More than ten years after its launch, the Single European Sky remains far from being achieved. The costs of fragmentation of European airspace, coupled with the anticipated growth in traffic, have led both the European Commission and the European Parliament to call for measures to speed up the implementation of the Single European Sky.

Legal framework

Two legislative packages form the SES legal framework.

The SES I package, launched in 2004, included four regulations, mostly designed to improve safety and to restructure airspace on the basis of traffic instead of national boundaries.

The objectives of the SES II package, launched in 2009, included tackling the challenge of substantial growth in air traffic, increasing safety, and reducing costs, delays and the impact of air traffic on the environment. It is built on four pillars:

- **Performance:** this pillar introduced EU-wide performance targets in the areas of cost efficiency, capacity and the environment, in particular. Moreover, it required national supervisory authorities to establish national performance plans, or plans established at the level of the functional airspace blocks (FABS), to contribute to these targets. This pillar also made the creation of FABS mandatory. FABS are regional airspace blocks (see map in annex) based on operational requirements (e.g. more direct routes) instead of national boundaries, to foster increased cooperation and better integration of airspace. Since 2010, EUROCONTROL (see box) has been tasked with assisting the Commission in setting up and managing the performance scheme for air navigation services.

EUROCONTROL

The European Organisation for the Safety of Air Navigation (EUROCONTROL) is a civil-military international organisation, dating from 1960, bringing together 39 European member countries and the EU. EUROCONTROL supports the development of safe, efficient and environmentally friendly air traffic operations across the whole European region.

EUROCONTROL is involved in setting up common rules for the SES. The Commission has asked EUROCONTROL to provide technical support, to draft regulations and to assist in the overall implementation of the future ATM system.

Background

Building on the achievements of the internal market and the need to cope with air transport growth and congestion, the European Commission (EC) launched in 1999 the Single European Sky (SES) initiative. The 1999 Communication underlined in particular that the European Union (EU) could not maintain frontiers in the sky where they had been removed on the ground.

The SES objective is to reform the architecture of air traffic control in the EU in order to meet future capacity and safety needs. It would do this through improving the overall performance of air traffic management (ATM) and air navigation services (ANS), with the aim of:

- increasing airspace capacity threefold, so reducing delays;
- improving safety performance tenfold;
- reducing environmental impact by 10%; and
- reducing ATM costs by 50%.

European airspace remains heavily fragmented today, being divided into 650 sectors under 27 national air traffic control systems. This imposes extra costs of around €5 billion per year. It adds 42 kilometres in distance to the average flight, leading aircraft to consume more fuel and generate more CO2 emissions, and causes more delays. The United States’ air traffic management system handles twice the number of flights at a similar cost. If nothing is done, congestion could substantially increase, considering the anticipated growth in traffic.
• **Safety:** this pillar provided for increased responsibilities for the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) to ensure that common safety rules are applied across the EU.

• **Technology:** focused on the SESAR project, which is working to provide a new generation Europe-wide ATM system.

• **Airport capacity:** the objective was to improve airports' capacity, in particular through the establishment of an Airport Observatory.

Achievements
The Commission’s 2011 report on the implementation of the SES legislation recognised that a lot had been done to implement the first package and that the basic SES II architecture had been set up according to time schedule.

However, it also highlighted that priority had to be given to those actions that would make the biggest contribution to performance and which remained pending, notably the performance scheme, the FABs and the deployment of the SESAR project. 2012 was expected to be a pivotal year for the implementation of the SES.

Criticism and way forward
Speaking at a high-level conference, “Single European Sky: time for action” in October 2012, Commission Vice-President Siim Kallas, responsible for transport, was very critical of the pace of implementation. Of particular concern was the poor achievement and delays affecting both performance targets and FABs.

In this respect, the Commissioner commented that large countries such as France, Germany and the UK, had not met expectations in terms of performance targets.

So far, nine FABs have been established. However, they are not yet operational, due to lack of full compliance with the legal requirements.

Concerning the way forward, Kallas declared that the Commission intended to use all legal means available (e.g. infringement procedures) to ensure that the necessary progress is made. He also announced that the Commission has plans to make new proposals. On one hand, in spring 2013, an "SES 2+" package would help to strengthen and complement the existing framework. On the other, it will table proposals on governance and financing of the SESAR project.

Some reactions from stakeholders
The Association of European Airlines (AEA) welcomed the announcements made by Vice-President Kallas to launch infringement procedures against Member States for non compliance, and urged the Commission to put more emphasis on enforcement.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) reacted positively to the Commission setting the delivery of the SES as Europe’s top aviation priority. It pointed out that the extra costs derived from fragmented airspace cannot be afforded by airlines and passengers, especially in difficult economic times. It recalled that aviation in Europe is a key economic catalyst.

In a resolution from October 2012, the European Parliament (EP) underlined the need to push ahead with the implementation of the SES and recalled the substantial economic benefits that it was expected to bring. The EP asked the Commission to put pressure on those Member States which fail to comply with their obligations, including through sanctions.

It also asked the Commission to report back on implementation of SES legislation by March 2013, to propose a strategy to accelerate the implementation of FABs and to switch to a top-down approach in order to ensure that the objectives of SES II are achieved. The EP also requested that Member States find the necessary funding for the completion of the SES and invited all actors to increase their public communication efforts on the social and environmental benefits of the SES project.
Annex: Map of the Functional Airspace Blocks (FABs)

(Source: European Commission and Eurocontrol)