

# COMMENT

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## All eyes on June

**R**ail policymakers and advocates gathered in Brussels amid stormy weather on April 3-5 for the Connecting Europe Days, ahead of the European elections in early June and critical decisions about funding for transport for the next EU legislative period.

On April 4 a coalition of more than 40 transport trade associations and advocacy groups issued a rallying call for the next European Parliament to boost transport funding. The partners have issued a document urging the European institutions and member states to increase the Connecting Europe Facility budget for transport in the upcoming EU Multi-Annual Financial Framework for 2028-34, preparation of which will begin next year.

Speaking on behalf of the European rail supply chain, outgoing UNIFE Director-General Philippe Citroën said the EU 'urgently needs to reflect its climate ambitions with significant financial support. As the backbone of sustainable mobility, rail is the most environmental friendly mode of transport, only accounting for 0.4% of Europe's total transport greenhouse gas emissions, which means the rail supply industry is perfectly placed to be a backbone of Europe's future prosperity as a net-zero industry.'

In her welcome address at the opening of the Connecting Europe Days on April 3, EU Transport Commissioner Adina Vălean reflected on the €50bn invested in transport projects through CEF since 2014, pointing out that 75% of this had been allocated to rail or inland waterway schemes. However, she believed that too many CEF applications were still being turned down for lack of public funding, and that the EU's long-term ambitions on climate and sustainability could be put at risk as a result. 'We will need more public funding', she insisted. 'We cannot miss this train.'

Reflecting on the many challenges facing EU policymakers in the run-up to the European elections, Vălean

0.4  
%

of Europe's  
total  
transport  
greenhouse  
gas emissions  
come from rail

suggested that 'transport policy should not fluctuate every 10 years', but nevertheless 'we cannot use an old map to navigate a new world'.

She was keen to emphasise the role the TEN-T network could play in enhancing military mobility, notably in eastern Europe in light of the war in Ukraine. 'We do not have separate military transport networks, so we must make sure the corridors we do have are fit for purpose', she explained.

Acknowledging the adoption in the past year of a revised TEN-T Regulation, she lauded this 'already successful' measure as a means 'not only to connect the EU, but to connect Europe'. This has brought an increased emphasis on enhancing links, especially railways, to countries in eastern Europe including Ukraine and Moldova, and the western Balkans. 'We have new maps now', she emphasised, 'and they do not include the aggressor'.

There was a consensus among speakers and delegates throughout the event in Brussels that transport advocates face multiple challenges in ensuring continued political support for programmes like CEF and TEN-T.

'If I were a politician, I'd be thinking how to balance the needs of people worried about making it to the end of the week with those worried about the end of the world', noted TEN-T Scan-Med Corridor Co-ordinator Pat Cox, a former President of the European Parliament. This was a clear nod to concern about a potential populist backlash against green policies at the European elections.

Against this backdrop, Cox's counterpart for the Orient-East Med Corridor Mathieu Grosch insisted that 'tomorrow, we must make common

cause with all the member states' to drive a societal mission to complete the TEN-T network. He was joined in a panel discussion on April 3 by the transport ministers of Spain, Óscar Puente Santiago, and the Czech Republic, Martin Kupka, both of whom pointed to the fragmented nature of the TEN-T rail network at present.

Puente suggested that from a European perspective, completing a high speed axis from northern Spain into southwestern France via Hendaye was a priority because it would connect Spain 'better with the centre of Europe'. But he noted the contrast in progress in work on rail links on each side of the border: Spain's 'Basque Y' connection linking Bilbao and San Sebastián with the border is well in hand, but the Bordeaux - Hendaye high speed line in France is seemingly stuck at the planning stage. Puente suggested this was because, unlike Spain, France already had strong rail connections to neighbouring countries in the east; in response, Grosch insisted that 'we must persuade the French to continue the work to better connect Spain'.

Kupka concurred that funding must be maintained to address shortcomings in the rail networks of central Europe too. 'The EU rail system is like the warning you hear on the London Underground', he said. 'Mind the gap! There are still too many gaps in the rail networks, especially in the CEE region. That is something we all need to address.'

That could be easier said than done as the European bloc faces up to an era of perma-crisis. Many Brussels-watchers fear a spike in far-right populist votes at next month's elections. In a survey of current EU policymakers conducted by *Politico* at the end of April, this ranked highest among issues 'keeping them awake at night'. Climate change and the Green Deal, on which so much rail investment will depend, still emerged as a critical issue, and that seems unlikely to change in a macro sense whatever the makeup of the next parliament.

But whether a 'big picture' commitment to the environment can be translated into tangible enhancements to the TEN-T network through CEF and other instruments is unlikely to become clear until at least the back end of the year. 🌍

“We cannot use an old map to navigate a new world”

Adina Vălean, EU Transport Commissioner

