



[Comment] 5000 reasons to complete the single market

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - Travellers all over Europe found themselves stranded by the collapse of EUJet at the end of last month. Five thousand British holidaymakers enjoying the best that Europe has to offer suddenly found themselves facing the worst.

How were they to get home? How long would it take? What would it cost? Well-laid plans were thrown into chaos by a corporate bankruptcy.

This is a familiar enough scenario – most years, it seems, some people get stranded somewhere – but the passengers last month were in for a second shock.

They discovered that EUJet was registered and regulated in Ireland and that British compensation measures did not apply. It was flying British passengers to and from a British airport but, such is the magic of the EU, it did not have to be a British-registered airline.

The passengers weren't to know this, of course, and it has in some cases made it harder for them to get home.

Keeping up the pace

This is not to criticise the airline concerned, of course: anything that increases choice and lowers prices is to be welcomed. The problem is that European rules have not kept pace with the European economy.

For the growth in the European low-cost airline industry has only been possible because of the way the EU has liberated the skies above our heads.

Airlines can choose their routes and their prices without government intervention. It is hard to imagine that before the single market, every international flight had to be approved by government civil servants. No wonder prices were high and service lousy.

There was a flashback to these bad old days last year when the Italian government objected to British Airways undercutting Alitalia on flights from Rome to New York.

Because New York is not in the EU, the single market rules do not apply. This felt like something out of the 1970s, like kipper ties or the Bay City Rollers. Fortunately, within the single market, we are able to be a bit more modern than that.

If ever there was a case for EU regulation, then this is it.

It makes no sense to rely on national rules when an airline registered in one member state is carrying passengers from a second and taking them to a third.

The cabin crew no doubt will be from fourth and fifth member states and the passengers themselves will be from all across Europe and beyond. International air travel is truly a cross-border business: this is exactly what European laws were invented to deal with.

When it comes to safety, the EU has already acted. The tragic crash of the Flash Air jet in January 2004 led to a change in the law so that EU member states would share information about airlines that had question marks about their safety standards, and it was reported last week that the Commission wants to make much more information available to the public.

If the EU wants to overcome public scepticism and regain popular support, it needs to deal

with the everyday experiences that citizens have within Europe and find ways to make them better.

Ensuring an adequate level of compensation to enable stranded passengers to get home should be part of this. The EU started the single market in air travel; the EU can now complete it.

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