

Dear Chairman and members of the Committees Kingdom Relations, I&W, VWS and EZK ¹,

I noted with interest the letter from the Dutch Parliament (IENW/BSK-2020/259810 dd. 31 December 2020) in which it is stated that Winair will be offered a mortgage loan by the Dutch government after the Prime Minister of St. Maarten has requested it. The interinsular connectivity would be at immediate risk. Koninkrijk.nu ² even speaks of *rescuing from bankruptcy*. BES-reporter ³ also speaks of *saving Winair*.

The Kamerbrief literally says "*Winair, the only airline that maintains connections with all six Caribbean parts of the Kingdom, and the only one that maintains a regular connection with St. Eustatius and Saba...*", where I then think: "*Is that really an important argument?*". I am referring to the fact that all six islands can be reached. That this situation is at issue is the result of an irresponsible (?) and unbridled (?) ambition of Winair (and/or of the government of St. Maarten) and less of making a service fit a demand. After all, the connectivity that is currently maintained by Winair is partly done with aircraft that are rented from other organizations (e.g. Air Antilles) ⁴. I cannot shake off the impression that Winair and/or Sint Maarten simply live too big a life and actually care little about what the actual demand for connectivity is. And what that loan is for is less clear from the letter; Winair simply falls short and, in my opinion, refuses to cut costs itself.

The Kamerbrief gives the impression that, without Winair, the connectivity of the Dutch islands in the Caribbean region would "completely collapse". As if airlines like EZ Air, SXM Airways and Divi Divi Air don't matter, and are only there 'for fun' and certainly not 'essential'. It occurs to me, however, that when you have an insight into what is desired in terms of connectivity, you should be able to make a neat plan with the existing infrastructure of airlines (equipment and personnel) in which Winair simply plays a role in the regional traffic between the windward islands (in a broad sense: including Sint Barths, Antigua, Saint Kitts and Nevis and Tortola).

When looking at what is desired in terms of connectivity (i.e. 'the demand'), it strikes me (not only me) that the construction of the Dutch Caribbean has existed for over ten years now, but that to date no attention has been paid to the mutual connectivity between precisely these three islands (Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius). The fact that St. Maarten wants to play an important role in the transport between these islands is most charming, but Bonaire is not part of the obvious playing field of Winair (given the available equipment). It strikes me that an organization such as EZ Air is not even mentioned as a potential supplier of connectivity. A Bonairean organization (*i.e. part of the Dutch Caribbean!*) that with its own personnel and equipment can maintain the transport between windward

¹ Kingdom relations: of course; I&W: it's about connectivity; VWS: I involve the provision of care in the analysis; EZK: because of the issue of "open competition" versus "monopoly position".

² See <https://koninkrijk.nu/2021/01/01/nederland-redt-winair-van-faillissement/>

³ See <https://bes-reporter.com/index.php/2021/01/01/holland-provides-3-5-million-in-capital-to-save-winair/>

⁴ The connection between the windward and leeward islands is maintained by Winair using equipment from another company in a so-called wet-lease construction. A condition for such a construction is that Winair is able to exercise 'effective control and ownership', but the leased airplanes are foreign to Winair, so meeting this condition seems questionable to me to say the least. But yes, the request comes from the own government, so the 'authority' is happy to turn a blind eye.

and leeward islands and in cooperation with - for example - SXM Airways can take care of the transport between St. Eustatius and Saba.

No, instead Winair is constantly being hoisted on the shield acting as a *de facto* monopolist, which means that the prices for the customer are far from friendly. The Dutch government doesn't just let this happen, it even stimulates this way of working! By being co-owner of Winair, competitors are being kept out of the playing field, and - as now - providing financing relatively easily and cheaply. When the Kamerbrief mentions "*think of patient transport*" (to illustrate the multifunctional aspect of connectivity) I notice that the ZVK transport (for people with an appointment in the hospital) to Bonaire is already done by EZ Air. The sentence "*Islands that are easily accessible contribute to a rapid recovery of the tourism sector, and thus to the economy on the islands*" seems to me to be the gotspe of the year. Although the content of the sentence is absolutely endorsed by me, little or no policy development has been observed in the past ten years that has linked goals or activities to the desired interconnection of the BES islands.

