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Road/Railway – New trend in the European Railway market:
European Commission to support 10 pilot projects to establish
new and to improve existing railway services

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【概要 : Summary】

The EU' s railways remain one of the safest and cleanest transport mode and they are supported by the EU' s policy to increase sustainability in the transport sector to reach the objectives of the European Green Deal. In the past 25 years, the European Commission' s efforts focused on improving the conditions in the rail transport market and to strengthen the railway' s competitiveness compared to other transport modes. However, many obstacles remain to be removed until a true Single European Rail Area is achieved.

Travels by rail need to become much more attractive to travellers and businesses to successfully compete with air and road transport in the long-distance mobility. To further encourage people to use trains for their cross-border trips in the EU, on 14 December 2021, the European Commission presented a TEN-T proposal, accompanied by an Action Plan on improving the long-distance and cross-border rail services. The Commission' s Action Plan intends to remove barriers to cross-border and long-distance travel and to make rail travel more attractive for passengers. Thereby, the EU intends to achieve its target of doubling high-speed rail traffic by 2030 and to tripling it by 2050.

As announced in its Action Plan, the European Commission invited proposals for cross-border pilot rail services to boost long-distance and cross-border passenger rail from 29 June to 31 October 2022, and planned to announce the selected successful pilot projects in January 2023. On 31 January 2023, the European Commission announced the selected 10 pilot projects, based on proposals of the rail sector and relevant authorities. As the selection of cross-border pilot services shows, the European Commission has also chosen several projects that involve night trains. In a next step, the Commission will invite the involved initiators and relevant authorities behind the 10 selected proposals to launch their projects.

【記事 : Article】

1. Background of the European Commission' s support to increase railway connections

The European railways remain one of the safest and cleanest transport mode. Therefore, they are at the focus of the EU' s policies to shift more passengers and freight to railways to increase the transport sector' s sustainability (European Commission 2021a).

Regarding EU rail transport policy, in the past 25 years, the European Commission' s efforts have

concentrated on improving the conditions in the rail transport market to strengthen the railway's competitiveness compared to other modes of transport.

The three major areas of the Commission's efforts to improve the railway services in the EU include the opening of the rail transport market to competition, the improvement of the interoperability and safety of national networks and the development of railway infrastructure (European Commission 2020d).

Between 2001 and 2016, four legislative railway packages were adopted with the aim of gradually open the rail transport service markets for competition, making national railway systems interoperable and defining appropriate framework conditions for the development of a single European railway area (European Commission 2020d). It also includes the harmonisation of charging and capacity allocation rules, common provisions on licensing of railway undertakings and train driver certification, safety requirements, the creation of the European Agency for railways and rail regulatory bodies in each EU Member State as well as common rail passenger rights.

However, many obstacles remain to be removed until a true Single European Rail Area can be achieved. In fact, although the number of people travelling by train has increased in recent years, only 7% of rail kilometres travelled between 2001 and 2018 involved cross-border trips, according to the European Commission (2021a). Therefore, rail needs a further boost to become more attractive to travellers and businesses as a means of transport that also meets the people's long-distance mobility needs (European Commission 2021d).

Furthermore, the European Green Deal (COM (2019)640 final) and the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy (COM(2020) 789 final) put rail transport in the focus of efforts to develop a sustainable transport and mobility system in the EU. In December 2020, the Commission published

its Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy (COM(2020) 789 final), which identified a need for decisive action to shift more activity towards more sustainable transport modes, notably to encourage travelling by rail (European Commission 2021d).

