

## IMPROVING INTERNATIONAL PASSENGER RAIL

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**Cc:** Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice President of the European Commission  
Karima Delli, Chair of the Committee on Transport and Tourism of the European Parliament  
Michael Clauss, Permanent Representative of the Federal Republic of Germany to the European Union  
**Subject:** **Improving International Passenger Rail in Europe**

Dear Commissioner Vălean,

Sustainable mobility is one of the main objectives of the European Green Deal. Your proposal to make 2021 the European Year of Rail emphasises the importance of rail transport in delivering this deal. Through the four railway packages, each consisting of a technical and a market pillar, Europe aims to revitalise the rail sector by realising a Single European Railway Area. We<sup>1</sup> – European advisory councils in the field of environment and sustainability – note that the intermodal competitiveness of international passenger rail services has nevertheless remained limited. In this letter, we stress that Europe can and must do more to improve international passenger transport by rail.

This letter is the outcome of an extensive analysis and consultation with international experts from various sections of the international rail sector<sup>2</sup>, based on the following observations:

- The importance of efficient international rail transport cannot be underestimated.
- The share of rail in international passenger transport is very limited.
- There are persistent bottlenecks that are not being adequately addressed.

In essence, our recommendations in this letter urge the European Commission to:

- give a major boost to stimulate European passenger transport by rail, in particular by:
- instituting European corridor authorities for passenger transport by rail;
- improving regulations on travel information, ticketing and passenger rights.

### Importance of international rail services

Air and road traffic volumes in Europe leave no doubt that there is huge demand for transport between the European metropolitan areas. International trains, as a safe and environmentally friendly mode of transport, should serve a larger share of this demand. Rail is a green and safe mode of transport and contributes towards achieving the EU's environmental goals. International rail passenger services play a crucial role in the transition towards a sustainable transport system by replacing short-haul flights and medium-distance car journeys on a wide number of origin–

<sup>1</sup> The undersigned parties are members of the EEAC, a network that brings together advisory bodies on climate change, the environment and sustainable development from 13 European countries and regions.

<sup>2</sup> Such as: ERA, EIM, CER, RailNetEurope, NS International, ÖBB, EPF, Thalys, Eurostar, Railforum, Schiphol Group, Flixtain, Rover, ProRail, Transdev, Omio, Lynxx, Trainline, TU Delft, Erasmus University and UGent.



destinations pairs. This significantly reduces the negative impact of transportation on society. Moreover, better international train services will enhance the economic competitiveness of urban agglomerations and stimulate sustainable tourism. And, in your own words: 'Setting up a coherent and functional network across all Europe is an exercise in political cohesion.'<sup>3</sup> Additionally, as a low-carbon transport mode, international trains contribute towards meeting the Paris climate targets (2015) and the objectives of the European Commission's Green Deal (2019).

The current COVID-19 pandemic is having a dramatic impact on international travel, with travellers dissuaded from using public transport because of the fear of crowding. The transport sector will need support from national governments and the EU to prevent a further collapse and future decline. This support can be used as an incentive for a post-pandemic shift to a more sustainable and efficient mobility system by stipulating that government aid be linked to support for the Commission's Green Deal targets, notably Europe's aim to become the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050.<sup>4</sup> This implies that now is the time to support a shift from air to rail, specifically for short-haul flights. We call upon European governments and EU institutions to utilise the framework of a strengthened European Green Deal as the pathway out of the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath. Policy coherence between the Green Deal and other EU Policies is of the essence.<sup>5</sup>

We are aware of and support the ongoing efforts by the European Commission to facilitate international passenger services: the 2011 White Paper *Roadmap to a Single European Transport Area* provides a vision for a competitive and resource efficient transport system. The four subsequent railway packages, with a market pillar to ensure open access and a technical pillar on harmonisation and the Technical Specifications for Interoperability, and the implementation of ERTMS<sup>6</sup> have fundamentally changed the way the rail sector works. The development of the core TEN-T network by 2030 and a comprehensive network in 2050 are enticing prospects for the future of European rail. EU funding instruments such as the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) and Cohesion funding for investments in cross-border railway infrastructure are improving connections. The Shift2Rail EU innovation programme 2014–2020 stimulates the integration of new and advanced technologies into innovative rail product solutions, and the current recasting of the Regulation on rail passengers' rights and obligations focuses on improving the experience of travelling by train for international passengers. Nevertheless, Europe can and should do more to improve international rail passenger services.

