

BACK ON TRACK

REPORT OF CONFERENCE IN VIENNA, OCTOBER 12TH - 14TH 2018

Over 40 members and supporters of the Back-on-Track alliance met in Vienna over the weekend of October 12th – 14th as a further step in their campaign for attractive European night trains as part of 24/7 international rail services.

The weekend's events were held jointly with Stay Grounded, a global network of organisations and individuals pressing for alternatives to airport expansion as a response to the challenges of climate change.

This report mainly covers the joint sessions and those sessions just for Back-on-Track. Some separate sessions were held just for Stay Grounded.

Both organisations will work together on matters of common interest and more about their work and actions can be found on their websites:

<https://back-on-track.eu>

<https://stay-grounded.org>

FRIDAY OCTOBER 12TH

TURNABOUT MOBILITY : THE CHALLENGE TO STAY GROUNDED

An evening public session in the University of Vienna was attended by nearly 100 people. The Moderator Matthias Krams and Professor [Ulrich Brand](#) welcomed everyone, asking “Do we always need to fly? What are the alternatives?” Each of the panel members then addressed specific issues.

Professor Emeritus [Hermann Knoflacher](#) ([Vienna Technical University](#)) described how mobility in the city had changed over the past 50 years, with reduced car usage, a greater share for public transport, car-sharing and more cycling. Season ticket costs had reduced but car parking charges had increased.

[Laura Machler](#) (Stay Grounded / [Am Boden bleiben](#)) said that for certain social groups flying had become normal, but only a small proportion of the population used a plane more than once a year. In India, only 3% of the

population had ever boarded a plane. However, taxation policies tended to favour aviation.

Trevor Garrod (Back-on-Track and former Chairman, [European Passengers' Federation](#)) put the case for better international day and night trains. Fast day trains from, for example, London to Paris and Brussels had led successfully to modal shift. Night trains had a role to play on longer journeys as part of a 24/7 network and recent experiences showed there was a demand for them.

Sam Mason and Tahir Latif ([Public & Commercial Services Union](#)) some of whose members work at British airports, spoke of the need to reconcile concern for the environment with secure, good-quality jobs. Transport must be looked at as an integrated service, within the public sector, whereas in the UK it was very fragmented.

Professor Knoflacher spoke of the need to challenge financial structures and vested interests but also to change people's behavior. Rail stations must be accessible to all, not just to motorists. Electric cars might be cleaner, but still take up just as much space as diesel cars.

Laura Machler stressed the importance of influencing the debate, using the report *13 Steps towards a just Transport System and rapid Reduction in Air Traffic* just launched by Stay Grounded in [English](#) and [German](#).

On jobs, Trevor Garrod pointed out that many skills in the aviation sector were transferrable to other transport sectors such as rail. Building, marketing and operating international trains were skilled jobs. Transport staff should be well trained, well equipped and well informed.

Sam Mason stated that PCS believed in building alliances with environmental campaigners and helping the latter to understand labour movement concerns.

In discussion there were calls for more equitable taxation and track access charges. Freight transport must also be considered and mention was made of the Lunatrain project in France, for a combined overnight passenger and high value goods service.

There were complaints about the difficulty in buying some international train tickets and the need to make it more convenient to travel by long-distance

train. It was pointed out that in the plans for the [2020 European Football Championship](#), with venues in 13 different countries, there was too much emphasis on flying whereas many of the cities hosting the games could reasonably be reached by train.

SATURDAY OCTOBER 13TH

Between 50 and 60 representatives took part in the sessions at the [WUK](#) cultural centre, Währinger Strasse 59, Vienna, on Saturday and Sunday.

A joint session on Saturday morning began with personal introductions from individuals from each network and presentation on how and why each had been formed.

The NGO [Finance & Trade Watch](#) in Vienna had responded to plans to expand [Vienna Airport](#) and to build or expand some 600 airports worldwide, which had prompted protests and led to seminars and conference in Toulouse, Bonn and London; and, throughout widespread consultation, to the production of a position paper listing 13 steps needed for a more just and climate-friendly transport policy, including a shift to other modes, summarised as “[system change not climate change](#)”. A “Stay Grounded” global action week had been called and led to 26 actions in 9 countries on 3 continents; plus an intervention in the recent [European Aviation Summit](#).

