ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOR REGIONAL AIRPORTS IN LATVIA

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ABSTRACT
Regional airports play a significant role in promotion of connectivity and regional development. This is one of reasons why airports are treated as public assets and in 77 % cases (airports providing scheduled air transport services) owned and operated by public sector in the EU. 71 % of these public airports have corporatized airport operators. Latvia has three public civil aviation airports planned for scheduled flights until 2015: Riga International Airport as well as Liepaja Airport and Ventspils Airport (Kurzeme planning region). Latvia currently has decentralised operational model of airports. Riga International Airport is owned by state and operated by a joint stock company. Regional airports are owned by Liepaja and Ventspils municipalities and operated by 100 % municipality owned limited liability companies. Liepaja Airport and Ventspils Airport plan to certify its aerodromes and start scheduled flights in 2015. The long term traffic forecast of both airports is short to provide a long term financial sustainability. Regional airports are reliant on public service obligation compensations for operation and maintenance of airfields as well as diminishing compensations to airlines for operating of scheduled flights. Considering the aerodrome's certification and financial feasibility risks, alternative operational models are worth considering. They include centralised model (joint operation of all three airports by a state owned company) and semi-centralised model (joint management of regional airports by resource sharing). The main conclusion is that current decentralised operational model is not feasible to provide long term operational sustainability of regional airports and it is worth considering introduction of alternative operational models (preferably centralised model) subject to further analysis.
KEY WORDS: *regional airports, airport management.*

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Introduction

Regional airports are important part of transport infrastructure promoting regional accessibility and economic cohesion. In general a regional airport is an airport serving traffic within a relatively small or lightly populated geographical area. The EU has not adopted yet a universal definition for the term "regional airport" (Report on the future (…), 2012: 3). In this article the term "regional airport" is a "non-hub" airport with an annual passenger volume of less than 1 million (small regional airport) (European Commission (…), 2005: 3) used for civil aviation public airports located outside the capital city Riga and intended for commercial aviation besides general aviation and aerial works.

Latvia has three civil aviation public regional airports in the territory of 64 thousand km^2, 2 million population and population density 31/km^2: Liepaja Airport and Ventspils Airport (NUTS3 Kurzeme planning region) and Daugavpils Airport (NUTS3 Latgale planning region). A distance from mentioned regional airports does not exceed 250 km to Riga International Airport, the Baltic Sea region air hub serving

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approximately 5 million passengers per annum. A distance between both regional airports in the Kurzeme planning region is 117 km.

The planned long term traffic forecast does not exceed 150,000 passengers (less than 4,000 movements) per annum until 2025 in case of Daugavpils Airport and Liepaja Airport; for Ventspils airport the traffic forecast is about 4.5 times smaller. None of mentioned regional airports currently provide scheduled passenger air traffic services. Renewal of scheduled traffic is planned in Liepaja and Ventspils airports starting from 2015.

Operating of airports according to ICAO and EU air traffic safety and security standards is expensive compared to low traffic volume. The purpose of the article is to assess the most appropriate regional airports' management model comparing current decentralised model versus regional and centralised operational model (regional airports and Riga International Airport).

The object of the article is two regional airports subject to public investment financing for reconstruction of its airfields during 2012–2014, namely Liepaja Airport and Ventspils Airport.

Tasks of the article are to review selectively the existing international practices in operation of regional airports in the EU countries, description of existing operational model of regional airports in Latvia, analysis of alternatives and recommendations for the optimal business and management model of regional airports in Latvia.

The research methods used are desk research, peer analysis and multi-criteria analysis.

1. International practices in operation of airports

This section includes a review of practiced business models for operation of airports (both "hub" and "non-hub") in the EU. The EU like the rest of the world has several airport business models where national and local governments have dominating role in ownership and management of airports:

a) Government solely owned and operated airports;
b) Government partially owned and operated airports: public and private partnership;
c) Privately owned (privatised) and operated airports;
d) Hybrid airports (government owned and privately operated).

The table below includes statistical summary on airport business models in Europe for airports providing scheduled air services.

