



RIGHTS OF PASSENGERS WITH SPECIFIC NEEDS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the rights of passengers with specific needs in air transport. It examines the legislative framework designed to protect these passengers and identifies the main challenges associated with its practical implementation. The study outlines key international and European regulations, with particular emphasis on the rights of persons with disabilities and reduced mobility, as well as on operational procedures at M. R. Štefánik Airport in Bratislava and other selected airports. The research findings reveal shortcomings in infrastructure, assistance services, and passenger awareness at M. R. Štefánik Airport. Based on these results, a set of recommendations was developed to improve accessibility and service quality for this passenger group. The analysis underscores the need to modernize the current system and to implement new measures that enhance the overall travel experience and ensure safe, accessible air transport for all passengers

Keywords

passenger rights, people with specific needs, reduced mobility, unaccompanied minors, proposal for improving services

1. Introduction

Air transport is one of the fastest and most efficient means of transporting people over long distances, playing a significant role in a globalized world. Air transport represents a key element of transport system, connecting regions, supporting global trade, and fostering social and economic progress (Bulíček et al., 2022). For many travellers, it is an integral part of their professional or private lives; however, for individuals with specific needs, the travel process can be considerably more complicated. Passengers with disabilities, reduced mobility, or other specific needs often face various barriers that hinder their equal access to air transport services.

For all modes of transport, there is the right to free assistance at terminals and on-board vehicles. Transport by air, bus, coach, or ship cannot be refused on the grounds of disability or reduced mobility, except where refusal is justified for safety reasons (as laid down in national, international or EU law, or by a decision of the competent national authority), or due to the design of the vehicle or infrastructure (Europa, 2025). The rights of passengers with specific needs are regulated by various international and European legal standards that establish the obligations of airlines and airports to provide appropriate assistance. Nevertheless, the practical implementation of these measures continues to encounter problems. Travelers face inadequately adapted infrastructure, missing or insufficient assistance services, poor information availability, and limited options for booking tickets and assistance. These factors can lead to significant complications and, in many cases, restrict the ability to travel.

The main objective of this paper is to thoroughly analyze the rights of passengers with specific needs in the context of air transport, focusing on their legal protection, service accessibility, and issues related to the enforcement of these

rights. The paper is based on an analysis of European Union legislation, particularly Regulation (EC) No 261/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council, which establishes common rules on compensation and assistance to passengers in the event of denied boarding, flight cancellations, or long delays, and Regulation (EC) No 1107/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 concerning the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when traveling by air, as well as applicable legal standards in the Slovak Republic. Special attention is given to the conditions and measures implemented at M. R. Štefánik Airport in Bratislava, which serves as the main international airport in Slovakia.

The paper focuses not only on the theoretical analysis of current legislation but also on identifying practical problems that passengers encounter. An important part of the study is assessing the quality of services provided at the airport, evaluating the accessibility of information, and proposing measures to improve the situation. The result is a set of recommendations that could contribute to raising the standard of services provided and strengthening the protection of the rights of passengers with specific needs.

The topic of passenger rights in air transport is important not only from a legal regulatory perspective but also in terms of equal opportunities for all travellers. Airlines and airports should view the provision of assistance services not only as a legal obligation but also as an ethical commitment to their customers. Ensuring full accessibility and equal treatment for all passengers is essential for the further development of air transport and its sustainability in the future.

2. Legal Framework for the Protection of Passenger Rights

Ensuring the rights of passengers with specific needs in air transport requires a clearly defined and effectively enforced legal framework. Given the global nature of aviation, their protection is influenced not only by national but also international and European legal norms. These laws define the obligations of air carriers and airports, establish rules for compensation and assistance, and prohibit all forms of discrimination. This chapter outlines the key legal documents that form the foundation for protecting passengers with specific needs, as well as the practical implications of their implementation (Sedláčková, 2023).

The foundations of international aviation law were laid in the early 20th century, notably with the Warsaw Convention of 1929, which addressed carrier liability in cases of damage during air travel. This was later replaced by the Montreal Convention of 1999, which unified compensation rules for delays, lost baggage, and passenger injury or death, thereby reflecting the needs of a growing global aviation market.

Within the European Union, two major regulations form the backbone of passenger rights protection. Regulation (EC) No 261/2004 sets out passengers' rights in the event of flight cancellations, delays, or denied boarding. It introduced financial compensation ranging from €250 to €600 depending on flight distance. The practical enforcement of this regulation has been shaped by rulings of the European Court of Justice, such as the *Sturgeon v. Condor Flug Dienst GmbH* case, where passengers were granted compensation for flight delays exceeding three hours. In that case, the Sturgeon family experienced a 25-hour delay after their flight from Toronto to Frankfurt was cancelled at check-in and replaced with a significantly delayed alternative route.

The second key document, Regulation (EC) No 1107/2006, specifically addresses the rights of people with disabilities and reduced mobility. It requires airports and airlines to aid free of charge, ensure accessible infrastructure, and properly train staff. Despite this, challenges remain in the practical enforcement of these obligations. In 2018, a British airline refused assistance to a woman with cerebral palsy because she "looked completely normal." In another case, a 56-year-old man was left waiting on a plane for nearly two hours due to the loss of his wheelchair. Such incidents have sparked debates on the need for better implementation and oversight of these regulations (SLOV-LEX, 1968) (SLOV-LEX, 2002).

