

Does the sky remain empty?

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Aviation must prepare for a long-term and global disruption. Two directions should now influence government decisions.

The article "The sky is empty" on April 9 gave a picture of the dramatic decline in flights at Vienna Airport. Three more facts: Our five regional airports either have now completely ceased their operations or operate just for rescue flights. In the European Airspace, the number of flights decreased since the beginning of April by 80 per cent compared to March 2019, in the Austrian Airspace even by 90 per cent. With 4.5 billion passengers worldwide 2019 was, (again) a record year. Now all announcements of new connections or further growth, which in aviation is always full-hearted, are maculated. The new announcements are fleet reductions, delays in aircraft deliveries, bankruptcies, questioning of investments like those of a new runway or terminals and the calls for governmental aid.

Since 2000, the aviation industry has financed in Europe with few exceptions (for example Alitalia) and North America itself – that means via passenger, air cargo is only in the Asian air traffic a substantial ingestion. Ticket-sales cover the airlines' expenses: personnel, leasing rates or purchase price of aircraft, kerosene, airport charges, handling and air traffic control. Major airports have, at their charges considerable "non-aviation revenues" from rent, parking, and purchases in the shops - but ultimately all of this have passengers at its roots.

The control authorities regulating air traffic have revenue only from the airlines lifted over- and approach charges - which are based on the flight distance and aircraft weight and according to the Eurocontrol-system only costs and investments cover. If passengers remain outstanding, the airlines reduce the number of flights or cancel them. If this happens in larger scope or through government measures in general, the entire system will collapse. This was already the case in 2003, during the second Gulf War and 2008/2009 in the global economic crisis. However, the triggers have been regional or financially containable and foreseeable in the end. In the year 2020, we lack this horizon and aviation must be geared up to a long-term and global interference. Therefore, the call for government assistance is understandable, since all states rely on the "internationality" and also the people are used to it. Life without aviation is for societies such as today's "European", unimaginable.

Operating obligation for certain flights and virus control

Two directions should influencing the government decisions now: A location guarantee for the national airline must be connected with an operating obligation of the aid granted to the state economic relevance and not replaceable by ground traffic flights. This would relate to the export- and import relations as well as to the incoming-tourism. As Austrian Airlines (AUA) is part of one of the world's largest aviation companies, this would make sure that we are not cut off from intercontinental flight connections.

Outgoing charter flights, to use a branch related term, should be free of subsidies or offered from foreign flight companies. Why should Austria promote tourism abroad? That such conditions are inconsistent with the EU practice for state aid is not misunderstood - but their adaptation seems, given the size and presumed duration of the crisis indispensable.

The second consideration concerns the date of re-starting of flight operations: The protection against re-entry of massive infections requires reliable information on the infestation of a target country with Covid-19 and the efficiency of the local health system. Where the risk of infection is already low and the treatment efficiency high - roughly those in Austria accordingly -, could be used in meaning of reciprocity permits to fly with which in the editorial by Walter Hämmerle from 9 April virus control planned of the passengers from the start of the flights.

All this would also require corresponding legal precautions of the European Union - virtually a return to the "bronze age" of the aviation industry, as operators are liberalized to fly since 2000. Nevertheless, as the EU succeeded in improving "flight safety" and "flight security", "flight safety and the defense against terrorist interventions", so that 2019 became the safest year in aviation, therefore it should also be possible in favor of flight-independent health of humans.

A forecast of when the European sky will probably be occupied again with maybe 20,000 daily flights - in 2019 it was with up to 32,200 is impossible unless drugs for the treatment of Covid-19 and a vaccination prophylaxis will be found, tested and available.