COVID-19 Testing and the Recovery of Travel & Tourism

Urgent need for a common EU Testing Protocol for Travel

1. Introduction

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic is having a massive impact on people's lives, our societies, and on the global economy – with air transport and the wider travel and tourism sector amongst the hardest hit[1].

The protection of public health – including that of aviation staff and passengers – is of paramount importance in restoring air connectivity and travel.

Since the early stages of this crisis, European airports, airlines, their operational partners and the wider travel sector have worked closely with European and national regulators to implement a range of new health and safety protection measures to restart air travel. These measures include physical distancing, the use of face masks, enhanced cleaning and disinfection procedures as well as optimised heating, ventilation and air conditioning. Based on the EASA/ECDC Aviation Health Safety Protocol[2], these broad measures have ensured that airports and aircraft are among the safest facilities and means of transportation when it comes to the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Unfortunately, European States are now reinstating travel restrictions focused on cross-border/international travel. Such restrictions – and in particular quarantines – are akin to the effects of border closures.

Moreover:

- They are depriving European citizens of their right to free movement within the EU/Schengen area and are negatively impacting the functioning of the internal market.

- They are at odds with the advice of both the ECDC[3] and the WHO[4], who consider travel restrictions to be ineffective in most situations whilst causing significant societal and economic disruption.

---

[1] In 2020, the total number of flights expected in Europe is anticipated to be -55% lower than in 2019, resulting in 6 million fewer flights (EUROCONTROL). In addition, the load factor (the number of passengers on board an aircraft) of many airlines is currently very low (25-35%) and the forward bookings for the forthcoming autumn and winter are down by -80% compared to 2019.

Europe's aviation sector is suffering dramatically financially as a result of this with total industry revenue losses of approximately €140 billion during 2020 for airlines, airports and Air Navigation Service Providers -- up from -€110 billion forecasted in April. As of August 2020, Europe's airports had lost -1.15 billion passengers (-68%) compared to 2019.

[2] June 2020 - https://www.easa.europa.eu/document-library/general-publications/covid-19-aviation-health-safety-protocol

[3] Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the EU/EEA and the UK – eleventh update: resurgence of cases (10 August 2020) – ECDC

The negative secondary effects of these travel restrictions are evident from the latest passenger traffic data – which shows that their adoption has stalled the recovery in demand for air transport and is now leading to a new downwards trend.

As a result:

- **EU States must harmoniously adopt and implement the proposed Recommendation of the European Commission[5] for the coordination of travel restrictions, including common criteria for risk assessment and a common colour coding system/mapping of designated risk areas.**

- **Quarantines must be replaced by testing – based on an EU Testing Protocol for Travel (EU-TPT) which is consistently applicable for passengers travelling from high risk areas in the EU/Schengen space and from third countries.**

The EU-TPT must also be used as a basis to revise the so-called "White List" and engage with third countries with a view to establish safe travel corridors. It must be developed by the European Commission in close cooperation with health authorities, EU States and industry.

ACI EUROPE, A4E and IATA are hereafter providing initial input for the development of the EU-TPT.

2. Our joint proposal

2.1. An EU-TPT aligned with and supporting the Common EU testing approach of the European Commission

The European Commission has proposed *Recommendations for a common EU testing approach for COVID-19[i]* which were agreed by the Health Security Committee on 17 September 2020.

Testing people for cross-border travel is aligned with and supportive of that common EU testing approach:

i) Testing cross-border travellers from high-risk areas should be part of an effective response to COVID-19.

While the ECDC considers the effectiveness and cost value of population-wide and individually initiated testing to be still unknown at this stage[6], increased testing capacities have allowed European countries to integrate the testing of those with mild symptoms as well as the asymptomatic.

Testing of asymptomatic people tends to follow a targeted approach – i.e. looking at individuals, groups or specific settings for which early

---

[4] Recommendation for international traffic in relation to COVID-19 outbreak (1 March 2020) – WHO

[5] Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1555

[6] COVID-19 testing strategies and objectives – ECDC (15 September 2020), p.3

identification and transmission prevention is considered to be part of an effective response to COVID-19.

Including cross-border travellers departing from areas where high transmission has been reported, into a targeted testing system of asymptomatic people[7] would contribute to **a more effective response to COVID-19 as this would limit transmission risks from incoming travellers more effectively than quarantines**.

