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## CARBON PASSPORTS: THE PATH TO A GREEN HELL, PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

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### Abstract

In recent years, personal carbon footprints have been mentioned as a tool to combat climate change. So far, the focus has been primarily on motivating individuals through various appeals, campaigns, or statistics. However, the idea of personal carbon passports has also emerged, based on what people would have as an annual travel quota. This study examines the feasibility of such a program and its potential impacts on personal freedom. The introduction of such a register would lead to serious negative consequences for both individual and societal liberties.

### Key Takeaways

- The discussion about carbon passports is beginning to appear in debates concerning the role of the individual in producing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.
- The introduction of carbon passports can theoretically be envisioned politically and legally and can be technically produced, but practical implementation would be much more complicated. However, if political means were found, such a system could be conceivable at the EU level.
- The concept of carbon passports would restrict personal freedoms and continuously monitor citizens' daily activities. Less invasive and discriminatory ways must be found to address greenhouse gas emissions and support a sustainable lifestyle.

## Introduction

The concept of the so-called "carbon footprint" has been discussed for some time in recent discussions about climate and sustainability. This concept has found notability not only in business but also within governmental institutions and non-profits. The effort to become "green" has become extremely relevant in recent years. Nearly everyone has come across the burdensome question of whether printing emails or issuing paper invoices, even receipts, is truly necessary if we are to be concerned for environmental protection.

Also gaining attention in recent years is the effort to quantify an individual's carbon footprint based on their habits, behaviors, and activities, such as travel, energy consumption, diet, or other practices. Now, each person's hypothetical carbon footprint can become a measurable quantity that may, for now, be assessed and evaluated for information and interest.

This number is proposed to serve as the basis for the so-called "carbon passports," essentially a carbon quota allocated to each person (for example, annually), which would determine both the mode of travel and where they travel, that is, if they get permission. Is this a tool that could significantly contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions? Or is it more a way to limit personal freedom and keep people in check, forcing people to spend their money only how the government wants?

## Carbon Passports, Please

In the context of climate and sustainability, there is an increasingly noticeable effort to appeal to the personal responsibility of every citizen. Currently, corporations confront the individual's personal choices (for example, the Commercial Bank's 2021 campaign urging people not to eat carp for Christmas) or various online calculators that inform users on how much their behavior pollutes the planet, motivating them to produce fewer CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. But the dialogue about the possibility of introducing carbon passports shifts the debate to a completely different level. The idea ceases to be primarily about subtle influence through awareness but constraint through a scarce commodity, namely carbon allocation.

A similar concept is not entirely new; the British Parliament considered something comparable in 2007 and 2008, but the idea of a personal emission quota did not gain traction then (Personal Carbon Trading, 2008). Most recently, the concept of carbon passports was stirred up again by the study "A Sustainable Future for Travel," published in November 2023 by the travel agency Intrepid Travel in collaboration with a consulting firm, The Future Laboratory. Their goal was to analyze the future of sustainable travel and create a hypothetical scenario of what would happen if the tourism sector, which currently generates roughly one-tenth of global greenhouse gas emissions, did not change.

Scientists have argued that returning to pre-pandemic levels of travel would have serious consequences for the global climate due to the increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. They have been asking for radical changes in the approach and attitude to tourism. If nothing is done to reduce emissions, the tourism industry as a whole will look drastically different. The following study declares that due to climate change, some of today's most popular tourist destinations, such as the Maldives, will no longer be an option at all by 2050. Places that are currently sought out for amicable weather will increase in temperature to an uncomfortable degree, leading to resorts in the Mediterranean being abandoned and replaced by resorts in Belgium, Poland, or Scandinavia. *"(A Sustainable Future for Travel, 2023, s. 12)*

In this study, the concept of carbon passports is only introduced – each individual would receive some sort of annual quota, and once it has been used up, they will no longer be allowed to purchase more airfare. The aim, of course, is to demand people to scrutinize their emissions. “Around 2040, it will be unusual to see members of Generation Alpha (those born post-2020) without the infrastructure to track their carbon footprint. Every Uber ride, plane trip, and even visit to the local supermarket will be tracked on their devices, and their carbon footprint will be calculated in real-time (A Sustainable Future for Travel, 2023, s. 12).

This travel agency (which published the document itself) is now issuing warnings about climate change's impacts on tourism. Given that the agency's business model is based around a more sustainable travel style and working with smaller groups, questions about its motivation and biases are naturally present. Furthermore, Alex Hawkins, the editor of The Future Laboratory study, admitted that though carbon footprints are our most likely future, he does not prefer it. ‘We conceived this concept as a provocative study to highlight that if we are not taking decisive steps against our climate crisis, we may witness various restrictions on our freedoms,’ he stated (Hadden, 2023). From a marketing perspective, the study was a success. The travel company has gained wide recognition, and many foreign websites have cited the study it performed.

## Theory and Practice

For the potential introduction to be feasible, three things would need to happen: 1) Political backing, 2) new legislation, and 3) sufficient tech. Given the radical environmental regulations and directives that the European Union has introduced as a part of the Green Deal, it doesn't seem like the first two would be tremendous obstacles. The complexity lies in the third – existing technology would have to be in close sync with digital registries of citizens and their banking information. Nevertheless, this block isn't insurmountable.

Theory and talk is one thing, but real-life application is something else entirely. When we talk of practical feasibility, the concept of a measure like this runs into objective limits. Firstly, it would necessitate a sizable amount of people to become members of this system. This can be imagined for the citizens of the EU, but introducing documentation like this on a global scale is just highly unlikely. On top of that, there are further specificities that need to be worked out, whether it be the individual CO<sub>2</sub> emission limits, the method that we would then calculate those carbon quotas, and the control mechanism itself.

