

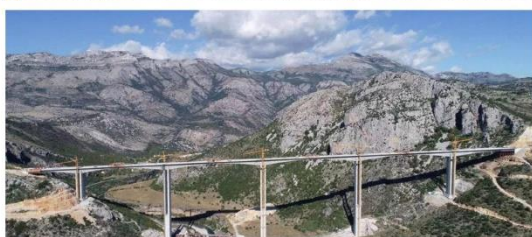
The European Year of Rail 2021 started in the Western Balkans on 3 February in Albania. The first large-scale overhaul of the railway network began with the signing of a contract for rehabilitation works between the state railways and the Italian company INC Spa. This project is supported by the European Union with an investment grant of €35.5 million under 'Connectivity Agenda for the Western Balkans' and by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) with a €36.9 million loan. The railway section in Albania is an extension of the Mediterranean Corridor, a part of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T). Under the contract more than 34 km of the existing railway track between Tirana and the port of Durrës will be rehabilitated. Additionally, a new 7.4 km-long rail track connecting Tirana city to the Tirana International Airport will be constructed. This project is also identified as one of the flagship projects of Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, published by the European Commission in October last year. The Transport Community strongly supports and will continue promoting success stories such as this one.



Importance of rail reforms in the region was highlighted in the interview of the Permanent Secretariat Director Zakonjsek for the Media Information Agency (MIA) in North Macedonia. <https://www.transport-community.org/2021/02/14/interview-matej-zakonjsek-director>. Upon invitation of the Head of EU Delegation Ambassador David Geer, we presented the Transport Community priorities for the 2021 at the meeting of Heads of Missions of EU member states accredited to North Macedonia.



The last stop of the Action Plan Roadshow (workshop) took place on 19 February in Podgorica. Following the opening of the workshop, a visit to Bar-Boljare highway construction site was organised together with the Minister of Capital Investments Mr Mladen Bojanic. The visit provided a great opportunity to highlight to Montenegrin public the importance of flagship infrastructure projects such as rail connections from



Podgorica to Belgrade and to Tirana, the road from Podgorica to Sarajevo and the so-called Blue Highway along the Adriatic Coast, all of which are part of European Commission's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans.

On 25 February, Transport Community organised the 2nd Social Forum focused on social issues in rail transport. The online event was opened by Transport Commissioner Ms Adina Ioana Vălean, who noted the importance of the Social Agenda in transport sector. Participants committed to promote social dialogue by referencing the EU acquis in social matters, workers' fundamental rights and involvement of the European Economic and Social Committee and national and European social partners in rail transport.

The work on extending Green Lanes to the borders between Western Balkans and the EU member states depends on establishing good bilateral relations with EU neighbours. During the meeting on 11 February, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia Mr Nikola Selakovic confirmed Serbia's dedication to economic prosperity based on regional cooperation and the extension of Green Lanes to Serbia's borders with Hungary, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The Permanent Secretariat continues to strengthen the inter-institutional cooperation and discussed organisation of joint events for promoting regional cooperation with the Central European Initiative (CEI).

On 12 February, an important meeting of Regional Steering Committee of Transport Community was held online. Both the EU and Western Balkans versions of the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy were presented to showcase how the EU and Western Balkan transport system can achieve its green and digital transformation and become more resilient to future crises. Initial discussions on establishment of Technical Committee on Waterborne Transport, as well as talks on organisation of the Ministerial Council and the Social Forum took place.



The month of February also brought continuation of focus on road safety. The work of the Permanent Secretariat was presented to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Executive Secretary Ms Olga Algayerova and the United Nations Special Representative for Road Safety Mr Jean Todt, highlighting the efforts to remove the dangerous road sections in the region. UNECE Executive Secretary voiced support for the Permanent Secretariat's border monitoring during the COVID-19 pandemic, which proved crucial in keeping the supply chains working. During a meeting with the European Federation of

Road Traffic Victims President Mr Jeannot Mersch, we presented our Road Safety Action Plan and plans to mark the UN Road Safety Week.

Permanent Secretariat remains dedicated to establishing a road safety transport observatory and standardising road safety methodology in the region, which is crucial to obtain reliable data. By doing so, we will be able to design policies which will contribute to Vision Zero – no more dead or injured on the roads in Western Balkans. (In 2020 N. Macedonia recorded the lowest ever number of road victims. While it may be attributed to limited mobility due to the pandemic, it was nevertheless a very positive development worth highlighting!)