



**European Commission -  
Speech**  
**[Check Against Delivery]**



## **Clean Aviation Annual Forum 2026 Keynote Speech**

Brussels, 17 March 2026

Ladies and gentlemen,

Competitiveness, sustainability and technological sovereignty are the keys to continued European leadership in aviation. I fully agree with you on this, and these three priorities go hand in hand. Europe is home to many global champions, especially in aviation. We are leaders in aircraft technology and in safe and sustainable air transport. At the same time, our companies face growing global competition and increasing supply chain vulnerabilities. There is also a risk of falling behind in areas such as zero emission technologies and AI driven services.

Let me start with competitiveness. In 2015, we adopted our first Aviation Strategy, which focused on connectivity, capacity and market access. It served us well. However, more than a decade later, the global aviation landscape has fundamentally evolved. Europe has rightly spearheaded decarbonisation efforts, but the increasingly adversarial global environment poses new challenges. It is time for a new Aviation Strategy, one with a strong manufacturing focus as well.

The Strategy will address Europe's innovation paradox. On one hand, we are very good at inventing, thanks in part to the seven billion euros invested in transport research and innovation during the current programming period. Through these investments, we have supported highly innovative companies and technologies, including Clean Aviation. On the other hand, as highlighted in the Draghi report, Europe must do better at bringing these innovations to market and deploying them at scale.

The European Competitiveness Fund proposed for the next programming period is designed to ensure that the EU safeguards and reclaims its competitive advantage. We foresee close links between this fund and the next research and innovation funding programme, with the goal of creating a seamless investment journey from research to deployment. We want to bring this seamless innovation pipeline to life through the proposed moonshot of developing smart and clean aviation and ensuring European leadership in the next generation of CO2 free aircraft and automated air traffic management.

Success will require strong partnerships with industry, a powerful scientific and engineering base supported by Horizon Europe, and robust industrial deployment backed by the Competitiveness Fund. Getting a zero emission aircraft into the sky is an ambitious objective, and our funding must match that ambition. This was the Commission's thinking when proposing to double the budget for research and innovation funding to one hundred and seventy five billion euros for the 2028 to 2034 period. Together with the European Competitiveness Fund, this would provide four hundred and nine billion euros to turn ambition into reality.

Technology is not always the biggest hurdle. The business case can be equally challenging. Taking alternative fuels as an example, closing the innovation gap requires de-risking private investment and addressing revenue risks associated with new technologies and services. This will require strong partnerships with market actors, including financial intermediaries. In the next programming period, we are determined to close this gap by giving companies access to the entire investment journey with simpler rules and faster follow up funding.

I cannot yet say anything about the precise timing of the new Aviation Strategy, but we will soon begin with a call for evidence. What I can say is that the Strategy will build on the Competitiveness Compass and the Clean Industrial Deal. It will also prioritise safety, security, the passenger experience and military mobility. As Europe increases its defence spending, dual use aviation technologies will become increasingly important, and Europe must be able to stand on its own in this area.

Defence is one reason to take innovation seriously, and sustainability is another. Europe is already a

global leader in clean technologies, and our ambition must be to consolidate that leadership and move further up the sustainability ladder by drawing on air traffic management, digitalisation, automation and artificial intelligence. The progress made in recent years is creating renewed confidence within the technical community, and I share this confidence.

The path to net zero is not easy for aviation. Long development and market uptake timelines, especially for long range aircraft, make the challenge even greater. In the short term, the focus should be on electrification and hydrogen powered aviation for smaller aircraft and regional connectivity. As we move closer to 2040, hydrogen solutions are expected to play a greater role. Hybrid solutions should soon support higher passenger and cargo volumes, helping to reduce pressure on limited supplies of sustainable aviation fuels.

The Clean Aviation Joint Undertaking has already invested substantially in hydrogen powered aviation, although market uptake has been slower than expected. Continued research in this area remains essential, along with the development of a supporting ecosystem. At the same time, zero carbon solutions for larger aircraft that ensure global connectivity will take time. This is why major investment in ultra efficient aircraft and engine technologies is also needed. Without these improvements, the full potential of sustainable aviation fuels cannot be realised.

In this context, the Sustainable Transport Investment Plan presented in November sets out a clear pathway to boosting European production and supply of alternative transport fuels, particularly for aviation. The Clean Aviation Joint Undertaking remains the largest public private partnership under Horizon Europe and receives the highest contribution from the EU budget.

By working together and planning together, the sector has already taken important steps to prepare for future challenges. Looking ahead, it is important to broaden the perspective beyond major players to include small aircraft manufacturers, rotorcraft developers and innovative air mobility stakeholders. New entrants help keep the industry dynamic and competitive, and there is value in testing and proving concepts on a smaller scale, especially with start ups and scale ups.

On future joint undertakings, it is still too early to define their exact form and scope. However, there is strong support for continuing public private investment in the next programming period. The objective is to create a model that supports all segments of the aircraft manufacturing industry across the full development chain, including possible support for prototyping and demonstration phases.

The Aviation Research and Innovation Agenda presented at the Paris Air Show provides a valuable strategic perspective, particularly in its analysis of challenges and enabling factors such as supply chains and skills. Ongoing work on a technology roadmap is also a positive development.

Safety must never be compromised in aviation. Close cooperation between Clean Aviation and EASA, including regular exchanges on new technologies, will help reduce time to market while ensuring a robust and efficient certification process.

I want future generations to be as proud of European aviation as we are today. We must work together to keep the industry competitive and build a truly sustainable future. Now is the time to lay the foundations for continued technological leadership on global markets.

At the same time, not all sections of the public share this vision, often due to scepticism about the industry's commitment to climate neutrality. Public investment in research and innovation, especially for large commercial aircraft, can be met with criticism. The industry is under pressure to accelerate technological change and deliver tangible results.

This is not an easy task, but you have my full support. Together, we must demonstrate that sustainable aviation is essential for competitiveness, strategic independence, security and resilience, and make that case clearly and convincingly.

Thank you.