### **The rail share of international passenger transport is very limited**

Our analysis starts from the interests and needs of the international rail traveller. We are aware of the necessity to improve the European rail infrastructure. Nevertheless, the EU already has a widespread rail network available to the international traveller: about 200 000 km in the EU,<sup>7</sup> of which almost 11 000 km are high-speed rail lines. So what is needed to get international travellers to choose the train? Travellers need to know what train connections there are, they should be able to buy international tickets without much difficulty and have access to frequent and comfortable train services, preferably without having to make many transfers. Although European rail passenger traffic is mostly domestic, with only 6% (of passenger-kilometres) crossing borders in 2016,<sup>8</sup> the

<sup>3</sup> European Commission (2020). Promoting Sustainable Mobility: Commission proposes 2021 to be the European Year of Rail. Press release 4 March 2020. Brussels.

<sup>4</sup> UBS Investment Bank (2020). "By train or by plane?" Traveller's dilemma after COVID-19, amid climate change concerns. Consulted via <https://www.ubs.com/global/en/investment-bank/in-focus/2020/by-train-or-by-plane.html>.

<sup>5</sup> European Network of Advisory Councils on Climate Change, the Environment and Sustainable Development (EEAC) (2020). Responding to Covid19: Building social, economic and environmental resilience with the European Green Deal. The Hague.

<sup>6</sup> European Rail Traffic Management System.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission (2020). Total length of railway lines. Consulted via Eurostat databrowser <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ttr00003/default/table?lang=en>.

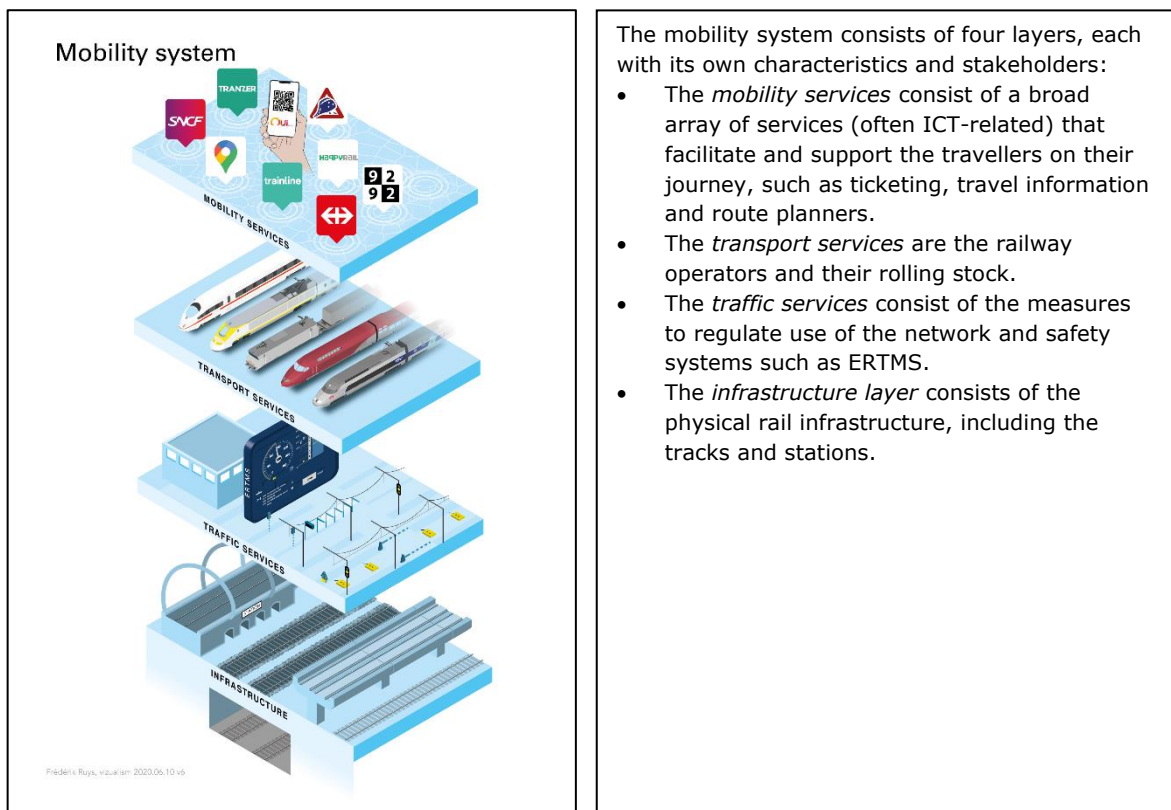
<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2019). *Sixth report on monitoring development of the rail market pursuant to Article 15(4) of Directive 2012/34/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council*. Brussels.

