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Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — A Drone Strategy 2.0

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

The current drone market

1. stresses that the drone market is one of the fastest growing sectors globally, worth EUR 28 billion in 2022 and expected to increase to EUR 541 billion by 2030, an increase of 38,6 % per year. In Europe, the increase is set to reach 21,9 %. Looking at the accuracy of forecasts in this regard for previous years, it can be concluded that the drone market is growing faster than expected. Therefore, the need to fill the legislative, technological, infrastructural, financial and competence gaps in the sector as a whole needs to be regularly assessed and, where appropriate, followed up with respective initiatives;
2. considers the creation in 2022 of the *Drone Strategy 2.0 for a Smart and Sustainable Unmanned Aircraft Eco-System in Europe* (hereinafter: 'the Drone Strategy') an appropriate response to the problems in the drone technology market that enables the EU to build technological leadership in the solutions outlined therein. The document highlights the important role of local and regional authorities in shaping the new drone reality and makes it possible to see the scope of their expected activity;
3. at the same time, the Committee of the Regions (hereinafter: 'the CoR') points out that the previous document with an impact on the development of the market — the 2015 Aviation Strategy for Europe — also provided a solid basis for the subsequent implementation of a legal framework for drones;
4. calls on the European Commission to review the state of the market more frequently (than every seven years) and verify the relevance of regulations, plans and strategies for its development, given the high likelihood of underestimating the speed of its growth due to the sector's innovative nature and the rapidity of technological obsolescence, but also take into account the uptake of the use of drones for civilian purposes;
5. recognises the responsibility and great potential of local and regional authorities in the economic, social, strategic and operational preparation of the economy for the changes brought about by the development of drone technologies and the subsequent legal changes resulting from the actions set out in the Drone Strategy;
6. calls, therefore, for decisive and coordinated regulatory measures at all levels of European governance. Such measures would give regional and local authorities basic autonomy to organise the new drone services in their territories and to manage the U-space, including the possibility for them to restrict the use of drones by certain groups of users, in very specific areas not considered appropriate for such use;

7. points out that the process of legislating for new technologies is often time-consuming, and so building resilience into the process is key given the risk of existing legal documents quickly becoming outdated. Legislation in this area should be sufficiently universal to make it possible to adapt existing regulations in the event of an unanticipated technological leap. Regulations should stimulate safe, barrier-free technological development;

8. appreciates that the Drone Strategy was drawn up in consultation with Member State representatives. At the same time, calls for local and regional authorities to be involved in regulating the future drone reality, given the need to create safe and citizen-friendly use of drones at regional level, which will have a positive impact on building public awareness of the responsibility of local and regional authorities and their substantive involvement. Recommends that citizens and citizens' initiatives must be closely consulted for this purpose in order to ensure the highest possible level of acceptance by the public;

9. is pleased to note that the European Commission's (hereinafter: 'EC') actions leading to the harmonisation of drone law in the EU (as set out in Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/947 ⁽¹⁾ and Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2019/945 ⁽²⁾) has significantly strengthened Europe's position in the global market for unmanned systems technology;

10. points out that the actions set out in the Drone Strategy, the Commission regulations on RPAS operations and the three U-space regulations respond to the expected market needs. At the same time, action should be taken at national level in close cooperation with regional authorities in order to address the current problems in the sector related to the enforcement of existing EC regulations;

Transport transition

11. recognises the fact that the introduction of drones for general use is an innovation, of which the acceptance and use needs to be monitored in the next years in order to see, whether parts of road transport will be shifted to drone transport, as envisaged in the Drone Strategy, which will be felt particularly in urban areas, translating into a need for harmonisation and coordination on a regional scale;

12. encourages the establishment of entities at regional level (or the extension of existing ones) to serve as first-line contact points for citizens, offering assistance in interpreting legislation or reporting potential offences;

13. supports the actions described in the Strategy leading to the unification of drone law and recommendations for the involvement of local and regional authorities in building and monitoring drone infrastructure (in view of the U-space concept and beyond);

14. welcomes the plans set out in the Strategy to adopt new standard scenarios for low- and medium-risk operations. At the same time, it calls for consultation with regional authorities on the scenarios to be implemented in order to take account of the specific characteristics, geographical circumstances, constraints and social, economic, military and political situation of the regions and the impact on the population concerned, which will help to draw up possible exceptions to be included in the scenarios and, as a result, ensure that regional authorities retain control over areas affected by specific circumstances;

15. points out, at the same time, that the implementation of the above-mentioned standard scenarios across the EU will reduce the need to implement national standard scenarios in individual Member States. It will help make it easier to interpret the rules applicable to drone users in a given country. A major problem at present is that drone users have to carry out extensive analysis to check the requirements for missions using unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) in individual countries. Consideration should be given to setting up an EU-authorised information platform compiling national UAS legislation, with a view to making it easier to check the laws specific to each country;

⁽¹⁾ Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/947 of 24 May 2019 on the rules and procedures for the operation of unmanned aircraft (OJ L 152, 11.6.2019, p. 45).