Considering the objectives of the 2019 European Green Deal, on 14 December 2021, the European Commission adopted four proposals to modernise the EU's transport system (European Commission 2021a). One goal is to shift more passengers and freight to rail, and thereby to subsequently support the European Green Deal's target to cut the transport sector's GHG emissions by 90% by 2050 (COM (2019)640 final). Therefore, to further encourage more people to use train for their cross-border trips in the EU, the European Commission presented a TEN-T (Trans-European Transport Network, TEN-T) proposal, accompanied by an Action Plan on long-distance and cross-border rail. The TEN-T is an EU-wide network of rail, inland waterways, short-sea shipping routes, and roads, connecting 424 major cities with ports, airports, and railway terminals (European Commission 2021b). Once the TEN-T network is completed, passengers will be able to travel long distances between major European cities in significantly shorter travel times by train (European Commission 2021b). The Action Plan (COM(2021) 810 final) accompanies the TEN-T proposal and is intended to boost long-distance and cross-border passenger rail services, combined with changes to the TEN-T to increase high-speed rail capacity. The European Investment Bank (EIB) is preparing new support for investment in rail (European Commission 2021b). Amongst the measures announced in the Action Plan, there are also legislative proposals and guideline revisions of the TEN-T Regulation, which will improve the passenger rail network and its improved integration within the multimodal transport system (COM(2021)810 final).

2. The European Commission's Action Plan to boost long distance and cross-border passenger rail (COM(2021)810 final)

The Action Plan to boost long-distance and cross-border passenger rail services of 14 December 2021 (COM(2021) 810 final) is a roadmap for the coming years, building on the experiences and findings of the European Year of Rail 2021. While complementing the European Commission's Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy (COM(2020) 789 final), it is the Action Plan's objective to make long-distance cross-border rail travel more attractive for many more European rail passengers (European Commission 2021c).

The Action Plan focuses on two main pillars, firstly, the full and correct implementation of the existing EU regulatory framework for railways, including the removal of any redundant national rules and secondly, the removal of obstacles to long-distance and cross-border passenger rail services (European Commission 2021c). To increasing long-distance and cross-border rail traffic by 2030, the Commission will support the launch of at least 15 cross-border pilot projects to test the Action Plan's approach, ahead of the entry into force of the new TEN-T requirements (European Commission 2021b).

Furthermore, the Commission's Action Plan to boot long distance and cross-border passenger rail intends to remove barriers to cross-border and long-distance travel and to make rail travel more attractive for passengers to meet the target of doubling high-speed rail traffic by 2030, and to triple it by 2050 (European Commission 2021a). The actions include a multimodal legislative proposal to accelerating digitalisation and to boost user-friendly multimodal ticketing to allowing passengers to find the best tickets at the most attractive price. It also includes a better support of passengers faced with disruption, and a commitment to investigating an EU-wide VAT exemption for train tickets. Sustainable cross-border and/or multimodal

collective transport should be introduced through Public Service Obligations, where necessary. Moreover, sustainable transport modes should become an attractive option for young people (European Commission 2021a, European Commission 2021b). The removal of redundant national technical and operational rules, ensuring a better availability of trains, coaches, and locomotives (rolling stock); modernising passenger rail infrastructure and more efficient use of the rail network and proposals on timetabling and capacity management, to boost quicker and more frequent cross-border rail services are further measures. Also, guidelines for track access pricing should be announced to make access to infrastructure for rail operators easier through appropriate pricing, increasing competition and allowing for more attractive ticket prices for passengers (European Commission 2021a, European Commission 2021b).

These measures summarised in the Action Plan should help to overcome the obstacles to long-distance and cross-border passenger rail services identified by the European Commission.

Since this Action Plan aims at boosting long-distance and cross border rail services, also night train services with long-distance and often cross-border travels will benefit from the measures foreseen in this Action Plan (European Commission 2021c). Most of the actions included in the Action Plan should be implemented as a matter of urgency and pilot-services could improve existing train services or could be newly introduced services (European Commission 2021c). The Commission intends to support the projects by facilitating contact between all relevant stakeholders and by providing assistance to help ensuring compliance with EU law and EU policies. The Commission will also assist in the identification of financing opportunities for particular pilot projects under this Action Plan (European Commission 2021c).

