

Cross-border rail connections:

Fostering cohesion between regions and their citizens

This publication follows the conference on cross-border rail links organised on 10 and 11 June 2021 by the MOT and the PAMINA Eurodistrict, with the support of the European Committee of the Regions. Taking place within the framework of the European Year of Rail, its objective is to highlight the recommendations made by the speakers, all of whom have called for a more «connected» and «greener» Europe. It is completed by a set of detailed project fact sheets.

Cross-border mobility hampered by the pandemic

Whilst Europe has some of the most integrated cross-border rail networks, cross-border mobility has been hit hard by the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis. In the spring of 2020, the pandemic forced a slowdown, or even an abrupt halt, to the logic of free movement of flows within the European area, jeopardising the economic model of cross-border railway networks. As a rule, decisions on travel restrictions were exclusively based on national considerations. Border workers have been the first victims of this lack of coordination between measures taken on both sides of the border. The daily users of the Øresund line, linking Copenhagen (DK) to Malmö (SE), bear witness to this. At the peak of the crisis,

when the Danes required a negative test of less than 72 hours, the Swedes were satisfied with a negative test of less than 7 days. Every day, Swedish residents working in Copenhagen also had to show their ID, employment contract and last pay slip to cross the Øresund strait.

Similarly, the slow recovery of rail traffic in certain cross-border territories is explained by the disparities between travel restrictions in the two countries. The Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai Eurometropolis, for example, has noted a drop in the use of its rail network, which it attributes in part to the differences between the French and Belgian measures, the former having been stricter than the latter (e.g. the limitation of travel within a 30 km radius in March 2021).

Railway companies were forced to completely revise their timetables and provide a minimum service for their passenger trains due to the successive lockdowns, which had a significant financial impact. However, the pandemic seems to have had a much smaller impact on freight transport. The Austrian-Hungarian company GYSEV reports