absolute number of passengers is significant and there is much to be gained from a better use of the existing infrastructure, including the further development of night train services.

On some cross-border city pairs, such as London–Paris and Amsterdam–London, international rail services have improved and connections – albeit still at low frequencies – are now competitive with short-haul flights. But for many other destinations, international passenger transport by rail in Europe is still underdeveloped and ripe for improvement on many fronts. The four railway packages have not yet brought about the development of a well-functioning international market and, despite the best efforts of the EU, the share of rail in the transport market has actually fallen.<sup>9</sup> The international rail traveller still has to contend with poor travel information, complicated booking procedures, mediocre comfort levels, unreliable timetables, low frequency services and low speeds on many services.<sup>10</sup>

### Persistent bottlenecks

In our analysis of bottlenecks for the traveller, we looked at the mobility services, the transport services, the traffic services and the infrastructure (see Figure).<sup>11</sup>



At the moment, the international rail network consists primarily of interlinked national systems which are optimised to meet domestic needs. The lack of integrated traffic and capacity management is detrimental to traffic predictability and an efficient use of this network. We note that this pushes the needs of the international traveller to the periphery. Travellers want a single service point and a single ticket for their international train journey and are not interested in the changes

<sup>9</sup> European Environment Agency (2009). Modal split of passenger transport in EU 27, 1990-2030 [Chart]. Last modified 2012. Consulted via <https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/figures/fig-2-modal-split-of-passenger-transport-in-eu-27-1990-2030>.

<sup>10</sup> See also: European Court of Auditors (2018). A European high-speed rail network: not a reality but an ineffective patchwork. Luxembourg.

<sup>11</sup> Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (2018). Better and different mobility: investing in mobility for the future. The Hague.

that have to be made to provide this service. What is needed is good cooperation between parties responsible for the mobility, transport and traffic services and for the infrastructure. However, there are many bottlenecks – both within and between elements of the mobility system – that prevent an adequate response to meeting the needs of the international traveller. We conclude that the lack of international cooperation persists because public authorities, rail carriers and infrastructure managers are primarily held to account for their performance in providing domestic services and to a lesser degree for international services. What is needed is a European mindset for rail passenger services, based on a supportive regulatory framework, and the right incentives to operators for offering cross-border passenger rail services.

