

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – European Year of Rail 2021

(2020/C 440/25)

Rapporteur:	Jarosław STAWIARSKI (PL/ECR), President of the Lubelskie Region
Reference document:	Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Rail (2021) COM(2020) 78 final

I. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AMENDMENTS

Amendment 1

Recital 6

Commission text	CoR amendment
By connecting the Union's main transport routes with its peripheral regions and territories, the rail sector contributes to social, economic and territorial cohesion.	By connecting the Union's main transport routes with its peripheral regions and territories, the rail sector contributes to social, economic and territorial cohesion, <i>both as a local and regional public service, and as a large-capacity, long-distance service for passengers and goods.</i>

Reason

The contribution to cohesion should indicate the different rail models provided, in order to emphasise their importance and the need for each and every one of them, without exception, to the objective pursued.

Amendment 2

Article 3(1)

Commission text	CoR amendment
(a) initiatives and events to promote debate, raise awareness and facilitate citizens, businesses and public authorities' engagement to attract more people and goods to rail as a means to combat climate change, through multiple channels and tools, including events in Member States;	(a) initiatives and events to promote debate, raise awareness and facilitate citizens, businesses and public authorities' engagement to attract more people and goods to rail as a means to combat climate change, through multiple channels and tools, including events in Member States, <i>together with new commercial policies that facilitate access to rail through reductions, discounts and promotions, with a special focus on particular groups;</i>

Reason

In order to attract new rail users, it is crucial to facilitate access to this means of transport through new fare policies, reductions and discounts, especially for routes subject to public service obligations.

Amendment 3

Article 4

Commission text	CoR amendment
The organisation of participation in the European Year at national level is a responsibility of the Member States. To that end, Member States shall appoint national coordinators. The national coordinators shall ensure the coordination of relevant activities at national level.	The organisation of participation in the European Year at national level is a responsibility of the Member States. To that end, Member States shall appoint national coordinators. The national coordinators shall ensure the coordination of relevant activities at national level, also covering the promotion of rail transport that may be carried out by the different regional bodies in each EU Member State.

Reason

In order to ensure that the European Year of Rail is implemented effectively in Member States, it is essential to get regional governments involved in this project and to promote rail not only at central level, but also at regional level in particular.

Amendment 4

Article 5

Commission text	CoR amendment
<p>1. The Commission shall regularly convene meetings of the national coordinators in order to coordinate the running of the European Year. Those meetings shall also serve as opportunities to exchange information regarding the implementation of the European Year at national and Union level; representatives of the European Parliament may participate in those meetings as observers.</p> <p>2. The coordination of the European Year at Union level shall have a transversal approach with a view to creating synergies between the various Union programmes and initiatives that fund projects in the field of rail transport or that have a rail dimension.</p> <p>3. The Commission shall convene regular meetings of stakeholders and representatives of organisations or bodies active in the field of rail transport, including existing transnational networks and relevant NGOs, as well as of youth organisations and communities, to assist it in implementing the European Year at Union level.</p>	<p>1. The Commission shall regularly convene meetings of the national coordinators in order to coordinate the running of the European Year. Those meetings shall also serve as opportunities to exchange information regarding the implementation of the European Year at national and Union level; representatives of the European Parliament and the European Committee of the Regions may participate in those meetings as observers.</p> <p>2. The coordination of the European Year at Union level shall have a transversal approach with a view to creating synergies between the various Union programmes and initiatives that fund projects in the field of rail transport or that have a rail dimension.</p> <p>3. The Commission shall convene regular meetings of stakeholders and representatives of organisations or bodies active in the field of rail transport, including existing transnational networks and relevant NGOs, as well as of youth organisations and communities, to assist it in implementing the European Year at Union level.</p>

Commission text	CoR amendment
The Commission may, budget allowing, organise calls for proposals and projects that can receive support for their outstanding contribution to the objectives of the year.	The Commission may, budget allowing, organise calls for proposals and projects that can receive support for their outstanding contribution to the objectives of the year. Projects that receive EU support should be selected based on geographical balance.

Reason

It is essential for the CoR to participate in coordinators' meetings given the important role of local and regional authorities in developing local and regional rail transport. Financial support for projects under the European Year of Rail should be balanced, hence the proposal for a geographical criterion.

II. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A. THE ROLE OF RAIL AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF EUROPE'S REGIONS, SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY AND ACHIEVING THE CLIMATE GOALS SET OUT IN THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AND THE EU'S TRANSPORT POLICY

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. welcomes the proposed 2021 European Year of Rail as a way to promote rail among citizens, businesses and authorities — through projects, debates, events, exhibitions and initiatives across Europe — as an attractive and environmentally sustainable way to travel across Europe;
2. notes that the objectives set out in the decision on the European Year of Rail are consistent with the promotion of rail transport outlined in the European Commission's communication on the European Green Deal, particularly with regard to sustainable and smart mobility and achieving the EU's climate neutrality by 2050;
3. points out that rail is one of the most sustainable, energy-efficient and safest forms of transport and, as such, will play an important role in the future European mobility system;
4. notes that rail is six times more energy-efficient than road transport, and emits nine times less CO₂ than road freight and air passenger transport;
5. stresses that rail, as a leader in climate neutral mobility in the EU, has established its own sustainable mobility strategy in order to reach a target of being fully operational with zero emissions by 2050;
6. points out that all modes of transport should help meet the external costs they generate, in line with the polluter pays principle. Accordingly, calls on the German Presidency of the EU Council to speed up debate on the Eurovignette so that a general approach can be adopted over the next few months. This will finally make it possible to conduct trilogue negotiations with the European Parliament and so promote the switch from road to rail;
7. underlines that the rail sector is also making a significant contribution to the European economy and the completion of the European single market;

8. points out, moreover, that the objectives of the modal shift to rail cannot be achieved solely by means of PULL measures in the rail sector. Rather, PUSH measures relating to fossil fuel-powered transport will also be needed in order to achieve the objectives set by the Commission under the Green Deal;

9. notes that passenger satisfaction with rail services has been consistently growing thanks to the rail sector's efforts to improve these services⁽¹⁾;

10. points out that growing urbanisation will be one of the biggest challenges in the world. It is therefore necessary to create new mobility patterns. A full roll-out of electric and automated vehicles is still many years away, but the rail sector already needs support to deal with the problems caused by climate change;

11. stresses that investments in rail freight corridors and transshipment terminals help improve the EU's territorial cohesion, development of trade with third countries, economic growth and employment;

12. ahead of the planned revision of Regulation (EU) No 1315/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council⁽²⁾ (TEN-T), encourages the EU institutions to continue to support the development of this network and to invest in new corridors, wherever needed in the European Union, particularly in the regions which have less developed railway infrastructure. The amber corridor and Rail Baltica are examples of corridors with European added value;

13. notes that, in the 2014-2016 period, investment in rail under the Connecting Europe Facility generated EUR 264 billion in GDP. Further expected benefits from this instrument, stemming from investment in the EU's core network corridors, should yield 1,8 % of additional GDP by 2030 and bring about a modal shift that lowers external costs;

14. notes the success of high-speed rail services in Europe and their potential to replace the air travel network for distances of up to 800-1 000 km; encourages the further development of high-speed rail infrastructure, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe and Nordic countries, as this will improve the connectivity of Europe's transport network, promoting the competitiveness, accessibility and climate goals of the EU;

15. notes that the COVID-19 crisis has confirmed that the European rail system has a high degree of resilience and stability which has allowed for unhindered territorial cohesion, particularly between regions, thanks to the transport of patients and urgently needed goods;

16. highlights the differences in infrastructure development and quality between the various European countries, and is pleased that the new Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) has already allocated a significant percentage of its budget to a coherent EU-wide strategy to reduce disparities in the operation of rail systems between EU countries;

17. is of the opinion that EU decision-makers should take advantage of the period of economic recovery following the pandemic to focus more on green modes of transport, such as rail. Future EU transport strategies and investment plans must reflect this new approach.

B. THE CHALLENGES FACING EUROPEAN RAIL AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOW TO PROMOTE AND DEVELOP THE SECTOR

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

18. notes that the 2011 white paper on transport aimed to bring about a significant modal shift towards rail; finds it regrettable that these objectives have not been met and that, overall, the transport sector has recorded a steady increase in greenhouse gas emissions;

⁽¹⁾ Flash Eurobarometer 463, January-February 2018 on Europeans' satisfaction with rail services.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 348, 20.12.2013, p. 1.

