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INVITED FOREWORD: AUSTRO CONTROL

This year has been hard on all of us. It has seen not only an unprecedented slow down in air traffic, but it has brought to the forefront many questions which we as industry might have been putting off facing. Not only were we facing questions of rescaling our operations, minimising health risks for our staff and addressing human factors concerns, but we were also confronted with the limitations of our underlying regulatory and financial framework. This raised the need to re-think much of our industry and many embedded habits.

That has been and remains a recurring theme for us this year at Austro Control. The learning of lessons every day was crucial during the fast-evolving months of March and April – when global forecasts of the nature of the pandemic and how it would spread, as well as the appropriate individual measures that needed to be taken, had to be rapidly adopted just to keep air traffic moving and our people safe. In order to keep the skies open, our procedures for the planning and conduct of day-to-day operations had to be more adaptable than they have ever been designed to be. But Austrian airspace, along with much of rest of the world has demonstrated that resilience and adaptability in the face of uncertainty can still be achieved, especially when our people come together in creativity and determination.

Applying acute measures is one kind of rapid lesson learning, but out of the ashes of the slowdown has been the need to face larger and much tougher questions about the future of our industry. Here again, Austro Control is not alone in attempting to get this right even as the global situation continues

to change. One thing we have learned already is that we need to make sure we are asking the right questions of ourselves, our systems and our data. The right questions might not always be the most comfortable, and they might reveal things we do not want to hear, but above all else a safe operation needs to be an honest operation.

One of these uncomfortable answers was the realisation that, in many respects, the way we provide our services and the extent to which these are available is determined more by tradition than by an actual and current assessment of the demands, requirements and necessary safety levels, let alone by an agreement between the stakeholders, particularly the State, and the ANSPs. We have yet to learn how to better address this issue and what impact it will have on air navigation services in the future, balancing financial constraints, service provision, capacity demand and safety levels in a new way.

The more immediate question of skill fade led us to conclude a large survey

of operational controllers to look at human performance through the unusual situation of having almost no air traffic. We wanted to understand how the novel situation has affected our operation and our people. This survey has shown us that we can be proud of the flexibility, cooperation and vigilance of our staff during the COVID lockdown, but also that as traffic returns, we must not ignore the effects that low traffic loads over such an extended period of time have had on controllers and pilots alike. We are grateful for even the smallest lessons and insights that our people and operation can provide, so that we can ensure a smooth and safe transition back to normal operations.

By listening and learning through interaction with our operations staff, whether it be through surveys, safety reporting or honest conversations with management, we will continue to build a system that can adapt to all kinds of situations – whether it be the overloads we experienced in 2019, or the underloads in 2020. Listening and learning is the key to providing our services effectively, efficiently and safely.

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Axel was born in Vienna in 1975, where he also concluded his studies of physics and law. He became a professional pilot in 1996 and worked in the commercial aviation industry in various management and non-management positions, including his own executive charter company. He currently holds an ATPL with flight instructor and flight examiner privileges. From 2005 until 2008 he was part of Austro Control, responsible for the approval and oversight of pilot training organisations at a time when Austria introduced JAA regulations. Afterwards, being self-employed, he directed his focus more on safety and quality management for the aviation industry. Having prepared different airlines for IOSA audits, he became an IATA-approved IOSA auditor in 2015 and conducted a large number of airline audits worldwide. He was appointed managing director of Austro Control from 1 January 2019. He lives in Vienna and is always happy to share his passion for his hometown with any visitors.