

COVID-19 AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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STATE OF PLAY AUGUST 2020



EPF'S UPDATE

on the current health safety measures in Public Transport

This update is a result of the EPF research conducted over the last month (end July-2020 to end August-2020). It reflects the differences of health safety measures across Europe, focusing on Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Italy and Spain.

COVID-19 AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Introduction

2020 was a year where **change was our only certainty**.

Policies and recommendations changed almost on a weekly base and with that came the quite normal human feeling of fear. Nowadays we are not only fighting an invisible enemy (the COVID-19), but also a very real feeling of anxiety whenever we step out of our houses.

This new reality is affecting public transport in two ways. On the one hand, travelling is **rather restricted**, as people tend to stay at home, avoiding big journeys and limiting their social contacts. On the other hand, even when people do go out, public transport is **not seen as a safe alternative**. Although more and more research shows that travelling by train is safe and even though transport operators do their best to keep the vehicles clean and up to standards, it is hard to get away from the image of it being a potential virus incubator.

Adaptation, clear communication and **restructuring** seem to be the only way to regain **passengers' trust**. The reality we once knew is now outdated and only by **innovating** and **tailoring** the services to passengers' needs can public transport try to restore the confidence of their passengers.



COVID-19 AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Main highlights per country



THE NETHERLANDS

Putting the responsibility on their citizens

- Even with an accentuated rise in infections, the Netherlands is one of the countries with the most relaxed COVID-19 measures;
- Passengers are gradually making more use of public transport and operators experienced the busiest month since public life came to a partial standstill in mid-March;
- There is a very low level of surveillance in the Netherlands, as far as health and safety measures are concerned. Bus and tram staff are advised not to actively search for people without mouth masks but to advise as the responsibility is on the travellers side;
- The Dutch railway is also testing the possibility of creating an AI system that analyses the occupancy of its vehicles, in order to show passengers what trains to avoid;
- With schools restarting early-September there was a big increase in cases where several schools had to be closed due to a high number of infections.

BELGIUM

A slow increase amidst the second wave

- After the imposition of new restrictive measures, the rate of increase in the number of infections declined. However, with the approach of the new school year, the infections' rate quickly increased;
- Mouth masks remain mandatory in closed spaces and several local governments decided to make them also mandatory in certain busy areas, streets or even in all public spaces. This lack of uniformity in the rules of public spaces has caused confusion;
- On the Belgian Coast, several mayors limited the access to their towns after conflicts between tourists and local police over the measures imposed. This caused problems in local stations, from which passengers were asked to return if they weren't locals or didn't have an emergent reason to be in the Coast;
- The number of fines increased exponentially; in the Antwerp region alone over ten thousand violations were reported;
- Rules were further relaxed at the end of August and the approach of the new school year brought a big increase in traffic and public transport occupancy rates;
- To motivate local tourism using sustainable mobility, the Belgian government created an initiative that allows every resident to get twelve free train trips.



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Main highlights per country



FRANCE

Facing the highest number of cases so far

- France's infections numbers increased exponentially when travel restrictions were relaxed, with now double as many cases each day compared with the peak of the first wave;
- Many people from the neighbouring countries chose France as a holiday destination, resulting in big traffic jams and delays for road freight;
- The acceptance level of wearing a mouth mask in France is quite high, but there were reports of violence in public transport due to the unwillingness to respect the measures;
- To assist the flow of passengers on trains and stations, SNCF, the French railway operator, "is using special software at the bigger stations to monitor passenger flows and physical distancing in real-time. This is then used to inform operational decisions aimed at managing passenger;
- Video surveillance cameras installed in several French cities have also been used to monitor the use of face masks in public transport;
- To increase trust in public transport and promote sustainable transport, children under 18 will receive a free public transport subscription in Paris for the new school year.

GERMANY

Stable recovery across the country

- German commuters are increasingly returning to their workplaces, leisure activities are being expanded, and school life is gradually re-starting;
- There is an encouraging increase in passengers' numbers (occupancy of trains and buses went up to 60-70%);
- However, even with an increase in passengers, the German government recognises the difficulties facing public transport and has established financial mechanisms to help regional and local operators to recover from the loss of passengers and the extra expenses involved in disinfecting the vehicles;
- Several German states have implemented (or are planning to implement) higher fines for those who refuse to wear masks in public places including buses and trains;
- The use of data to monitor the occupancy of vehicles was thoroughly discussed in August, and some local operators have created systems that allow passengers to monitor occupancy levels.



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Main highlights per country



ITALY

Strong measures to prevent a second wave

- Having been affected so strongly by the virus, Italy was cautious about lifting its state of emergency;
- The number of passengers increased and some regions have decided to rule-out the one meter physical distancing in public transport, bringing vehicles at their full capacity;
- The different rules per region received a share of criticism, as lack of uniformity can cause confusion for those travelling across regions;
- With the beginning of the school year, public transport is preparing to increase the capacity of school buses in some regions. Namely, the Trentino region will make 100 more school buses available to keep up with the predicted increase in demand.

SPAIN

Entering a harsh second wave

- In August, Spain reported the highest level of COVID-19 related deaths since May. Logically, the prevention measures in the country are still one of the strongest in Europe. This impacts the amount of passengers that travel to Spain and the measures in public transport;
- The number of passengers in public transport was 63% lower this August compared with to the same period last year. The most affected means of transport were air (87% lower than last year), boat and long distance-buses;
- Many cities in Spain are approaching this new normality as a good challenge from which necessary change can rise, taking the time to rethink public transport routes and timetables. As remote and flexible working become more common, the flexibility of public transport is increasingly recognised;
- A modal shift to active travel - cycling, walking and the use of e-scooters etc. - are on the rise in Spain. Spaniards see these as safer alternatives to public transport.



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Reflections on the future of public transport



To move forward, public transport needs to listen to its passengers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the World just how quickly status quo can change and how important it is to **remain flexible** in order to face challenges ahead.

Public transport was **one of the crucial services** during the peak of the pandemic, allowing people to take essential trips (for their jobs, groceries, etc.). Nevertheless, public transport was **one of the biggest victims** of the crisis, having lost the majority of its passengers at the peak of the pandemic and still struggling to recover from that period.

As normal life returns, so do passengers, but regaining their trust requires **adaptation**. Many operators already understood this, offering flexible services and innovative solutions to keep passengers feeling safe in their vehicles and at stations and hubs: from flexible timetables to the use of digital tools to improve their services; many are the solutions to encourage passengers to rebuild their trust in public transport.

Technology plays an important role in creating these solutions and rebuilding trust. Several operators are using, for example:

- **Digital tools for the safety of passengers:** digital ticketing and access to information on occupancy (namely allowing passengers to understand the emptier locations of the vehicles);
- **AI tools** that allow to understand the **concentration of people in certain areas**. This allows, for example, passenger flow to be nudged in stations, avoiding big concentrations; or to control the use of mouth masks when required.

Moreover, **clear and coordinated communication** on the measures taken as well as the **adequate application of passenger rights** (such as clear reimbursement procedures) are **crucial to regain passengers' confidence**.

As the state of play evolves rapidly, the European Passengers' Federation will continue to monitor it closely, releasing regular updates on our [website's COVID-19 section](#).