

Europe's cross-border services in peril

DISCONNECT The European Commission's lofty ambition of a Single European Railway Area is being undermined by its own policy failings as cross-border passenger services continue to wither.

A comprehensive, integrated and attractive passenger network is crucial for meeting the transport and environmental aims of the European Commission's 2011 White Paper, which calls for the development of a Single European Railway Area.

Unfortunately trends on the ground differ markedly from such aspirations, with international rail services in especially sharp retrenchment. Some of the worst examples include:

- closure of all Greek border crossings to passenger trains in 2011;
- Italy's FS Group no longer co-operates with neighbouring state railways in the operation of international passenger trains: there are currently no through passenger trains from Italy to Slovenia and beyond, and no daytime through trains from Venezia to Villach and Wien;
- poor connections, a reduction in destinations served by direct trains, and increasingly-complex ticketing issues at the major hub station of Brussels Midi;
- extensive timetable cuts in the Balkans made in December 2012, especially in Serbia, where many long-distance journeys across the region are simply no longer feasible by rail.

So, what has gone wrong? Although it is tempting to focus on technical interoperability issues, as the Commission is wont to do, the problems are in fact largely caused by failings in broad EU-level transport policy and railway liberalisation policies that have led to additional interfaces and costs, compounded by poor management and funding crises in many EU states.

The Commission and national governments have dragged their heels over the imposition of 'user pays' and 'polluter pays' principles in the road and aviation sectors for far too long. Similarly, highway building and upgrading programmes continue apace,



Simon Field is a World Carfree Network Campaign Co-ordinator and an independent transport planner. WCN is a non-profit online campaign forum that promotes alternatives to car dependence and automobile-based planning, and works to improve the quality of life for all.

especially in central and eastern Europe, supported by EU TEN-T policy. The result is that trunk hauls (of people and goods) become quicker and cheaper by road, leading to modal shift away from rail, which in turn fuels a vicious cycle of declining passenger numbers, freight volumes and revenue. In the last few years attention has turned from the pruning of rural branch lines to strategic secondary routes and cross-border lines, especially in central and eastern Europe.

Policy failures drive up costs

Vertically-integrated national railways used to have responsibility for international trains on their own territory. An assessment of commercial viability was based on the marginal costs associated with operation to/from the border, which for any given train were close to zero on a vertically integrated railway with significant other traffic. However, some infrastructure managers currently demand track access fees that are substantially higher than the marginal costs associated with a specific train.

This article is based on excerpts from an open letter to the European Commission issued by World Carfree Network on December 7 2012.

This problem is compounded by perceived EU restrictions on subsidies for international passenger operations, both direct to operators and in the form of discounted track access fees. This is one reason why international tariffs are often significantly higher than domestic rates either side of the border, deterring potential passengers. In addition, the time and cost associated with the approval process for new and existing rolling stock to be used in other countries can hamper operators' attempts to improve efficiency and reduce journey times.

The impact of the current financial crisis means rail in general and international passenger trains in particular are regarded as a low priority by national and regional governments, and the international financial institutions on which they depend. Closer to the coal face, railway management failings and a lack of attention to detail, especially in terms of timetabling, ticketing and rolling stock comfort, often lead to the provision of an offer unattractive to the modern traveller.

We therefore ask the Commission and European funding institutions to:

- push politically unpalatable but crucial policies such as road user charging;
- urgently review and mitigate the consequences of the requirement for trains and infrastructure management to be separated beyond the level of accounting transparency, especially with regard to excessive track access fees that the market cannot bear;
- take immediate steps (most logically by attaching pro-rail conditions to funding/aid) to ensure that countries do not make strategic international rail routes difficult or impossible to use;
- review and clarify the perceived restrictions on operating subsidies for cross-border passenger trains contained in EC Regulation 1370/2007;
- consider setting up a dedicated funding stream to modernise cross-border railway routes.

World Carfree Network urges immediate action to maximise the potential of rail to facilitate economically, socially and environmentally-sustainable transport across Europe.

'Attention has turned from the pruning of rural branch lines to strategic secondary routes and cross-border lines'