By constantly coming up with Winair, the dependence on St. Maarten is emphasized again and again, while it would be a good thing if the development of St. Eustatius (and - I think - also of Saba) would take place (more) independently of St. Maarten. One of the lessons that could be heard shortly after the household of Hurricane Irma on St. Maarten is that St. Eustatius' and Saba's dependency on St. Maarten should be mitigated. After all, if St. Maarten lies 'flat' then St. Eustatius and Saba also 'don't' function to 'a lot less'. Not only the supply was negatively affected in 2017, also the connections of St. Eustatius (and Saba) with the outside world (internet) went via the infrastructure of St. Maarten and therefore did not function for some time.

Note: The operational management on St. Eustatius (and on Saba) is still hampered by the situation on St. Maarten. The number of COVID-19 cases is significantly higher on St. Maarten than on St. Eustatius (and then on Saba) so for a relatively simple hospital visit a period of quarantine automatically follows upon return.

Note: When an emergency case needs to be transported to the hospital on St. Maarten it is transported via the airport on St. Maarten, followed by transport by ambulance, while the helicopter can also fly directly to the hospital and land on the adjacent parking lot (which is of course considerably faster). What comes to my attention is that otherwise the airport (and therefore the government) will miss out on landing fees. In such a case, the well-being of the patient is absolutely not central. Well....

Speaking of helicopter transport, I can imagine that helicopters can also contribute to the tourism sector. Flying around the volcano with a small amount of people seems to me something that may not justify the presence of a helicopter, but when a helicopter is present, it seems to me an additional source of income. From older people on the island (Saint Eustatius) I hear that in those days it was also possible to fly to Sint Barths or Saint Kitts and Nevis for a "day" (go in the morning, back in the evening). It seems to me that a helicopter can provide excellent services here as well.

In previous letters I have suggested that additional efficiency can be obtained when also the care of St. Maarten and - especially - Colombia is redesigned with a primary function of the care on the Leeward Islands. I am especially thinking of Bonaire (because of the BES-construction) but also, taking a financial point of view, of Bonaire, Curacao or Aruba for the same 'care' as is provided nowadays by Colombia. Up until now I have never heard good arguments why this could not increase efficiency. In any case, it will increase the occupancy of the planes connecting the windward and leeward islands.

Finally, I would like to present you with an internal conflicting public policy (in order to eliminate the conflict). On the one hand there is the dogma that diversity in services may be expected to have a price reducing effect, on the other hand I see that due to the ownership structure of Winair (Sint Maarten and the Netherlands) no diversity in services is desired, so that a monopoly position for Winair is achieved/confirmed. The letter of 31 December 2020 from the Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management only confirms my observation. The last sentence of the letter perhaps offers an opening: after all, information on long-term connectivity will follow; however, the fact that the central Dutch government, St. Maarten and Winair will talk about this (and therefore no other parties) suggests that no substantial improvements are to be expected here either.

I would like to give you into consideration to...

- involve EZ Air in addressing the connectivity issue in the Caribbean region (the current connection offered by Winair between St. Eustatius and Bonaire requires you to stay on the other island for at least a week: extremely ill-considered and short-sighted);
- get it done that also on St. Maarten the aviation authority independently of the government adheres to the regulations in general and to those regarding the wet-lease construction in particular;
- change the ownership structure of Winair (so that the Netherlands no longer has a share in it) so that the Netherlands can strive for more diversity in the services of connectivity (i.e. more competition for Winair);
- mitigate the dependency on Sint Maarten in favor of a good connection to Bonaire;
- consider the structural deployment of a helicopter with services to the tourism sector for short distances;
- involve ZVK transport integrally in finding the optimal solution for the connectivity issue in the Caribbean region (with care on the Leeward Islands instead of Colombia).

With kind regards,

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Cc: Government commissioner on St. Eustatius