⁽²⁾ Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2019/945 of 12 March 2019 on unmanned aircraft systems and on third-country operators of unmanned aircraft systems (OJ L 152, 11.6.2019, p. 1).

16. shares the concerns of representatives of the drone sector when it comes to defining geographical areas and assessing the risk of the difficulties of checking flight requirements in their specific area. Strategic and legislative action should be carried out to reduce the risk of a proliferation of airspace zones for which approval is required. The requirements in this regard should be sufficiently precise to allow access to airspace to be restricted where justified, while maintaining an approach conducive to the development of the drone sector;

17. takes note of the actions set out in the Strategy to strengthen the EU's position on the use of dual-use drones, and supports action plans for synergies between civil, defence and space industries, and calls for transparency of relevant transfers of technology and knowledge acquired by defence and space to the civil use of drones;

18. shares the concerns of industry manufacturers regarding the prospect of an overly costly certification process for drones and the initial cost-effectiveness of U-space services. Action should be taken at European, national and regional level to address these risks;

U-space concept

19. welcomes the provisions of the Drone Strategy on U-space, including in particular the recommendations set out in the action on promoting coordinated research on integrated communication, navigation and surveillance technologies, as well as in the action on rules for the design and operation of vertiports;

20. at the same time, given the scope of the changes linked to the implementation of the U-space concept and its direct impact on society, it calls for more systematic cooperation between the European, national and regional levels in building U-space tools; in particular, calls for the promotion of technologies that make operations more reliable, safer and more secure, such as U-space environment simulators at regional level, as they will speed up technological and regulatory developments, improving the economic prospects of the sector at EU level;

21. shares the European Commission's conclusion on the multifaceted role of local, urban and regional authorities in implementing the U-space concept, particularly concerning the economic, social, strategic and operational preparation of the economy. It points to the following tasks for local and regional authorities to be carried out at various levels: once the construction of a vertiport is approved and resources are provided, support for its creation and the necessary plotting of air corridors, and the construction of associated infrastructure and of an urban drone space; the designation and provision of locations for U-space infrastructure; and cooperation in the development of navigation, localisation and surveillance tools. In addition, regional authorities should include the U-space concept in future strategic documents and updates of land-use plans, identify possible areas prohibited for drones, take into account the possibility of flights being operated at night, commission studies on the impact of noise and light generated by drones on society and biodiversity, and ensure that the infrastructure for testing solutions is in place, including by supporting simulation systems and the Living Labs for Future Urban Ecosystems referred to in the Drone Strategy. It may also be the task of regional authorities to facilitate the certification of drones for regional manufacturers through spatial planning and the allocation of financial resources for the construction of certification centres;

22. stresses that consideration should be given to mobilising financial support for regional authorities in view of the need to invest in the implementation of the U-space concept, and points out that the actions set out in the Strategy and in the cited European Commission regulations represent a significant financial burden for the regions. A separate funding stream for U-space projects could be considered; to this end, calls for a catalogue of existing U-space research, development and innovation (R & D&I) infrastructure to be created;

23. sees a strong need to stimulate the development of drone-related education and training. The creation of dedicated courses in secondary schools and higher education institutions, but also easily accessible courses for the general public provide an opportunity to address the existing gap that regional representatives should fill. This can also lead to a responsible use of drones and their services and become an asset of the future workforce and the competitiveness of the regions themselves;

Public acceptance and the role of the local and regional authorities

24. draws attention to the fact that the issue of public acceptance is the most frequently discussed topic in consultations at various levels. This makes the plans set out under the action on funding a dedicated online platform all the more positive;

25. underlines that the confidence of citizens in these new technologies is increasing thanks to ongoing consideration of protection of human rights and privacy in regulations;

26. at the same time, points out that action at European level is far from sufficient and sees the need to also take initiatives in this area at regional level, closer to citizens, in order to reach as many stakeholders as possible. One of the tasks of local and regional authorities should be to inform about the tools developed by the European Commission, such as the dedicated online platform, and to explain their significance for local realities;

27. points out that Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine creates instability in the EU, including in terms of the drone market. One negative example is the introduction, for safety reasons, of significant airspace restrictions in regions bordering Ukraine. The use of drones for military ends, including Russian attacks on residential areas and civilian infrastructure, undermines public confidence in the new technology;