Back-on-Track had begun with spontaneous demonstrations and petitions by passengers, environmentalists and trade unions in Germany, France, Scandinavia and Switzerland, against plans to cut night trains. These were successful in gaining publicity and the attention of the wider public and politicians. Meeting with politicians followed, including at EU level, an [activists' weekend in Perpignan](#) and in 2018 a 60-strong [conference in the European Parliament in Brussels](#) and a [meeting with European Commission officials](#). Three European Weeks of Action were organised and an 8-point plan to expand the role of night trains was put forward.

Individuals then gave updates on recent actions and developments.

For example there were 27 instances of controversial mining and airport projects around the world. In the UK, unions and politicians were divided in their policy towards Heathrow Airport expansion but there was strong public

support for public ownership of transport and other services, which should be “under democratic control” rather than a “centralised bureaucratic structure.”. A video was shown of the campaign against expansion of Arlanda Airport, Stockholm featuring a “one way ticket to climate crisis.” A message from Mexico reported on protests by local people against their land being taken for an “unnecessary” new airport and ancillary services.

Back-on-Track colleagues explained that the withdrawal of night trains by DB was “a political decision”; but the expansion of the ÖBB Nightjet service to Düsseldorf, Hamburg, Germany-Zurich and Munich-Italy was very welcome and was profitable. Government pressure had been needed to ensure co-operation over ticketing and local pressure had succeeded in retaining motorail services (linked to sleeper services) at [Hamburg Altona](#)

Colleagues from France, where night trains had been reduced to just 4 services, were pleased to report that the Minister for Transport had now agreed to a refurbishment program.

A report was read from a Dutch colleague indicating renewed interest in international train services as an alternative to short haul flights and the work being done by the group Train2EU “to improve the radius in which trains are a feasible mode of transport, from the currently assumed 500-700km to 1300 km or even more.” Greenpeace NL were actively campaigning against expansion of Schiphol Airport

Mention was made of travel planners in Finland which gave environmentally friendly advice. This could be used to persuade people to choose train rather than plane for appropriate journeys.

For the afternoon session each network had separate meetings.

Back-on-Track began with a consideration of EU-wide action, with a call for the European Commission to take the initiative in promoting a level playing field between air and rail; and to make things easier for passengers – for example in international ticketing.

It was pointed out that strengthening passenger rights could lead to unintended consequences, with train operators reluctant to take responsibility if something went wrong on a stage of the journey chain which was provided

by another operator. There were opportunities for third parties to sell international tickets, however.

Colleagues made calls for the European Union to state clearly its policy on night trains, on saving energy in transport and on reducing congestion.

Reference was made to the [European Court of Auditors' study on the high speed network](#), describing it as an “ineffective patchwork.” However, it made no mention of night trains and seemed to concentrate on the case for high speed lines with cars acting as feeders.

As one could not expect new initiatives from the European Commission at this stage in the Parliamentary cycle, our current priority was to try to influence the political parties in the run-up to the European Parliament Election in May. For example, it was reported that the Swedish Greens were putting international night trains in their campaign document. It was also considered that parties should be lobbied on the access charge rules, especially for night trains.

[Mr Kurt Bauer](#), Head of the Long-distance Passenger Department of [ÖBB](#) (Austrian Federal Railways) was welcomed to the meeting. He explained why they had expanded their night train services into Germany. The brand “Nightjet” fitted into their marketing strategy (alongside “Cityjet” and “Railjet”). 15% of ÖBB’s long-distance revenue had come from night trains in 2015 and there was a [clear demand for such services](#).

ÖBB were able to take over 42 overnight coaches from DB and thus replace some of their own oldest stock. It is necessary to do the maintenance of the rolling stock in Austria, at existing facilities in Vienna, Innsbruck and Graz, which puts limits to new night train lines.

For investment in new stock, all options were possible (such as a state pool) but the risk factor had to be removed. It would also help to have a guarantee that access charges would remain stable for a long time.

