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Illustration: Eugen Bachmann-Geiser

Delays and congestion are creating chaotic conditions for air travel.

The trouble with air traffic control

BY SEPP MOSER

Europe's air traffic is suffering from congestion. The sharp rise in flights is creating problems, impeding the efficient flow of traffic and causing bottlenecks and delays.

DELAYED – LATE ARRIVAL – CANCELLED:

regular air passengers have come to know these words only too well from flight information boards. Air traffic chaos is caused by various factors, but the main problem is the fact that air traffic control has failed to keep pace with the times.

In the hard-fought liberalised air travel market, airlines have improved their offerings in a bid to increase passenger numbers and hence also the number of flights. In the wake of this trend airports are also expanding their offerings, though perhaps not always fast enough.

Lagging behind

Only in the area of air traffic control are there few discernible developments. The

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field has changed little over several decades and is still largely dominated by bureaucrats, rigid structures and inflexible unions which, in an age of European unity, impede the free flow of air traffic. In Europe there are 49 air traffic control centres operating within 31 national systems, using equipment from 18 different manufacturers. Their computers work under 22 different operating systems and 30 programming languages. In many countries the air traffic controllers are still civil servants.

Air traffic control

For every single flight a plane needs the go-ahead from all air traffic control units involved. These determine the time, route and altitudes at which a plane may fly. The job of air traffic controllers is to make sure the relevant air corridors are free. Air traffic controllers working efficiently with the aid of modern equipment can allow planes to fly within relatively close distances of each other without risk. This is how they are able to process so many planes an hour. Rigid labour regulations, poor staff morale and outdated equipment permits, however, only a fraction of this capacity. SM

So it comes as no surprise that in 1998 a 5% increase in air traffic caused a 44% increase in delays compared with the previous year (figures for 1999 are still incomplete). For Switzerland, where air traffic control is semi-privatised and relatively efficient by comparison, the statistics were even worse, with 73.3% more delays reported for a 6.8% rise in air traffic. In June 1998, for instance, every plane in the Zurich region was delayed by an average of 22 minutes.

Pan-European solutions such as Eurocontrol have been proved unworkable since they are as politically weighed down as traditional structures. Witness the fact that Eurocontrol's declared objective is actually to increase rather than decrease delays (in concrete terms the goal is to allow delays to increase only up to five times as much as air traffic volumes!).

Competition as the cure?

A growing number of experts believe that the most immediate solution to the problems of the European air traffic system is to introduce a competitive element. Former state-run airlines, they argue, would be forced to become more dynamic in a liberalised competitive environment.

The same could apply to air traffic control organisations. Once they were no longer able to rely on their national monopolies, their performance levels would be bound to increase. Unfortunately there is a long way to go until this happens.