

Preface

Saturday, November 7, 2015 was a very sad day in the history of Estonian aviation. At 4 PM Estonian time, the long awaited decision of the EU Commission's Directorate-General for Competition was announced. According to the decision Estonia had given illegal state aid in the amount of 84.9 million EUR to its national carrier, Estonian Air, which the company had to pay back. Already before it was clear that in such a case, the company would from one day to another cease operations.

That was also immediately announced on the company's web page, where it had still on the same day been possible to buy tickets for the company's flights. Just after 4PM a message instead appeared that from the 8th of November Estonian Air would cease all operations.

At the same time Estonian Air's last flight had just departed from Copenhagen, OV144 Copenhagen-Tallinn, which was the last flight of Saturday's flight schedule and the EU Commission's decision was probably timed accordingly. At 5:38 PM, when it was already dark, Estonian Air's aircraft landed for the last time in Tallinn, symbolically in pouring rain, the captain was Immanuel Pärt, son of the world-known Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. The first officer was the young French pilot Caroline Garnier.

Estonian Air, the airline in the Baltics operating for the longest time (of those with bigger aircraft) had become history. 1 year and about 3 weeks were left to its 25th year anniversary.

The last months before the fatal decision had been made, there had been rumours in the media from undisclosed sources, that in more and more secure terms made little doubt that a negative decision would be announced. Although still on November 6th the Commission claimed a decision had not yet been taken.

Also acts of the Estonian state hinted that it was known beforehand that the decision would be negative, or that there had at least been very strong hints that it would be. During the last approximate 1.5 months the successor of Estoni-

an Air, so to speak, had been created, a new state airline, who already from the next day started flying on almost all Estonian Air's routes. But an airline cannot be created within 1.5 months, so the successor had to operate through another airline operating in Europe and order flights from 3rd parties, that also were European airlines. Thanks to this complicated solution the same routes could continue the next day Sunday, November 8, and yet Estonian Air tickets were still valid on the first three days. The state had promised to reimburse tickets for flights on November 11th and further on, which is quite extraordinary when an airline ceases operations.

But conditions in the Estonian and European aviation markets are very different from those at the time when Estonian Air was created. Estonian Air's valuable achievements gained during a long time of operations were thrown overboard. They would have been much needed in today's competition, which is much stronger than 25 years ago due to the EU's "open skies" market. Already before the end of November the new airline decided to give up the route Tallinn-Copenhagen, which had for a long time been the most important route of Estonian Air. It certainly cannot be easy to start from scratch.

It would be difficult to fill the shoes of Estonian Air for the new airline, that was introduced at a press conference only 3 hours after the news of Estonian Air closing down. The happy mood at the press conference seemed a little inappropriate to the people who showed up.

As a former employee of Estonian Air I was not indifferent to the sad message on November 7th either, although I had left the airline more than 10 years earlier. Having worked during the „golden years“ at Estonian Air when the airline operated profitably 5 years in a row, I am convinced that the last 10 years' losses were not inevitable. The so far most important Estonian air company's achievements during almost 24 years should not sink into oblivion unnoticed, but are worth a book. This is the aim of this book. Talks have been held with former Estonian Air employees during the process of writing, especially with former CEO Erki Urva and former COO Rait Kalda. Thanks to everybody who participated.

Background

Humankind's centuries-long dream of building a working flying machine came through in 1903, when the Wright brothers had their first flight on an engined airplane. But in the very early years of aviation airplanes were mostly used for airshows where people could admire the courageous pilots, not for passenger transport or other practical purposes. Also in Estonia there were airshows, the first engined flights were in 1912.

In WWI aviation technology took a big step forward as airplanes were used for military purposes. After the war it was clear that they could be used for civil purposes, such as mail and passenger transportation.

The first airlines were founded, probably the first in Europe was the Danish DDL founded in 1918. Many others followed, KLM in 1919, Swedish SLA in 1921 and ABA in 1924, and Aero (the later Finnair) in 1923, their first route was from Helsinki to Tallinn in 1924.

Also Estonia was among the early countries as the Estonian airline „Aeronaut“ was founded in 1921 on March 22nd. The company made their first flights in cooperation with the Swedish airline SLA, who started flights between Stockholm and Tallinn from July 19th, it was the first route from Stockholm to a destination abroad. Already the same year a Sablatnig PIII airplane was bought from the Danish airline „Dansk Luftexpress“ and a route with this airplane from Tallinn to Riga began flights on July 29th 1921. The same year the company „Danziger Luft-Reederei“ from Gdansk in today's Poland prolonged their route Danzig (Gdansk) – Königsberg (today Kaliningrad)-Klaipeda-Riga to Tallinn from September 20th.

Sablatnig airplanes were built in Estonia from the end of 1921, as there were limitations on how powerful planes could be built in Germany according to the peace treaty, this was a way to avoid these limitations. Some of these planes were used by Aeronaut, others were sold. In 1923 Aeronaut acquired a Fokker F13 plane and started a route to Helsinki.