Table 1. Ownership of airports in Europe (2009)

	Number of airports	**Number of public owned airports**	**Number of mixed owned airports**	**Number of private owned airports**
All airports	404	317	52	35
EU – 27 airports	306	237	43	26
Non-EU airports (18 countries)	98	80	9	9

Source: Airports Council International Europe. The Ownership of Europe's Airports, 2010: 6

The vast majority of EU airports ($N = 306$) are publicly owned (77 %), followed by 14 % public-private partnerships and 9 % privatively owned airports. With regard to public airports, 71 % of EU airports have corporatized airport operators while 29 % airports are run by public administrations. Commercial entities are owned by national governments but in certain cases (Germany, Netherlands etc.) also by regional and local municipalities. In Lithuania and Estonia, neighbouring Baltic countries, state owned commercial entities operate public airports providing scheduled air services (see the Table 2 below).

Latvia had adopted a mixed public ownership model as the "hub airport" Riga International Airport is owned by the state and regional airports located in Liepaja, Ventspils and Daugavpils cities are owned by local municipalities.

Table 2. Operators of airports in the Baltic States providing scheduled air services (2013)

Airport	Latvia	Lithuania	Estonia
Riga International Airport (RIX)	State joint stock company "International airport "Riga""	n/a	n/a
Liepaja Airport	Municipality owned "Aviation company "Liepaja" Ltd.		
Ventspils Airport	Municipality owned "Ventspils airport" Ltd.		
Daugavpils Airport	municipality owned "Daugavpils airport" Ltd.		
Kaunas Airport (KUN)	n/a	State Enterprise "Kaunas Airport"	n/a
Palanga International Airport (PLQ)	n/a	State Enterprise	n/a
Vilnius International Airport (VNO)	n/a	State Enterprise "Vilnius International Airport"	n/a
LennartMeri Tallinn Airport (TLL)	n/a	n/a	State owned "Tallinn Airport" Ltd.
Kuresaare Airport	n/a	n/a	State owned "Tallinn Airport" Ltd.
Kärdla Airport	n/a	n/a	State owned "Tallinn Airport" Ltd.
Pärnu Airport	n/a	n/a	State owned "Tallinn Airport" Ltd.
Tartu Airport	n/a	n/a	State owned "Tallinn Airport" Ltd.

Source: author, based on webpages of airports

Majority of European airports are state owned because the play a significant role in economic development, especially promoting the regional cohesion. Several European countries (Spain, Norway, Greece, Sweden, Finland etc.) have developed system of airport networks operated by a single operator. The state owned enterprise Avinor in Norway operates 46 airports (one of the biggest airport networks in Europe) and the state owned enterprise Finavia in Finland operates 24 airports. Swedavia AS in Sweden is 100 % publicly owned commercial entity that owns, operates and develops eleven airports across Sweden (Swedavia AB, Year – end report. January – December 2012, 2013: 3). The rationale of state involvement is to create the optimal air access in Sweden, Europe and rest of the world to facilitate travel and business. The idea of sustainable development is not only to provide necessary air connections but also to create a long-term profitability of airports' operations. In the Baltic countries Tallinn Airport Ltd. is a network operator including Tallinn Airport and 4 small regional airports (see Table 2 above).

2. Description and performance projections of Latvian regional airports

This section includes information on traffic forecast and financial projections of both regional airports to assess the business potential.

2.1. Liepaja Airport

Liepaja Airport (ICAO code EVLA) is located in the South-West part of Latvia, 215 km road distance from the Riga City and 70 km from the Palanga City (location of the closest operating international airport). The territory of the airport is part of Grobina parish bordering with the Liepaja City. The aerodrome's reference code is 4D (runway length 2,002 m suitable for short and medium haul flights); flight rules VFR/IFR (NONP); terminal capacity 50 PAX/hour. Currently the aerodrome is not certified for scheduled flights.

Liepaja Airport serviced 250 passengers and 98 flights in 2011. Historically the highest traffic volume was in 2008 when the airport accommodated scheduled flights (44,820 passengers and 2,677 movements).

The owner of Liepaja Airport is Liepaja City municipality. The airport's operator is "Aviasabiedrība "Liepāja" Ltd. (Aviation Company Liepaja), an enterprise 100 % owned by Liepaja City municipality. Aero navigation infrastructure is owned by state joint stock company "Latvijasgaisasatiksme" (Latvian air traffic), a sole aero navigation services provider in Latvia.

