

# Getting Europe on Track: *A Young Europeans' Manifesto for the Future of Rail.*

International rail travel has great potential and is becoming ever more appealing to the European traveller, and in particular to the European youth. Not only is it a sustainable and environmentally responsible way of travelling, it also allows young people to enjoy the rich European landscapes, meet other travellers, meet strangers, make friends, and discover places you would otherwise never be able to reach when flying from airport to airport. **Rail travel holds an incredible potential to offer great experiences, precisely the kind that could attract many young travellers who seek more than simply getting from A to B.** And there are plenty of them.

**Yet at present, rail travel offers a whole different kind of adventure.**

Adventures that start at the planning and booking stage. Different sites and apps each show incomplete overviews of infrequent, complex routes at unaffordable prices. Finding the cheapest fares requires a serious effort. Compare that to airline tickets that can be purchased in just a few clicks, often at much lower prices. Obstacles extend to the train routes themselves too. Even when demand for a route clearly exists, new train operators face immense hurdles: permits that take long to approve, limited access to tracks, and the dominance of national operators make it challenging to launch new connections. **The result is a system that feels fragmented, outdated, and out of touch with the needs of young Europeans.**

Once you do board your train on the way to your destination, uncertainty about your passenger rights still remains. Small print in ticket T&Cs and EU regulations currently leave passengers to fend for themselves when things do not go as planned. **Under current circumstances, it is nearly impossible to expect the average young traveller to choose rail over flying.** Even when we are willing to pay a small premium for a more sustainable travel option, at some point, the limit of our purchasing power is met, and as long as aviation enjoys structural fiscal advantages while rail services face high access charges and fragmented market conditions, competition between the two cannot be considered balanced.

## Four Key Measures to Transform Rail Travel

Therefore, from our experience as passengers, us young Europeans urge the European Union to consider the following four measures that make the rail experience simpler, smoother and more competitive:

- **Create fairer market conditions:** It is no longer defensible that flights are VAT-exempt while train travel is not, especially when considering the CO<sub>2</sub> footprint of both. This fiscal and regulatory bias that favours aviation over rail must therefore be eliminated, and the playing field levelled. Aviation currently enjoys tax-free kerosene and minimal carbon pricing, while rail bears VAT on tickets and high track access fees.
- **Guarantee structural funding for more and more frequent international rail connections:** This will enable a sustainable alternative for flying by ensuring that the true environmental and social costs of aviation are no longer externalised, while rail, as the cleaner option, receives the investment it deserves.
- **Guarantee seamless ticketing:** Operators should be required to share booking data and adopt interoperable standards such as OSDM. This would make planning and booking as effortless as air travel, removing a major barrier for young travellers.
- **Strengthen passenger rights:** Passengers should receive full protection across their entire journey, regardless of operator changes, missed connections, or other misfortunes. Clear, standardized rules, similar to those in aviation, would give travellers confidence and clarity.

For rail to become a realistic alternative to flying, especially for short to mid-range distances of up to 900 kilometres, it must become just as accessible and affordable. Young Europeans want to travel by train, but the current system makes it harder and often more expensive than it needs to be. The recent proposals from the European Commission are a step in the right direction, but they must not remain mere intentions. **The gap between policy and practice has persisted for decades, and it is now time to turn words into action.**

## Further recommendations

While technical challenges such as differing voltage systems and signalling standards very much exist, a large number of obstacles to seamless international rail travel are inherently organisational, and therefore political. Lack of coordination, protectionist national policies, and fragmented decision-making have stifled progress for years. Yet, we can achieve so much more without needing billions of euros for new infrastructure. By addressing a few systemic issues, we can unlock the potential of the existing rail network and make cross-border travel faster, smoother, and more affordable.

Together with our previous recommendations, in order to make international rail travel a realistic option for young Europeans, we therefore also propose the following short- and medium-term actions:

- **Break down systemic barriers:** Member states and national rail operators prioritise their own domestic network over international travel, while simultaneously blocking new operators from entering the market. This pattern must be disrupted through a shift in mindset, placing passenger interests at the core of decision-making.
- **Align national incentives with international mobility goals:** Governments should integrate cross-border objectives and performance criteria into contracts with the rail operators under their jurisdiction.
- **Improve timetable and capacity allocation:** Existing infrastructure should be used more efficiently before prioritising costly expansion projects.
- **Support regional cooperation:** Groups of neighbouring countries should start coordinating services rather than wait for EU-wide unanimity.
- **Adopt pragmatic solutions:** Prioritise open access for international rail operators and pursue regional agreements where broader consensus cannot yet be achieved. Progress should not be delayed when operators are ready to run new cross-border services.
- **Dynamic pricing:** The EU should mandate the implementation of fair, transparent, and inclusive dynamic pricing models for rail travel, ensuring affordability for all passengers while maximising occupancy and competitiveness.
- **Lead by example:** Public institutions and governments should demonstrate their commitment by prioritising rail for their own travel needs.