of robust demand for air travel

Brussels, 1 May 2024: Europe's airports join the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the biggest EU enlargement to date by presenting data on the virtuous circle of closer integration driving air travel demand, in turn enhancing societal cohesion across Europe.

On 1 May 2004, ten countries joined the European Union as newly minted Member States, including **Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia**. This landmark wave of accession expanded the EU community in terms of population (+20%), territory covered (+18%) and GDP (+9%). New analysis from ACI EUROPE points to the benefits extending to air connectivity as well. The period after EU enlargement was marked by a continued convergence between the initial 15 EU Member States (EU15) and the new 10 accession Member States (A10) in terms of demand for air travel.

Joining the EU played a pivotal role in the growth of air travel in accession countries resulting in fast expanding air connectivity and a much higher growth rate of passengers compared to EU15 countries.

- From **air connectivity** standpoint, the enlargement has brought Europe's airports and their communities much closer. According to ACI EUROPE's Connectivity Index, direct air connectivity of the A10 countries has surged by **+85%** since accession, while EU15 Member States continued to post connectivity gains at a steadier pace (+32%). This boosted their economic performance as every 10% increase in direct connectivity of a country yields a +0.5% increase in GDP per capita.
- From 2004 to 2019, **air travellers** surged by **+215%** in accession countries, as EU15 countries continued to grow at a slower pace (+77%) indicating their market maturity prior to enlargement. This dynamic growth in the accession countries is attributed to factors that were bolstered by the enlargement, such as economic development and convergence, infrastructure improvements, alignment of operational and service standards and increased integration into the EU market.
- By 2019, the **ratio of population to air passengers** in accession countries had decreased to **0.59 compared to 2.31 pre-accession** - just shy of the EU15 ratio of 0.26. The significant decrease¹ in this ratio across the new EU Member

States boosted cohesion across the EU bloc as more EU citizens had access to air travel.

Olivier Jankovec, ACI EUROPE Director General commented: *"Today we celebrate the European project and the important milestone in its progress that was the 2004 enlargement. Aviation has played a crucial role in enabling the essential EU freedoms: the freedom of movement and the freedom to provide services. This means aviation has been developing closer ties, driving convergence and boosting economies in the newly expanded bloc over the last two decades. The dynamic expansion of air connectivity and growth in passenger numbers resulted in a virtuous circle as more integration triggered more demand for air travel, which in turn further strengthened the social and economic fabric of the Union and contributed to its cohesion."*

He added: *"This positive track record is particularly relevant in the context of today's challenging geopolitical environment which has given impetus to a new wave of EU enlargement. The data we share today is a positive signal for the 9 candidate countries² and indeed for the EU bloc as a whole as it eyes further expansion. This also means sustainable and competitive air connectivity must remain a top priority for the EU in the next 5-year political cycle – for passengers, communities and the Planet."*

ACI EUROPE delivered a set of strategic recommendations and policy asks to the EU institutions on transport policy last January – focused on 3 key priorities:

1. Enabling the effective decarbonisation of aviation – while preserving the socio-economic benefits of air connectivity.
2. Safeguarding and reinforcing the integrity of the Single Aviation Market.
3. Enabling resilient, digitised and green airports.

Download your copy of the Airport Industry Manifesto for the Next EU Political Cycle [here](#).

¹ A decrease in the ratio of population to the number of passengers denotes an increase of passengers in absolute terms.

² Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine.

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Note to editors

Access the EU enlargement aviation benefits data set [here](#).

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ACI EUROPE is the European region of Airports Council International (ACI), the only worldwide professional association of airport operators. ACI EUROPE represents over 500 airports in 55 countries. Our members facilitate over 90% of commercial air traffic in Europe. Air transport supports 13.5 million jobs, generating €886 billion in European economic activity (4.4% of GDP). In response to the Climate Emergency, in June 2019 our members committed to achieving Net Zero carbon emissions for operations under their control by 2050, without offsetting.