ÖBB bought the same basic type of train for day and night-time use, but there was not yet a technical solution for complete interchangeability. The high-speed philosophy restricted the availability of infrastructure for non high-speed trains.

Asked if the tourist industry could do more to encourage use of night trains, Mr Bauer said that ÖBB's in-house tourist agency already did this, "But we're a small business. We don't have the resources to do it Europe-wide." He added, "Our challenge is costs and unfair competition. The demand is not a problem."

It was important to show political and transport decision-makers that there was a rail alternative. The night train network really needed to be international but there was no international Public Service Obligation.

ÖBB's future plans included [introducing new train sets in 2022](#), with some old stock then going out of service; strengthening the existing network and then considering one or two new routes. On the new [Vienna – Berlin](#) night train via Poland, the Polish taxpayer was paying for a sleeping coach to and from Krakow and the Ukrainian border.

Mr Bauer commented, "Competition is good, but it doesn't solve all the problems. Yield management was needed when everyone wanted to travel at the same time.

Asked about extending Nightjet into the Netherlands, Mr Bauer said that the greatest demand would be for Amsterdam – Munich, but fitting such a train into the tight domestic timetable would also be challenging and it must be borne in mind that "we don't sell mileage, we sell seats and places."

Meanwhile, ÖBB had a very stable customer base in Germany. He also commented on prices charged by DB and Flixbus and misleading media reports about these.

Asked about private operators, Mr Bauer said that it would be challenging for them to develop an entire system from scratch, but that there could be scope for them to do things together with state operators. What was important was to have know-how, which could be lost if a country abandoned its night trains.

Mr Bauer was thanked for his presentation and participation in the discussion.

[Joachim Holstein](#) continued the debate by speaking about the high level debate on carbon emissions. On October 8th the [IPCC had produced a report](#) calling for a reduction and 17 countries had already announced restrictions on cars with internal combustion engines. On October 3rd the [European](#)

[Parliament](#) had voted for a 40% reduction in carbon emissions and seven days later [European Environment Ministers](#) voted for a 35% reduction. Meanwhile, on October 9th the Parliament's [Transport & Tourism Committee](#) decided to strengthen rail passengers' rights .

In Germany the ICE night services being run by DB were “full but uncomfortable” demonstrating that there was a demand for overnight travel. DB had also announced that it was resuming and expanding [ticket sales for the international Thalys and Eurostar trains](#). The Federal Government, at an Aviation Summit in Hamburg on October 5th, expressed a desire to replace some short-haul flights by train journeys. “Long-standing dogmas are being called into question” and activists needed to keep pressing for “trains not plane” and “more trains, fewer cars.” He concluded, “Politicians talk a lot now about ‘electromobility.’ Railways have provided that since 1883!”

The debate continued with reports by colleagues from other countries.

[Pau Noy](#) (from NGO [PTP, Barcelona](#)) explained that the city had a long tradition of night trains, but now only the night train to Galicia remained. However, colleagues in France had proposed a “Lunajet” or “Lunatrain” service between Barcelona and Frankfurt-am-Main via Montpellier and Mulhouse. It could also cater for evening travel between Barcelona and Montpellier and early morning travel between Mulhouse and Frankfurt.

An innovation on such a service would be the carriage of light but high-value goods. These could be loaded at Barcelona and further loaded or unloaded quite quickly at Perpignan, Avignon, Belfort and Mannheim. There was certainly a high demand for such traffic from Spain.

The catchment area of such a train contained 50 million inhabitants and planes on this route contained 3500 seats. If only 10% of these passengers transferred to rail, the train could be filled.

[Poul Kattler](#) spoke of the demand to travel between Germany and Scandinavia. Petitions against the withdrawal of night trains were being presented to the [Swedish](#) and [Danish](#) Governments. A new concept had been presented for the rail route between Denmark and Germany via Jutland with electric locomotives

and day coaches. A large meeting in Copenhagen on night trains had been held the previous week.

