

Chopin Airport in Warsaw has enjoyed an 11% increase in passenger traffic.

Pole position

Poland has seen rapid growth in its air traffic following the nation's entry into the EU. To keep pace with this increase and further drive air travel expansion, there are plans to develop Poland's airport infrastructure in line with the best in the world. **Michal Marzec**, director general of Polish Airports, tells Mark Brierley how the country intends to do this.

How has Polish air travel changed in the post-war period? For example, what effect has the fall of communism, Poland's recent entry into the EU and the economic downturn had on air travel trends in the country?

Michal Marzec: Polish air travel has been growing rapidly over the past few years. The numbers say it all: since Poland's accession to the EU and the introduction of the 'open skies' policy, with budget airlines entering the market, passenger traffic at all Polish airports has been increasing by over 30% every year.

In 2004 Polish airports handled a total of 8.8 million passengers. In 2007, the number rose to as many as 19.1 million – an increase of 116%. And if we take into account the regional airports alone, excluding Warsaw, the growth rate was even greater – nearly 260%.

Michal Marzec

Michal Marzec is director general of the state enterprise Polish Airports (PPL). He has worked on civil aviation law for the Polish Ministry of Transport and was vice-president of the Association of Regional Airports. Marzec has been a board member of the Council of the European Airports, ACI Europe, since 2008.



Alongside China, Poland was at that time one of the two fastest-developing markets in the world.

According to the Polish Civil Aviation Office, last year saw 20 million passengers served at all Polish airports. European Commission statistics show that citizens of the so-called 'old EU' travel by plane an average of 2.5 times a year, whereas the average Pole flies once every two years. This reflects the enormous potential of the Polish air travel market.

Also, the economy is bouncing back from the 2009 crisis. Chopin Airport saw passenger numbers increase by more than 11% year-on-year in the first four

months of 2011. I believe this shows that we've put the crisis behind us as more people can afford to travel by plane again, whether on business or on holiday.

What strategy does Polish Airports (PPL) use for the improvement of the air transport infrastructure in Poland as a whole?

It is true PPL's activities include the construction and management of airports, as well as the provision of services to passengers and airlines. However, we only operate two airports: one in Warsaw and one in Zielona Góra. PPL holds shares in ten other companies operating



Polish airports served 20 million travellers in 2010.

airports in Kraków, Szczecin, Poznan, Gdansk, Modlin, Wrocław, Katowice, Szczytno, Bydgoszcz and Rzeszów, but

these are independent companies. Undoubtedly, UEFA's decision to award the 2012 European Football Championships to Poland and Ukraine is acting as a major stimulus to the development of Polish airports. All major airports – the ones in Warsaw, Kraków, Katowice, Gdansk, Wrocław and Poznan – are preparing to accommodate the increased traffic. New passenger terminals are being built, along with new aprons and taxiways, and new navigation instruments are being installed to facilitate operation in difficult weather.

The construction of two new airports is underway in Modlin, north of Warsaw, and in Swidnik, near Lublin in eastern Poland. Both have the ambition to handle over 1.5 million passengers per annum.

We are, as a shareholder, directly involved in the development of Modlin Airport, which is expected to be a reliever airport for Warsaw Chopin. We hope this will result in more flights to the Warsaw region, especially those operated by low-cost airlines.

This rapid development of Poland's airport industry is spurred by strong air

traffic growth forecasts. As the operator of Warsaw Airport and a shareholder in regional airports, we welcome these changes. Rather than seeing each other as competitors, we seek to work together.

So where do you see air traffic coming from in the future, in terms of passengers and carriers?

Our aim is to gradually expand Chopin Airport's route network. Our efforts have already been rewarded, with 4.7% passengers more last year than in 2009. Apart from Europe, we intend to extend our route network in the Middle East, Asia and South America.

In 2010, 14 new services were introduced, including two to the Middle East. We also launched flights to Hanoi in Vietnam, our first Far East destination. The service is operated by Polish airline LOT, our long-time business partner, which has helped us establish a strong position in Central Europe.

