

How to improve international trains? European Passengers' Federation ivzw

The European Commission has taken the initiative for the so-called Green Deal, an effort to steer the economy in a sustainable direction. The responsible European Commissioner, Vice-President Timmermans, has made clear that this would mean for him less flying and more international trains. He has said many times in speeches that the airlines benefit too much from tax-free kerosene without the obligation to pay VAT. The European Commission is willing to invest a lot of money in cross border railway lines, preferably in High Speed Lines to offer an alternative to airlines.

The European Commission can make proposals but the decisions at the European level are taken by the European Council of Ministers, who represent the member states of the European Union, and the European Parliament.

Last year, the Netherlands government launched an initiative to promote international trains. In November 2019, an intergovernmental consultation took place in Amsterdam with many other stakeholders such as the European Railway Agency (ERA), CER, AllRail, DG MOVE and Shift2Rail. EPF had a prominent part, due to the chairmanship of Chris Irwin and the participation in the discussion by Willy Smeulders and Arriën Kruyt, all three members of the Management Board of EPF.

After the consultation, the Netherlands government continued consultations with other EU member states to build support within the Union. The German presidency of the EU in the second half of 2020 has fully endorsed the Netherlands initiative. The decisions on the Green Deal and the Netherlands initiative will be taken in the autumn of 2020.

A lot of work still has to be done. The European Union does not run trains, neither does it build High Speed Lines. The EU depends on national initiatives to build cross border lines and on railway companies to run trains. The EU will subsidise but only when national or regional authorities are willing to invest.

But the European Union has legislative powers. Many passengers have complained about the difficulty of booking international tickets. The airline companies have solved this problem decades ago. It appears that some of Europe's big railway companies are more interested, unfortunately, in protecting their own sales rather than in cooperating in the interest of international passengers. The EU should make a directive to enforce a smooth passenger-friendly booking system. The EU should not subsidise anything until this problem is solved.

Passenger rights protect airline passengers better than passengers using international trains. The European Parliament has strongly endorsed the position taken by EPF in attempting to do everything possible to improve passengers' rights. The European Council is too much influenced by state run railway companies to see the importance of passengers' rights. In autumn of this year the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council of Ministers have to resolve this issue in the so called trilogue. EPF will continue to lobby on this issue.

Arriën Kruyt, 30th July 2020