What scope was there for campaigners to run their own night trains to cater for niches in the market? It was reported that Chris Engelsmann of Jazz Express (noordwestexpress.nl) was planning a twice-weekly night train between Amsterdam and Berlin in 2019.

David Loher of East West Tours was working on a project to link Berne with all European capitals by sleeper and motorrail train at least once a week. For more information contact davidloher@bluewin.ch

The practice of combining sleeper and motorail trains was further considered with the example of Hamburg-Altona and the local campaign group [Prellbock](#). A proposal had been made to move the terminus back 2 km and sell the land. Prellbock wanted the station maintained, with all its facilities (including motorail) on the present site and had successfully taken the matter to court. A side effect of this action was that the local news media realised how many car carrying trains there were!

Further general discussion emphasised the importance of researching demand for an overnight service, especially when there was no high speed line and then, if there was a political will to retain or introduce one, look for the technical solutions. In this context, possible redesign of couchette coaches was also mentioned by Simon Hope.

In pressing for night trains, it was important to point out that – for tourists especially – a night train was attractive because it could serve more destinations than a plane. The [Caledonian Sleeper](#) from London to Scotland was a case in point. So was the sleeper from Paris to the Occitanie region, which can serve tourist destinations in the Massif Central, Pyrenees and Mediterranean coast by through coaches. In Germany, the potential for a long-distance sleeper train to serve Erfurt, Weimar, Leipzig and Dresden was worth considering, for tourist, cultural and other reasons.

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SUNDAY OCTOBER 14TH

During the morning, the focus was on how Back-on-Track should move forward, what its priorities should be and how it could involve members and supporters. This included improvements to the website and greater use of social media and a possible bulletin or – if not – mailings on specific topics. Joachim Holstein already runs the website www.nachtzug-bleibt.eu and Trevor Garrod issues 4 times a year his *Bulletin of European Rail Travel* (which covers **more** than just night trains).

It was suggested that the Back-on-Track website could also include practical advice on night trains and how to book them. In this respect, the website of Mark Smith, [The Man in Seat 61](#), was also highly recommended. Another possible project was to list all destinations which could be reached directly by night train.

Back-on-Track should work with other organisations (such as Stay-Gounded) where appropriate; and could also work with the tourist industry in, for example, towns or regions which no longer had night trains. Passenger rights were mentioned by several colleagues, and it was pointed out that the [European Passengers' Federation](#) had particular expertise here; and had also contributed to the KCW consultants' report in June on cross-border services. Other international organisations such as [Transport & Environment](#) in Brussels should also be contacted.

Conclusions – Over the coming months, dialogue with the political parties who are preparing for European Elections must be a priority, with up to ten questions to be put to them concerning international night trains and what can be done at EU level to “level the playing field”. This can include the role of the European Rail Agency.; and whether there should be an obligation on national rail operators to participate also in the operation of international services.

Other actions will include a workgroup on the website and social media; a study group to investigate what reports have been published on aspects of night train operation: a further meeting in Brussels in early 2019 (to be followed possibly by a large-scale conference in the second half of the year) and a slightly more formal structure for Back-on-Track, with funding.

(Donations had been received to help fund the Vienna event and provide funding for further work.)

Back-on-Track will continue to have monthly teleconferences and in the autumn of 2019 a further internal meeting to assess progress and future development.

It was noted that September 16th-22nd will be [European Mobility Week](#), and this could provide an excellent opportunity for Back-on-Track (perhaps in co-operation with Stay Grounded) to organise actions or an event. In the nearer future, a landmark event will be the reintroduction of a Vienna – Berlin sleeper service, and Back-on-Track supporters are planning to welcome it when it starts / arrives in Berlin on December 9th / 10th.

Night trains in Eastern Europe was the focus of the discussion for the first afternoon session which began with a presentation by Iwona Budych of the [Polish](#)/German group [kolejDEPL](#) (campaigning for rail travel Germany-Poland)

She explained that long-distance trains in Poland were mainly operated by the state-owned [PKP InterCity](#) (established in 2001), while the Czech private operator [Leo Express](#) had, since 2017 also run from Prague to Krakow and may extend its services in the future. Rail had increased its market share on long-distance traffic over the past four years from 33 million passengers to nearly 42 million; while cross-border trains had increased from 2.5 million in 2015 to 3 million in 2017. There were 9 domestic night train services and five on international routes. These were especially popular during the holiday period when there were sometimes capacity problems.