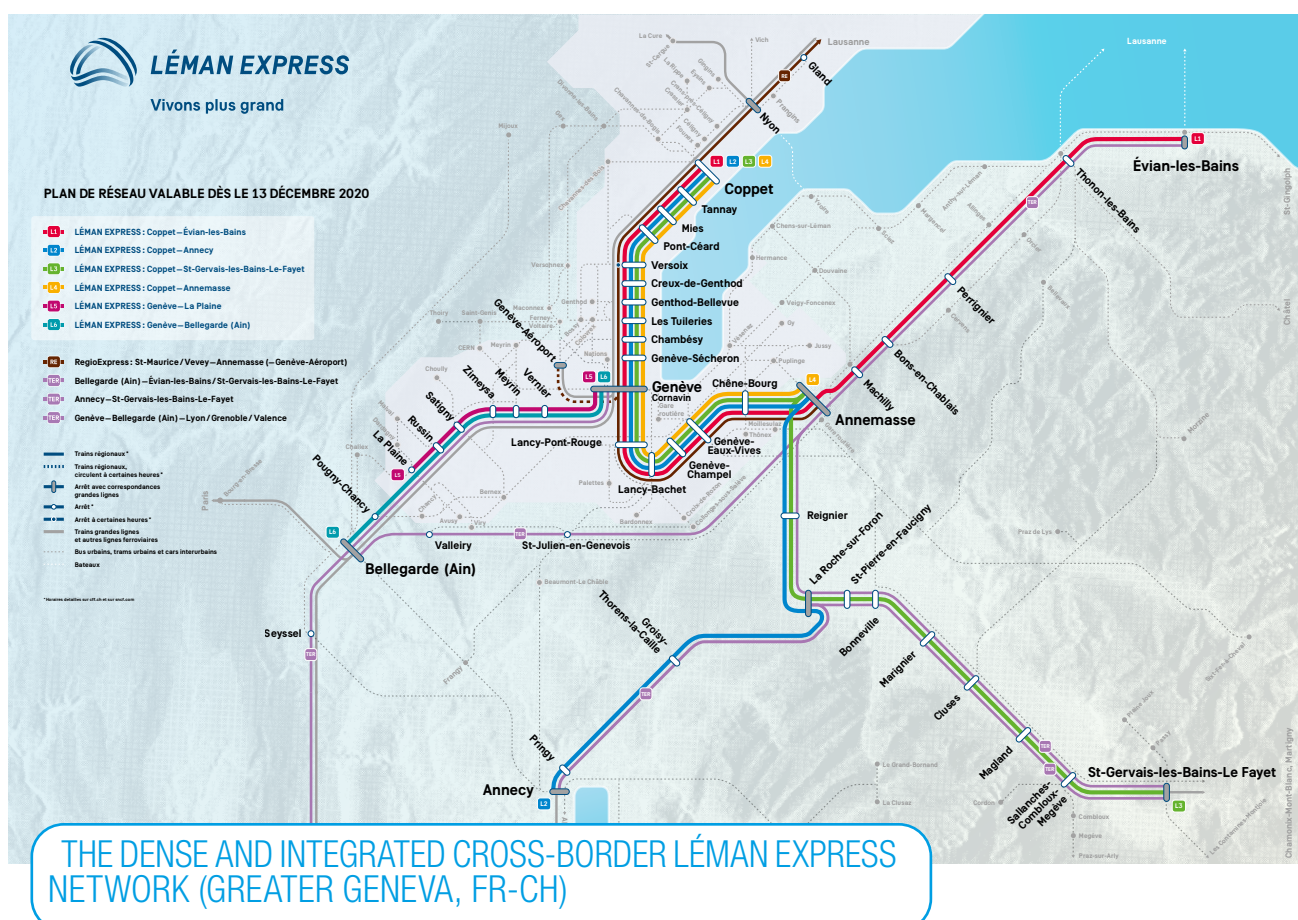


Finally, since the resumption of rail traffic, many regular users are still reluctant to use public transport again, worried about the health risks they might incur. Josef Doppelbauer, Director General of the ERA¹, said that on the contrary, «the train remains the safest means of transport today, including health risks»².

¹ EU Agency for Railways (ERA).

Cross-border functional urban areas

Some of them are now exemplary, such as the Léman Express. Serving Geneva and its cross-border conurbation, this network has no less than 230 km of tracks. For the Greater Geneva, its success is essentially due to a single, simplified fare system for passengers, operational intermodality between trains, trams and buses, and an effective Franco-Swiss governance system. Disparities in development persist, however, as the lack of funding does not allow the network to be modernised as quickly on the French side as on the Swiss side.





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On the other hand, the lack of communication between operators and local decision-makers as well as the absence of cross-border governance on mobility issues can hinder the development of rail. Despite its strategic position as a European crossroads, the Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai Eurometropolis is struggling to develop its cross-border rail network, pointing to the lack of an integrated pricing system at the level of the territory. Nevertheless, negotiations are currently under way between the SNCF, the SNCB and the Hauts-de-France Region to move towards better integration of the Eurometropolitan network.

Dysfunctions also occur when there is disagreement between national governments, especially when some of them do not wish to commit themselves fully to the single European railway area. The heterogeneous development of ERTMS³, the European Rail Traffic Management System, which aims to harmonise technical language throughout the European Union, is evidence of this. The ambitions of some countries are thus curbed by their neighbours' refusal to participate in this harmonisation, as in the case of Denmark, which is carrying out a vast project to develop ERTMS on its territory, slowed down by its Swedish neighbour, for whom ERTMS is less of a priority. In the event of disagreement between States, the ERA, the European agency responsible for railway interoperability and safety, can intervene as a technical mediator and encourage the development of common solutions to the problems of cross-border connections. However, the adoption of the ERTMS depends solely on the will of the governments and the funds they are willing to allocate to it.

³ Today, there are 23 different systems for railway signalling in Europe. See speech by Josef Doppelbauer, RT1, «Cross-border rail links: promoting cohesion between regions and their citizens», 10 June 2021.

A 360° opening for peripheral territories

Many sparsely populated border areas have also become significant cross-border traffic areas, where the use of the private car remains dominant. Regional rail links, connecting the employment areas on either side of the border, meet the challenge of opening up the region, while at the same time being in line with the logic of decarbonising transport. The modernisation or even creation of small railway lines and the support by all political levels are therefore necessary to stimulate economic growth and job creation, while reducing social and territorial inequalities.