The table below includes selected performance indicators of Liepaja Airport after the planned start-up of scheduled flights in 2015.

Table 3. Selected performance indicators of Liepaja Airport (2015–2015)

Indicator	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2025
Population in catch. area	300,000	300,000	300,000	300,000	300,000	300,000	300,000
Total passengers*	4,500	18,600	80,000	108,000	128,000	129,000	140,000
Total movements*	290	780	2,980	3,300	3,700	3,700	3,800
Scheduled destinations	1	1	3	4	7	7	7
Movements per week	6	15	57	64	71	71	73
Winter flights (4 months)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PSO infrastructure O&M	required	required	required	required	required	required	required
PSO air services	required	required	required	required	required	required	not req.

*Includes general aviation, commercial aviation (scheduled and non-scheduled) and aerial works

Source: author and Liepaja Airport

It can be concluded from the table above that operation of the airport is not financially feasible in the long term period due to low expected traffic volume (a preliminary forecast made in 2012; will be revised considering limited availability of public financing for PSO compensations). The average annual number of movements per week is less than 210 (daily 30) – a traffic volume benchmark of small airports in Europe. A public service obligation compensation is needed both for operation and maintenance of the aerodrome (recipient of State aid is the airport) and operation of scheduled air services (diminishing State aid to airlines operating at the airport and assuming the commercial breakeven point at 75 % load factor for 50 seats aircraft). Operation of an airport is financially sustainable if annual number of serviced passenger reaches 500,000 (European Commission, Report on the future of regional airports and air services in the EU (2011/2196 (INI)), 2012: 11). It is very likely that in the long term the traffic at Liepaja Airport will not reach 0.5 million passengers per annum.

2.2. Ventspils Airport

Ventspils Airport (ICAO code EVVA) is located in the South-North part of Latvia, 184 km road distance from the Riga City and 117 km from the Liepaja City. The airport is located on the outskirts of the Ventspils City. The aerodrome's reference code is 3C (planned runway length 1,500 m suitable for short and medium haul flights); flight rules VFR/IFR (NONP); terminal capacity 50 PAX/hour. Currently the aerodrome is not certified for scheduled flights.

Ventspils Airport serviced 1,032 passengers and 255 flights in 2011. Like in case of Liepaja Airport the highest traffic volume was in 2008 (6,607 passengers and 476 movements).

The owner of Ventspils Airport is Ventspils City municipality. The airport's operator is 100 % municipality owned "Ventspilslidosta" Ltd. (Ventspils Airport). Aero navigation infrastructure is owned by the state enterprise "Latvian air traffic".

The table below includes selected performance indicators of Ventspils Airport after the planned start-up of scheduled flights in 2015.

Table 4. Selected performance indicators of Ventspils Airport (2015–2015)

Indicator	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2025
Population in catch. area	102,000	102,000	102,000	102,000	102,000	102,000	102,000
Total passengers*	1,260	3,000	7,200	9,800	12,900	14,600	30,800
Total movements*	320	610	1,000	1,100	1,250	1,250	2,230
Scheduled destinations	1	2	3	3	3	4	4
Movements per week	6	12	19	21	24	24	43
Winter flights (4 months)	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PSO infrastructure O&M	required	required	required	required	required	required	required
PSO air services	required	required	required	required	required	required	not req.

*Includes general aviation, commercial aviation (scheduled and non-scheduled) and aerial works

Source: author and Ventspils Airport

Like in case of Liepaja Airport operation of Ventspils Airport is also not financially feasible in the long term period (on-going PSO compensation is required for the airport and diminishing compensation for airlines). The average number of movements per week is nearly twice less and number of passengers served 4.5 times less than in Liepaja Airport forecastin 2025 (for PSO calculations the assumed commercial breakeven point is at 75 % load factor for 19 seats aircraft).

Analysis of selected performance indicators of both regional airports indicate the need of on-going public sector financial support to provide accessibility of air transport services for regional development. This has an implication on the preferred operational model of airports as they cannot be operated solely at the commercial risk of private sector.

Besides, catchment areas of both airports overlap (300,000 refers to total population number in Kurzeme planning region) and they have to co-operate on joint route development to increase the cost-effectiveness of provided services.

