



CALL FOR ARABIAN GULF CARRIERS TO JOIN NEW EUROPEAN OPEN SKIES POLICY

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The European transport commissioner yesterday said she wanted **Arabian Gulf carriers** to be part of a single **European sky** policy but that they would have to play by the rules.

The arrival of Violeta Bulc in Dubai this week has reignited the controversy surrounding the global expansion of Gulf carriers as the European Union develops a new aviation policy.

“We are delivering for the first time a comprehensive strategy on aviation,” she said on the sidelines of the Dubai Airshow. “That is going to happen on December 2. We will ask for a very open, flexible mandate.”

She added: “A very important part of that will be naming all the countries we believe are important for European growth and the creation of jobs. Then we can negotiate comprehensive agreements with the host countries.”

The commissioner, who has met several leaders, ministers and airline chiefs this week, declined to comment on the details of the new policy or whether it would address complaints by some

European governments and airlines that Gulf competitors benefit from state subsidies – a claim denied by all of the big three carriers.

She said that there had been a “lot of hype” around the issue of subsidies.

“I don’t want to blow it out of proportion. That will be part of the comprehensive agreement, but let’s wait and see,” she said.

Still, Europe’s planned new aviation policy is being watched closely by regional governments.

“We would like to see them be part of a single European sky, but of course under the same conditions that others are operating,” the commissioner said.

“They know they will have equal-opportunity rights but they will have to comply with the rules that already exist. Who knows how we will develop this in future? Maybe we will do it together.”

Helped by lobbyists, cities, airports and even a humorous TV advert featuring the Friends star Jennifer Aniston, the Gulf carriers have so far fended off attempts by US rivals to curb their growth across North America.

But now they must turn their attention to Europe.

The stakes are high for the transport commissioner from Slovenia, who was appointed to the role a year ago.

Striking a balance between supporting European airlines when industrial relations in the sector are at a low ebb without losing the economic benefits that the big three Gulf airlines bring will be challenging.

“Europe will have to balance the consumer benefits that competition brings, along with improved trading links with new markets, against the complaints by some, not all, of its home airlines,” said John Strickland, the director of London-based JLS Consulting. “Taking the UK as the best example, many UK regional cities have added direct access to a hub and global markets due to Gulf carrier services. The level of capacity access is something that would never be delivered by European carriers to such cities.”

Ms Bulc acknowledged it was a challenging task.

“I don’t like compromises. I like two positions to find a new common higher goal, which we can all meet.

“I would like to find a mutually agreed modus operandi that will really help Europe to grow and at the same time generate employment. But we can’t overlook that this region accounts for 50 per cent of orders for Airbus, so it’s a big challenge.”

The commissioner said she had been well received in the region and that her discussions had not just been about aviation, but also touched on the rail and ports sectors.

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