



Trains for Europe - Project Proposal

Faced with the challenge of climate change, how we travel in Europe in the future is going to have to be more carbon-neutral. Green air travel is a long way off, and while electric vehicles continue to improve and become more prevalent, cars are not viable for most very long distance trips, and congestion remains a problem. That means rail has to gain market share in the long-distance travel market. 2021 is the EU Year of Rail to promote train travel.

Travelling long distances during the day is time-consuming, and passengers are reluctant to spend more than 4-6 hours on a train. Therefore it becomes necessary to step up the provision of night trains for very long-distance trips (>500km).

In the past few years the argument that night trains are a green and time-saving way to travel long distances has been won in Europe, with the press greeting the launch of every planned new route. But in terms of market share, night trains remain a niche product.

Only a single railway company – ÖBB (Austrian Railways) – is seriously investing in night trains, and when its fleet is complete, it will only have 60 trains in service. By comparison, Deutsche Bahn alone has 300 daytime ICE units (with a target of over 400 in 2025), and SNCF has 400 daytime TGVs. However, these major players in European rail have shown no intention of entering the night train market, preferring instead to focus on shorter, national routes, and on higher speed daytime trains.

Plenty of smaller operators and startups (RegioJet, Snälltåget, European Sleeper) want to run Europe-wide overnight services. However, a lack of available rolling stock limits these plans – there are not enough couchette and sleeping cars available to lease or purchase second hand to allow these firms to scale their operations. Purchase of new rolling stock has not been an option for small operators, as it is costly to procure and takes time to approve.

In other words: the companies that *could* provide international night trains currently have no intention of doing so, while the companies that *would like* to provide these services do not have the means to do so.

The Trains for Europe project wants to solve this problem: to procure a fleet of new night train carriages for Europe-wide use that could be leased to operators, to allow night trains to be scaled up quickly.

The campaign is connected to no operator or railway company, be they state owned incumbents or private sector rivals. All railway companies would be welcome to lease the carriages.

How could a procurement of a new night train fleet be done?

Traditionally trains are owned by the company that runs them – but SNCF, DB etc. currently show no intention of ordering new night trains (their preference is for higher speed national services instead), so that route does not work here. An alternative model is needed.

The first option would be for the European Union to work with existing leasing companies to find means (perhaps through loans at preferential rates or grants) to procure night train carriages make them available to the operators. This is a model that works in freight rail already, with companies like Railpool or Beacon Rail leasing locomotives and waggon to operators.

The second option would be for the European Union to set up a rolling stock leasing company and finance it. That company would then procure rolling stock and lease it to operators. This approach is similar to a system the Swedish government uses for night trains from Stockholm to Northern Sweden, or the system used by Baden-Württemberg to for regional services.

The third option is the one that has been used by the government of Nordrhein-Westfalen in Germany to procure trains for the *Rhein-Ruhr-Express (RRX)* network, where the manufacturer of the trains – Siemens in this case – owns and maintains the trains, and leases them to operators.

The exact costs of each of these options, and the political and legal pros and cons of each, will be researched in Phase II of the project (see below).

What political backing is there for the idea?

That this rolling stock problem needs to be solved already has some political backing. Transport Ministers at the Rail Summit in Berlin 17.5.2021 [stated they](#) “request the European Commission to propose the launch of an EU financial assistance programme for investment in rolling stock that can operate across borders in support of the objectives of the European Green Deal” – although it was not stated how this would be done.

The European Commission and some MEPs in the Transport Committee in the European Parliament have raised the rolling stock problem in the past, but a plan for the practical implementation of the idea has not been forthcoming.

What routes are missing night trains?

Night trains work best on routes with a daytime travel time of over 4 hours, and with a night travel time of 14 hours or less. Routes radiating from Austria (and in the coming years, from Switzerland) are well covered by ÖBB already, but the rest of Europe remains poorly covered.

An initial basic assessment, based on where night trains ran in the past and where rail infrastructure is adequate to support night train services, would indicate that routes like the following would be possible:

Amsterdam-Brussels-Hendaye or Bilbao	Frankfurt-Milan
Amsterdam-Brussels-Marseille or Barcelona	Kosice-Budapest-Zagreb

Barcelona-Milan	Marseille-Rome
Belgrade-Sofia	Milan-Zagreb
Belgrade-Thessaloniki	Oslo-Göteborg-Hamburg-Berlin
Bordeaux-Toulouse-Milan	Paris-Barcelona
Copenhagen-Basel-Zürich	Paris-Bilbao
Copenhagen-Berlin-Prague or Warsaw	Paris-Milan
Copenhagen-Brussels-Paris	Paris-Rome
Frankfurt-Dresden-Krakow or Warsaw	Prague-Ljubljana-Zagreb
Frankfurt-Marseille or Barcelona	Vienna-Budapest-Belgrade

Covering these 22 routes would need a fleet of at least 50 night trains – each route needs 2 trains, with 10% spare carriages in reserve to allow for maintenance.

Phase II of the campaign (see below) will refine this research and will determine with more precision what night train routes have the highest passenger potential, and the greatest potential for emissions reductions.

What night trains would be needed?

The minimum requirements for night train carriages are known. Stock would be locomotive hauled, standard gauge (1435mm), and capable of 200km/h. Accommodation would be in four classes: seats, couchettes, sleeping cars and mini-compartments.

Options would include increasing maximum speed to 230km/h or even 250km/h, and multi-gauge capacity (1520mm and 1668mm – to allow operation in countries with Russian gauge and in the Iberian peninsula).