Moreover, we observe that all parties concerned are strongly focused on technical and infrastructure bottlenecks, the bottom two layers of the mobility system. To a degree, the implementation of European policy is no exception to this, given the focus on infrastructure in the CEF, for example, and the technological focus of the Shift2Rail initiative. Judging by the many identified bottlenecks resulting from technical and infrastructural issues, improvements in these areas will certainly be part of the solution. However, the attention being given to these aspects appears to be inhibiting improvements to the top two layers of the mobility system which will benefit international travellers in the short term. Moreover, changing the infrastructure is a very costly business and the decision-making involved is time-consuming. We do not underestimate the importance of these investments, but point out that important improvements can also be made elsewhere in the mobility system which could already have an effect in the short term. The availability of better travel information and a simple ticketing process will lead to an increase in the number of international rail passengers. This increased demand will in turn stimulate the development of new international rail services, leading to an increasing need for a better capacity management. This growth will also highlight the capacity bottlenecks in the infrastructure for international services and the obvious need to resolve these problems will then figure more prominently in the priorities of decision-makers.

## **Recommendations to the European Commission**

In the light of the European ambitions for international rail transport (Fourth Railway Package), the Paris climate agreement and the European Green Deal, we stress the need for a major boost to stimulate international passenger rail, consisting of two specific recommendations, one on the need for better corridor coordination and the second on travel information, ticketing and passengers' rights. These recommendations are also relevant for the many national, supranational and industry parties involved in international passenger transport by rail.

### **1. A major boost to stimulate European passenger transport by rail**

We believe the European Commission and EU Member States should give a major boost to the further development of a European rail transport network for international travellers, putting the preferences and needs of the international rail passenger first. It is important to note that when travellers decide which mode of transport to use, they do not just look at price and speed, but also consider service, comfort, availability of direct services and the uncertainties surrounding changing trains en route.

So far the European approach has leaned heavily on stimulating market mechanisms and harmonising regulations, information and technology, and technical standardisation. There is still room for improvement because major bottlenecks remain that are caused by poor coordination between countries and between rail parties. The major boost that is needed implies an increase in political attention, speeding up policy effort from DG-Move and stimulating the international working groups and actors concerned with international passenger rail. The European Commission must therefore give priority to further improvement of international passenger transport by rail. Better

coordination across the European rail network can bring about a huge improvement, but the network itself must also be made better connected and faster. As set out below, much can be achieved in the short term by improving corridor coordination in terms of traffic management and capacity management, by providing adequate travel information and simple ticketing, and by improving passenger rights.

## **2. European corridor authority for passenger transport by rail**

We see the need for a better institutional framework, in particular good international coordination on the main rail links between the major urban agglomerations in Europe. We are in favour of an EU regulation establishing a European 'rail traffic control and capacity management' governance structure for the rail network as better network coordination is essential for improving rail connectivity between the European agglomerations. This pan-European initiative could start with international coordination along the separate core corridors for passenger transport within Europe: Rail Passenger Corridors.

### *Establish corridor authorities*

We recommend that the European Commission ensures that agreements are made on improving international rail services in the most important core corridors between the major urban agglomerations taking national interests into account. The focus should be on cross-border city pairs that now lean heavily on short-haul flights but can be connected within three or four hours by international rail. Parties to these agreements should be the relevant public authorities (EU, national government, regions and cities), the infrastructure managers in the Member States and the railway undertakings). This will allow concrete decisions to be made and create institutional space for considering the interests of the international traveller.

The EU already has regulations on TEN-T and rail freight corridors (RFCs). These regulations are primarily directed towards rail freight traffic. There is no regulation for passenger corridors similar to the RFCs. For dedicated tracks this needs to be addressed with a regulation for passenger corridors. For tracks with mixed use the existing imbalance (coordination of freight only and not passenger transport) needs to be corrected. A suitable regulation is needed to transform the RFCs into an integrated coordination body. The governance of both types of corridors (dedicated and mixed) should consist of two tiers: a board of directors consisting of representatives from the Member States and the EU, and a management board consisting of infrastructure managers and allocation bodies.

*Corridor coordination is aimed at two elements of the rail system: traffic control and capacity management:*

#### *1. European rail traffic control*

We see a need for supervision and monitoring of international rail traffic. In order to realise this, infrastructure managers and allocation bodies need a structured and standardised way of coordinating traffic across borders. A European traffic control system must instruct national traffic management centres to work together in a defined standard approach for a smooth transfer of international trains from one part of the network to the other. Traffic control procedures are needed for a smooth handling of adjustments or disruptions to the timetable.

