

Briefing Paper – Caps or Bans on (short-haul/domestic) Flights

Facilitation: Manuel Grebenjak, Climaxió (manuelgre@riseup.net)

Paper prepared also including inputs by Werner Reh.

In a time of climate crisis, there seems to be no good reason for domestic flights within Europe and short-haul flights (connections that can be arrived within one day or night using alternative modes of transport) in general. Instead, investments in good train infrastructure and ecological passenger ships are needed. The argument that personal liberty would be cut in case of forbidding or limiting short-haul flights, must also consider the restricted liberty of all the people already suffering from the climate crisis as well as from airport noise and pollution.

In this working group, we will discuss the pros and cons of bans, limits and caps as well as the promotion of rail alternatives to short-haul flights. This includes thinking about what would be needed for people to accept this idea and for politicians to actually put a law in force. The role of decent alternatives and a just transition are likely to be at the centre of the discussion as well as questions about the national or international scope of the measure.

1 Short summary of strategy/measure

Leaving political feasibility aside, introducing absolute limits on aviation is technically the easiest and most secure way to guarantee the industry's contribution to climate mitigation targets. Taking feasibility into account, such limitation is foremost an option for short-haul routes. A reduction of short-haul flights seems to be the easiest way to reducing flying without causing significant negative effects for travellers. Preconditions for this are well developed alternatives. For example, western European states invested billions of Euros since the end of the 1980s in a high speed rail network which can replace a large proportion of short haul flights (even though we need to keep in mind that energy use rises exponentially with speed).

Different forms of limits, bans or caps on (short-haul) flights are possible:

- immediate bans on flights with rail alternatives of four or five hours and expand the rail network for speeds of 200 km/h and optimize timetables (integral fixed-interval timetables). Establish networks of comfortable overnight trains in Europe and on all continents
- caps on the amount of flights on short-haul connections from one specific airport to another (e.g. maximum of two flights a day instead of seven from one destination to another); also as an intermediate step for a complete abolition
- bans on short-haul flights with a rapid phase-out transition period for airports and airlines as well as the building of alternatives
- Flight limitations for airports, that are related to both emission targets and noise and fine dust limits (limits of the environmental capacity of airports). Reduction of the huge excess capacities of airports in Europe to a greatly reduced capacity of airports per country.

2 State of the art: Does this measure already exist somewhere?

In our research, we could not find an existing ban/cap on flights, especially short-haul flights at the national or international level. However, the idea to ban especially easy-to-substitute short-haul flights is gaining momentum. The most prominent recent example might be the [statement of Frans Timmermans](#), the European Social Democrats' top candidate for the May 2019 EU elections, who said in a televised debate that he would support a total ban on short-distance flights. Also his conservative counterpart Manfred Weber advocated for a reduction of such flights, although not supporting a ban. The EU White Paper on Transport stated 2001 "We can no longer think of maintaining air links to destinations for where there is a competitive high-speed rail alternative."

In a [recent move](#) members of the Dutch parliament wanted to ban the flight between Brussels and Amsterdam. Similar debates on domestic flights are ongoing [in France](#): A new [French mobility law](#) under preparation proposes banning flights between airports where an alternative rail link exists, as long as the rail journey in question would be no more than two hours and 30 minutes longer than the flight it replaces.

Even more radically, the well-known German climate expert Hans-Joachim Schellnhuber [stated](#) earlier this year that "domestic flights within Germany should be banned" and proposed that air travel be reduced to 20 flights in a person's lifetime and that its price should be increased considerably.

3 Advantages

The comparative climate advantage of alternatives like trains, high-speed trains and even busses is very high. Therefore, there is a high potential for rapid emission reduction.

Short-haul flights have poor economic profitability because of their lower occupancy rates than European or international flights. They are continued by airlines and alliance partners in order to feed their international and intercontinental hubs and for fear of losing their historic („grandfathered“) slots in airports („Use it or lose it" rule). The slot regulations are not only highly inefficient but even counterproductive for climate protection policy.

A main advantage is that this measure is more effective and socially just than market and price mechanisms. Putting taxes on flying is of course necessary in order to treat all forms of transport equally, or disincentivize the most harmful form of transport, but raising prices could mean that the well-off continue flying as before, amplifying the injustice in the mobility system.. Banning short haul or domestic flights would not give the rich more opportunity to fly and applies equally to everyone.

Short haul flights are used for ordinary transit, which could be shifted to the railway. But some people, living in one city and working in another or companies with branch networks, use them for frequent commutes. This form of work life is exhausting and hard to combine with relationships and family life, so banning such flights could disincentivize harmful work norms and promote alternatives such as video conferencing.

Banning short haul/domestic flights could lead to shutting down lots of regional airports - which are often deficitarian anyways and kept alive by subsidies. Jobs could be created simultaneously in the

railways. A multimodal and sustainable approach to (public) transport is demanded in many official government papers – but nowhere delivered yet. Modal shift from short-haul flights is a low hanging fruit. But obviously still hanging too high for today's politicians.

4 Disadvantages

Despite announcements by politicians during election campaigns, the political feasibility of bans or caps on flights or of restrictions on individuals' amount of flying is questionable at this moment. So far and despite a slow cultural shift beginning (e.g. Swedish "Flygskam"), flying has still a very positive image. Lifestyle and work relations of a rising middle and upper class are often based on the existence of such flights, enabling the aviation industry to avoid adequate regulation of its growing contribution to the climate crisis.

The infrastructural feasibility of banning short-haul flights varies by country, depending on the extent and quality of their train networks. Therefore, an implementation on e.g. the EU level with the same rules for every country might not be feasible within the current political landscape. Limiting aviation in economically growing countries in the Global South might conflict with issues of global justice and historical responsibility for environmental problems like the climate crisis. Therefore the highly industrialized countries must go ahead.

5 Discussion: For reducing short-haul flights significantly in Europe a three step approach could be discussed in the working group

- By 2020: Shift all short-haul flights within EU member states and Switzerland to rail with a parallel train alternative of four hours or less travel time. Possible driving actors: A coalition of forerunner countries France, Germany, Benelux countries.
- By 2023: After strategic expansion of the European rail network for trains and a European-wide night-train offer: Shift all short-haul flights to destinations that can be reached within ten hours by rail.
- By 2026: All in the EU are shifted to rail. Short-haul flights are only taking place in peripheral countries of the EU where there is no rail alternative, and just until a rail alternative is in place.

6 Literature

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