

Joint declaration for a new Regional Rail Strategy in the Western Balkans, endorsed by Transport Ministers and representatives of the Western Balkans parties, meeting in Brussels at the occasion of the second Ministerial Council of the Transport Community

Concerned by the fact that the lack of competitive rail transport services in the Western Balkans is a major impediment to achieving sustainable transport of passenger and goods, as well as to enhancing connectivity within and throughout the region;

Recognising the need to create opportunities for further developing railway services that can satisfy regional and international demands and provide for an appropriate level of passenger protection, and *acknowledging* that solutions to railway transport based on isolated domestic markets are neither capable of meeting these objectives nor desirable as a means thereto;

Recalling that within the framework of the EU's Connectivity Agenda, an indicative extension of the Trans-European Transport network (TEN-T) was agreed for the Western Balkans, together with a first set of Connectivity Reform measures and actions to be implemented at regional and national level;

Recognising the need to underpin investment in the region with a firm process of reform and modernisation of the rail sector in the medium and long term, including through the deployment of new technologies and innovative solutions;

Praising the South East European Transport Observatory (SEETO) for the work carried out in the framework of the Railway and Intermodal Working Group;

Recalling that the implementation of the Transport Community Treaty, ratified by all six partners, is the key step leading to progressive integration of the region into the EU transport market and network;

Stressing the importance that will be played by the permanent secretariat of the Transport Community in providing technical assistance to the regional partners;

Calling for the setting up of a new working group to look at rail transport issues, with extended competences, to be steered by the permanent secretariat of the Transport Community;

Noting that, in its Communication of 6 February 2018¹ on a credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, the European Commission stressed the need for a new rail strategy to bring the Western Balkans into the main EU network and market;

Recalling that, in May 2018 at the EU-Western Balkans Summit, the leaders of the EU and of its Member States jointly endorsed the objective to develop a new rail strategy for the Western Balkans as part of the Sofia Declaration;

¹ COM(2018) 65 final

Noting the establishment in 2018 of the 'Alpine-Western Balkan' rail freight corridor involving four EU Member States and one of the six South East European Parties;

Noting the Joint Declaration on Borders and Common Crossing Points, endorsed by Transport Ministers and representatives of the Western Balkans on 25 April 2018 in Ljubljana;

Inviting the EU Member States to support this initiative and take all necessary actions, at their level, to improve connectivity by rail between Western Balkans countries and EU countries;

Hereby express our commitment to develop and implement an enhanced rail strategy across the South East European Parties, in the framework of the Transport Community, with the view to boosting international rail transport services, for both freight and passengers, within and across the Western Balkans, with priority focus on extended rail TEN-T Network, and call for the following:

1. Actions for rail market opening at regional level

- *Commit to carrying out, as soon as practicable, in a coordinated manner, legislative changes of national law and its implementation to allow non-discriminatory access to rail infrastructure and rail market opening at regional level for railway undertakings of the South East European Parties, giving priority to freight services;*
- *Develop legislative and policy measures liable to attract passengers' shift to, and increased use of, rail services;*
- *Agree to organise regular consultations at regional level on progress in achieving the institutional reform and the restructuring of the rail sector, in accordance with the EU rail acquis, and its respective amendments, as listed in Annex 1.2 of the Transport Community Treaty;*
- *Commit to speeding up taking over and implementing EU technical specifications and requirements for rail;*
- *Co-operate on application of efficient charging schemes for use of TEN-T railway networks, in line with EU legislation, and coordinate charges for international services;*
- *Co-operate on the review and cleaning up of national rail technical and safety rules, in line with the EU rail acquis and the prerogatives of the European Union Agency for Railways;*
- *Ensure the publication of railway network statements extended to also cover rail terminals, including in sea ports and river ports;*
- *Take necessary measures to achieve mutual recognition of train driver licences for railway undertakings of the South East European Parties, as well as cross-acceptance of operating licences, safety certificates and vehicle authorisations;*

2. Actions for setting up a framework for implementation of EU rail freight corridors

- *Commit to intensify consultation between the South East European Parties and EU neighbouring countries on the further extension of EU Rail Freight Corridors in the Western Balkans;*
- *Implement all necessary measures at regional level to improve the operating conditions for international rail freight in the region, in particular with regard to:*
 - *Co-ordination of maintenance plans for railway infrastructure;*
 - *Allocation of infrastructure capacity of good quality for international train paths;*
 - *Coordination of traffic management and planned temporary capacity restrictions;*
 - *Integration of multimodality and combined transport issues;*
 - *Publication of information on the conditions of use and monitoring the quality of rail freight services;*
 - *Deployment of IT systems in line with the ones used by the EU rail freight corridors;*

3. Actions for implementation of intelligent transport systems for rail

- *Deploy and implement the European Railway Traffic Management System (ERTMS), in a coordinated manner at regional level;*
- *Establish and make use of relevant electronic registers to support smooth railway operations, such as register of infrastructure and a register of vehicles;*
- *Facilitate the timely exchange of information in electronic form between railway actors and logistics operators;*
- *Engage in railway research and innovation activities, in particular regarding the deployment of digital, autonomous, connected and sustainable rail systems and operations;*

4. Actions for development and maintenance of the rail TEN-T network infrastructure

- *Review of the current asset management system, based on an asset register to assess the financing needed for repair and replacement and with details on the expenditure for the infrastructure;*
- *Adopt rail maintenance plan, ensuring no section remains in poor/very poor condition by 2022, looking at condition-based and predictive maintenance;*
- *Develop an implementation plan at regional level, under the auspices of the Transport Community Treaty, describing the actions to progressively adapt the infrastructure to comply with the TEN-T requirements;*
- *Ensure effective coordination between the regional Infrastructure Managers, consultation with interested parties before preparation of maintenance plans and the schedule for works, and publication in the network statement;*

- *Set up a coordination mechanism at regional level for managing investment planning for critical infrastructure development and modernisation of railway infrastructure;*
- *Identify priority projects of regional interests for the upgrading / reconstruction / construction of specific railway sections;*
- *Carry out a scoping analysis for developing a network resilience plan to climate change, in a coordinated manner at regional level;*

5. Actions for improving rail border-crossing operations

- *In line with the endorsed Joint Declaration on Borders and Common Crossing Points, take all necessary measures to identify railway infrastructure bottlenecks at key borders crossing points;*
- *Ensure effective coordination of all cross-border rail transport operations between railway undertakings, infrastructure managers and other relevant bodies, including through IT solutions;*
- *Prioritise and address specific rail interoperability issues relevant to cross-border operations.*