In June 2023, France formally introduced a ban on direct domestic flights that could be replaced by a train ride lasting no more than 2 ½ hours. Other countries and many employers have since followed suit. Employers have the freedom to run their companies as they see fit. However, it is a radical departure from the liberal and market-driven economic policies that are usually associated with the free and democratic world for states to determine consumer choice in this way.

This fact did not escape the scrutiny of the European Commission (EC), which argued it constituted a departure from the right of European air carriers to freely operate intra-EU air services. After further consideration, the EC decided that the measure was appropriate, and France could introduce the ban.

Before more countries follow suit, the climate impact of the French ban must be understood. The ban concerns only three routes, from Paris-Orly airport to Nantes, Bordeaux, and Lyon. According to the French government, total domestic flights in France generate no more than 4% of the country’s CO2 emissions from transportation. As seen in the chart, until the ban was proposed in 2021, the three affected routes accounted for a mere 1.4% of all flights and about 4% of domestic flights in France. Operations were cut already from that year, although the ban was not implemented until 2023. Le Monde estimated that the ban reduced CO2 emissions from transport in France by 0.12% if fully replaced by zero-emission transportation. However, should passengers instead travel by coach or car, the reduction in net CO2 emissions would be even smaller.

This contribution to combating climate change and building resilience, the stated objective of the ban, is unjustifiably small with respect to the inconvenience imposed upon travelers on those routes.