



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
September 12, 2018

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Privatized Foreign Systems Continue to Fall Further Behind the U.S.

European air traffic control providers are plagued by massive delays and cancellations

- According to a recent AP article, “the leading trade group for global airlines is criticizing air traffic control agencies in Europe for seeking ‘super-normal profits’ instead of investing to improve performance at a time when air travelers are facing longer waits.” ([Washington Times, July 18, 2018](#))
- Specifically, according to the International Air Transportation Association (IATA), privatized and non-privatized air navigation service providers (ANSPs) across Europe are experiencing increased delays. In fact, **“in the first half of 2018, air traffic management delays more than doubled to 47,000 minutes per day, 133% more than in the same period last year.”** ([IATA Press Release No. 42, July 18, 2018](#))
- Yet at the same time, “the largest service providers have either under-invested in staff or use outdated employment practices which don't deploy staff when and where they're most needed, resulting in unnecessary delays for passengers. Many European ANSPs have also failed to make planned technology investments intended to increase capacity.” ([IATA Press Release No. 42, July 18, 2018](#))
- For example, across Europe, **Ryanair was forced to cancel 1,100 flights in June 2018, “due to air traffic control strikes and staff shortages in the U.K., Germany and France.”** Chief marketing officer Kenny Jacobs said: “Regrettably, over 210,000 Ryanair customers had their flights cancelled in June because of four weekends of ATC (air traffic control) strikes and repeated U.K., German and French ATC staff shortages.” ([The Independent, July 3, 2018](#))

Canada's privatized ATC system has been plagued with delays, staffing shortages; radar technology costs continue

- Air Canada, the flag carrier and largest airline in Canada, recently was ranked last in on-time performance out of 72 global airlines that are tracked by AirHelp, a consumer advocacy group. ([AirHelp, 2018](#))
- In July 2018, more than 22 percent of flights at **Canada's nine busiest airports were delayed, with an average delay of more than 52 minutes, according to FlightStats.** ([FlightStats, July 2018](#))
- Total air travel complaints in Canada skyrocketed in recent years. According to the Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA), **over the past five years, total complaints have increased almost tenfold, reaching more than 5,000 complaints in 2017-2018.** ([CBC News, July 26, 2018](#))
- Canada is in the midst of a **staffing crisis** as well. According to a study by the Canadian Council for Aviation and Aerospace (CCAA), Canada will need 2,000 new air traffic controllers between 2017 and 2025. ([CCAA Labour Market Information Report, March 2018](#))
- A Nav Canada senior official has admitted that **staffing shortages are having an impact and that the problem is most acutely felt at the largest airports**, where staff is stretched. "There are always [staffing] challenges throughout Canada, especially when we get into the four majors—Montreal, Pearson, Calgary International and Vancouver International...So if we have a number of retirements, or we have someone go off sick, we can get into situations where we'll have a reduced number of controllers." ([Skies Magazine, June 29, 2018](#))
- These staffing issues also extend to airline baggage handlers. At Trudeau International Airport, Air Canada passengers report that suitcases are routinely lost. One passenger said that Air Canada had lost her luggage twice in the past month, while another passenger said, "You feel helpless, because they have your belongings, and I feel like a coat check at any restaurant does a better job of security than what Air Canada has done with these bags." Air Canada even acknowledges the staffing issue, "An Air Canada employee at the airport told CBC there's just not enough staff to deal with the backlog." ([CBC News, Aug. 20, 2018](#)) But to passenger rights activist Gábor Lukács, staff shortages are no excuse for lost luggage, and according to Lukács, airlines have "a legal obligation to transport the bag with the passenger—to make sure the bag is available when the passenger arrives." ([CBC News, Aug. 26, 2018](#))
- Additionally, Air Canada has said that 20,000 mobile app users may have been affected by a data breach between August 22 and August 24. Information that may have been accessed includes name and contact information, personal information like passport and NEXUS card numbers (which is for expedited processing when entering the U.S. or Canada), gender, birth date, nationality, and financial information like credit card numbers. ([Global News, Aug. 29, 2018](#))
- Moreover, Nav Canada **continues to depend on and invest in ground-based radar. In 2017, Nav Canada announced that the replacement process will take 10 years, and that "over the course of the next 10 years a massive radar replacement project will take place across the country. It's the largest capital project NAV CANADA has ever undertaken at a cost of \$159 million."** ([Nav Canada Blog, Oct. 20, 2017](#))
- Earlier this year, Sunwing Airlines had at least five flights that were delayed for **roughly 24 hours out of Toronto's Pearson Airport**, during which passengers were unable to

access their baggage, cutting them off from clothing or medication. ([CityNews, April 16, 2018](#)) **After receiving 89 complaints involving 23 flights**, the Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA) launched an investigation of Sunwing Airlines. ([CBC News, April 26, 2018](#))

