

Press Release

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Report by European Court of Auditors casts unfair representation of European airlines

- The European Court of Auditors (ECA) has launched a report claiming air passenger rights during COVID-19 were not protected and that European airlines have abused state aid.
- The reality is that most airlines – particularly small to medium-sized operators – have not received any state aid during the pandemic, but still refunded passenger tickets in accordance with the regulation and incentivised the use of vouchers due to their shortage of cash.
- If airlines who received state aid are expected to have provided passenger compensation, those specific airlines should be named instead of unfairly making a generalisation that all airlines are guilty of not complying with their passenger rights obligations.

The ECA asserts that European airlines received billions of euros in state aid – a statement that can be considered a huge generalisation. Whilst state aid was provided to some flagship carriers to allow them to continue operating, many of ERA's airline members (small to medium-sized operators) were not granted this same benefit and have continued to face serious liquidity problems throughout COVID-19 and during the ongoing recovery period.

ERA strongly believes the global pandemic to be an extraordinary circumstance under regulation EU261 given its scale and the effects on society. Despite the unprecedented situation airlines have found themselves in, the majority of operators have made every effort to continue providing high-quality customer service, of which in some cases included providing vouchers.

Montserrat Barriga, ERA Director General, says: "This Special Report by the ECA is an unfair representation of European airlines and casts blanket aspersions on an industry already extremely damaged by the COVID crisis. Many airlines continue to work tirelessly to survive whilst reorganising their fleet, staff and operations, and whilst having to still adapt to extremely low revenue levels. They are now being challenged regarding their handling of passenger rights during a global pandemic, something that can surely only be described as an extraordinary circumstance – a situation that was not anticipated.

"ERA would like to highlight the essential air services provided by airlines during the pandemic, and the role of European aviation, during the worst months of COVID and the recovery period to protect jobs, competition, consumer choice and regional development. Europe's diverse range of airline operators provide a broad range of services for consumers including essential regional connectivity and vital air links. It is of the utmost importance that our industry is supported so we can start to rebuild our sector following the worst crisis in our industry's history."

For more information, please contact Becky Taylor, Editor Corporate Communications, on +44 (0)1276 485582 or by email at becky.taylor@eraa.org.

Founded in 1980, European Regions Airline Association (ERA) is a non-profit trade association representing around 60 airlines and 150 companies involved in European air transport and is the only association representing the entire spectrum of companies involved in European aviation. The association promotes the interests of European airlines by lobbying European regulatory bodies on policy matters, promoting the social and economic importance of air transport and its environmental commitments.