Everyone, of course, would then ask how it can be possible to fairly set an appropriate limit that considers social, economic, and geographic differences between individuals and regions. Placing these quotas would require a comprehensive analysis and then a balancing of these various factors, which could be prone to errors and unjust procurements.

It also remains uncertain how it would be possible to ensure the proper and reliable technical infrastructure for tracking carbon emissions and the management of the passports. This would require extensive investments into digital technologies and databases, as well as the implementation of strict security measures to protect personal data. Additionally, the issue of compatibility and interoperability between new and old systems in a variety of countries and regions would need to be dealt with. Without a global standard, there could be problems with crossing borders and trade, which would lead to even more administrative and logistical issues.

It can be said, then, that the creation of a global carbon passport and the system around it would be highly unlikely to come about. However, given the current way of thinking and the manner in which laws are adopted at a European Union level, a system like this is not unimaginable for its members.

## Carbon Credit System

Since we have established that a carbon passport system is not realistic at this time, the conversation around it is a part of a larger discussion on how to motivate, maybe compel individuals to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle when it comes to transportation, energy, and consumption. There are various ways to accomplish this, which include media and information campaigns, legislative changes ranging from construction to transportation, and adjustments in taxation. The main “pioneer” in this regard is Brussels, which has introduced measures in the fight against climate change. These include bans on internal combustion engine cars and on fossil fuel boilers, accompanied by subsidies for electromobility, mandatory home insulation, and emission allowances for households and personal transportation.

However, the consideration of carbon passports for every individual takes the debate to a different, dangerous place. (Drury, 2021; Johnson, 2021). Based on this concept, each person would be assigned a certain CO<sub>2</sub> quota that they could “consume” within a given time frame. Nearly anything could be included in such a personal “account” - purchasing airline tickets, refueling a car, using various services, and even grocery shopping (especially meat). Along with the tendency to abolish or at least significantly limit the use of cash, replacing it exclusively with cashless transactions. This is all included under the expansion of biometric technology (devices for identifying citizens by iris, cameras capable of recognizing individuals by face, etc.). The concept of a personal carbon footprint represents a huge step towards the continuous monitoring of people’s daily activities and the further restriction of their freedoms. Such a regime would bear great similarities to the Chinese Social Credit System (2024).

The idea of a personal carbon footprint raises a whole range of questions and concerns regarding privacy, freedom, and fairness. For instance, how could CO<sub>2</sub> quotas be set to take into account the specific needs and unique life situations of every individual? There is a real risk that such a system could disadvantage and potentially truly harm those with lower incomes, who might find it difficult to purchase emission allowances or offset their exceeding their limit (Johnson, 2021). Alternatively, the system might unfairly penalize successful people, as wealthier individuals tend to have a higher carbon footprint (iRozhlas, 2021).

Taken to an absurd extreme, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions could become parallel to a currency that people could pay and barter with. Carbon banks could energy, where people could accumulate emissions or even go into carbon debt, which could then have various consequences, such as restrictions on driving their own car or purchasing only certain types of food. Moreover, it could become common practice to find annual emission statements similar to tax returns today. From our stance today, this is an obscene proposition. But we must remember that the ban on internal combustion engine cars, or the proposal by German Transport Minister Volker Wissing a few years ago that prohibited driving cars on the weekend, also seemed fantastical at the time (iDnes, 2024)

Other legitimate concerns relate to the protection of privacy and data security. The collection and tracking of information on citizens’ daily activities could lead to potential misuse of personal data and its unauthorized use. There is always the risk that such a system could be abused for surveillance and control of citizens by governmental or private entities. Combined with other trends such as the development of digital currencies, biometrics, and increased control over social media content, these all might lead us to a massive loss of freedom, where nearly every aspect of a person’s life could be monitored.

The idea that daily choices, such as what you eat, where you travel, how you travel, the approval of a bank loan, being dictated on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is very concerning.

Such a system would have a significant impact on individuals' lifestyles and would likely deepen social and regional inequalities that currently exist. Above all, it would open Pandora's box of absolute control over people by the state or corporations, a kind of carbon totalitarianism. Such a concept much be unequivocally rejected.

## Conclusion

This analysis has focused on considerations regarding the possible implementation of carbon passports, as well as the concept of a personal carbon footprint. While both ideas offer a fresh perspective on sustainability and combating climate change, their implementation would pose a serious threat to individual freedoms, especially in conjunction with other tools of digital control. Introducing such documents and measuring personal emissions could have a significant negative impact on society, as it would undermine fundamental principles of individual freedom and privacy.

Such measures would essentially allow the state and private entities to monitor every step and decision of individuals to a level that would be considered unacceptably invasive by today's standards. Measuring personal carbon footprints would require analyzing a wide range of data and information, which could create opportunities for misuse and privacy loss. The idea of governments or private companies being able to track every purchase, every journey, every meal of every individual is deeply troubling. Rather than a democratic society, it resembles totalitarian practices. After all, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

## Zdroje

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He graduated from the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, majoring in English and Political Science, and in 2008 he received his PhD in Political Theory from the LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome. For fifteen years he worked at the daily Právo, where he first worked in the foreign editorial office. Since 2009 he has worked in the political department, from 2018 to January 2021 as deputy editor-in-chief. Since February 2021, he has been the media advisor to the chairman of the ANO movement.

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