

Conference report

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Putting cross-border rail traffic on the right track: The European Year of Rail in border regions

A conference organised by the *THE LEFT* group in the European Parliament and the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Brussels Office in cooperation with the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Prague Office

Rail travel is an environmentally friendly, safe, comfortable and convenient way of getting around. One of the **ideas behind the European Green Deal** is to shift freight transport from road to rail and inland waterways in order to reduce greenhouse gases, prompting the European Commission to announce that 2021 would be the **European Year of Rail**. The EU has set itself a difficult task here. Europe's rail infrastructure has been **neglected for decades and lines have been closed down**, and there is also a lot of catching up to do in terms of cross-border European freight transport.

We discussed these issues with civil society representatives from Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany, trade unionists, the European Commission and members of parliament from the *THE LEFT* and *DIE LINKE* groups in the European Parliament, the *Bundestag* (the German federal parliament) and the parliament of one of the German federal states (a *Landtag*).

We were also delighted to **welcome to this web conference more than 85 guests from every region** adjoining the German-Czech-Polish border and from across the EU.

In her words of welcome, **Cornelia Ernst**, a member of the *THE LEFT* group in the European Parliament, pointed to the fact that there is obviously a need for a radical transport revolution, including the development of rail traffic. She indicated that the Christian Democrats (CDU) in the German state of Saxony had closed many railway stations in the 1990s, making a drive to **build new and modernise existing infrastructure and make massive investments in the system** all the more pressing. A comparison of per-capita investments in rail was enough to show the scale of the challenge: in Germany these came to €76 each year, whereas in Sweden, for instance, investment levels were triple that and in Switzerland they were five(!) times those in Germany.

Marco Böhme, from the *DIE LINKE* (The Left) group in the state parliament (*Landtag*) of Saxony, called for the German State to offset in full the current **loss of revenues** for railways and local public transport so that public transport did not come under even more pressure because of the COVID-19 crisis. Saxony's **shrinking population** had been used as a pretext for shutting down lines. However, the closure of railway lines had gone far beyond the level that might have been expected based on this demographic decline. While Saxony's population had dropped from 4.8 million inhabitants to 4 million over the past 30 years, an astonishing **22% (570 km) of its railway lines three decades ago** had been shut down, despite an increase in the overall volume of traffic. The impact of this was particularly clear in the case of

freight traffic, with a **major shift from rail** to road transport in this domain. The planned motorway upgrade would further fuel road traffic volumes, because more roads lead to more traffic. The railways should not be disadvantaged by disproportionately high network costs compared with road transport. Instead, incentives should be put in place to ensure that the **'rolling road' or 'truck on train'**¹ system (a means of transporting trucks relatively long distances by train) could enjoy a renaissance, as Marco said that this had been positively received in the past.

Iwona Budych, from the *KolejDEPL*² German-Polish rail transport initiative, reported that this initiative had been launched in March 2017, when the **Wrocław-Hamburg-Krakow line was closed**, arousing strong opposition from members of the public, as only a few links operated by regional railway companies had been spared by the **reduction of cross-border connections**. However, *KolejDEPL* campaigned not only for rail connections to be reinstated but also against an exclusionary transport policy. Iwona said it was unacceptable that **in practice, 14 million people in Poland were now out of reach of rail transport** or had been cut out of the system (especially in Masuria, the Carpathian Mountains and Central Poland). Many connections had been scrapped in recent years, especially in Eastern Poland. Iwona said that this made Eurocity's reactivation of the Krakow-Berlin connection all the more welcome, and she called for the development or reinstatement of rail connections **between European cities** to be made a priority, along with the reactivation of the European night-train system. This included, she said, **electrifying** the lines on either side of the German-Polish border, and **standardising** services to facilitate cross-border ticketing.

Petr Šlegř, from the Centre for Efficient Transport, or CEDOP (Czech Republic), welcomed the fact that after 10 years of preparatory work, the construction of the **rail connection between Dresden in Germany and the Czech Republic was apparently finally getting under way**. He indicated that countries like Germany and the Czech Republic had high levels of car use, which resulted in the rail network being neglected. He said that while motorways could be built quickly, **thanks in part to financial support from the European structural funds**, this was in his view completely the wrong priority. In his presentation, Petr demonstrated how ridiculous it was that in the very centre of Europe, **train passengers had to make incredible detours**

¹ Response to Marco Böhme's interpellation on the subject of the 'rolling road' system:
https://marco.linxnet.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/6_Drs_14204_1_1_1_.pdf (in German)

² <https://bahndepl.wordpress.com/uber-uns/> (in German)

simply because the rail infrastructure had been dismantled in recent years. He said that while the European Union had come up with some progressive solutions, these had been inadequately implemented in EU Member States. According to him, this made it all the more important for **the EU to introduce uniform parameters for rail connections** to also promote cross-border rail traffic. He said that clearly tolls were urgently needed to make rail more attractive vis-à-vis road transport and that tolls in the Czech Republic, for example, were too low to steer people away from the roads.

Caren Lay, from the *DIE LINKE* group in the German *Bundestag*, stressed that **transport policy also had a social dimension** and rail travel in Germany simply must become more affordable. She said that the **delay in electrifying** the Dresden-Wrocław line on the German side was an embarrassment for

Germans because Poland had fulfilled its part of the bargain whereas Germany had not. She pointed to the absurdity of a situation where it had been faster to travel by train between Hamburg, Berlin, Dresden and

Prague **before the Second World War** than it was now. Caren referred to the fact that after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the part of Lusatia in Saxony had suffered a **major blow** when 570 km of rail infrastructure had been dismantled in the state, mainly affecting **border and rural rail traffic**. The *DIE LINKE* group in the *Bundestag* had submitted a minor interpellation about this.³ It turned out that a derisory 63 km of new railway infrastructure had been built in recent years. However, Caren welcomed the news that some of the billions of euros involved in the coal phase-out would apparently be invested in rail transport.

Keir Fitch, from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE), emphasised the key role the European Year of Rail would play in meeting the targets of the European Green Deal, whereby greenhouse-gas emissions in the **transport sector would have to be cut by 90% by 2050**. He was dismayed that many cross-border links were being underutilised, saying that **regulations from the Member States** were among the factors standing in the way of frictionless cross-border rail traffic. According to him, this posed a particular challenge for the regions because they had to **put contracts in place for any cooperation** in order to operate any cross-border connections at all. He said that the **Fourth Railway Package**, which only came into force in 2020, would alleviate problems with these links. Keir also pointed out that **EU financial support**, in the form of the Connecting Europe Facility and the regional funds, was available for the regions to move electrification forward and press ahead with plugging any gaps. He welcomed the fact that the **EU recovery programme** could also be spent on the railways, but it would be up to Member States to make use of this leeway.

³ <https://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/183/1918387> (in German): Minor interpellation tabled by *Bundestag* members Caren Lay et al. on the closure and revival of railway lines in Saxony, 26 March 2020

Kateřina Konečna, a Czech member of the *THE LEFT* group in the European Parliament, pointed out that in recent years there had been **14 serious accidents on the Czech railways**, causing many people to have reservations about using this mode of transport. She said that one of the reasons why the **risks** had increased while safety had declined was that train drivers were not adequately trained. She indicated that it was vital in this regard that in the future, trains could 'talk' to each other better and that **electrical safety systems** were upgraded. However, this would all be in vain if **workers had to work long night shifts**, under **poor conditions**, and were forced into doing things that were not best practice. She expressed regret that EU Member States were neglecting rail infrastructure in their border regions, as she pointed out that there was in fact some potential here for promoting tourism. Kateřina referred to a **2016 European Parliament resolution**⁴ calling for cross-border connections to be developed, which however had apparently met with no response from the European Commission. She said that the inadequacy of these links reinforced the declining demographic trend in border regions. In all, **17 cross-border connections** had been discontinued after the Second World War, of which nine had now been reinstated. She was disappointed that the European Commission was supposedly promoting **mainly Trans-**

European Transport Network (TEN-T) connections at the expense of **regional programmes** (such as Interreg), which were however particularly important for the regions.

Jolanta Skalska, from the German railway and transport workers' trade union EVG, made the point that what was needed was not a 'Year of Rail' but a '*Decade of Rail*' because there was a need to communicate to the public much more clearly about the untapped potential of the railways. She said that EVG had also drawn up a position paper on this subject⁵. Jolanta indicated that the promotion of rail transport also brought with it **new jobs**: a new railway works was being built near Cottbus, creating 1,200 new positions. We needed a mobility revolution, and this would have the support of citizens, **as 90% of people in Germany** and 70% in the EU as a whole wanted more rail and less road transport. This would also relieve the road network, as a single freight train could already carry goods equivalent to 52 trucks. While the European Commission had set out some ambitious targets for environmental protection,⁶ **greenhouse-gas emissions produced by the transport sector had continued to rise**, with the increase amounting to 30% since 1990. Jolanta criticised the fact that rail was apparently **systematically disadvantaged** vis-à-vis its competitors, road and aviation, e.g. as a result of electricity tax and VAT. She said that in the railway sector, there was a need to create **decent and secure jobs**, especially for women and young people. In the context of cross-border rail traffic, **harmonised employment conditions** were required. Indeed, there were simply no controls on such conditions, e.g. excesses such as freelance train drivers working 16 hours at a time, with all the knock-on effects of such practices for the workers themselves and for

⁴ European Parliament resolution of 25 October 2016 on improving the connection and accessibility of the transport infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0408_EN.html

⁵ https://www.evg-online.org/fileadmin/user_upload/20-11-09-avg_200946_avg_pp_klimaneutraler_Verkehr_in_Europa_2050_201007_doppelseitig.pdf (in German)

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_11_372

safety. **Precarious employment must be abolished** because employment in rail freight transport must not be allowed to become as precarious as in road freight transport. In this light, Jolanta called for improvements to the European Commission's **current Mobility Strategy**.⁷

Programme:

- Words of welcome: **Cornelia Ernst**, *DIE LINKE* (The Left) MEP (THE LEFT group) and member of the European Parliament's Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE), Germany
- Moderators: **Joanna Gwiazdecká**, Head of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Prague Office, and **Cornelia Ernst**
- **Marco Böhme**, *DIE LINKE* member of the Saxony state parliament (*Landtag*), Germany
- **Iwona Budych**, *KolejDEPL* (German-Polish rail transport initiative), Poland
- **Petr Šlegř**, Centre for Efficient Transport (CEDOP – *Centrum pro efektivní dopravu*), Czech Republic
- **Caren Lay**, *DIE LINKE* member of the *Bundestag* (federal parliament), Germany
- **Keir Fitch**, Head of the Railway Safety and Interoperability Unit, DG MOVE, European Commission
- **Kateřina Konečná**, *Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy* (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia) MEP (THE LEFT group) and member of the European Parliament's Committee on Transport and Tourism (TRAN), Czech Republic
- **Jolanta Skalska**, EVG railway and transport workers' trade union, German

⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/transport/sites/transport/files/legislation/com20200789.pdf>