3. Optimal business and operational model of regional airports in Latvia

Considering the long lasting international experience and business projections of Liepaja Airport and Ventspils Airport, the public ownershipis quite evident: without national or local government intervention air traffic in above mentioned airports will be limited to general aviation and partially business aviation movements (the current situation).

An important issue is the type of public ownership. Experience of network airports suggest that the most appropriate governance form is central government ownership and financing supported by budget contributions from local governments in the airports' catchment area. However, detailed analysis of this alternative is outside the scope of this article because the Latvian government (represented by the Ministry of Transport) in the foreseen future does not plan to take over regional airports from Liepaja and Ventspils municipalities. The current *status quo* entitles local governments to operate airports and support scheduled air services while the role of the government is to provide capital investment financing (85 % of planned investments in both regional airports will be co-financed from the Cohesion Fund during 2012–2015). Regional airports neither from its own revenues nor local municipalities from its budgets have capacity to finance reconstruction of regional airports (Kokars, 2009: 11).

The outstanding question is as follows: if regional airports have to be operated and financed by local governments, what is the most optimal operational model in the framework of three operating airports – Liepaja Airport, Ventspils Airport and Riga International Airport? This question is also important in the context of planned Commission Regulation (EU) of laying down requirements and administrative procedures related to aerodromes pursuant to Regulation (EC) No 216/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council (should be adopted by end 2013). The planned regulation envisages separate certification of aerodrome operators and apron management service providers (under current aerodrome certification regulations these functions are not separated). Both regional airports will undergo certification process in 2014 and before mentioned regulation will affect certification and operation costs of aerodromes (detailed impact analysis is not provided in this article).

The current operational model of regional airports can be considered as "decentralised model": each airport is managed by its owner (municipality) through individual corporatized airport operators (limited liability companies). Financing to airports is provided either by equity increase or PSO agreements.

Three models are considered for further analysis:

- Decentralised operational model as described above;
- Establishment of state owned company for management of three airports including Riga International Airport and regional airports (under the current legal framework Liepaja and Ventspils municipalities will have to conclude agreements with such company and finance operating of regional aerodromes);
- Joint management of regional airports (resource sharing).

Another operational model includes merger of regional airports with Riga International Airport (establishment of daughter companies or affiliates), which is not analysed in this article.The Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Latvia promoted the idea of regional airports' merger with Riga International Airport. Although supported by local municipalities (especially Liepaja and Ventspils), the proposal was not implemented due to political reasons (Kokars, 2009: 10). Local municipalities supported the merger idea because they expected that operation of regional airports would be fully or partially financed by the state.

The table below includes description of multi-criteria analysiscriteria of proposed operational models. The analysis is made on assumption that cross-subsidisation of airports is not planned (allowed) and financing mechanism of regional airports is according to existing national legislation as explained in the second paragraph of this section. The following criteria are used:

- Accessibility of services;
- Quality of services;
- Cost effectiveness of services;
- Sustainability of services.

For each criterion evaluation points are applied in range 0–2 and adjusted for statistical weights as explained in Table 6 and Table 7 below. Assessment of operational models is performed by author based on his professional experience and consultations with aviation industry experts.

Table 5. Description of assessment criteria of regional airports' operational models

Criteria	Points 0	Points 1	Points 2
Accessibility of services	Accessibility of services does not meet requirements of minimum aerodrome's O&M standards set forth in PSO agreements	Accessibility of services corresponds to requirements of minimum aerodrome's O&M standards set forth in PSO agreements	Accessibility of services is likely to be higher than minimum aerodrome's O&M standards set forth in PSO agreements
Quality of services	Service quality does not meet minimum service delivery standards set forth in PSO agreements	Service quality correspondsto minimum service delivery standards set forth in PSO agreements	Service qualityis likely to be higher than minimum aerodrome's O&M standards set forth in PSO agreements
Cost effectiveness of services	Aerodromes' O&M costs (the first year of 12 months operation) under the planned traffic forecast are substantially higher (+25 %) compared to original estimates of airport operators	Aerodromes' O&M costs (the first year of 12 months operation) under the planned traffic forecast do not significantly exceed (allowed range +10 %) the original estimates of airport operators	Aerodromes' O&M costs (the first year of 12 months operation) under the planned traffic forecast are lower than (range exceeds minus 10%) the original estimates of airport operators
Sustainability of services	Operation of aerodromes ensured during 20 years period according to requirements of PSO agreements. Traffic forecast in the 5th year after start-up of scheduled flights is significantly lower (minus 25%) compared to original estimates of airport operators.	Operation of aerodromes ensured during 20 years period according to requirements of PSO agreements. Traffic forecast in the 5th year after start-up of scheduled flights is not significantly lower (allowed rangeminus 10%) compared to original estimates of airport operators.	Operation of aerodromes ensured during 20 years period according to requirements of PSO agreements. Traffic forecast in the 5th year after start-up of scheduled flights is higher (rangeexceeds +10%) compared to original estimates of airport operators.