28. recalls that the European Commission's communication acknowledges the fact that noise, safety, privacy, environmental issues and security are at the top of the concerns of European citizens. For this reason, proposes a two-step approach to introducing new drone services: first by developing, as a test to reassure citizens, first applications with a strong public interest (health protection, environmental safety, crisis management, last mile delivery) and, second, by postponing and further regulating the more contradictory uses like human transport or urban surveillance. Examples of positive applications in crisis situations and of the daily lives of citizens being facilitated through drones will significantly increase public trust in them;

29. appreciates the European Commission's approach to regulating the use of drones in line with the 'safety first' principle and stresses the need for local and regional authorities to inform citizens about this approach in order to also increase public trust towards legislators;

30. supports the initiative in the Strategy to set up local consultative groups involving citizens and calls on the EU Member States to support these recommendations. Such groups will give citizens the opportunity to express their views on the location of the planned U-space infrastructure, allow for a substantive discussion on the expected levels of noise and light generation in the neighbourhood, the potential impact on biodiversity, the need to modify urban infrastructure and the expected changes in the design of the landscape;

31. points out that some of the formulations and plans described in the Strategy may be too specialised and that it is therefore the role of local authorities to carry out activities such as publishing their interpretations and setting up working groups, thereby increasing transparency and the understanding of complex rules by the public;

32. stresses that, with an increasing number of uses for drones, local and regional authorities should work on solutions to prevent the misuse of drones to the detriment of public security, and on cybersecurity, as also included in the Strategy. Building systems that minimise the risk of the misuse of drones will help to establish public confidence in their use;

33. encourages, at the same time, wide-ranging information activities on the consequences of the misuse of drones. The feeling of impunity among some pilots, observed by representatives of the drone sector, and the disregard for drone law and safety rules adversely affects the level of public trust in the use of even the smallest drone models. These actions require a very even-handed approach and a balance between encouraging the use of technology and getting the public accustomed to the growing number of drones in the sky;

Drones and sustainable development

34. takes note of the drone market development actions set out in the Strategy in line with the objectives of the European Green Deal and draws attention to the crucial role of local and regional authorities can play in the further development of new drone technologies;

35. supports the recommendation to build circular economies on, for example, the recycling of batteries and other electronic elements of drones, and recognises the role of local authorities in stimulating the development of green drone technologies and building infrastructure for safe recycling;

36. notes that aviation is the second largest source of transport-related greenhouse gas emissions, after road transport. It sees, therefore, the potential in the drone sector (mostly based on electrical solutions) to take over part of the load not only of road and rail transport, but also of manned aviation;

37. points to the great potential of drones in tackling the climate crisis, e.g. through their use in road transport (reducing traffic congestion and exhaust emissions), as well as in agriculture, forestry and horticulture (replacing agricultural combustion-engine vehicles and supporting precision farming, thereby reducing pesticide consumption and exhaust emissions);

38. notes that the implementation of U-space is one of the greatest challenges and breakthroughs in the history of technological development, and therefore calls on the European Commission to adopt in future drone strategies a separate, independent flagship action on the development of green drone solutions related to U-space, highlighting their positive impact on the environment and on the overall improvement of quality of life;

Financial support

39. considers that the development of the Strategy will contribute to more efficient planning and use of available financial instruments for the development of drone technologies;

40. stresses the importance of the plans set out under the action on securing funding and points to the need to reflect this at regional level, e.g. by including actions relating to drone development in planning documents and strategies of local and regional authorities, implementing the U-space concept and mitigating associated negative impacts on society and the environment;

41. draws attention to the need to update regional innovation strategies and highlight in these the importance of research into noise emissions, impact on biodiversity, U-space infrastructure and green propulsion systems;

42. calls for close cooperation between the European, national and regional levels in creating dedicated funding pathways and establishing a separate support stream for drone technologies;

43. suggests that local and regional authorities consider establishing a priority path independent of manned aviation and a smart specialisation dedicated to unmanned systems;

44. recommends that Member States carry out an analysis of local and regional legislation in order to ensure that drone solutions can be financed and that dedicated pathways remain possible;

45. proposes that regional authorities support the implementation of flagship actions on building European technological independence. This can be done by stimulating R & D&I and the testing and deployment of new drone technologies with the help of appropriate financial instruments and access to infrastructure;

46. recognises the potential and development of drone technologies in space and supports the plans contained in the strategy to enhance capabilities and synergies between EU civil, defence and space industries. At the same time, it notes the potential to already enhance these synergies at regional level by mobilising the emergence of clusters, incubators, and dedicated education or financing streams in the fields of aviation, aerospace and unmanned systems technologies.

Brussels, 10 October 2023.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO
