

## Connecting Europe through High-Speed Rail

### EPF position – January 2026

On 5 November 2025, the European Commission launched [“Connecting Europe through High-Speed Rail”](#), a roadmap to accelerate the development of a faster, better-functioning European high-speed rail network by 2040. Building on the 2020 *Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy* and the 2021 *Action plan to boost long distance and cross-border passenger rail* – which the Commission acknowledges has so far failed to deliver –, it proposes measures on infrastructure investment, standardisation of digital (safety) systems and rolling stock, regulatory harmonisation and improved ticketing and passenger rights. Anchored in the TEN-T framework, it seeks to cut journey times, strengthen cross-border links and make rail competitive with short-haul flights while also reducing congestion, freeing capacity on conventional lines, and supporting regional economic development.

#### **Needed: a state of the art operational mission: more trains.**

EPF welcomes the European Commission's ambitious plans to expand rail travel across Europe. From a passenger perspective, however, the strong focus on building new high-speed lines does not adequately address the **urgent demand for more and better international train services in the short and medium term**. This gap is particularly evident given the Commission's goal of rapidly offering passengers a credible alternative to short- and medium-haul flights, as well as a fast and comfortable alternative to car or bus travel.

EPF therefore urges the European Commission, Parliament and Council to prioritise measures that can **provide the greatest number of travellers with a rail alternative as quickly and cost-effectively as possible**, translating this into a clear, measurable operational objective aligned with passenger demand and EU climate goals. This objective should drive immediate action to run more international trains and improve connections between international services and regional and national public transport. The overarching goal must be a **rapid and robust modal shift** away from fossil-fuelled transport towards sustainable mobility – from planes and cars to trains, walking, cycling and public transport.

To this end, EPF calls for short-term **priorities to be guided by passenger demand rather than solely by capital-to-capital links**. While preparations for new and upgraded high-speed rail infrastructure should continue, immediate focus should be on measures that can deliver rail alternatives for the largest number of travellers in the shortest possible time, including connections to a wider range of destinations that matter most to passengers.

#### **Unlocking the full potential of rail infrastructure investments.**

Investment in high-speed rail – necessary to address missing links (including cross-border), and to strengthen rail as the backbone of a European-wide, multimodal, sustainable mobility network –, is essential, but not sufficient on its own to drive a modal shift.

Frequent services are essential to **make optimal use of both existing and new infrastructure** and to attract more passengers to rail. For example, around 30 flights operate daily between Schiphol and London, yet Eurostar only runs four direct trains from Amsterdam Central to London St. Pancras, despite ProRail confirming that hourly train paths are available. Similar untapped opportunities exist in many border regions, where nearby stations are not yet connected by cross-border services.

As noted earlier by EPF, infrastructure investments must be complemented by **improvements in other areas** to maximise impact:

- Timetables and connections: An “Europatakt” should form the basis for infrastructure planning, enabling integrated timetables, optimal network capacity use, and seamless connectivity for passengers.
- Information and ticketing: Passengers should have access to unbiased, dynamic journey information, allowing them to compare and combine different operators and modes according to their needs.
- Passenger protection: Passengers must be fairly treated when disruptions occur, with guaranteed journey continuation across all (rail) operators as a priority.
- Understanding costs: Internalising external costs and ensuring consistency as to the basis of charging across transport modes would create a level playing field and guide users toward sustainable choices.
- Overcoming administrative and political boundaries: Prospective operators of new international services would benefit from harmonised regulations, including aligned planning cycles and track access policies.<sup>1</sup>

While the new High-Speed Rail Action Plan addresses some of these elements – such as interoperability improvements, support for new operators to enhance competition, and measures on booking, ticketing, and passenger protection – **significant gaps remain**. Key areas, notably easier ticketing and stronger passenger protection across multiple operators, still lack concrete proposals, long awaited for years and expected in 2026. Other crucial elements, including coordinated timetables and the internalisation of external costs, are entirely absent from the plan, representing a missed opportunity.

### **Making rail travel not only faster, but also more affordable and price-competitive.**

Next to availability and faster travel times – presented as a key objective of *Connecting Europe through High-Speed Rail* –, the price difference between air and rail travel is the most important reason why travellers often choose to fly.

