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PRESS RELEASE

Economic importance of air transport and airport activities in Belgium – 2012 report

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In March 2009, the National Bank of Belgium (NBB) first published an extensive study of the economic importance of air transport and airport activities in Belgium. In December 2011, a first update was released, presenting the results for the 2007-2009 period. In 2013, NBB was asked to update its analysis again.

The study assesses the economic importance of Belgian air transport and airport activities in terms of value added, employment and investment in the 2009-2012 period. It does not limit itself to aviation only and encompasses all other activities in Belgium's six airport zones (Antwerp, Brussels, Charleroi, Liège, Kortrijk and Ostend). It also focuses on indirect value added and employment, and includes an analysis of social balance sheets and a number of financial ratios (return on equity, liquidity and solvency).

The 2009 slowdown in the results reported by Belgian air transport and airport activities compared to the year earlier persisted well into 2010. However, the fall in the 2010 value added was amply compensated in 2011 and 2012, taking total growth at current prices over the 2009-2012 period to 9.9%, in line with growth in the country's national economy. The air transport cluster performed better than other airport-related activities on airport sites. Within the air transport cluster, the key drivers were air transport itself and building and repairing of aircraft. In 2012, air transport and airport activities generated €2.9 billion in direct value added. Together with the indirect value added, this works out at €5.6 billion or 1.5% of Belgium's GDP.

Unlike value added, employment never quite recovered from its 2010 decline and failed to return to 2009 levels. That said, in 2012 air transport and airport activities directly employed over 32,100 full-time equivalents – and well over double that figure (66,200 FTEs) if we factor in employment created indirectly. The total figure represents 1.7% of Belgian domestic employment.

The story was no different for direct investment in 2010: it, too, came down by no less than 30% on the previous year and failed to make up for lost ground in the years after. The companies within the scope of the study invested over €349 million in 2012. Airport operators accounted for the highest cumulative spend in the four-year period, three-quarters of which was down to Brussels Airport Company.

A subsequent analysis of the various Belgian airports and related activities shows Brussels Airport to be unquestionably the largest, boasting a 70-75% share on most parameters: 75% of the direct value added by the total group of six Belgian airports, 76% of direct employment, 70% of direct investment and 72% of passenger arrivals and departures, putting it 21st in the ranking of European passenger airports. However, the airport's share had amounted to 87% in 2003 and the difference between the two percentages has gone to Charleroi, which on the back of Ryanair's success now claims over one-third of Brussels Airport's passenger numbers. On cargo traffic, Brussels was overtaken a few years ago by Liège, which now accounts for over half of all Belgian cargo traffic. Liège and Brussels currently come 8th and 9th in the European cargo airports ranking.

In relative terms, Brussels Airport has recorded a decline in the 2009-2012 period under review, with direct value added and direct employment both down, by -3.4% and -3.9% respectively. Factoring in indirect effects, growth figures amounted to 0.6% for added value and a negative 1.8% for employment. Charleroi, Brussels' main rival on passenger traffic, notched up a jump in (direct) value added of 42.3% and employment growth of 17.1% in the same period. Cargo traffic frontrunner Liège saw its value added climb 31.8%, with employment numbers growing by 16.4%. Flemish regional airports Antwerp and Kortrijk also showed growth, if to a lesser degree, but they have specialised more in flight training and business aviation. Increases in direct value added and employment came in at 10.4% and 1.3% respectively for Antwerp and at 30.2% and 2.0% for Kortrijk. Only Ostend performed less, with an ongoing decline in value added and employment: it lost 17.7% of its direct value added and 11.8% of direct employment in the space of three years, primarily in the wake of contracting cargo traffic.