Air carriers are obliged to allow people with reduced mobility to book flights without discrimination. Furthermore, airports must ensure that dedicated personnel and technical equipment are available, such as lifting platforms, wheelchairs, and specialized vehicles to support boarding and deboarding. Airports are also responsible for guaranteeing barrier-free access to check-in counters, designated waiting areas, and sanitary facilities. This includes appropriate signage and navigation systems adapted for passengers with visual or hearing impairments (Editors, 2009).

3. International Cooperation in Protecting Passenger Rights

In the context of increasing demand for air travel, international cooperation plays a key role in strengthening passenger rights and addressing challenges associated with accessibility and safety. Although many rights are guaranteed by national and EU regulations, several international institutions contribute significantly to their practical enforcement (EASA, Cooperation international civil aviation organization icao, 2024).

One such body is the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), which ensures high safety standards across all EU member states. By establishing unified safety regulations for airlines, airports, and aircraft manufacturers, EASA helps maintain a high level of operational safety—an essential element of passenger protection (EASA, International cooperation, 2024).

Another important organization is the International Air Transport Association (IATA). While it does not issue legally binding regulations, IATA sets global industry standards that airlines widely follow. It also acts as a communication bridge between carriers and passengers and supports the development of safe, efficient, and fair air transport services. Through initiatives related to pricing policies and passenger compensation, IATA influences industry-wide practices that affect passenger rights.

These collaborative efforts help shape a more inclusive and secure air travel environment, ensuring that passenger needs are acknowledged and addressed at both the European and global levels (EASA, Cooperation international civil aviation organization icao, 2024) (EASA, International cooperation, 2024) (MZV, 2023).

4. Differentiation of passenger types in air transport

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5. Proposal to improve access for passengers with specific needs at M. R. Štefánik Airport in Bratislava

5.1. Identified Deficiencies at M. R. Štefánik Airport

The current system at M. R. Štefánik Airport has several shortcomings that may negatively affect the experience and satisfaction of passengers. One key issue is the lack of available lifting platforms for boarding or disembarking aircraft, or assisting passengers with reduced mobility, which complicates their boarding process. This can result in delays, discomfort, or unnecessary stress for affected passengers.

Another issue is the insufficient number of personnel designated for assistance during peak hours, leading to longer waiting times for help, delays in boarding, and general dissatisfaction. Some passengers also struggle to navigate the

airport due to unclear signage and limited visual or auditory guidance systems.

Although assistance services are available, passengers may still worry about missing their flights or facing unexpected issues. While the airport provides parking spaces for holders of disability cards (ŤZP), the number of these spaces is limited and often insufficient during high travel periods (e.g., summer months). When parking is full, it becomes more difficult for passengers with disabilities to access the terminal.

Additionally, the process of requesting assistance in advance through the airline may be complicated, impractical, and confusing for some, which lowers overall satisfaction and comfort when using the airport's services.

5.2. Proposal regarding Technical Measures

One of the main challenges already mentioned is the limited physical infrastructure for passengers with disabilities. To address this, the implementation of lifting platforms and the construction of barrier-free access to aircraft is necessary. Modernization of existing facilities, such as ramps and elevators, would greatly ease mobility for passengers with limited movement.

Currently, no lifting platforms are available at the airport, often causing delays, as these passengers need to be physically lifted onto or off the aircraft with the help of staff and then guided to or from the terminal entrance.

Another proposed measure is the expansion of dedicated areas for assisting these passengers, ensuring greater privacy and comfort during check-in. Parking for disability card holders should also be expanded, with more designated spaces closer to terminal entrances and better availability during peak times.

5.3. Proposal for Personnel and Information-Based Solutions

M. R. Štefánik Airport needs to increase the number of assistance staff, especially during peak hours when the airport infrastructure is most heavily used, to reduce waiting times. The quality of assistance services could also be improved by implementing regular employee training focused not only on physical aid but also on communication with passengers with specific needs.

For parents of unaccompanied minors, introducing a digital tracking platform could be useful, allowing real-time monitoring of the child's movement within the airport. Automated check-in kiosks adapted for passengers with reduced mobility could speed up the check-in process and reduce the need for direct assistance.

5.4. Estimated Cost and Implementation

The proposed measures to improve services for passengers with disabilities and unaccompanied minors at M. R. Štefánik Airport focus on three main areas: improvement of physical infrastructure, modernization of assistance services, and increasing passenger awareness. These include specific investments and organizational changes aimed at enhancing comfort, accessibility, and efficiency.

Based on average market prices for necessary infrastructure and technological solutions, the estimated costs for implementing physical changes are outlined in Table 1. Actual prices may vary depending on selected suppliers, construction companies, and technological partners. Since exact parameters for implementation at the selected airport are not available, the prices are approximate based on general estimates. For instance, the cost of acquiring lifting platforms ranges between \$95,000 and \$130,000 per unit. Sarajevo Airport underwent such changes in 2017 and paid €301,000 for a single platform (Bosnian, 2017), (dimaindustry, 2023), (gov, 2022).

