German Aerospace Industries Association

Shaping European aviation research to be technology-neutral and strategically focused

BDLI position paper on the structure of research funding within the framework of the proposed 'Smart and Clean Aviation' partnership

The BDLI welcomes the continuation of a European aviation partnership. We advocate a research approach that is open to all technologies whilst remaining strategically focused, taking into account the differing requirements of the various aviation segments. Clear funding priorities should drive decarbonisation, strengthen Europe's industrial competitiveness, sovereignty and resilience, and link research with industrial application.

Expanding the thematic focus to include missing technology pathways

The background paper for the ERAC '[1]' meeting on 12 and 13 October envisages a focus on electric, hydrogen-powered and hybrid-electric aircraft. These approaches are key building blocks of future aviation research. The BDLI is committed to supplementing these with missing technology pathways for all aviation segments and to aligning funding with the requirements of the various aviation segments, as well as with strategic objectives such as maintaining competitiveness and technological leadership, and decarbonisation.

1 Taking aviation segments into account and setting funding priorities

The future partnership should take into account suitable technology pathways for all aviation segments, including medium- and long-haul. Funding priorities should be set on the basis of transparent criteria. Key factors should include, in particular, technological and industrial feasibility, the strengthening of European competitiveness and technological leadership, the contribution to decarbonisation, and the strengthening of sovereignty and resilience. Technologies that can be deployed earlier should be given greater weighting when setting priorities.

In addition to electric, hybrid-electric and hydrogen-based technologies, consideration should be given to the next generation of commercial aircraft, more efficient engines, aerodynamic improvements, lightweight construction and technologies for the climate-efficient use of sustainable aviation fuels (SAF). This should also include the use of SAF in the regional aircraft segment. The weighting should be based on the respective application potential and the expected contribution to the common objectives.

2 Strengthening Europe's industrial competitiveness

European research funding should provide targeted support for the development of the next generation of commercial aircraft and their components. This also includes new concepts for the short- and medium-haul segment, as well as hybridisation and hydrogen applications. The selection and prioritisation of projects should be guided by the common funding criteria and their potential for industrial application in Europe.

The aim is to build on technological strengths across the European value chain and to safeguard the international competitiveness of the aviation industry. Strategic funding priorities should help to maintain and further develop industrial expertise and technological capacity in Europe.

[1] The European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) is a strategic policy advisory committee that provides early-stage advice to the Council, the Commission and the Member States on research and innovation policy issues.

The digital transformation of the aviation sector is another key challenge in this context. It will require substantial investment across the entire value chain in the coming years and should be given due consideration in European research funding.

3 Linking research with industrial application and market introduction

We are committed to effectively coordinating the European Competitiveness Fund and the future Aviation Partnership. The funding instruments should facilitate a seamless transition from research and innovation, through demonstration and industrial readiness, to market introduction.

Clear interfaces and harmonised funding conditions are intended to prevent funding gaps and accelerate the transfer of promising technologies into industrial application. In this way, the instruments can jointly contribute to decarbonisation and to strengthening Europe's position as an aviation hub.

4. Ensuring reliable funding for research and demonstration

Europe's ambitions for climate-friendly and competitive aviation must be underpinned by adequate and reliable funding. The BDLI is committed to securing investment in research and innovation within the future EU financial framework and to ensuring that aviation research is provided with sufficient funding beyond 2027.

What is required is continuous support for research, through to demonstration and industrial readiness, including projects beyond Technology Readiness Level (TRL) 6, both for individual technology components and at the overall system level. Smaller companies, in particular, should be supported in developing technologies beyond TRL 6. The future Aviation Partnership and the European Competitiveness Fund should be coordinated in such a way as to avoid gaps in funding. Strategic priorities and adequate funding must work in tandem.

Aviation research should be embedded within the relevant funding areas (policy windows) in such a way that synergies with other technological fields – in particular advanced materials or modern manufacturing processes – can be harnessed.

This is possible, in particular, by classifying aviation under Policy Window I (Clean Transition & Industrial Decarbonisation). A restructuring of the policy windows and a shift of the transport sector to Policy Window II, as envisaged by the European Parliament, pose risks to these synergies. Furthermore, this restructuring could reduce the funds available for a future partnership in the aviation sector. A smaller budget would be offset by greater funding pressure arising from a multitude of potential future partnerships within Policy Window II compared to Policy Window I. This would undermine Europe's ambitions to maintain its global technological leadership in civil aviation.

The BDLI therefore supports the Council's position on retaining the Policy Windows proposed by the Commission and urges the Federal Government to defend this position in the trilogue negotiations. This will ensure that this strategically important European industry receives the necessary support to remain globally competitive and sustainable.

Shaping the partnership for a sustainable future

We call on the German Government and the European Commission to advocate for a 'Smart and Clean Aviation' framework that is technology-neutral, strategically focused and reliably funded. The partnership should take into account the requirements of all aviation segments and set clear funding priorities based on transparent criteria. This will enable the decarbonisation of aviation to be combined with the strengthening of European competitiveness.

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