



MR JOSEPH BUGEJA, CHAIRMAN & CEO OF TRANSPORT MALTA - PANDEMIC CRISIS, INDUSTRY RECOVERY AND VISION FOR FUTURE

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During MACE 2021 - Malta Aviation conference & Expo, we had an opportunity to interview Mr Joseph Bugeja, Chairman & CEO of Transport Malta. To discuss on pandemic crisis, aviation industry recovery and his vision for future development. We are glad to share with you the essential:

Q. Global crisis stopped everything, what was your first reaction facing corona crisis, without even knowing all circumstances?

A. The massive scale of the outbreak and its sheer unpredictability made it extremely challenging for everyone to respond. As an Island nation, we were extremely worried as the consequences were two fold – taking all measures to ensure the health of the nation and suspension of connectivity to protect it. This implied that we had to stop all flight connections abruptly and try to

manage such a critical activity and its implications on the nation. It was a big challenge that required bold and courageous decision-making as we were navigating uncharted waters. Fear from the unknown amongst employees and other stakeholders rendered everything surreal.

Q. How you managed supply issues – as an island, you are quite depending on cargo?

A. Communication and trust among the decision makers was key. The challenge was to make sure that we all understood we had one common objective – protecting the health of a nation. But everyone needed to look at the bigger picture and not focus on one's direct remit. As an island nation, connectivity is our lifeline and once everyone involved – government, health authorities, our civil aviation directorate and civil protection amongst others, was aligned to this goal. We found common ground on how to safely keep the flow of cargo into our island. New health protocols were designed and implemented to organize critical flights and related activities. We issued the relevant NOTAMS for operators to ensure everything was managed safely and efficiently within the circumstances. The major challenge was that everything changed abruptly, sometimes on a daily basis.

Q. What measures were taken to help people working in transport industry?

A. After a year of the Covid 19 pandemic, it is evident that the transport industry was the most effected on the economical level. The travel restrictions that were put in place to minimize the spread of the virus hindered the capability of companies to transport passengers from different places around the world and the freedom of movement. As a result, transportation related revenues dropped significantly, transport workers' wages jeopardized, some transport workers were laid off, and some transport companies closed due to bankruptcy. Our government was instrumental in supporting the industry. The Maltese Government has implemented several measures as part of a financial package to help the Maltese economy during the COVID-19 outbreak, mainly aimed at easing pressures on the liquidity of businesses, protecting jobs and helping the most vulnerable during this challenging period. Following the initial measures, the focus of Government shifted on an Economic Recovery Plan aimed at reducing business costs, stimulating domestic consumption and directly supporting businesses.

On a local, operational level, our crew were assisted and given certain exemptions to operate. At a later stage, Transport workers were considered as essential and were given priority during the vaccination programme. In fact, all our transport workers had been fully vaccinated before the summer season. Our own Civil Aviation personnel worked remotely through their central online system to assist our clients whilst several exemptions were issued to allow companies continuity and to diversify from their normal operations.

Q. Industry recovery – how you see it in actual situation, what is your vision for next 2 years?

A. No one can underestimate just how much the COVID-19 pandemic has devastated airlines. Apart from the financial implications, the pandemic's longer-term effects on aviation are now emerging and become clearer. Apart from the obvious one related to hygiene and safety standards, which have and will become more stringent, the major challenge, not just for the aviation industry but for the whole transportation sector, is digitalization.

It will certainly affect the whole travel experience and keep up, through several applications, travelers' vaccine certificates and/or COVID-19 test results.

The COVID-19 has also changed consumer behavior but I believe the people's propensity to travel

will increase as people are itching to travel again for holidays. As long as the recovery post COVID-19 remains stable and manageable, leisure trips and business travel will fuel the recovery although remote work and other flexible working arrangements are likely to remain for some time. However, it will take time for airlines to restore former capacity, and may experience some bottlenecks and delays in bringing aircraft back to service. Crew retraining is also another constraint. All these factors may lead to a higher demand than supply, resulting in possible higher short-term prices.

Q. What measures you would initiate on EU level to protect the industry and assure the definitive recovery?

A. In order to be effective, industry wide challenges must be address holistically and in a more unified approach. Everyone should work together and have the same reaction. Although the situation could differ from country to country, the basic reactions should be streamlined and better coordinated. The industry needs time to reboot itself, so we need to work together to regain people's trust to travel with the necessary peace of mind. On a higher EU level, greener transportation remains one big challenge for the aviation industry. The devastating effecting of COVID-19 pandemic on the aviation industry has temporarily, but rightly, shifted focus from this impending issue but it still remains a major long-term objective. The availability of sustainable aviation fuels at competitive prices is a key step forward for the industry on its decarbonization journey and can help achieve the desired climate goals. We must also not forget that any changes in the geopolitical landscape will create new challenges to maintain global approaches to aviation policymaking but also new opportunities.

We thank Mr Joseph Bugeja for this conversation! With best wishes for aviation cluster of Malta we will be closely follow further development.



Transport Malta

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