A recent Europe-wide [Greenpeace study](#) (August 2025) shows that **flying is still cheaper than taking the train** on most cross-border routes. Meanwhile, a recent [Eurobarometer survey](#) (April 2025) found that although over 75% of EU citizens consider environmental impact important when planning their journeys, only 21% adjust their travel behaviour accordingly. The key incentive cited for encouraging more sustainable options was cost comparability. Affordability is even more crucial for young people – which is why in September 2025, EPF joined T&E, BEUC, and several youth organisations in a joint statement calling for rail to be made more affordable (including by addressing VAT disparities) and more accessible (through easier information access and ticketing systems).

Rail travel prices can be made more affordable through improving **operational efficiency**, and fostering **healthy competition**. In addition, EPF calls for a level playing field between transport modes in terms of **taxation**, including VAT. For EPF, **“understanding costs”** is a foundation for creating a level playing field between transport modes, upon which fair competition and resource optimisation depend. EPF supports the internalisation of external costs in transport pricing, in line with the polluter-pays and user-pays principles.

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<sup>1</sup> See also EPF’s Priorities for future EU action, available here: <https://www.epf.eu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EPF-priorities-24-04-10.pdf>

### Structural funding for a solid modal shift to sustainable mobility.

Rail travel should not only become more affordable for passengers, but **sufficient funding must also be secured** for Member States – supported by EU budget – to invest in rail, benefiting regional, national, and international travellers alike. Yet in many Member States, public transport budgets are being cut, causing a declining share of passengers compared to car and air travel – directly contrary to the trend needed to meet climate goals. Rather than relying solely on the Commission's complex co-financing schemes for high-speed rail, EPF urges the European Commission, Parliament and Council to pair the promotion of sustainable travel with realistic, structural funding. **Public transport must finally become a budgetary priority** across the EU and in all Member States.

Given the harmful emissions associated with flying, the EU has long recognized the need to better reflect the environmental and social costs of transport in pricing. **Taxation** in this area remains the competence of individual Member States, and several have already introduced aviation taxes or flight levies. However, the absence of **EU-level coordination** has resulted in divergent approaches and early signs of tax competition between Member States. EPF therefore calls on Member States to consider a broader range of measures to **internalize the external costs of transport** across different modes, including – but not limited to – aviation taxes or flight levies. Similar instruments could be applied to road transport, for example through road toll schemes, or the phasing out of salary cars. Where aviation taxes are introduced, EPF supports the establishment of common minimum levels at the EU level to prevent a “race to the bottom”.

Importantly, EPF considers it essential that **revenues generated** through such levies be **earmarked for the development of sustainable mobility alternatives**, including the structural financing of public transport, active mobility, and international rail services. Evidence shows that well-designed, substantial levies can contribute to a level playing field between international rail and air travel, leading to significant reductions in flights and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, while generating substantial annual revenues (CE Delft, *Frequent Flying Levy*, October 2025). As targeted instruments to support a modal shift towards sustainable mobility, these measures can provide stable, long-term funding, deliver short-term benefits, and create the necessary space for the preparation and roll-out of high-speed rail where there is clear passenger demand, including in regions with limited rail connectivity. The link between revenues from emissions-related levies and targeted spending – such as that established between ETS2 revenues and the EU Social Climate Fund – demonstrates that Member States and EU institutions can find common ground between pricing harmful emissions and supporting socially beneficial investment.

### Conclusions

**EPF urges the EU to prioritize passenger-driven, cost-effective measures to provide the largest number of travellers in the short to medium term with practical alternatives to planes and cars, enabling a rapid shift toward sustainable mobility. To unlock the full potential of rail infrastructure investment, frequent services must be offered to make optimal use of the network, while concrete proposals are needed to address long-standing issues such as ticketing and passenger protection. Additional action is also required to coordinate timetables and internalize external costs, ensuring that rail travel becomes not only faster but also more accessible, reliable, and affordable. Public transport and rail must finally be treated as a budgetary priority, with revenues from levies on more polluting transport modes earmarked to invest in sustainable mobility.**