

Rail is key to decarbonise the transport sector and contribute to the EU's green recovery



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In this interview, Jarosław Piotr Stawiarski (PL/ECR), President of the Lubelskie Region, answers six questions on rail transport in Europe. The rapporteur of the opinion on the European Year of Rail 2021 calls for an increase of rail's share in the transport market, stressing that rail is the undisputed leader in low emissions and reduced external costs. Next year is the European Year of Rail, which will feature a range of events and campaigns to attract more people and goods to and energy-efficient, rail is set to play a crucial role in helping the EU become climate neutral by 2050.

What are the main benefits in your view of investing in rail in Europe?

We all know about the benefits of rail travel. Rails means more accessible regions and mobility of people, economic development and a better climate. Modern transport must be not only fast, safe, comfortable and environmentally friendly but, as shown by the events of recent months relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, it must also be resilient to an ever growing number of crises. The European rail system proves that all these conditions are met. In light of the objectives of the Green Deal, rail's share of the transport market needs to increase. Rail transport has a better environmental record than motor or air transport, and is the undisputed leader in the rankings for low CO₂ and greenhouse gas emissions. It has little effect on climate change and has the least environment impact compared to other competitive forms of mobility. It is worth noting that rail generates significantly lower external costs than road transport. For example, in the

case of rail, environmental pollution, noise, congestion and the social costs associated with accidents are many times lower. It is also one of the safest modes of transport. In view of the European Green Deal, the climate challenges we all face and the responsibility for future generations and our planet, we need to ensure that rail plays an even greater role in the EU's economic bloodstream. What is more, rail is a comfortable way to travel, providing an opportunity to learn about new places and people, and about undeniable cultural heritage.

How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the European rail sector?

The speed with which the pandemic spread came as a surprise to all sectors of the economy, including transport. The share of passenger transport in the first months of the pandemic fell by some 90%, while in freight transport demand was 20-30% lower. It also resulted in a drop in the revenues of railway infrastructure managers, who are responsible for maintenance of the rail network and investments. However, it is worth noting that rail has proved to be the most resilient mode of transport during the crisis: trains ran and rail services operated while taking all possible precautions. This resilience of rail is of great importance for the regional, national and EU economies.

As I mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic fall in demand for rail transport services. It should be noted that this has had a significant impact on railway undertakings. This impact will last at least until the end of this year, possibly much longer. The circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak are beyond the control of railway undertakings, which are facing major liquidity problems and heavy losses. Therefore, in order to counter the negative economic impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, railway undertakings may need financial support and so there is an important responsibility on the EU institutions not to hamper rail's development in the coming years. There is no doubt that the EU recovery programme, including the possibility of financing rail projects, is a step in the right direction.

What are the main challenges the European rail sector faces nowadays? How could local and regional authorities and the EU help to address them?

The challenges for the rail sector are related to the changes brought about by an open competitive market, business and public expectations. Liberalisation, intra-modal and intermodal competition, make it necessary to improve the quality of services, both in passenger and freight transport. The customer already expects not only better infrastructure, modern and punctual trains and multimodal stations, but also the deployment of new technologies, innovation, digitalisation and accompanying services providing door-to-door transport. In addition, there is a need to further electrify railway lines and improve energy efficiency.

We as regional authorities have a huge role to play in defining how we want to shape public transport in the region. It is us who draw up transport strategies and plans at regional and local level, and we often decide on investments and the role of rail in these plans. This has a direct impact on the entire transport system of the country and the EU. Of course, the European Commission plays a very important role, with responsibility for shaping the objectives of transport policy and setting investment priorities. Hence, the scope of investments in the rail sector and for rail is directly linked to these activities. It should be borne in mind that the amount of EU funding to be allocated to rail in the new 2021-2027 financial perspective will be crucial not only for the effective implementation of the Union's transport policy, but also for the implementation of many EU policies.

In some regions of the EU, railway vehicles are currently not as energy efficient as they could be. What measures could the EU and LRAs envisage to accelerate the modernisation of rolling stock at local and regional level to make rail travel more attractive and more energy efficient in those areas?