#### *2. Capacity management*

As stated, we see a pressing need for better coordination between countries, regions and cities along corridors. Not just between public authorities, but especially between carriers, infrastructure managers and other rail parties. A corridor authority coordinates consultation and planning between all the parties to ensure, among other things, better connections between train paths and services. The corridor authority, as the transport authority within a corridor, must have the ability to make it

clear to all stakeholders what level of service is required – in concrete terms, the rolling stock to be deployed, the frequency of services and the desired operating speed – and to ensure that international connectivity is guaranteed during disruptions to the network. As a market instrument, the corridor authority must be able to stimulate high level and competitive services to clients and users of the tracks, for instance by putting cross-border public service obligations (PSOs) out to tender. As a policy and governance instrument, the corridor authority should be able to harmonise national practices across a broad range of topics, but also tackle the various obstacles to international freight and/or passenger transport by rail, such as cross-border difficulties and problems with interoperability. The corridor authority must be able to hold the parties concerned to account. We therefore recommend that the EU is represented on the board of directors of the corridors. In the event of conflicts between countries, infrastructure managers and/or carriers, the European delegate must be able to break the deadlock. We feel that this arrangement will ensure that the interests of international passengers are given full consideration in the decision-making process.

#### *Long-term objective*

Based on the lessons learned from corridor coordination between city pairs (for passengers) and harbours (for freight), pan-European rail traffic and capacity management should be allocated to a European agency. In synergy with the existing tasks of the European Union Agency for Railways (ERA), the responsibility for pan-European rail traffic and capacity management for the international network should therefore be allocated to this agency, which implies an extension to the mandate of the ERA. The ERA must be able to conclude new supranational PSOs for important services, with key performance indicators geared to the efficient use of the available capacity. The European rail traffic and capacity manager will also seek to increase the operating speed of the services by resolving technical problems and removing bottlenecks in the infrastructure. For particularly difficult bottlenecks, appropriate EU financing will be needed, for example from the CEF fund, under the condition that this demonstrably leads to faster train services on international routes. This should also include the implementation and management of a harmonised EU model for track access charging, including collecting and disbursing funds for an improved EU-wide railway infrastructure.

#### *Criteria for corridor quality*

In its regulation, the European Commission should set down criteria for defining passenger corridors, such as:

- international connectivity: services between major urban agglomerations (e.g. > 500 000 residents);
- easy to reach: stations near the city centre;
- transport value: a minimum service level to be maintained on each section of the corridor, based on the potential ridership for both daytime connections and night trains;
- substitution potential of road and air: possibilities for opening stations at international airports;
- network function: connections at different system levels, national and regional.

Criteria should also be set for service level per corridor:

- average speed: rapid international services;
- frequency: number of services per day or per hour that must be offered on each section of the corridor;<sup>12</sup>
- comfort and facilities: for instance, the quality of the rolling stock on the corridor.

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<sup>12</sup> In concrete terms, this involves setting a minimum level of service for international journeys, such as the number of changes and time spent waiting for connections. It also includes providing sufficient day return services with departure and arrival times that suit international travellers rather than domestic users. This would connect the existing European networks in a convenient way for passengers. Day return services are needed for international business travellers who want to arrive in the morning in time for a meeting and be back home again in the evening.

### 3. EU Regulations on travel information, ticketing and passenger rights

As stated, the quality of international travel information and ticketing is below par. There is urgent need for a better EU regulation on travel information and ticketing. The ongoing revision of the EU Regulation on rail passengers' rights and obligations presents an opportunity to improve the rights of international rail passengers.

