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ACI EUROPE President urges aviation competitiveness reset

ACI EUROPE

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Athens, 19 June 2025: ACI EUROPE President & CEO of SEA Milan Airports, Armando Brunini, today delivered a stark warning over the competitive position of European aviation and its ability to effectively decarbonise — urging a comprehensive aviation policy reset to ensure the sector is no longer left behind in the EU's Competitiveness Compass and Roadmap.

Speaking at the association's **35th Annual Congress and General Assembly** in Athens following a keynote address from the **EU Sustainable Transport and Tourism Commissioner, Apostolos Tzitzikostas**, Brunini addressed the key factors for the exacerbating competitiveness deficit of aviation in the EU and pointed to the risks involved for the bloc.

THE 4 CRITICAL DRAGS ON COMPETITIVENESS

While the EU's global competitors are leveraging the economic and social multiplier impact of air connectivity by supporting and developing their aviation eco-system, Brunini lamented how the EU is heading in the opposite direction — with 4 critical drags on the sector's competitiveness:

1. Unbalanced climate policy

"Our commitment to decarbonisation remains unwavering, as this is not just about our license to grow but about our license to keep operating. But if we need the sticks — with the EU SAF mandates and EU ETS — we also need the carrots. Our sector requires the financial support and flexibility mechanisms to shoulder the €1.3 trillion bill to get to net zero. No other World region is imposing such a burden on its aviation sector."

2. Punitive taxes on aviation

"Many EU States and the UK continue to treat aviation as a cash cow — oblivious to the decarbonisation costs we are facing and without allocating the proceeds from their aviation taxes to finance such costs. Once again, Europe stands out as an exception on this compared to the rest of the World — with data showing a clear correlation between aviation taxes and underperformance in air connectivity.¹"

3. Airport capacity deficits

“Europe is already home to half of the World’s most congested airports and, with a few exceptions, our Governments are not just reluctant to support new capacity expansion but are also increasingly looking at imposing operating restrictions limiting the use of existing capacity. Meanwhile our global competitors are all racing to develop airport capacity as part of their strategic agenda for economic development and global outreach.”

4. Regulatory impediments to innovation

“Airports face severe regulatory constraints from EU regulations when it comes to innovation in the fields of security equipment, safety processes, biometrics and the passenger experience — all taking a toll on our competitive position.”

WANTED: EU AVIATION STRATEGY

These drags on competitiveness are not just burdening the aviation sector and hurting air connectivity — they end up holding back the competitiveness of the EU along with its global positioning.

Brunini said: *“It is puzzling that after being heralded for years as a success story of the EU project, aviation is now at risk of becoming the next automotive sector due to a severe competitive deficit that is all of Europe’s own making. This calls for an EU Aviation Strategy that addresses this unsupportive and disjointed policy framework — and that needs to happen quickly. It is difficult to understand why the European Commission is de facto sidelining our sector while actively working simultaneously on a maritime strategy, a rail strategy and a tourism strategy.”*

PUTTING AVIATION BACK ON TRACK & CONNECTING THE DOTS

Brunini then went on to outline the key measures required to put EU aviation back on track and future-proof it, including:

1. Full recognition as part of the EU’s Competitiveness Agenda of the need for airports to preserve and optimise the use of their existing capacity along with their ability to develop and finance new capacity where needed. Key enabling measures include:

- The urgent revision of the 30 year-old EU Airport Slot Regulation — as called for by the Draghi report. This is essential to also safeguard the integrity of the Single Aviation Market in the context of airline consolidation.

- Full adherence to and enforcement of the EU Noise Balanced Approach Regulation — as called for by the *Athens Declaration & Call for Action* to be released later today by ACI EUROPE, A4E (Airlines for Europe) and ERA (European Regions Airline Association).
- Adjustment by the European Investment Bank (EIB) of its Climate Bank Roadmap to allow lending to airport capacity expansion.
- Regulatory stability as regards the EU Airport Charges Directive to ensure investors see certainty for financing infrastructure upgrades, digitalisation, decarbonisation and capacity.

2. Concrete and effective supportive measures to ensure the availability and affordability of SAF

“These measures must be secured in the forthcoming Sustainable Transport Investment Plan to be adopted by the European Commission next September — including the earmarking of ETS funds, SAF allowances under the ETS beyond 2030, financing from financial institutions including the EIB, and a Book & Claim system. Such inclusion will clearly condition our ability to deliver on our net zero Destination 2050 roadmap and thus our continued support for the EU SAF mandates”.

3. Preserve regional air connectivity and cohesion by allowing smaller regional airports to keep receiving operating aid beyond 2027 under the EU State aid Guidelines for airports and airlines.

4. Support for innovation and resilience through:

- Continued financial support for both SESAR Research and Deployment in the next EU Financial Framework — complementing the competitiveness goals by developing technologies for airport capacity and performance optimisation and ensuring their implementation.
- Establishing a fully integrated EU testing and certification system for aviation security equipment.
- Strengthening financial support and simplifying procedures to unlock the full potential of innovative green technologies, thereby accelerating aviation decarbonisation and climate adaptation.

¹ Access the latest analysis in ACI EUROPE Airport Industry Connectivity Report 2025:
<https://connectivity.aci-europe.org/>

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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 600 airports in 55 countries. Our members facilitate over 95% of commercial air traffic in Europe. Airports and air connectivity support 14 million jobs, generating €851 billion in European economic activity (5% 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.