



Press Release

Ryanair/Charleroi: the Regions reaction to the Commission's Decision

Strasbourg, 3rd February 2004

The Assembly of European Regions (AER), as a first reaction to the decision, is pleased to note that the Commission has suddenly taken into consideration the importance of regional airports for the economic development of the Regions. The AER regrets, however, that the promise contained in the title of the Commission Communication - "The Commission's decision on Charleroi airport promotes the activities of low-cost airlines and regional development"- remains rather undeveloped within the actual text.

The Commission continues to insist on the "prudent private investor criterion" and thereby seems to ignore the general interest aspect of regional air transport.

The Commission suggests that the Ryanair/Charleroi Airport case is a one-off, whereas its decision will most certainly affect all regional airports in Europe.

Mr Onno Hoes, Chairman of AER's "Regional Aviation" group, comments: "The decision should have been based on an in-depth analysis of the complexity of the issue and the diverse regional situations in Europe. The small airport of Knock in Ireland cannot be compared to Frankfurt-Hahn (D) and these two cannot be subjected to the same rules."

The AER therefore questions the wisdom of the Commission's intention to establish common rules and principles for this sector. Imposing a maximum duration of 3-5 years for regional aid could in many cases endanger the Regions' long-term investments and their sustainable economic development. Within a constantly fluctuating market, there is no room for applying a European-wide definition of "normal operating conditions".

The AER is convinced that its member the Walloon Region negotiated the contract with Ryanair in the full interest of the Charleroi area and its citizens, aiming to address the area's industrial decline and the high level of unemployment. There remains no doubt that the Regional Government used public funds in the best interest of the tax payer.

Dr Franz J. Stummann of the AER Secretariat, referring to the AER's political objectives, insists that interregional cooperation and solidarity, rather than uniform European rules, will benefit both the passenger and the Regions. At the initiative of the AER, the Regional Ministers for Transport will meet in Brussels on 12th February to evaluate the impact of the Commission's decision and to formulate an initial position.

AER Contacts:

Onno Hoes, Chairman of the AER Working Group "Regional Aviation"; tel: (0031) 618 30 30 60; e-mail: ohoes@brabant.nl

Dr Franz J. Stummann, AER General Secretariat; tel: (0033) 3 88 22 74 47/43; e-mail: f.stummann@a-e-r.org