Table 1. Estimated costs for implementation of measures; (Source: authors)

Measure	Estimated costs [€]	Implementation time (months)
Lifting platforms and barrier-free access	250 000 – 400 000	6 – 18
Modernization of elevators and ramps	100 000 – 200 000	6 – 12
Expansion of assistance areas	80 000 – 120 000	6 – 12
Increased capacity of parking spaces for disabled	50 000 – 100 000	3 – 6

5.5. Benefits of Implementing Measures

The implementation of these measures would bring numerous positive changes, significantly improving the travel experience of passengers with disabilities and unaccompanied minors. Increased availability of physical infrastructure would enable faster and more comfortable airport movement, eliminating delays and discomfort during boarding and disembarkation.

The modernization of assistance services would provide more effective support, reduce travel-related stress, and increase overall customer satisfaction. Better access to information via mobile apps, digital displays, and social media would help passengers prepare more effectively for their journeys, reducing uncertainty and potential complications.

Enhanced communication channels would also increase passenger trust in airport services and encourage greater use of M. R. Štefánik Airport for future travel.

6. Results

The research conducted in this paper focuses on assessing the current state of services for passengers with specific needs in air transport, with a focus on M. R. Štefánik Airport in Bratislava. Based on the evaluation of the legislative framework, existing standards, and the practical operation of assistance services, several key deficiencies have been identified that directly affect the comfort, safety, and equal access of this group of passengers.

From the perspective of physical infrastructure, which is identified as problematic, the issues include insufficiently marked spaces designated for passengers with reduced mobility, the lack of guiding elements for the visually impaired and blind, and the absence of designated zones for these passenger groups. The navigation system in the airport is outdated and confusing, causing difficulties, particularly for people with limited orientation abilities. These factors reduce the level of independence for passengers, increasing their reliance on airport staff, who, in many cases, are not sufficiently trained to communicate effectively with people with disabilities.

From the perspective of assistance services, several gaps have been identified in the areas of booking and providing help. The reservation system on the airport's website does not offer an intuitive or user-friendly interface, especially for elderly people and those with intellectual disabilities. Moreover, multilingual information processing is lacking, including versions in simple language or video/audio guides. Passengers are often not sufficiently informed about their right to assistance and frequently do not know that they are entitled to free help with airport mobility, boarding, or luggage handling.

A document review and comparison with recommendations from the European Union and international organizations (ICAO, EASA, IATA) revealed that while the airport meets the basic requirements of Regulation (EC) No. 1107/2006, its practical implementation is often insufficient to ensure high-quality services.

Based on these findings, measures were proposed in three main areas: improving infrastructure (e.g., lifting platforms, barrier-free access), enhancing the quality and availability of assistance

services (e.g., staff training, modernization of the reservation information system), and intensifying awareness campaigns for passengers (e.g., mobile app). These proposals are specific, feasible, and reflect the need for better access in civil aviation.

7. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of legal regulations and passenger experiences, it can be concluded that the protection of the rights of people with specific needs in air transport is still unsatisfactory and requires further improvements. Although the legal framework exists and is detailed, several practical issues prevent its effective implementation.

One of the main problems is the insufficient infrastructure at M. R. Štefánik Airport in Bratislava, where essential barrier-free elements are missing, or assistance services are underdeveloped. Recently, a lifting platform (ambulift) has been installed at the airport; however, it is not yet fully operational, which continues to limit the quality and safety of assistance provided to passengers with reduced mobility. Another issue is the lack of awareness among passengers about their rights and available assistance options. Additionally, there are discrepancies in the level of services provided by different airlines and airports, leading to inconsistent treatment of passengers with specific needs.

In addition to M. R. Štefánik Airport, which was analyzed in detail in this paper, Košice Airport also plays an important role as the second busiest airport in Slovakia. Passengers' experiences with specific needs are occasionally negative due to deficiencies that significantly affect the comfort and safety of travel for people with reduced mobility, particularly for immobile passengers.

The paper includes the experience of a passenger in a wheelchair who expressed dissatisfaction with the absence of a lifting platform (ambulift), which is necessary for a safe and dignified boarding process. Currently, assistance is provided in a makeshift manner, which often leads to unpleasant and degrading handling of passengers. Moreover, the lack of specialized and professional technical equipment for handling immobile individuals increases the risk of injury to both the passengers and the staff. These deficiencies highlight the need for significant modernization of the technical infrastructure and the establishment of standards that comply with European legislation on the rights of people with reduced mobility.

To ensure true equality in the services offered to all passengers, the implementation of legislative measures needs to be strengthened, and uniform standards for all airports should be created. This paper identifies specific solutions, such as the modernization of specific airports, better staff training, expanded information, and enhanced legal protection for passengers.

The paper emphasizes the importance of continuous improvement in conditions for passengers with specific needs and underscores that fair transport should be a priority for all airlines and airports. Implementing the recommendations in this paper could lead to significant improvements in conditions at M. R. Štefánik Airport and enhance the overall comfort and accessibility of air transport.

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