European States have enacted strict quarantine rules (including penalty regimes), but compliance largely depends on the willingness of travellers to abide by these rules – with rather limited enforcement capabilities. This also needs to be considered in the context of the current surge in COVID-19 cases in many European countries, which is predominantly attributable to '*compliance fatigue*' with health safety rules and accompanying restrictions.

By ensuring that only those people who have tested negative are allowed to travel, a common testing regime for travel would better protect communities than quarantines - which do not prevent infected yet asymptomatic people from travelling. This offers the prospect of improving risk management. In addition:

- **This would further limit transmission risks during air travel.**

- **The need for detrimental travel restrictions (quarantines) but also large-scale and generalised stay-at-home measures (local confinement measures) would be mitigated**.

- **Air connectivity and the free movement of people within the EU/Schengen area would be restored.**

This would also reduce current negative societal and economic impacts by finally enabling the recovery of the travel and tourism sectors.

A significant reduction in the risk of importation of new COVID-19 cases through travel would result from the followingcumulative factors:

1) The overall low prevalence rate of COVID-19 cases within the wider European population.
2) The fact that only asymptomatic people are currently allowed to travel by air.
3) Testing prior to departure of travellers departing from areas where high transmission has been reported as an additional step in the passenger journey, done close to the departure time.

ii) Testing cross-border travellers should be based on common criteria, agreed on necessary pre-conditions and mutual recognition – all defined at EU level as part of an EU-TPT.

iii) Criteria for an "effective" EU-TPT

In order to be integrated into the travel process, testing would need to meet the following criteria:
1. It must be performed at speed, particularly when testing is to take place at the airport (results within one hour).
2. It must be at a sufficient scale for this to be practical.
3. It must be accurate – with high sensitivity and specificity.
4. It must be supported by a system of mutual recognition across the EU/EEA/Switzerland and by the UK regulators.
5. It must be publicly financed or at an affordable cost for passengers.

2.2. A common framework applied to passengers flying from high-risk areas

The EU_TPT should be based on the criteria for risk assessment and colour-coding proposed by the European Commission. This represents an easy to understand framework which is science and risk-based.

On this basis, we propose the following framework for common travel restrictions and an EU approach for testing:

Passengers travelling from:	Travel-related measures:	
Green areas	No restrictions, no requirements	
Orange areas	No restrictions, no requirements	
Red areas	**Testing is required before departure**	Off-airport testing certified by the health regulator, conducted within an agreed timeframe based on a common risk assessment and modelling. *(Passengers arrive at the airport "ready-to fly")*
		OR
		Tests are made at the airport premises, preferably before entering the terminal *(Test guarantees that passengers are "ready-to fly")*

---

[7] Asymptomatic means that no symptoms or signs of disease are present.

Grey areas	**Testing is required before departure**	Off-airport testing certified by the health regulator, within an agreed timeframe based on a common risk assessment and modelling. *(Passengers arrive at the airport "ready-to fly")*
		OR
		Tests are made on the airport premises, preferably before entering the terminal *(Test guarantees that passengers are "ready-to fly")*

Other travel-related measures:

The above testing framework should be part of a multi layered approach also involving:

- Enhanced cleaning and disinfection, the use of masks, the optimisation of heating, ventilation and air conditioning and the deployment of contactless devices as per the EASA/ECDC Health Safety Protocol.

- Effective contact tracing. The prompt identification and management of the contacts of COVID-19 cases makes it possible to rapidly identify secondary cases that may arise after transmission from primary cases. This enables the interruption of further onward transmission. For this reason, effective electronic solutions shall be implemented by authorities to directly collect passenger data through a clear, uniform, and standardised data set as per pre-existing "Public Health Passenger Locator Form'', following the ICAO standard.

3. Conclusion

- Member States' uncoordinated travel restrictions have not only prevented the recovery of air transport, but have also proven ineffective.

- A risk-based, common and simple EU-TPT is urgently needed at European level as part of a more effective response to the pandemic. It must be based on an effective and full coordination between EU and national authorities.

- Together with the measures already put in place by the air transport sector, testing passengers originating in high-risk areas can to, further reduce transmission risks both in communities and during air travel, restore confidence among the travelling public, avoid border closures and remove ineffective quarantines. This would allow the travel and tourism sectors to also begin their recovery – and thus protect livelihoods.

1 October 2020