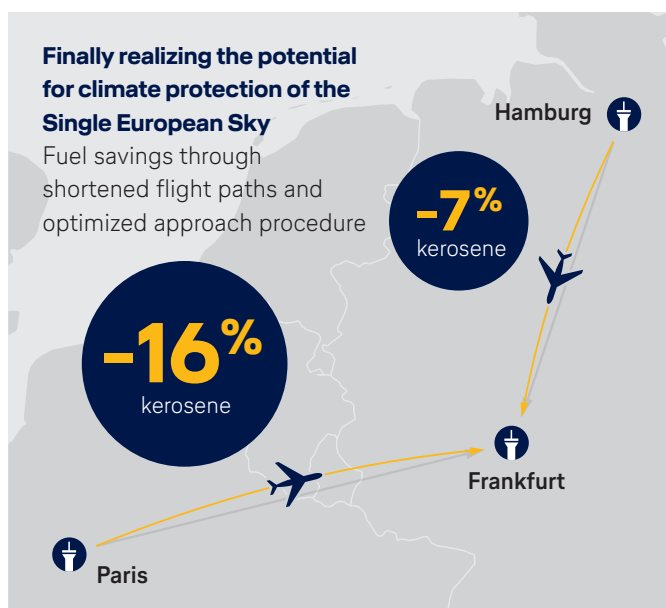


Single European Sky

EU CLIMATE POLICY INCREASES PRESSURE TO ACT

Direct flight routes, more punctuality, fewer emissions – the long-overdue reform of European airspace offers plenty of opportunities. For many years, the European Commission has wanted to implement the so-called Single European Sky (SES). But the project is once again threatened by a stalemate.



After initial reform efforts failed in 2013, the European Commission presented a revised proposal for a regulation to implement the Single European Sky (SES2+) in September 2020. The need for this had become increasingly evident, following the 2018/2019 capacity crises and the formulation of ambitious climate targets at the EU level. Since last summer, discussions, also known as “trilogues”, have been ongoing between the Commission, the EU Parliament, and the Member States, so far without success. While the Parliament supports large parts of the Commission’s proposal, several Member States are blocking it. The problem then, as now, are concerns about national sovereignty. Until now, air traffic control has been a largely sovereign matter in each country. Currently, more than 60 control centers with different IT systems are responsible for air traffic control throughout Europe. In the future, these are to be harmonized at the European level in the SES.

The Member States’ inability to agree on the SES so far does not bode well for the EU’s ambitious climate policy goals. Airlines and passengers are not the only ones who would benefit from shorter flight times and fewer delays.

The environment also stands to gain: A more efficient and uniformly structured airspace with optimized flight routes could reduce CO₂ emissions in EU airspace by up to 10%. The long-overdue implementation of the SES would be a real climate protection measure.

The negotiations, so far stagnant, need to get moving. Two decisive, but to date hesitant countries have now placed the reform project back on the political agenda. Both Germany and France, the latter having taken over the EU Council presidency at the beginning of the year, have included the implementation of SES2+ in their programs. The objective now is to put the Commission’s proposals into practice, sooner rather than later.

Three core tasks lie ahead:

- **Harmonizing airspace and enabling climate-optimized flight routes:** Lufthansa and Germany’s air traffic control are working consistently to guide aircraft to their destination without detours. Reduced flight volumes during the crisis contributed to saved CO₂ emissions, through shortened flight paths and an optimized approach procedure: On the Hamburg-Frankfurt route, this resulted in fuel savings of 7%, and as much as 16% were saved on the Paris-Frankfurt route. To achieve comparable results on European transnational routes, airspace structures must be harmonized.
- **Introducing interoperable, modern, and uniform air traffic control systems:** Some of the technologies that air traffic controllers use in Europe date back to the 1970s and are therefore outdated. An automated division of labor at the European level often fails due to incompatible systems. Improvements are urgently needed – with the necessary processes and technologies being already available today.
- **European regulation of air navigation service providers:** To increase the efficiency and performance of national air navigation service providers, a binding European regulatory framework is needed. This means clear specifications for cooperation at EU level to achieve ambitious environmental, capacity, and cost targets.