Source: author

Assessment of operational alternatives is provided in the table below.

Table 6. Assessment regional airports' operational models according to evaluation criteria

Criteria	Alternative 1 (decentralised model)	Alternative 2 (state owned company)	Alternative 3 (joint management regional airports)
Accessibility of services	The proposed alternative ensures minimum level of services accessibility, but very likely a longer certification period is required as originally planned by airport operators (availability, price and training of qualified staff). Certification risk can be eliminated if selected services are outsourced from Riga International Airport. Number of points 1	The proposed alternative ensures minimum level of services accessibility, and it is likely that planned certification period will be followed (however, procedures related to establishment and operation of legal entity might delay the process). This alternative is feasible only if state mandate is provided. Number of points 1	The proposed alternative ensures minimum level of services accessibility, and likely a longer certification period is required as originally planned by airport operators. Combining of resources can eliminate certification risks, including outsourcing selected services from Riga International Airport. Number of points 1

Criteria	Alternative 1 (decentralised model)	Alternative 2 (state owned company)	Alternative 3 (joint management regional airports)
Quality of services	Please refer to assessment of criteria „Accessibility of services”. Number of points 1	Please refer to assessment of criteria „Accessibility of services”. Number of points 1	Please refer to assessment of criteria „Accessibility of services”. Number of points 1
Cost effectiveness of services	It is likely that O&M cost deviation compared to original estimates of airport operators will not be higher than 25 %. Number of points 1	Economies of scale by sharing fixed costs of regional airports, incremental benefits from utilisation of Riga International Airport experienced personnel. Advantage of this alternative increases in case of adoption of Regulation on Aerodromes. Number of points 2	Economies of scale by sharing fixed costs of regional airports. Number of points 2
Sustainability of services	Operation of aerodromes ensured during 20 years. It is assumed that traffic forecast in the 5th year after start-up of scheduled flights will not be lower than minus 25 % compared to original estimates of airport operators. However, a sustainability risk is high because any effect on traffic reduction, increase of operating losses can result refusal to increase the PSO compensation to airports if financing of airports will remain sole responsibility of current owners (Liepaja and Ventspilsmunicipalities). Number of points 1	Operation of aerodromes ensured during 20 years. Economies of scale not only in O&M of airports but also joint air route development and procurement of PSO services for airlines. The main advantage of this alternative is sustainable support to regional airports considering resources and experience of Riga International Airport staff. If this co-operation is institutionalised, regional airports are less volatile to adverse decisions of Riga International Airport management with regard to service availability and pricing policies. Number of points 2	Operation of aerodromes ensured during 20 years. Economies of scale not only in O&M of airports but also joint air route development and procurement of PSO services for airlines. Number of points 1

Source: author

According to rough assessment of proposed alternatives the highest evaluation is for Alternative 2 (centralised operational model) followed by Alternative 3 (joint management of regional airports) and Alternative 1 (decentralised model). In the table below higher statistical weights are applied to cost effectiveness and sustainability criteria as they are more impacted by selected operational model (minimum accessibility and quality standards are mandatory as set forth in the PSO agreements and also verified in the aerodromes' certification process).