Some recent announcements by railway undertakings show that long-distance and high-speed services can often be operated profitably as open access services, including night trains (European Commission 2021c). After decades of decline, the night train services have recently gained significant attention and they could contribute to reduce the carbon footprint of travellers by avoiding short-haul flights and road trips. In this respect, also night trains could contribute to the mobility needs of European citizens in future while reducing GHG emissions in transport (European Commission 2021c).

However, although the climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic are contributing to change the travellers' habits of choosing transport means, it seems unlikely that the night train sector will grow beyond a small niche and the market of night trains will remain a niche market for the time being.

In fact, in the past decades, there was a pronounced shift from night trains (down 65%) to high-speed trains (up 95%), which may have made some journeys too brief by day for a dedicated night train to remain viable. The number of routes served has declined, with a focus on more frequent services on core routes.

Meanwhile, the European Parliament has asked the Commission to assess how cross-border night train services can be promoted. The Commission has therefore commissioned a study on long-distance cross-border passenger rail services to provide further insights into long-distance cross-border rail services, obstacles to the establishment and potential actions to remove these obstacles (European Commission 2021d).

According to the European Commission (2021d), immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic, cross-border travel within the study area was mainly by air, with rail and coach only carrying around 10% of public transport passengers each (European Commission 2021d). Only 6-7% of total passenger journeys and passenger-kilometres involve

crossing one or more borders. Only a proportion of these cross-border rail passenger journeys are on long-distance services, and only a small proportion of those on long-distance cross-border services are on night trains (European Commission 2021d). Moreover, there is a risk that increasing congestion, and prioritisation of domestic services make it difficult to introduce new cross-border services (European Commission 2021d). The European Commission's Action Plan adopted on 14 December 2021, to boost long-distance and cross-border passenger rail services could help to create opportunities also for the night train market and help the EU achieve its strategic milestones of doubling high-speed rail traffic by 2030 and tripling it by 2050 (European Commission 2021c). Finally, to support the setting up of new rail services requiring large investment in rolling stock, the European Investment Bank (EIB) has launched the Green Rail Investment Platform (GRIP) to assist investments, by both public and private entities in rail projects, through existing EIB products and through financial instruments made available by the Commission (European Commission 2021c).

3. Pilot Projects to develop cross-border rail passenger service

As announced in its Action Plan, the European Commission invited railway undertakings, infrastructure managers and competent authorities to submit proposals for cross-border pilot rail services to improve long-distance and cross-border passenger rail. The invitation was opened on 29 June 2022, during the Connection Europe Days, bring together politicians, industry representatives and the European Commission to discuss transport and mobility, and their role in achieving the European Green Deal's goals (European Commission 2022).

According to European Commissioner for Transport Adina Vălean, rail cross border connections are important to make rail an attractive option for

long and cross-border journeys. Since currently the operation and introduction of new services in cross-border rail still face obstacles, it needs the pilot projects to break down the remaining barriers (European Commission 2022). The pilot projects can establish new services or improve existing ones. Proposals could be submitted until 31 October 2022 and in January 2023, the results of the evaluation were made public (European Commission 2022).

After the submission of proposals on cross-border pilot services by the railway undertakings, infrastructure managers and competent authorities, the Commission is expected to support the selected projects by facilitating contact between the relevant stakeholders and by providing assistance (European Commission 2022).

On 31 January 2023, the European Commission announced it will support 10 pilot projects to establish new rail services or improve existing ones, based on the proposals, which were submitted by the rail sector and relevant authorities in response to the Commission's Action Plan (European Commission 2023). Together, they are expected to improve cross-border rail connections across the EU, making them faster, more frequent, and more affordable. The European Commission intends to encourage and help rail companies to create new international train connections to eliminate the many barriers to cross-border rail.

According to the Commission's announcement, the selected projects include also cross-border pilot services of night trains.

