You have completed four years of your tenure as Director General at EUROCONTROL. What are your biggest accomplishments?

I have now been Director General for four years and so I still have almost a year – quite a long time – to go, with a lot on our plate for 2017! Looking at my mandate so far, we have seen membership grow further which is an indication of EUROCONTROL’s attractiveness as the competency centre of Air Traffic Management (ATM) in Europe. With the accession of Georgia and Estonia, we now have 41 member states and comprehensive agreements with the Kingdom of Morocco and the State of Israel. That’s important, as the Single European Sky and its coherent rules and procedures have to cover the whole of Europe, not just the EU states, in order to avoid fragmentation through different Air Traffic Control Procedures. The ATM network is more efficient at improving performance when it covers the entire continent.

We have also seen a much greater appreciation that ATM is not a monolithic function but rather that it is the sum of a whole range of services, such as surveillance, data processing, aeronautical information management, communications both air–ground and ground–ground, and so on. Each of these services needs to be considered individually to see how it can best be organised. It’s the concept behind our Centralised Services programme for services that are best organised on a pan-European level in an industrial partnership with Air Navigation Service Providers (ANSPs) and the manufacturing industry; here we are close to letting contracts for some of the first such services to demonstrate that ATM is a service and can be done under market conditions; however, this is not everywhere accepted, so obviously we do see some opposition to this market-based approach.

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How have you seen EUROCONTROL change during your time at the organisation?

The Agency is certainly leaner – reflecting the pressures on ATM as a whole. In fact, our costs are going down about twice as rapidly as required under the EU’s Performance Scheme (for RP1 and RP2). We’re also more focussed on how we can really add value to ATM in Europe. The landscape is changing – not least because of the increased (and increasing) role of the EC and its agencies. EUROCONTROL has a valuable, and valued, role to play. It is truly pan-European, it has a unique civil–military capability and its technical experience and expertise are widely recognised, both in Europe and globally.

So, we’re working closely with our EU colleagues to make sure that we can help achieve our common goal – the Single European Sky. A good example of this is the major contribution that the EUROCONTROL Agency makes to SESAR. We were a founding member of the SESAR Joint Undertaking and we are continuing this with SESAR 2020, investing time, money and technical expertise into many of the projects. We have received an additional mandate to operate military air traffic control out of Maastricht through an integrated civil–military operational set-up.

What improvements have you seen in ATM performance in Europe and how have these been achieved?

Just over 20 years ago, Europe was suffering massive levels of delay as a result of insufficient capacity. The solution included the creation of the Central Flow Management Unit – now part of EUROCONTROL’s Network Manager function. Despite rising traffic – last year saw our highest ever number of flights
(about 10.2 million) – en route delays are now, on average, well under a minute. That has come about as a result of coordinated effort by all EUROCONTROL’s 41 member states, the ANSPs and the airspace users, including the military.

At the same time, safety is at remarkable levels, despite high and increasing numbers of flights. Costs, while still higher than in the US, are coming down. However, we need to be careful to strike a balance between costs and other objectives. For example, we are seeing signs of delays increasing in some areas, possibly as a result of cost cutting. EUROCONTROL, as Network Manager, works closely with ANSPs across Europe to identify issues such as these and to minimise overall network delay.

What are the biggest challenges in achieving the Single European Sky currently?

It is well known that the fragmentation of the industry is perhaps the greatest challenge. There are just 20 Area Control Centres covering the whole of the continental US upper airspace, compared with 62 for Europe. That means a lot more support staff and many duplicated systems. However, we need to recognise that it is very difficult, politically, for a country to allow its airspace to be managed by a control centre located in a neighbouring country, despite the fact that EUROCONTROL’s Maastricht Upper Area Control Centre (MUAC) demonstrates that this can be achieved and that it can be done very efficiently.

This fragmentation is one of the drivers for the move to stop looking at ATM as an indivisible operation and to start seeing how services can be provided cross-border. In 2016, we conducted a trial in which live surveillance data was sent by Slovenia to MUAC and processed in Maastricht with the Maastricht ATM System. These data were provided to Slovenia in a form suitable for use at the Air Traffic Controllers’ working positions in ATC. This demonstrated how even ATM data, a central element of ATM, can be processed offsite in real time. I am sure that we will see more developments such as this, which some call ‘virtual centres’.

The airline industry, as the finance source for the European air traffic system, has a significant interest in the business. How do you see that interest evolving in EUROCONTROL as a state entity?

EUROCONTROL is an intergovernmental organisation. Its funding comes from the states, which choose to recoup this, along with the costs of their ATM operations, from airspace
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users. In turn, many of these users recover these costs from their passengers. In addition, some of EUROCONTROL’s activities, such as the Network Manager functions, are carried out in the context of European Union legislation. EUROCONTROL thus has many stakeholders, both civil and military. For many years, it has involved them, including the airline industry, in its advisory and governing bodies.

Indeed, the airline industry is well represented on our Provisional Council as well as the Network Management Board and other bodies. There are two airline staff in a liaison cell at our Brussels site with full access to operational information meetings and we also have aircraft operator liaison officers in our operations centre.

EUROCONTROL’s member states have examined how the governance of EUROCONTROL might be streamlined and how it should evolve in the future. This includes the role of the airline industry. At this stage, it is too early to speculate on the form of this evolution, although it appears likely that EUROCONTROL will remain an intergovernmental organisation.

How do you see EUROCONTROL developing over the next five years?
The most significant developments relate to the re-nomination of EUROCONTROL as Network Manager which we expect at the end of 2017. The current mandate ends at the end of 2019 and we are currently working with the EC in order to develop the Network Manager role further. EUROCONTROL has a unique capability here and it is widely acknowledged that the Network Manager is one of the clear success stories of the Single European Sky. It is in the interests of European ATM that this continues and I am confident that we will be able to reach an agreement with the EU for this to happen.