UK NATS, the UK's privatized ATC provider, plagued by flight delays and outdated technology

- The UK's privatized air traffic control provider, NATS, faces constant delays. According to data from the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), flights at the top airports in the U.K. left an average of 15 minutes late in 2017. **The Airport Operators Association said that "outdated" airspace infrastructure limits the efficiency of flights.** ([BBC, May 21, 2018](#))
- In the NATS 2018 annual report, CEO Martin Rolfe stated that "our airspace structures have not changed significantly **over the past 50 years and will not accommodate the forecast growth in traffic and airport infrastructure**, including a new runway at Heathrow, without causing unacceptable air traffic delays to the travelling public." ([NATS, 2018](#))
- According to Which? Travel, a consumer advocacy website, airlines are "padding" their schedules to say they've improved their on-time performance. As a result, scheduled flight times across Europe are up to 35 minutes slower this summer than they were 10 years ago. Despite padding their schedules, British Airways, Easyjet, and Ryanair were *still* less punctual last year than in 2009. ([Which? Travel, Aug. 27, 2018](#)) Rory Boland, from Which? Travel, told The Mirror, "longer scheduled flight times are likely to mean passengers spend more time sitting around at the gate or on the plane itself, just so the airline can pat itself on the back for being 'on time' at your destination. Conveniently, it could also reduce the number of instances when an airline has to pay you compensation for a flight delay." ([The Mirror, Aug. 27, 2018](#))
- Heathrow Airport just last **month experienced an airline IT glitch and a temporary closure of Heathrow's air traffic control tower.** ([Sky News, July 19, 2018](#)) While the air traffic control tower was closed, take-offs and landings were stopped, and between the two incidents, **hundreds of flights were delayed and some departures were cancelled.** This ultimately **affected 10,000 passengers, including around 3,000 British Airways passengers stranded overnight abroad.** ([The Independent, July 19, 2018](#))
- These issues have persisted throughout the UK's system. According to The Independent, citing a CAA report, "high levels of sickness, unplanned retirements, and staff reluctant to work overtime all contributed to the disarray" of the air traffic control system in the UK. ([The Independent, Aug. 4, 2017](#))
- In addition, NATS has stated that a "**massive**" **program of modernization** is needed to keep up with demand for air travel. According to a NATS official, "We are going to have to redesign our airspace and we are going to need government support to make sure we can do that in the right way." ([BBC, June 30, 2017](#))
- Staffing issues also continue to plague Gatwick Airport, the second busiest airport in Britain, where air traffic control is managed by ANS, a British subsidiary of the German company DFS Group. ([Daily Mail, April 8, 2018](#))
- UK passengers are becoming more and more unhappy when it comes to flying. The CAA's August 2018 UK Aviation Consumer Survey found that only 39 percent of respondents agree that "the experience of travelling by air is getting better." ([UK Aviation Consumer Survey, Aug. 2018, p. 7](#)) Additionally, overall satisfaction with respondents' last flights has declined from 90 percent in March 2016 to 83 percent as of April 2018. ([UK Aviation Consumer Survey, Aug. 2018, p. 31](#)) While in the same time-

frame, the passenger experience with airports has also gotten worse; respondents' satisfaction with each part of the "airport experience" has declined over the last two years. ([UK Aviation Consumer Survey, Aug. 2018, p. 40](#))

- After a late-night landing due to delayed flights, Ryanair passengers were forced to wait hours at Stansted Airport to retrieve their baggage. Ryanair attributed the flight disruptions to air traffic control delays and bad weather and said the baggage delays occurred because, "Some flights are arriving much later than planned—especially at night—which has stretched available resources beyond normal shift timings." In some cases, passengers were forced to wait up to five hours. ([BBC News, Aug. 12, 2018](#))
- This isn't an isolated incident, either. About two weeks later, baggage delays at Manchester Airport caused "chaos," according to one passenger quoted by BBC News. The cause for the delay was a fire alarm, which forced an evacuation of the terminal and overextended the overnight Swissport staff of baggage handlers. Passengers vented their frustration, saying the airport told them nothing, with one passenger saying he'd been calling the airport and Swissport, the baggage handler, since 9 a.m. and no one was answering the phone. ([BBC News, Aug. 25, 2018](#))
- Gatwick Airport, the second-busiest airport, experienced what The Independent described as "chaos" after departure screens went out due to an IT issue on "one of the busiest days of the summer." Airport staff was forced to use "temporary flight boards," which were literally whiteboards with information written on them, while staff made announcements about gates. This led to many flights departing late, with some flights leaving over an hour late. ([The Independent, Aug. 20, 2018](#))