Our plans are to further develop cooperation with LOT and add new

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Chopin's route network will extend still further in the Middle East, Asia and South America.

destinations to our long-haul route network. Once LOT's new Boeing 787 Dreamliners have been delivered, we will continue to work together to open up new routes to the US, with an emphasis on Atlanta, Miami and Washington, and to increase flights to New York. We have also started talks with American air carriers, including Delta Airlines, which has been interested in operating flights to and from Warsaw for some time now.

We also seek to attract other carriers offering long-distance services. Our intention is to extend the airport's route network to include destinations in the Far East and Central Asia, such as China and Kazakhstan.

With such a strategic view over Poland's airports, is the plan to develop each with a unique selling point based on their location and facilities? Are you developing each with particular customers or routes in mind?

PPL's main area of activity is managing Warsaw Chopin Airport, therefore our focus is on its development and establishing its position as the strongest aviation brand in Central Europe.

Our business efforts are aimed at attracting new customers, while looking after the existing ones. For example, we reduced airport charges as of October 2009, which was well received by airlines struggling with the effects of the economic downturn. Carriers and tour operators can also benefit from our marketing cooperation programmes. Flights from Warsaw are now widely

advertised. Those activities have recently been recognised at the Routes Europe forum in Cagliari, where Chopin Airport received the 'highly commended' status in the Routes Airport Marketing Awards.

Together with LOT we strive to make Chopin Airport a more appealing transit airport, particularly to passengers coming from Polish regional airports and those flying from the East to destinations in Europe and North America. We would also like to launch connecting flights on Middle East and Asian routes. Hence, our focus is on developing long-haul services to North America, the Middle East and Asia, as well as streamlining the transit process. Clearly, we must not only attract carriers from those regions, but also work more closely with our national airline. Cooperation with LOT is one of our top priorities.

We have also been developing our infrastructure. In 2010 we opened a new executive lounge, Polonez, the fourth one at Chopin Airport. The lounge is available to LOT and Star Alliance passengers. Being aware of the importance of this segment of the airport services to airlines, we are currently in the process of preparing a new range of VIP services ('VIP Line'), including personal service, private transfer to the aircraft and separate, quiet and comfortable lounges to satisfy our most demanding customers. An increasing number of business passengers are choosing low-cost carriers. Chopin Airport is conveniently located (just 8km from the city centre) and has all the necessary infrastructure while maintaining reasonable prices. We greatly value our

cooperation with budget airlines, which is reflected in the segment's leading carriers, such as Wizz Air, who now base their aircraft at Chopin Airport.

Airport capacity expansion, especially runway capacity, is lagging far behind other regions globally. Do you see Poland re-positioning itself within Europe to take advantage of other European airports' limited expansion plans?

In my opinion there are currently no capacity problems at Polish airports and certainly there are no concerns regarding runway capacity. Air traffic in Poland is still relatively small and there is room for all carriers willing to operate from Polish airports. At Chopin Airport we handle 34 aircraft movements per hour, but in Poznan there are 12 take-offs and landings an hour and in Łódź only two. In Warsaw we plan to develop the manoeuvring area so as to increase the throughput to 50 aircraft movements per hour. Within two years there will be new rapid-exit taxiways and a category III instrument landing system, allowing us to accommodate more aircraft regardless of varying weather conditions.

In the near future we expect to complete the extension of the passenger terminal and open a direct rail link with the airport. Due to the growing demand, reflected in record freight figures in 2010, we also plan to expand cargo infrastructure.

It is also worth noting that the government is considering building a brand new airport in central Poland, which would compete for the position of a leading Central European hub, taking over much of the traffic from both Warsaw and Łódź airports and from airports in other countries as well.

In this way we are catching up with Western European countries, which have more advanced airport infrastructure, becoming a more attractive business for airlines. Poland is one of the fastest-growing markets in the air traffic industry and I'm confident that the extensive development plan will only help strengthen our position. ■