PRIME
Platform of Rail Infrastructure Managers in Europe

PRIME 20th Plenary

24 November 2022

Discussion on Cross-border rail traffic – better management and coordination

Input paper

Rail capacity is expensive, and even when resources and investments are forthcoming, it can take years or decades to address physical bottlenecks. In the short to medium term, it is crucial to optimise the use of the existing infrastructure.

Challenges in international capacity allocation, shortcomings of current practices and perspectives

On a number of European routes, capacity is scarce. Important infrastructure renewal programs as well as an increase in demand resulting from multiple factors lead to a growing utilization of the network, potentially generating capacity conflicts.

Some key weakness of the current legislative framework result:

- From its reliance on an annual timetable process as the central structuring element for the management and allocation of capacity. While some form of periodization is required to optimize capacity utilization and enable new entrants to gain access to attractive capacity, the current processes may be too rigid and not always allow, on the one hand, longer-term planning (including infrastructure works) to ensure optimal use of capacity, and, on the other hand, short-term allocation of capacity to accommodate short-notice requests or the entry into the market of new services.
- but also from the fact that SERA and EU legislations have left much room for interpretation which has resulted in both Member States and Infrastructure Managers implementing and applying the rules differently.

A capacity allocation process based on an annual timetable may not suit the needs of all users, putting some at risk of being restricted to residual capacity, e.g., for freight trains, train paths of lower quality ‘left over’ by passenger operators or by temporary capacity restrictions.

Another key challenge consists in the impact of planning and execution of infrastructure maintenance and renewal work on the overall capacity. Late planning of works and planning done at different times in different countries can bring additional constraint into the system.

Infrastructure Managers have initiated different projects and adopted varying approaches to improve the current system. However, optimization on a national level does not necessarily imply the optimization of the European network as a whole, notably on cross border traffic.

Regulation (EU) 913/2010, establishing the rail freight corridors (RFC), intended to address these shortcomings by introducing special rules specifically targeting freight trains, applicable to just a part of the EU rail network designated to nine corridors and based on a yearly timetable. However, the evaluation of Regulation 913/2010 has shown that an approach limited to freight traffic and to corridors does not capture the complexity of the timetable process and introduces unnecessary duplications, without solving the problems.

This opens the question of identifying rules and procedures that may hinder this cross-border optimization so as to proceed, where and if useful, to their evolution.

In response to these problems, the rail sector has been working on an industry-driven initiative in the past several years[1].

The initiative aims to better respond to the needs of the rail customers: pre-planned capacity for all capacity applicants (freight, passengers and IMs), stable timetables and early booking of tickets for passengers and some freight shippers and flexible train runs for other freight shippers.

For this purpose, the programme enables infrastructure managers to take a more proactive role in planning the capacity offered to train operators. The infrastructure managers will segment capacity for different types of *booking modes* (early or late), as a basis for a more flexible allocation process. The programme is based on common processes and interlinked IT systems at European level facilitating seamless cross-border operations. The setting of commercial conditions incentives for infrastructure managers and users to respect their capacity-related commitments provides an enabling framework to improve the planning of capacity.

Nonetheless, such an initiative may not automatically solve the entirety of the shortcomings observed.

This PRIME plenary discussion aims to explore to what extent additional measures, are needed to address current problems related to cross-border capacity planning, in particular:

1. Why have the Rail Freight Corridors not achieved the goal of increasing modal share?
2. Should harmonized priority rules for capacity allocation be established and how do you decide what traffic to prioritise if there are conflicts between different types of traffic?
3. Introducing a strategic capacity management phase preceding the actual capacity allocation process[2] helps to ensure optimal scheduling to maximise the use of rail capacity. Is it relevant to let IMs be allowed to prioritise the allocation of capacity to an applicant who complies with the outcomes of the strategic capacity management rather than an applicant who orders outside of it?
4. How do you ensure all operators are treated fairly in a system that gives infrastructure managers a more proactive role in the management and planning of capacity?
5. How can we reconcile visibility and flexibility in the allocation of freight paths?

---

1 "Time Table Redesign (TTR) for Smart Capacity Management" programme. The initiative is co-developed by infrastructure managers and railway undertakings under the auspices of RailNetEurope (RNE) and Forum Train Europe (FTE).

RailNetEurope is an association involving the main infrastructure managers of EU Member States and other states closely connected to the Single European Railway area (e.g. Switzerland, Norway, Serbia). The scope of RNE comprises capacity and traffic management and supporting services such as IT. Forum Train Europe (FTE) is an association supporting the coordination of cross-border timetables on behalf of its members.

FTE's members are around 90 passenger and freight operators from 31 European countries, including both incumbents and new entrants

2 Sometimes referred to as 'advance planning phase' in TTR documentation and comprising capacity strategy, capacity models and capacity supply as key outputs.

6. How do you ensure that national capacity plans add up to a consistent plan for cross-border traffic? Who identifies possible inconsistencies? IMs together? Some entity at EU level? How best to make use of existing structures (ERA, RNE, Eurolink, RFCs, PRIME, ENRBB…)?
7. How can you safeguard capacity for cross-border services over several years? Do infrastructure managers manage to coordinate framework contracts for cross-border services? Is there a need for additional instruments? Are planning horizons sufficiently aligned?
8. Is the current legal framework for coordination of works across borders a sufficient and efficient tool? If not, how can a better coordination be achieved?

All infrastructure managers are invited to participate actively in the discussion.