



Back-on-Track.eu

European network to promote
cross-border night trains

Position Paper

Why we need more night trains:

Trains are the most climate friendly means of transport, planes the most unfriendly one. In the EU average in 2019, according to International Energy Agency (IEA) numbers, their actual emission of greenhouse gases (GHG) was [28 times higher](#) than the emissions of long distance passenger trains, including night trains.

Because aviation will not decarbonize any time soon

While the airline industry regularly refers to “green” flying, there is no real pathway to this happening. The capacity for the production of “sustainable aviation fuels” is vanishingly low, and even if they were used on a larger scale, flying remains multiple times more climate-damaging compared with trains due to the [non-CO₂ effects](#). Hydrogen has huge unsolved storage and transportation issues. Finally, battery-driven electric propulsion has made some limited progress but, even if one assumes a continuous increase in the energy density of batteries, by 2050 this will only suffice for very-short distance flights (up to 500 km), the category in which fast day trains, if available, could easily compete with aviation.

Only night trains can replace medium haul flights

For the majority of short (500 - 1,500 km) and medium haul (1,500 - 3,500 km) flights, night trains are the best alternative, because most people are not willing to spend 6 hours or more of their daytime on a train. The advantage of night trains is the possibility to sleep while travelling and cover a distance of up to 2,000 km, or even up to 3,000 km when combined with high speed rail. If rolled out on a European scale as an alternative to flying, night trains can prevent 3% of the gross EU climate-wrecking emissions.

High-Speed Rail is not the only solution

Building new lines for high speed rail (HSR, for speeds of 250 km/h and more) is costly and has a huge environmental impact - so this cannot be the general solution for long distance passenger transport. Where high-speed lines already exist, suitable night trains should be able to take



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advantage of them. But extending the night train network would not necessarily require an expansion of HSR beyond closing a few gaps. Upgrading all existing main lines to allow 160 to 200 km/h (or 230 km/h if possible) would be sufficient for the increase in the range of night trains that we are striving for.

Maglev is no alternative

While building new tracks for high speed rail is expensive, building completely new infrastructure for magnetic levitation (maglev) trains would cost even more. Magnetic levitation has no speed advantage over HSR as long as the air resistance is not minimised by vacuum tunnels (“hyperloop”), which has so far only been achieved to some extent under laboratory conditions. Current maglev proposals serve as an excuse to question the necessity of investments in rail, blocking the decarbonisation of the transport sector rather than promoting it.

How we get more night trains:

Degrowing aviation

Without countermeasures, European aviation emissions will continue to rise by 3% annually. Even with a lower growth rate, by 2040, aviation alone is expected to emit more greenhouse gases than any other sector, including energy industries. When we demand immediate action to improve market and finance conditions for night trains this will hardly endanger Europe’s aviation industry. It might just help to stop its emissions from growing.

Our long-term goal:

Trains should be cheaper than planes. While trains have to generate energy and sales tax revenue and must partly refinance their infrastructure, air transport is exempted from most levies. This subsidy structure in favour of the most climate-damaging means of transport must be reversed. This can be achieved by making planes less attractive or by making trains more attractive. We demand both.

Our short-term demands:

1. Charging of kerosene with all applicable energy taxes.
2. The reintroduction of VAT on international airline tickets.



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3. Extending the emission trading system, including non-CO₂ emissions and effects.
4. Speeding up the withdrawal of free emission certificates for aviation companies.
5. Using the additional earnings to build rail tracks, to finance rolling stock for night trains and to subsidise them where necessary (see next section)

Stop unfairly penalising night trains

Our long-term goal:

Our aim is to increase rail's overall share of the transport market. This could be achieved in different ways: with an integrated European state railway company or with a genuine European railway market on a state railway network. However, we currently have different national mixes with the worst components of each approach.

Our short-term demands:

6. Stop charging night trains like daytime passenger traffic. Night trains (defined as trains offering sleeping facilities and running completely including the 00:00 to 05:00 time frame), must be mentioned in Annexe VI of Directive 2012/34/EU and should be defined as a compulsory market segment in Art. 32. Due to their lower market viability, this would require the track access charges for night trains to be reduced to the direct costs.
7. Track access charges should additionally be temporarily suspended for night trains in order to boost new services, following the example in Belgium.
8. The VAT for tickets for international night trains must be set at 0% in all EU member states - at least as long as international flights are exempted from VAT.