After careful evaluation the following proposals for cross-border pilot services have been chosen by the Commission: 1. the new services connecting Hungary, Austria and western Romania; 2. the connection Germany - Denmark - Sweden, with participation of SJ (new night train service Stockholm - Copenhagen - Berlin and day train Hamburg - Gothenburg (and potentially Oslo, in co-operation with DSB and DB), Snälltåget

(enhanced night train service Stockholm - Copenhagen - Berlin), České dráhy (new service Prague - Berlin -Copenhagen, in co-operation with DB and DSB) and Flixbus (new service Leipzig - Berlin - Copenhagen- Stockholm); 3. Midnight Trains' new night train service Paris - Milan - Venice; 4. the Flixbus' s new service route Munich - Zurich; 5. WESTbahn, new service Munich - Vienna - Budapest, extension of existing service; 6. Nederlandse Spoorwegen, enhancement of the existing Amsterdam - London service, in cooperation with Eurostar; 7. European Sleeper, a new night train service Amsterdam - Barcelona; 8. Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane /Deutsche Bahn, new services Rome - Munich and Milan - Munich; 9. ILSA, new services Lisbon - La Coruña and Lisbon - Madrid; 10. Ferrocarrils de la Generalitat de Catalunya, new services connecting Catalonia and the South of France. (European Commission 2023). As the selection of cross-border pilot services shows, the Commission has chosen several projects that involve night trains. Until the 1970s, the night train services were in high demand to cover long distances on the European continent. However, with the liberalisation of the aviation market and the introduction of low-cost/no-thrills airlines the railway could not compete anymore with the low-cost airlines' prices. Together with an increase in car ownership and the extension of the networks of motorways, the decline of night train services became visible and further increased due to the introduction of high-speed trains and low-cost airlines. Furthermore, the general problem of a fragmented booking system for railway tickets in Europe, which makes it complicated for travellers to book cross-border tickets was not resolved. Moreover, night/sleeper trains also lost their competitiveness due to the further expansion of the high-speed railway network throughout Europe since the 1990s.

However, in recent years, the European night trains experienced a revival, mainly based on a

change in public awareness of climate change and the carbon footprint of the aviation sector. One example is new French start-up “Midnight Trains”, which aims to run “hotels on rails” from Paris to 12 cities across Europe, starting from 2024. The aim is to offer an alternative to the basic and state-run SNCF sleepers as well as short-haul flights (midnight trains 2021). The European Sleeper, a new company based in the Netherlands, announced it would introduce a night train from Brussels via Antwerp, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, via Berlin and Dresden to Prague (Burroughs 2021). In a next step, the Commission expects the 10 selected pilot project proposals to be launched by the respectively involved railway undertakings, infrastructure managers and competent authorities.

4. Conclusion

The introduction of new cross-border passenger rail pilot services under the Commission’s Action plan to boost long-distance and cross-border passenger rail are one of the several measures to support the extension of the cross-border railway services in the EU.

Against the backdrop of the European Green Deal’s target to achieve a 90% GHG emission reduction for the transport sector by 2050, the European railways could play an important role as an environmentally friendly and more sustainable mode for long-distance, cross-border transport. The Commission’s Action Plan could help to strengthen the long-distance and cross border rail services, including the further expansion of night train services as long-distance, and often cross-border option in passenger transport.

Most of the actions included in the Action Plan should be implemented as a matter of urgency and Pilot project services could improve existing train services or should be completely new services, like in case of most night train projects. The Commission supports these projects by facilitating contacts between all relevant

stakeholders and by providing assistance to help ensure compliance with EU law and EU policies. The Commission will also assist in identifying financing opportunities for pilot projects.

While there seems not to exist any earmarked extra fund to finance the pilot projects, many of the train services are expected to be viable commercially, and the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) can also support them by financing technical assistance, and by supporting studies and preparatory activities relating to new technologies and innovation.

Moreover, the Commission will support the project initiators in addressing the obstacles identified in the Action Plan for their projects, and the Commission will help railway operators and authorities to overcome remaining barriers in practice regarding the introduction of cross-border pilot services. The Commission’s assistance could be also provided in the form of coordination of stakeholders and assessment of compatibility with the legal framework.

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