Source of U.S. airline delays and travel woes has nothing to do with ATC

- According to data by the U.S. Department of Transportation, it's factors within the airlines' control, including mechanical, staffing, volume and scheduling issues, more than weather and ATC, that were responsible for the majority of delays in 2017. ([Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics](#)) These delays are getting worse, **with over 19 percent of flights delayed in 2017, which is 3.5 percent higher than the prior year.** ([Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics](#))
- Not only do the airlines make little effort to manage day-of flight operations, but very **frequently they are responsible for IT glitches that cause system-wide delays.** A recent news report from the Washington Post highlighted that **technology-related meltdowns and outages among domestic airlines has "risen unevenly during the past decade."** ([Washington Post, Jan. 11, 2018](#))
- One airline executive at Frontier recently said, "We don't necessarily believe that it's cost-effective to end up in the top quartile for on-time performance." ([The American Prospect, Nov. 3, 2017](#))
- At an off-the-record crew forum, American Airlines President Robert Isom acknowledged that they've had "a really rough summer," dropping to 15th in on-time performance for North America. Isom identified a few reasons for American's drop in on-time performance, including an older fleet of aircraft and even the degrading performance of newer aircraft. ([View From The Wing, Aug. 14, 2018](#))
- In fact, the airlines and the companies they rely on to administer their technological systems were responsible for **12 massive glitches causing system-wide delays** in 2017. ([Quartz](#))

- In June, PSA Airlines, a regional carrier of American Airlines, was forced to cancel about 3,000 flights after a computer problem occurred within PSA Airlines' crew scheduling program. Of the canceled flights, 2,500 were through the Charlotte Douglas International Airport. ([Charlotte Observer, June 28, 2018](#))
- A little more than a month later, all American Airlines flights were grounded for about 40 minutes by another glitch. On the same day, but unrelated to the American Airlines glitch, Delta, United and Alaska Airlines had more than a thousand flights delayed by a system outage at SkyWest. According to the Daily Mail, "Some 1,106 SkyWest flights were delayed along with 686 American Airlines flights due to their respective malfunctions." ([Daily Mail, July 30, 2018](#))
- Airline consolidation compounds the issue. According to Jack Vonder Heide, president of Technology Briefing Centers, "**Carriers that have been through multiple mergers are most likely to suffer an IT outage.** This is due to the patchwork of systems, components and staffing that is prone to error." ([The Washington Post, Jan. 11, 2018](#))
- Bob Edwards, former chief information officer of United Airlines, has said, "**When fuel prices are low and there's extra cash on hand, they want to spend it on the cool shiny things like planes and mobile apps...Nobody gets excited about the data center.**" ([Reuters, Aug. 12, 2016](#))
- Airlines in the United States fail to make adequate investments into their own IT infrastructure, despite **collecting \$7.5 billion in baggage and reservation change fees in 2017.** ([Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics](#))

Examples go on and on...

- In July of 2016, a single failed router forced Southwest Airlines to cancel 2,300 flights over four days. ([The Wall Street Journal, March 17, 2017](#))
- United Airlines experienced almost back-to-back delays toward the end of January and early February of 2017. First a computer failure delayed 481 flights in one day. ([Bloomberg, Jan. 23, 2017](#)) Two weeks later, United experienced a system-wide computer problem that "slowed down the creation of flight plans for airline crews and employees," and delayed hundreds of flights at airports across the country. ([Chicago Tribune, Feb. 8, 2017](#))
- In August 2017, a "network issue" with SkyWest led to hundreds of Delta, American, United and Alaska Airlines flights being delayed, and 62 flights being cancelled. ([Quartz](#))
- In November 2017, American Airlines experienced a glitch in its internal computer system that allowed thousands of pilots to be granted time off and created uncertainty as to whether there would be flight crews for more than 15,000 American flights scheduled between Dec. 17 and Dec. 31. ([CBS News, Nov. 30, 2017](#))

As has been demonstrated over and over, privatization of air traffic control would not do anything to lessen delays and travel woes for passengers, as the causes of these delays have nothing to do with ATC. The simple truth is that bad policy proposals are nothing more than beating a dead horse and will never get better with age. ATC privatization has been repeatedly debated, discredited and defeated by bipartisan majorities for years. This terrible scheme needs to be abandoned once and for all to make way for genuine air travel reforms that will provide positive benefits for the traveling public and all communities across the country.

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