Nevertheless, the private car remains the preferred means of transport for the inhabitants of border areas. Often, the small railway lines are not unanimously considered as an efficient alternative, and their systematic use for daily journeys is not anchored in the mindsets. However, according to David Asséo, Transport Delegate for the Canton of Jura, in this type of territory, it is not so much a question of satisfying a demand as of provoking it, by creating a simple and user-friendly public transport offer adapted to the specific needs of the local population. On the Belfort-Bienne line, the Franco-Swiss differences in terms of train frequency, regularity of timetables and interoperability explain the greater use of trains on the Swiss side, where the use of public transport is simple and adapted to the needs of commuters. However, a project to modernise the French section of the line is underway, coordinated by a Franco-Swiss governance body, established in 2020. In the long term, the aim is to have a truly integrated system of governance between the two countries, covering all technical aspects, timetables, ticketing, interoperability etc.



BELFORT-BIENNE LINE (FR-CH)



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THE CROSSMOBY TRAIN, A PILOT PROJECT OF THE SAME NAME, LINKING TRIESTE (IT) TO LJUBLJANA (SI)

Since they have little visibility, small cross-border lines require special political and economic support. When national investments tend to focus more on major mobility projects with the risk of neglecting everyday transport, the European Union's cohesion policy can be activated to support smaller cross-border investments. Thus, European programmes are often an essential aid to make possible or to initiate the creation or modernisation of regional lines, as in the case of the INTERREG V-A Italy-Slovenia 2014-2020 programme which co-finances the CROSSMOBY project. European funds are thus used to set up efficient transport services between the two countries, in order to remedy the lack of sustainable mobility options and improve cross-border accessibility. It is in this framework that the CROSSMOBY train connecting Trieste to Ljubljana was launched in September 2018.

Although the European programmes offer several advantages to project leaders, some obstacles inherent in the cross-border status of these small lines remain. Slawomir Tokarski (DG REGIO) insists on an essential prerequisite for local stakeholders: agreeing on a common long-term approach as well as on a specific and sustainable governance. Several European local actors also insisted on the added value which would represent a tool such as the ECBM - European Cross-Border Mechanism - to simplify the resolution of legal obstacles in the context of cross-border mobility projects.

Missing railway links

In March 2018, DG REGIO published a comprehensive study identifying cross-border missing links in Europe⁴. Since then, interest in these missing links has continued to grow and their potential for the economic and social development of cross-border territories is increasingly highlighted at local, national and European levels.

⁴ «Comprehensive analysis of the existing cross-border rail transport connections and missing links on the internal EU borders», European Commission, DG REGIO, March 2018

https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/studies/pdf/cb_rail_connections_en.pdf

