

Member States (BE, BG, CY, CZ, EL, FR, IE, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT) ' joint statement on airline vouchers

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on international transport, including air travel. An immense number of flights have been cancelled. Air carriers are no longer generating passenger business, yet they continue to incur high running costs.

Because of this, Regulation EC (No) 261/2004 and its obligation to reimburse cancelled tickets in cash, if the passenger so decides, places airlines in a difficult situation where they are facing a serious cash flow challenge. When the wording of the regulation was conceived, the current global crisis and its impact on air travel could not have been foreseen. The goal shared by the European Union and its Member States must now be to preserve the structure of the European air traffic market beyond the current crisis, while considering the interests and necessary protection of passengers.

We, the undersigned, therefore:

- Call upon the European Commission to propose, as matter of urgency, a temporary amendment of Regulation 261/2004, possibly preceded by other initiatives such as further Interpretative Guidelines, which allow airlines to choose the means by which passengers are reimbursed. This has to be done similarly across the European Union according to a common set of criteria. Such a temporary rule would be a solution for current cash flow constraints of airlines while preserving the competitiveness of European aviation, and maintaining harmonized criteria of application on a European scale so as to allow a common and adequate level of consumer protection;
- Call upon all stakeholders, including the aviation sector and consumer organizations, to join their efforts in order to reach a constructive and common solution for the European aviation market in a timely way. That solution will not only protect airlines and consumers in these difficult times but it will also stimulate market recovery through flexibility of travel and enhancement of consumer trust in the long-term.

We believe that regulating the temporary issuance of vouchers is possible and acceptable for consumers, if some key principles are taken into account: transparent information to the passenger, non-discrimination, a common length of voucher validity, maximum flexibility of use and a clear right of reimbursement immediately at the end of validity in the event of non-use of vouchers.

Moreover, as consumers are offered vouchers with a long-term validity, it is crucial to discuss ways to protect voucher owners against the risk of bankruptcy of the airlines that issued those vouchers. We are ready to explore this on a European level and call upon the Commission to take this aspect into account. The corresponding work should however not block action on the demand from airlines, which is becoming more urgent every day.