Improving rolling stock for night trains

Our long-term goal:

We aim for a network of modern, attractive and quiet night trains that covers the whole of Europe and connects neighbouring countries. It should be able to accommodate the potential of more than 360 million passengers per year who would consider night trains under reasonable



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conditions. For this, we need new, innovative vehicles that improve privacy and safety without giving up the space for encounters with people that night trains used to have. The necessary backbone for this is around 20,000 locomotive-hauled carriages (or groups of carriages) built for distances of up to 1,500 kilometres or more and speeds of up to 250 km/h. In order to utilise existing high-speed lines and to cover some interchangeable routes in the 1,500 and 3,000 km distance range, these would be supplemented by around 500 special high-speed trains, each capable of carrying up to 800 sleeping passengers.

Our short-term demands:

9. The ERA should be commissioned to define a technical go-everywhere standard for night train carriages allowing them to travel with maximum speeds of at least 200 km/h on standard gauge tracks in the EU, Norway and Switzerland.
10. In order to double the number of night trains in the EU by 2030, the European Union must organise the procurement of a fleet of at least 1,000 night train carriages (sleeping cars, couchettes and mini-cabins) to be leased to operators interested in setting up new routes, either under a public service obligation or on open access terms. The investment of around €2bn is to be financed by the European Investment Bank (Green Rail Investment Platform). They should be manufactured in European factories; their standardisation ensures the best prices and fastest results. However, railway companies must retain the option of purchasing and operating their own night train rolling stock with different concepts.

Improving operating conditions for night trains

Our long-term goals:

The rollout of a single technical standard for the European Railway System, based on 25/15 kV AC, standard gauge and ETCS should be a joint effort of all member states.

Language requirements are not the most pressing issue today, but once international transport becomes more important, it would facilitate night train operations if train drivers and infrastructure managers as well as train crews and station managers were able to communicate in English. Social dumping should be avoided by strengthening collective bargaining rather than language requirements.



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In order to ensure punctuality and higher speed at night, night trains must be able to use existing high-speed tracks during the night.

Our short-term demands:

11. Investments in the TEN-T railway corridors to ensure speeds of 160 to 200 km/h (or 230 km/h if possible), also during the night, so that even distances beyond 2,000 km can be served by overnight trains.
12. Night trains and other international trains must have priority in access to train paths when arriving at the main railway stations in the morning.
13. In the case of passport control when crossing borders, it must be possible for the authorities to cooperate with the train staff to store passports in order to prevent waking up passengers in the middle of the night.

Funding connections where needed

Our long-term goal:

We want to give every European citizen equal access to rail transport in proportion to population density. This includes the ability to reach distant regions of our continent in a reasonable amount of time while sleeping.

Our short-term demands:

14. By 2030, the European Commission should tender missing or inadequate links in a night train target network, to be defined by 2026 based on existing proposals, in order to provide a comprehensive and affordable network of long distance night train services to all regions of Europe.
15. In cases of mere transit without stops the subsidy proportionality requirement should not apply to the night train route of the transit country, so this part of the night train journey may be subsidised by any neighbouring country.
16. If one or more countries wish to subsidise an international night train and not all competent authorities on its route agree to subsidise, they can nevertheless offer commercial stops in the transit country provided that the proportionality of their subsidy is confirmed by the ERA according to the principle of proportionality to the origin of passengers being served.



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Promoting night trains

Our long-term goal:

One app to find and book the whole trip: A fully functional, standardised booking app would not only make it easier to find and book international as well as domestic train journeys, it would also help to automate the boarding and ordering process and thus further improve the efficiency of night trains. However, it is highly unlikely that a standard will be developed by multiple market actors, nor will accurate, reliable information. Instead of waiting for others to solve this, the EU Commission itself should provide a European multimodal transport application for searching and booking, working together with the National Access Points (NAPs) for transport data and possibly based on existing solutions (so as not to waste time).

Transparency is a prerequisite for any well-functioning market. Front-end and ancillary services could be offered by different market players.

Our short-term demands:

17. The EU must ensure that all National Access Points in Europe provide immediate access to information about all passenger trains, boats and other public transport services, including real-time passenger information about delays for trains or about rescheduling with the fastest and most convenient alternative connection, possibly also for buses, if that is the best alternative for rescheduling.
18. Ticket sellers should be able to sell all types of tickets and therefore have access to all the discounts that the operators have implemented at least four months in advance. If they are to be remunerated by the operators they must in return commit to selling all types of tickets and products (like couchettes and sleeper cabins) including more complex booking options (such as whole cabins, or women only cabins etc.).
19. The EU should extend the reciprocal voluntary HOTNAT rescheduling agreement as a binding agreement for all train operators.