

French “domestic flight ban”

A ROLE MODEL?

Domestic flights have become a controversial topic in climate policy discussions, with comparison often being drawn with France and its introduction of a “domestic flight ban.” It is true that restrictions on domestic flights have been in place in our neighboring country since May 2023. Nevertheless, it may surprise that the number of weekly domestic flights in France stands at a total of 4,200, almost twice as high as in Germany. How can this discrepancy be explained?

Comparison of weekly domestic flights in 2023

Germany

2,200

France

4,200

In France, a strict rule applies: if two cities can be reached by train multiple times a day within a maximum travel time of two and a half hours, flights are prohibited. While this might sound stringent, there are nuances to consider. First, France’s central hub airport Paris-Charles de Gaulle (CDG) remains unaffected by these regulations. The train cannot compete with any flight route to CDG airport within a 2.5 hour time frame. This time window allows the French government to safeguard its strong hub and network airline operating there. Secondly, even beyond the hub, the impact is manageable. Despite discontinuing flights between Paris-Orly and Bordeaux, Nantes and Lyon in preparation for May 2023, little has changed since then. The resulting reduction in CO₂ emissions is approximately 0.2 percent of all air traffic emissions in France. This figure only holds true if the trip is cancelled entirely and not replaced by car or train travel. Thirdly, even with an improved rail service, these restrictions will only affect a few domestic routes. If France’s regulations were applied directly to Germany, it would impact only four routes. The effect, as in France, would be marginal.

Why is France protecting Paris-Charles de Gaulle?

Hubs are essential to ensuring international connectivity, because long-haul flights do not solely carry passengers from the immediate airport catchment area. They also serve as central gathering points for travelers from various domestic and foreign cities. The French government is well aware of this fact and has strategically designed domestic air traffic restrictions in France in such a way that Paris-Charles de Gaulle remains unaffected.

Structure of German domestic flights

- Domestic passengers on routes <400 km: **3%**
- Proportion of transfers: **2/3**
- Development of domestic air traffic vs. 2019: **-53%**

Ultimately, the French regulations are symbolic policy. So, what would be a better approach? The answer lies in consistently optimizing synergies between rail and air traffic, a concept that works well in Germany even without legal requirements. Lufthansa and Deutsche Bahn are continuously expanding their cooperation, ensuring there is now an alternative train connection for every domestic feeder flight to and from Frankfurt. Flight routes with attractive rail services have long been discontinued, for example routes such as Hamburg-Berlin, Berlin-Nuremberg, and Cologne-Frankfurt. It is essential to note that most domestic flights are merely the first leg of an international journey. Passengers flying with Lufthansa from Stuttgart to Frankfurt, for instance, usually intend to transfer at the hub to reach destinations in the Far East, Africa, or America. The goal is to persuade these travelers to embrace intermodal services.

However, government involvement is crucial. To date, only five German airports are connected to the long-distance rail network: Frankfurt, Dusseldorf, Berlin, Cologne-Bonn, and Leipzig-Halle. Stuttgart is scheduled to follow in 2025, while Munich still lags behind. One thing is clear: the more high-speed lines there are, connecting airports with cities throughout Germany, the fewer domestic flights there will be.