#### *Ticketing: make it easier to find and book international train journeys*

International rail passengers want an easy-to-use booking process, which shows all the carriers (incumbents and non-incumbents) that operate services on a route in a single, clear and comprehensive format. Because passengers do not travel from station to station, but from door to door, they want integrated travel advice and ticketing. The development of Mobility as a Service (MaaS) will help to fill this gap in the future. Various apps are already under development that will provide integrated travel information and ticketing services. However, and notwithstanding existing EU regulations,<sup>13</sup> app developers still face the problem of inadequate access to travel information, passenger data and ticket sales because carriers are not making these available. Carriers must therefore make these data publicly available as soon as possible. A new EU regulation should be considered that makes the provision of travel and passenger information a requirement and standard condition for carriers to obtain access to the rail infrastructure. Examples of easy to realise improvements to the quality of the service are advanced route planning, real-time traffic information, mobile applications and related push notifications.

#### *Ticket availability: tickets must be available to buy at least nine months before the date of travel*

Train tickets are usually only available three months in advance. This does not match the booking behaviour of many international travellers. The EU regulation should require international train tickets to be available for purchase earlier than the current three months in advance. We consider a period of nine months to be feasible.

#### *Booking: agreements on international ticketing*

There are at this time big differences between the booking systems of national carriers, which is a hindrance to making agreements on international ticketing. The European Commission should make provisions, in a regulation, to ensure that tickets can be booked across these systems in a way that is convenient for the traveller. Service providers and ticket agents will then be able to sell through tickets that are valid from the point of departure to the final destination. The regulation must also contain a provision that when tendering and awarding PSOs, countries must oblige carriers to share data and permit third parties to sell tickets. The many years of negotiations between carriers with only limited results on this point suggests that a uniform commission percentage fixed by the European Commission is now essential.

#### *Passengers' rights: improve the rights of passengers, such as compensation and inclusion in the EU Regulation on rail passengers' rights and obligations*

Like airlines, rail carriers should make mutual agreements on taking over each other's passengers in the event of delays or cancellations (through ticketing). The European Commission should aim at making binding agreements on this in the recast Regulation on rail passengers' rights and obligations, which is currently under revision. Public authorities should also be obliged to make agreements on through ticketing when awarding PSOs. It is not up to the passengers, but the carriers to work out how to deal with the costs incurred as a result of missed connections. This can

<sup>13</sup> One of these is the EU Regulation 454/2011 on the technical specification for interoperability relating to the subsystem 'telematics applications for passenger services' of the transEuropean rail system (TAP TSI). The aim is to establish procedures and interfaces between all types of actors to provide information and issue tickets to passengers via widely available technologies. Another relevant regulation is Commission Delegated Regulation 2017/1926 on multimodal travel information systems that aims to gather (static and dynamic) travel information and booking data in central national data hubs in order to facilitate access to these data. This regulation contains an obligation to provide static data and leaves the decision on dynamic data to the Member States.

be addressed in the current revision of the regulation by including a provision that compensation for delays or cancellation of trains applies not just to the part of the journey that is subject to delay, but to the entire journey by train. This will encourage carriers to be more aware of each other's interests in the event of delays or cancellations (and thus also the interests of the passengers). Guaranteeing passengers' rights reduces the need for through services, which may obviate the need for investments in other layers of the mobility system.

**In conclusion**

The undersigned place considerable value on your efforts on this topic. We think that improving international passenger transport by rail will make a considerable contribution towards European objectives. If you so wish, we will gladly discuss with you the points set out above in more detail.

Yours sincerely,

**Council for the Environment and Infrastructure, Netherlands**



Jan Jaap de Graeff (Chair)



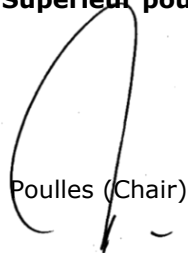
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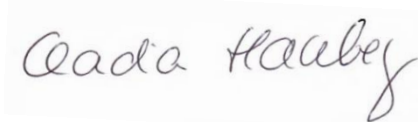
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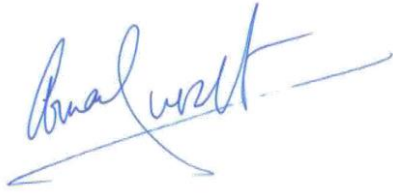


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