Table 7. Ranking of regional airports' operational models according to evaluation criteria

Assessment criteria	Statistical weights	Points (Alt.1)	Impact of criterion (Alt.1)	Points (Alt.2)	Impact of criterion (Alt.2)	Points (Alt.3)	Impact of criterion (Alt.3)
Accessibility of services	0.20	1	0.20	1	0.20	1	0.20
Quality of services	0.20	1	0.20	1	0.20	1	0.20
Cost effectiveness of services	0.30	1	0.30	2	0.60	2	0.60
Sustainability of services	0.30	1	0.30	2	0.60	1	0.30
Total points		1.00		1.60		1.30	
Rank		**3**		**1**		**2**	

Source: author

According to the table above the recommended operational model is establishment of a state owned company for operation of all airports. This alternative as well as joint management of regional airports where two independent corporatized operators share resources to cut operating and maintenance costs and outsource services from experienced airport operator (e.g., Riga International Airport) is subject to detailed analysis in light of planned Regulation on Aerodromes (see paragraph 3 of this section). Such analysis is outside the scope of this article and will be referred to in upcoming research studies.

Conclusions

Provision of access to scheduled air services from regional airports in Latvia is a precondition for sustainable regional development, including creation of new businesses and labour mobility. The planned traffic volume from regional airports is not enough to provide a long term financial sustainability of Liepaja Airport and Ventspils Airport. As both airports are reliant on public subsidies (PSO compensations), they have to be owned by public (state or local governments, as is the current case). A public ownership model corresponds to the best international practices, for example, in Scandinavian countries and other Baltic States.

Aviation industry is complex and highly regulated business with regard to delivery standards, especially in safety and security areas. Certification of Liepaja and Ventspilsregional airports is thus challenging considering the existing physical infrastructure and airports' capacity, experience in management of scheduled services airports.

In light of expected certification as well as management and financial sustainability risks Liepaja Airport and Ventspils Airport have to look for alternative operational models, namely centralised model of all three public airports (Riga International Airport and regional airports – Liepaja Airport, Ventspils Airport, in the future Daugavpils Airport) or joint management – resource sharing model of regional airports. Such models are subject to detailed analysis considering planned changes in the EU regulatory framework of aerodromes by end 2013.

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ALTERNATYVŪS REGIONINIŲ LATVIJOS ORO UOSTŲ MODELIAI

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Santrauka

Regioniniai oro uostai atlieka svarbų vaidmenį skatinant regionų susietumą ir jų vystymąsi. Todėl net 77 % reguliarias transportavimo paslaugas teikiančių ES oro uostų priklauso ir yra valdomi viešojo sektoriaus, 71 % šių oro uostų turi privačius operatorius.

Iki 2015 m. Latvija turės tris valstybinius oro uostus: Rygos tarptautinį oro uostą, Liepojos ir Ventspilio oro uostus (Kuržemės regione). Šiuo metu Latvijoje galioja decentralizuotas oro uostų valdymo modelis. Rygos tarptautinis oro uostas priklauso valstybei ir yra valdomas uždarosios akcinės bendrovės. Regioniniai oro uostai priklauso Liepojos ir Ventspilio savivaldybėms, juos 100 % valdo savivaldybėms priklausančios ribotos atsakomybės bendrovės.

Liepoja ir Ventspilis planuoja sertifikuoti savo oro uostus ir nuo 2015 m. pradėti reguliarius skrydžius. Ilgalaikės paslaugų poreikio prognozės leidžia manyti, kad abu oro uostai nepajėgs išsilaikyti savarankiškai, todėl regioniniai oro uostai yra priklausomi nuo viešojo sektoriaus įsipareigojimų kompensuoti už oro uostų valdymą ir jų priežiūrą.

Turint omenyje oro uostų sertifikavimo ir finansinių galimybių riziką, verta apsvarstyti alternatyvius jų valdymo modelius, tokius kaip centralizuotas modelis (jungtinis visų trijų oro uostų valdymas per valstybei priklausančią bendrovę) ir iš dalies centralizuotas modelis (jungtinis regioninių oro uostų valdymas dalijantis ištekliais).

Taigi galima teigti, kad dabartinis decentralizuotas valdymo modelis nepajėgus užtikrinti tvaraus regioninio oro uostų funkcionavimo, dėl to vertėtų apsvarstyti ir toliau analizuoti alternatyvius valdymo modelius, pageidautina – centralizuotą valdymo modelį.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: *regioniniai oro uostai, oro uostų valdymas*.

JEL KLASIFIKACIJA: H54.

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