Adequate numbers of standard gauge 200km/h cross border capable locomotives are available to lease already, so would not need to be addressed in this project.

Why only night trains?

There are problems with daytime cross border services and regional services, InterCity services, and even high-speed services. However, the rolling stock requirements to solve these vary enormously from border to border, and some second-hand daytime stock is available to lease already. Therefore the scope of this project is limited to conventional night trains. However addressing these other types of trains could become follow-up projects.

How would such a campaign be run?

The most important prerequisite for the campaign is to find a “Träger” – an organisation that would be able to provide the administrative and book-keeping support for the campaign throughout its duration. As this campaign is limited in scope and has an 18 month time frame a partnership like this would be the ideal model, rather than going through the complexity of forming a not-for-profit only for this purpose. This organisational structure would need to be in place as

soon as possible. Once a “Träger” and organisational structure has been established, an ad-hoc advisory group of 6-8 experts from all of the groups relevant to the campaign will also be formed.

The SMART Objective for the campaign is: by the end of 2022, the European Union will have taken the legal or budgetary decision to procure a fleet of new night trains.

This objective would then be refined in two ways in Phase II of the campaign.

The campaign would be split into four phases, and would run until the end of 2022 – by the time the objective has been met.

Phase I of the campaign is a soft launch. This will happen in June 2021, with the launch of the Trains for Europe website, accounts on social media channels, and newsletter. Individuals (experts, politicians, authors) and organisations (passenger groups, NGOs, campaigners) will also be invited to support the idea of the campaign at this stage, with the aim of achieving a wide base of support for the idea. There is no time to lose with this as 2021 is EU Year of Rail, and hence going public with the idea as soon as possible is desirable.

Phase II would be focused on research, and specifically to answer the two main outstanding questions about how to solve the night train problem.

The first aspect is the market for night trains – on what routes, and with what combination of price/comfort, are night trains viable? Some work has been done by different organisations and NGOs in some parts of Europe about this already, but a solid Europe-wide overview of the potential night train market is vital. Answering how many passengers could take a night train on any route is not too complicated, as statistics on daytime train passenger numbers and air passenger numbers are readily available. This research would also focus on the environmental impact of modal shift from road and air to rail, identifying not only routes with the best passenger potential but with the best emissions reduction potential.

A complete assessment of the market would allow the list of potential routes to be firmed up, and to assess how many carriages would be needed to serve these routes. That would in turn mean answering the question about the size of the total budget to procure the fleet.

The second aspect is to answer the question about how to procure a fleet of trains – legally and practically. As the European Union has never done something exactly like this, answering how to do it – which model to go for – needs a definitive answer.

A third and optional aspect at this stage would be to commission a passenger survey about attitudes to night time travel, that would feed into how night trains in the future would be designed and timetabled, and the demands later in the campaign. The precise rolling stock requirements would be also refined and confirmed in Phase II.

This Phase II research would require a series of calls and meetings with different players in this market – policy makers at regional, national and EU-level, European Investment Bank, experts in assets and financing, experts in rail leasing, train designers. Depending on the budget available some of this work could be sub-contracted to consultants or research NGOs.

At the end of Phase II the SMART objective for the campaign would be refined – to include reference to how many trains would need to be procured, and to state which procurement model is the best one.

Phase III would be in the first half of 2022, and would start with a detailed stakeholder mapping process. Some stakeholders and decision makers will already have been reached through Phase I outreach, but this – together with the refined objectives from Phase II – will need to be revised and retargeted here. Exactly who the right individuals to target in Phase III is contingent on the results of the research in Phase II, but it is a fair assumption that at least a large set-piece conference in Brussels or possibly in at least one national capital would need to be organised at this stage.

It might also be necessary to deploy public support for the (re-)construction of a night train network in Europe at this stage, and launch a petitioning activity to demonstrate the grassroots support for the idea. This would give policy-makers the political cover necessary to make legal and/or financial decisions about the pool of rolling stock idea – that night trains have public support, and hence deserve political and financial backing.

Phase IV would be the implementation phase – to see either a legislative proposal drafted, or for an agreement on a financing mechanism to be reached. Again the exact form of this would depend on Phases II and III, but the campaign would only be done at the point at which there was no way for the fleet of trains to not be able to be procured, where a kind of point-of-no-return had been reached.

What are the main risks in this campaign?

Like any political advocacy campaign, the largest risk is that political decision makers choose to not act, or that the administrative or practical hurdles of the proposal are too numerous to overcome. However with three viable examples from other railways to work with, and some political backing already assured, the chances of success are good. The political climate in the EU is also open to proposals like this right now, in the context of the Green New Deal.

There is also the danger that everything simply takes longer than planned, as EU political processes can be slow. Were this to be the case the level of campaign activity can be stepped down and spread more thinly over a longer period.

Who would run the campaign, and what would it cost?

The campaign is the idea of long time Berlin-based political blogger and campaign consultant Jon Worth (jonworth.eu and [@jonworth](https://twitter.com/jonworth) on Twitter (70k followers)) and he would switch from consultancy to run the campaign full time over the foreseen 18 month campaign period. No-one is better placed to run a campaign like this, as Jon understands the politics of the EU institutions, the technical aspects of the railway market, and has the media and communication experience to build and be the face of a campaign like this.

As soon as a “Träger” organisation is found, fundraising for the campaign can begin – to be based on individual donations and financing from foundations. Running the campaign for 18 months with a total budget of between €220000 and €300000 would be possible – depending on the exact scope of research in Phase II.