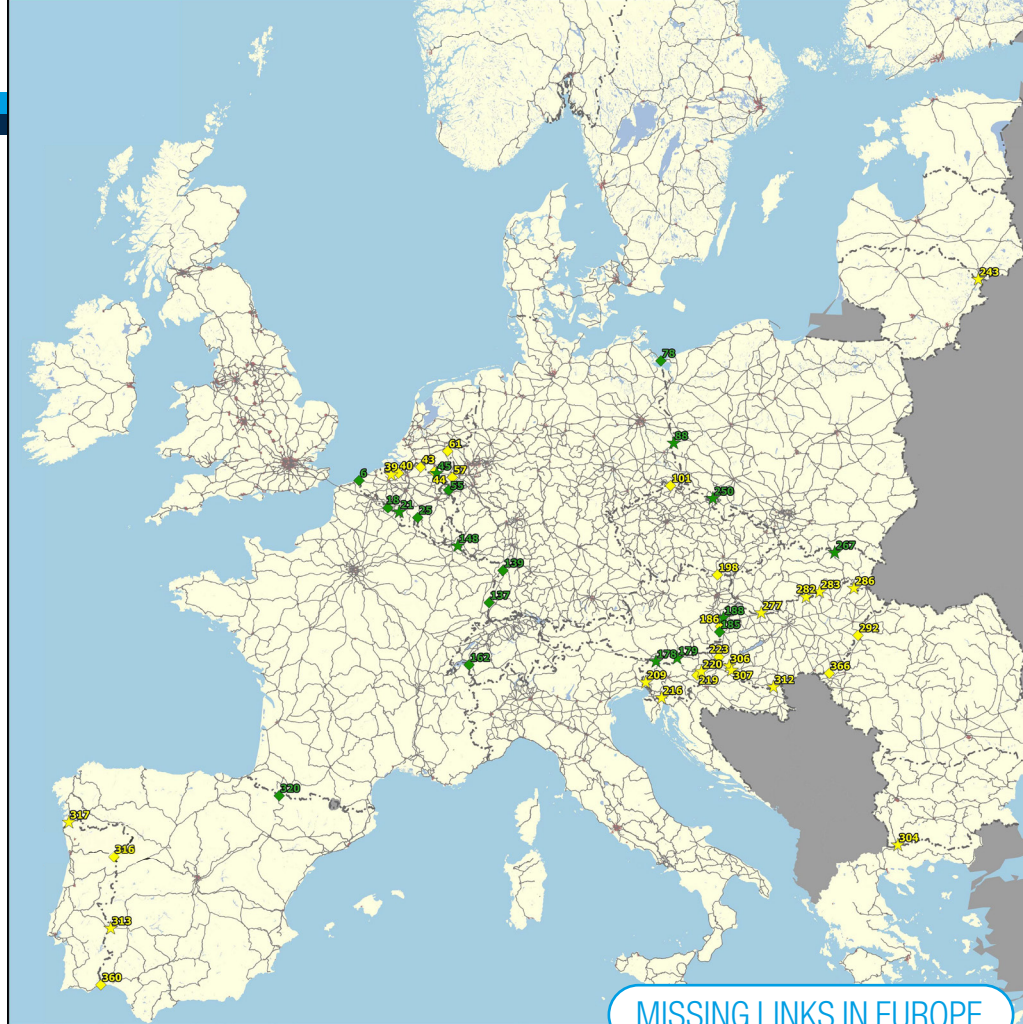
The activation or reactivation of missing links has first and foremost an added value at the local level. More than just technical projects, they are often the core of a truly territorial development strategy. Their reactivation would, for example, contribute to strengthening the attractiveness of border areas, in order to lessen their peripheral status. Some of them also represent a very high potential for the development of freight traffic. In northern Alsace, the Karlsruhe-Rastatt-Haguenau-Sarrebruck link would make it possible to meet the significant needs in terms of goods mobility, linked to the high density of businesses located in the area. In the Pyrenees, the reopening of the Pau-Canfranc-Saragossa route would make it possible to rebalance the modal share of rail traffic, which currently accounts for only 3 % of goods traffic, compared with 15 to 20 % in the Alps and up to 70 % on the Swiss side. These reopening projects would also be in line with the French government's plan to support rail freight, which is committed to doubling the modal share of rail by 2030. In the Pyrenees, an area with strong tourism potential, the Pau-Canfranc-Zaragoza route is also a tremendous asset for the development of tourism. The project leaders have therefore identified several local partners, with whom they have co-constructed the future rail offer, in order to support the development of several tourist projects near the line with a view to its reopening.

The reactivation of missing links would also allow for greater social equity, by improving the quality of life of citizens, especially border workers, and by ensuring better access to local supplies. The trans-Pyrenean link would, for example, enable many inhabitants to more easily cross the mountain range, which has only three cross-border rail links: one on the Atlantic side and two on the Mediterranean side.