Sometimes there were problems in buying tickets – such as for the Hamburg – Krakow train; and the fact that the German and Polish systems used different voltages on electrified routes brought operating constraints.

KolejDEPL had as its current goals – to focus more attention on the case for better cross-border services; giving opinions on projects for future timetables; and preparing a resolution for the forthcoming Polish/German Railway Summit. It had previously taken part in conferences in Germany organised by the European Passengers' Federation in Berlin and [Pro Bahn](#) in Kassel.

[Miroslav Vyka](#) of the [Czech](#) public transport users' association SCVD outlined the development of the rail network of his country since the time of Austria-Hungary. As Czechoslovakia, its major services were east/west; but nowadays a million Czechs every year liked to spend their holidays on the Adriatic. From Prague to Split took over 23 hours by train, compared to 3 hours 20 minutes for the same distance from Paris to Marseille. It was therefore not surprising that only about 1% of Czech holidaymakers travelled to the Adriatic by train.

In 1990 there had been 4 or 5 night trains between Prague and Kosice, second largest city in Slovakia. Now there were only two. Yet despite the division of the former Czechoslovakia, many Czechs had family connections in Slovakia, and vice versa, and so there was a demand for travel between the two states.

Between 60 and 80 stations in the Czech Republic had booking offices which could issue international tickets. Alternatively, it was possible to book some journeys by smartphone.

There had been night trains to Amsterdam and Zurich via Germany and were still night services to Budapest, Ostrava to Warsaw, and Kosice; and to Zurich via Linz. Flights from Prague airport had increased from 2.3 million to 15.4 million in 17 years. Open access had left to four operators competing on the main east/west route from Prague to Olomouc and Ostrava with a 30% growth in day train usage. Different ticketing, prices and rules on these domestic services could be a problem, but there was generally a high level of passenger satisfaction.

The needs, by 2020, were for overnight links to such cities as Gdansk, Frankfurt-am-Main, Hamburg and Munich and, by 2025, from Prague to Venice, Slovenia and Croatia. One problem for the previous night train to Split had been high track access charges in Austria.

In discussion it was pointed out that in some Eastern and Central European countries, the international night train was part of the PSO contract within the country. Future international night trains might only operate through 2 or 3 countries as the financing could otherwise become overly complex. Given the life cycle of new rolling stock (30 years), design harmonisation was important to make it easier to operate them across borders.

FINAL JOINT SESSION

Colleagues from Stay Grounded and Back-on-Track met together for a final session and were joined by 4 others on line.

It was reported that 120 groups had now signed the position paper of *13 steps*. These included Back-on-Track, which had voted *nem. con.* to do so in its earlier internal session.

Poul Kattler, Co-ordinator of Back-on-Track, reported back on the morning session and the importance of dialogue at EU level, adding “We can’t wait for liberalisation to bring all the developments we want to see. We must challenge this more.” Other positive aspects of the weekend had been the very good Friday evening public event and having a night train operator to speak to and discuss with us.

Mira Kapfinger for Stay Grounded highlighted areas of co-operation which could include welcoming the arrival of the new night train between Vienna and Berlin and joining with Back-on-Track for a Brussels meeting. Stay Grounded could also contribute specific questions to the list for the political parties. Each network could support the other in media work and a simple system of sharing minutes could be set up. Stay Grounded also proposed a conference in Barcelona, potentially in May, on the positive alternatives to aviation. A further possibility was webinars (on-line seminars) to discuss the potential of night trains.

This report has been compiled by Trevor Garrod, who takes full responsibility for its content.

Special thanks are due to our new colleagues in Stay Grounded for the organisation of the event, and to Back-on-Track colleagues Poul Kattler, Lars Igeland, Joachim Holstein and Bernhard Knierim, as well as to all colleagues from both networks for their input into the discussion.

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08/11/2018