

Strong funding for rail transport is a must-have in the next EU budget

Rail and infrastructure leaders have called for the continuation of a strong transport funding mechanism in the European Union's next long-term budget. Hosted by MEP Nina Carberry and the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Community of European Railway and Infrastructure Companies (CER) and its member Iarnród Éireann-Irish Rail gathered decision-makers and stakeholders at the European Parliament on 9 September for the policy debate *"From Funding to Delivery: Putting Rail Projects on Track"*. Participants underlined that an ambitious EU envelope for the rail system is not a luxury budget item but an essential investment in European competitiveness, resilience and sustainable growth.

The call comes at a time of rising demand for rail transport. Rail passenger traffic increased by 6% last year and continues to grow, while infrastructure capacity constraints are already limiting the network's ability to accommodate additional passengers and freight. EU citizens' support for rail investment is equally strong: according to CER's 2025 European high-speed rail perception survey, 79% of Europeans agree that Europe should invest more in high-speed rail.

Against this backdrop, the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) remains the European Union's most effective instrument for supporting both immediate infrastructure needs and long-term strategic investment, which can maintain and enhance regional development and drive economic activity.

The exchange focused on concrete projects, such as the Brenner Base Tunnel, the centrepiece of the Scandinavian-Mediterranean Corridor, which is helping remove a major bottleneck on a 9,400-kilometre rail corridor serving eight countries and 110 million citizens. Another flagship CEF investment, Rail Baltica, will fully integrate Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into the European standard-gauge rail network. Alongside cutting regional travel times by up to 50% and improving freight transport, the project will strengthen military mobility, reinforcing Europe's security and resilience. Ireland meanwhile is pursuing an ambitious national rail development programme with a strong focus on regional development and connectivity to strengthen cohesion and meet climate goals.

Together, these examples show that completing Europe's vision of a seamlessly connected continent through the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) requires both flagship cross-border projects and strong regional connections. Funding certainty for projects that cannot be achieved with national or private funding alone remains critical to turning political commitments into tangible results for citizens and businesses.

The discussion also touched upon ongoing negotiations on the National and Regional Partnership Plan (NRPP) Regulation, the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) and Horizon Europe. Debaters converged on the need to ensure that these funding facilities also recognise the role rail can play for the competitiveness of the EU economy. With Horizon and the ECF, this means ensuring adequate resources for rail research and for the scalability of new products; with NRPP, it means ensuring that Member States allocate resources to the portions of the TEN-T corridors that fall outside CEF's funding scope.

With the Council expected to advance discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) in October, the event sent a strong signal in support of rail and transport investment. If the European Commission put forward its strongest CEF proposal to date,

it is because the fund is simply indispensable for completing the TEN-T network that underpins Europe's Single Market, industrial competitiveness and security.

The high-level event featured contributions from Seán Canney, Minister of State at Ireland's Department of Transport; Anna Panagopoulou, Head of Cabinet to the European Commissioner for Sustainable Transport and Tourism; Andrey Novakov MEP; Mary Considine, Chief Executive Officer of Iarnród Éireann-Irish Rail; Eric von Breska, Director at the European Commission; Marko Kivila, Chief Executive Officer of Rail Baltica; Tomás Campbell, head of Bus and Heavy Rail Investment in Ireland's Department of Transport; and Sandro Francesconi, Director of Finance at Brenner Base Tunnel.

Seán Canney, Minister of State at Ireland's Department of Transport said: *"Ireland is supportive of the EU vision outlined in the High-Speed Rail Plan published last year, and we would like to ensure that this vision maintains a balance in its focus on cross-border high-speed rail projects on the one hand and financial support for the maintenance, development and enhancement of more isolated and regional networks and legacy infrastructure on the other. Such a balance can help us achieve connectivity and cohesion across our countries, enhance economic activity across our regions and deliver modal shift to support our climate goals."*

Nina Carberry MEP said: *"Europe's rail ambitions must be matched by the funding and streamlined procedures needed to deliver projects on time. For Ireland and the EU, sustained investment in rail is essential to improving connectivity, supporting regional development and strengthening our competitiveness."*

Mary Considine, Chief Executive Officer, Iarnród Éireann-Irish Rail said: *"In Ireland, through delivering the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, we are developing rail as the backbone of a sustainable transport system as a contributor to the address of national strategic challenges; to support a growing population, provide access to new housing at scale, respond to road congestion in cities, support regional balance, and enable people to live and move about sustainably."*

CER Executive Director Alberto Mazzola said: *"Growing demand, public support, and Europe's climate, competitiveness and security objectives all point in the same direction: rail infrastructure must remain a strategic priority in the next EU budget. Every euro generated by rail supports an additional 2.7 euros in other industries. A strong Connecting Europe Facility is essential to maintaining today's network and delivering cross-border links, while a robust National and Regional Partnership Programme complements it by supporting European, national and regional connections. For European citizens, the freedom to stay goes hand in hand with the freedom to move."*

Contact person

Laura Henry
CER Head of Communications
E: laura.henry@cer.be
M: +32 491 16 21 73

About CER

The Community of European Railway and Infrastructure Companies (CER) brings together railway undertakings, their national associations as well as infrastructure managers and vehicle leasing companies. The diverse and comprehensive membership made up of long-established bodies, new entrants and both private and public enterprises, covers the large majority of the rail infrastructure network, rail freight business and rail passenger operations in EU, EFTA and EU accession countries. CER represents the interests of its members towards EU policy makers and transport stakeholders, advocating rail as the backbone of a resilient, competitive, and sustainable transport system in Europe. For more information, visit www.cer.be or follow us on social media.