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PAU-CANFRANC LINE (FR-ES)



Map from the study
«Comprehensive
analysis of the existing
cross-border rail
transport connections
and missing links on the
internal EU borders», DG
REGIO, 2018

MISSING LINKS IN EUROPE

The (re)opening of these missing cross-border links is also an important issue for the internal market and the cohesion of the European area, like the Colmar-Freiburg link, which is one of the fifteen priority projects identified as part of the Aachen Treaty. The missing links would thus contribute to the deepening of cohesion policy, in particular by speeding up the creation of the European railway area, which is scheduled for completion by 2030. Because of their strategic position within the European territory, some of them play a major role in the TEN-T. The Karlsruhe-Rastatt-Hagenau-Sarrebruck link, for example, is located at the crossroads of four major routes and would make it possible to link them better: the Atlantic corridor, the Rhine-Danube corridor, the North Sea-Mediterranean corridor and the Rhine-Alps corridor.

The interest given to missing links is also in line with the European commitments made in favour of the ecological transition, especially as the transport sector remains the leading sector in terms of emissions and the only one that has increased in recent decades.

Finally, for Josef Doppelbauer, promoting rail connections between states also contributes to the return of the «European state of mind». While the health crisis has brutally re-established borders where de facto there were none, the development of a common European vision seems essential so that future crises do not affect territories, especially cross-border ones, as much.

Despite their importance for cohesion policy and their undeniable potential for territorial socio-economic development, projects to reopen missing links sometimes lack sufficient political support to be able to see the light of day. On a European scale, their inclusion in the TEN-T is essential in order to be able to claim funds from the Connecting Europe

Facility (CEF), following the example of the Pau-Canfranc-Saragossa route, for which the support of the European Commission and the inclusion in the overall TEN-T network in 2011 were the key to the success of the project. Nevertheless, as this inclusion cannot be made without a prior request from the States to the European Commission, the political support of the States often conditions the implementation of these projects. Despite being identified as one of the most promising European missing links among more than 350 cross-border sections, the Colmar-Freiburg and Saarbruck-Rastatt-Hagenau-Karlsruhe cross-border lines are not yet eligible for CEF funds. For this to happen, France and Germany, committed to strengthening cross-border relations following the signing of the Treaty of Aachen, will have to jointly request the inclusion of these two lines in the TEN-T.



KARLSRUHE-RASTATT-HAGUENAU-
SAARBRÜCKEN (FR-DE)

The MOT's recommendations

CROSS-BORDER RAIL CONNECTIONS

fostering cohesion between regions and their citizens

Bringing together experts, cross-border cooperation and rail practitioners, elected representatives and institutional actors, the conference of 10 and 11 June resulted in a series of recommendations for improving connectivity between border territories. In order to convey the voice of these actors wishing to improve cross-border mobility in Europe, the MOT supports the following recommendations:

- **Consider cross-border territories as single territories**, to ensure that each cross-border living area has an integrated multimodal transport network.
- **Promote a stronger involvement of cross-border regional decision-makers** in national policies on cross-border cooperation and major transport networks.
- **Establish multi-level governance on each border** to involve all the stakeholders (local, regional, national and cross-border) in cross-border mobility issues and resolve obstacles of all kinds. e.
- **Provide for the possibility of creating a single organising authority for cross-border transport** when the local or regional network crosses borders.
- **Set up cross-border forums** to work on common spatial planning, involving transport operators, users, line committees, employers and civil society.
- **Promote the sharing of rail data** at European level and **harmonise data standards** for passenger information.
- **Set up cross-border observatories** (existing transport supply, actual and potential flows) **and forecasting tools** to analyse the needs and to anticipate future developments in cross-border mobility.
- **Provide increased political support for missing links** at European and national levels, through the systematic inclusion in the TEN-T of the 19 missing links identified by the Commission as 'potentially most beneficial'.
- **Establish cross-border crisis management task forces** to harmonise measures and restrictions across the cross-border catchment area to avoid any disruption of service in the event of border restrictions.
- **Stimulate the combination of funds** between INTERREG (studies, 'soft' actions), and other types of funds - ERDF, CEF, loans - dedicated to investment in infrastructure.



More info

- ▶ On the conference on cross-border rail links, 10-11 June 2021:
<http://www.espaces-transfrontaliers.org/en/conference-eyr-06-2021-en/>
- ▶ On the European Year of Rail:
https://europe.eu/year-of-rail/index_en