19. calls on the EU institutions and the national authorities to take urgent action to create a level playing field between the different modes of transport, particularly by factoring in negative externalities on the environment and aligning taxation, and to consistently promote rail. Would point out here that the European Committee of the Regions supported the European Citizens' Initiative Fairosene calling for taxation of aviation fuel;

Meeting the EU's climate goals

20. reiterates its call⁽³⁾ for an abolishment of the current VAT exemptions stipulated in Council Directive 2006/112/EC⁽⁴⁾, under which all Member States apply VAT exemptions for cross-border aviation but not for cross-border rail;

21. calls on the EU institutions and governments to strengthen strategic cooperation to tackle climate change by providing urgent support for a range of measures, including:

- introducing the principle of full internalisation of external costs in transport; ensuring equal and safety concerned standards between all forms of transport,
- making rail (in line with the obligation entered into by Member State ministers in the Graz Declaration) a focal point for sustainable mobility in the EU in passenger traffic as well as freight transport,
- providing further support for electrification and modernisation of the rail network,
- supporting the modal shift towards rail, including, in particular, rail passenger transport in local traffic and regional transport as well as for journeys up to 1 000 km and the implementation of aid and financial programmes for rail freight transport, which will enable it to increase its share of transport in the EU from 17 % at present to a minimum 30 % in 2030,
- taking stock of the work carried out under the Shift2Rail initiative and stepping up support for R & D and innovation in the rail sector, including through further measures under the Horizon Europe programme;

Meeting the objectives of the EU's transport policy

22. notes that the EU's TEN-T policy is a key instrument for coordinating important multimodal transport projects for the EU (and third countries) and contributes to the development of cross-border and regional infrastructure;

23. draws attention, however, to the lack of complementarity with regard to investment between the core and comprehensive TEN-T rail networks. It is important to ensure sufficient funding including for the comprehensive network;

24. stresses that transport policy should not only focus on network extension projects to include new railway lines, but also on modernising and improving the performance of existing rail infrastructure; during this process the right of way on tracks should be prioritised according to climate efficiency and avoidance of road traffic congestion effects of the measures;

25. calls for full support for the public investments needed in rail infrastructure, as well as for measures drawing on rail's potential and its role in the European economy's recovery from the COVID-19 crisis;

26. notes that urban rail hubs are not sufficiently integrated into the TEN-T network. Rail also has shortcomings with regard to 'last mile' infrastructure; recommends that sustainable transport plans and strategies should be drawn up to put rail at the centre of a system that integrates the various forms of regional and urban transport;

⁽³⁾ 2015/2347(INI).

⁽⁴⁾ OJ L 347, 11.12.2006, p. 1.

27. calls for a bigger role for railway stations as efficient multimodal interfaces in urban and suburban mobility chains, connecting and integrating rail systems with other modes of transport and shared urban systems (e.g. cycling);

28. draws attention to the need for an adequate level of protection for passengers, including passengers with reduced mobility. Future legislative solutions must determine rights and obligations in a balanced way, enabling the sector to meet its commitments;

29. furthermore, calls on the EU institutions to opt for a broader approach to supporting and developing secondary rail networks and the additionally required intermodal infrastructure (e.g. terminals) when improving or expanding rail infrastructure, and to adapt or enlarge the support instruments accordingly;

Investment needs, financing needs and making the rail sector more competitive

30. draws attention to the considerable investment needs of rail, especially at regional level. In order to remain competitive, the rail sector needs access to EU funding for infrastructure projects, investments in rolling stock, innovation, digitalisation and activities to tackle terrorist threats, particularly in countries which have a less developed rail service sector;

31. calls for the 2021-2027 EU budget and Member States' budgets to ensure that sufficient resources are made available to cover rail's investment needs; notes that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are facing problems due to the obsolescence or lack of rolling stock. Investments are essential in order to make rail more competitive;

32. in view of the financial challenges facing the rail sector and its ambitious development goals, the Committee calls for a relaxation of cohesion rules so as to allow for a vital increase in funding to support rail investments under the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund. Also calls for an increase in the budget for the Connecting Europe Facility with a view to contributing to the green transition of Europe's transport system;

33. recommends that consideration be given to a long-term EU financing mechanism for sustainable transport, using resources from less environmentally friendly modes of transport, in line with the polluter pays principle;

34. points to the need to retain grants as the main formula for EU funding for rail investments. Most infrastructure projects do not generate sufficient revenues — typically they cover 10-20 % of total investment costs. At the same time, these projects generate considerable socioeconomic benefits;

35. underlines the importance of investment in boosting the capacity of urban rail hubs and regional rail transport, which is the backbone of mobility in some regions; rail increases the territorial cohesion of the EU, thus preventing transport exclusion;

36. stresses the importance of projects promoting borderless mobility, accessible to all users, including older people, people with limited mobility or those with disabilities;

37. points to the need for investment in digitalisation and rail automation in order to make rail transport even more efficient and competitive;

38. notes the need for funding to implement existing innovative solutions with a view to improving connections with countries with different track gauges, such as the SUW 2000 system for automatic change of track gauge, which will help improve connections with third countries;

C. COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS RECOMMENDATIONS ON EFFECTIVE WAYS TO PROMOTE RAIL TRANSPORT AS PART OF THE 2021 EUROPEAN YEAR OF RAIL

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

39. encourages the EU institutions and national and regional authorities to take action in line with the objectives of the European Year of Rail, with a view to promoting rail as an environmentally friendly, innovative and safe mode of transport. In cooperation with railways and railway organisations, they could organise and promote:

- initiatives, exhibitions and events to promote political, business and social debate highlighting the importance of rail in the EU's transport and economic system (including the TRAKO 2021 rail fair in Gdańsk),
- information and educational campaigns on the role and added value of rail transport and measures to encourage the public to help meet the objective of sustainable transport,
- exchanges of experience and good practices between regional and local authorities, rail companies and representatives of the EU institutions, in order to promote rail;

40. the CoR is committed to increasing the contribution and role of rail in public transport, and to making its image more economically and socially attractive. In addition to promoting rail's climate neutrality, it would be worth taking steps to improve and highlight the attractiveness of employment in this sector, in light of the emerging generational gap and changes in rail professions. This is why the CoR in particular:

- encourages national and regional authorities to promote education in rail-related careers and to set up schools and courses of studies focussing on rail at universities, reflecting market demands, particularly in the fields of engineering, automation, signalling and other specialised areas,
- encourages railway companies to offer additional training, and to make working in the rail sector more attractive,
- recommends that rail companies and schools, with the support of regional and national authorities, organise competitions for students to test their rail knowledge,
- encourages the European Commission to maintain and expand the #DiscoverEU programme. The CoR also proposes a joint initiative linking this programme with the rail sector. The aim would be to connect the Interrail trips that young people make to a programme of events in cities and regions focusing on local railway stations as vehicles of culture or technical visits so that young people can learn more about rail,
- welcomes the involvement of the rail sector in the 2021 Europalia international art festival, which will focus on rail's influence on art and the role of rail as a promoter of change;

41. recognises the need to support rail at EU and national level, not least given the challenges faced by the sector. Therefore:

- encourages rail to increase its contribution to sustainable tourism by creating new rail links and restoring ones that have been closed down,
- calls on the rail sector and the Member States to extend services offered by night trains and car-carrying trains,
- calls on the European Commission to set up a coherent European high-speed rail network as an alternative to or alongside air and private transport without compromising the expansion of the regional and freight train infrastructure,

- encourages rail to continuously improve the digitalisation and accessibility of services by developing applications and ticketing platforms, and to work towards a common European rail ticketing scheme,
 - supports rail and Member States in their efforts to promote interoperability in international transport,
 - encourages Member States to promote and fund programmes to shift freight from road to rail by developing new projects such as *tiry na tory*⁽⁵⁾ (lorries onto rail) and to share their best practices for modal shift,
 - encourages regional and national authorities to draw up long-term transport plans with a leading role for rail, where appropriate, and points to the need to promote rail as a key element in addressing the issue of the transport exclusion of outlying and/or less developed regions. In regions where there is no rail transport, as is the case in the outermost regions, the CoR recommends finding alternative mobility solutions that are suited to the situation in these regions,
 - encourages regional authorities to support existing rail monuments, museums, and historical engine houses as cultural heritage in their regions,
 - recommends that local authorities, in cooperation with rail companies, promote and implement joined-up, door-to-door transport solutions, taking account of collaborative economy projects, including bike sharing,
 - recommends that comprehensive joint campaigns promoting regions and rail be carried out using various media and information channels, and that the role of railway stations and rolling stock as cultural vehicles be highlighted, in order to expand education and build relationships with passengers, and to generate public awareness of the fact that, as a means of transport, rail can play a key role in tackling climate change,
 - encourages national and regional authorities to support investment in construction of intermodal terminals along rail routes and at borders with third countries, to modernise and maintain railway stations and stops, including access roads, and to mark out and create parking spaces for people arriving at train stations by car;
42. points to the need to promote multimodal initiatives linked to the integration of rail with other means of shared transport (car sharing, bike sharing);
43. regards as necessary regional and national investments in modernisation of historical stations, which are being renovated not least to reduce the negative environmental impact, and in new innovative stations which take account of green requirements, mainly relating to the use of renewable energy sources;
44. recommends that the EUR 8 million budget referred to in the proposed Commission decision (COM(2020) 78) be increased to EUR 12 million.

Brussels, 14 October 2020.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS

⁽⁵⁾ <https://tirynatory.pl/>