In answering this question, I would like to underline the particular importance of EU funds for co-financing the modernisation and replacement of rolling stock. In a number of Central and Eastern European countries, rail rolling stock is

several decades old, and for many reasons it is not technically feasible and economically justifiable to modernise it. Without EU support, both operators and local and regional authorities will not be able to modernise rail, to make it attractive. It would be unwarranted if, after several years of EU investment in modern infrastructure, old, dilapidated rolling stock were running on it.

As regards the energy intensity of rail, it should be borne in mind that the rail system is formed of many interdependent areas that contribute to its overall energy efficiency. Reducing consumption and investing in renewable energy sources can enable carbon emissions to be cut significantly by as early as 2030. And while rail transport compares favourably in terms of energy efficiency, many of the factors that determine efficiency can still be improved, including in relation to railway vehicles. This begins with the shift from diesel-powered to electric rolling stock, modernisation in the area of energy recovery (20-25 % savings), implementation of eco-driving equipment (5-10 % savings), establishment of solar farms enabling replacement of energy sources with more environmentally friendly equivalents (40 % savings), insulation of railway buildings and replacement of heat sources with non-incandescent equivalents, and goes as far as the implementation of new technological solutions on which the rail industry and sector have been working intensively for years, such as solutions in the field of hydrogen technologies.

The European Committee of the Regions opinion drafted under your leadership mentions big disproportions in development of rail sector in Central-Eastern and Western Europe. How can the EU help to bridge this gap?

There is no way of not noticing the still significant disparity at EU level in the quality of railway systems overall. There is a difference between these systems in Western Europe and in Central-Eastern Europe. Even the example of the age of rolling stock I mentioned earlier. Statistics on investment in rolling stock in different EU countries point to these differences. Of course, investments in infrastructure, rolling stock and stations are taking place, allowing improvements, but the investment backlogs in the Central and Eastern European

countries are considerable. The situation is improving thanks to EU and budgetary funding, but this process is not taking place at the rate we would like to see. Suffice it to say that, while the high-speed rail system has been in operation in Western European countries for several decades (TGV – 40 years, German ICE – 35 years), there are virtually no such solutions in Central and Eastern Europe.

The EU has an important role to play in improving the transport accessibility of regions and territorial cohesion. The EU, in cooperation with the Member States, must properly define what kind of transport should play the predominant role in its territory. I believe that EU funding and the right decisions will make it possible to create an open and interoperable market for rail services, since a considerable need remains. As the marshal of the voivodship, I see the need to promote rail. Rail must be the mode of transport that plays the main role in the EU's transport and economic system.

Is rail a priority for the Lubelskie region you are the Marshal of? What specifically is your region investing in when it comes to rail?

The Lubelskie region has been supporting rail investment for many years. The geographical position of my region means that we are the natural economic and transport gateway for third countries such as Ukraine and Belarus on the European Union's eastern border, and form part of the international rail freight corridors and trade routes linking Asia and the European Union. In the Lubelskie region, we see the importance and role of railways, and so together with the Polish State Railways, we are carrying out major rail investments using EU budgetary resources and funds. Ten railway stations are currently being modernised or built in the voivodship, including the planned modernisation of the railway station in Lublin – the region's capital. Investments are also being made in logistics terminals, transshipment points and rolling stock maintenance facilities. The rail network is also being upgraded by increasing technical parameters and speed, including modernisation of the main railway line connecting the capital of the voivodship with Warsaw,

something that will reduce travel times directly, boost capacity and increase the number of trains on the railways. Lublin is also a city of many universities whose graduates should also find employment in the transport sector. We want to pursue a sustainable development policy in the region, where rail will have an important role to play.

The opinion of Jarosław Piotr Stawiarski (PL/ECR), President of the Lubelskie Region, on the European Year of Rail 2021 is to be adopted at the next CoR plenary session on 12-14 October 2020.

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Press Contacts

1. **Eric Mamer**

Chief Spokesperson

eric.mamer@ec.europa.eu

+32 2 299 40 73

2. **Dana Spinant**

Deputy Chief Spokesperson

dana.spinant@ec.europa.eu

+32 2 299 01 50

3. **Elisaveta Dimitrova**

Head of Unit

elisaveta.dimitrova@ec.europa.eu

+32 2 295 88 38

4. **Johannes Bahrke**

Coordinating Spokesperson

johannes.bahrke@ec.europa.eu

+32 2 295 86 15

5. **Vivian Loonela**

Coordinating Spokesperson

vivian.loonela@ec.europa.eu

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