

Benelux/ITEM Workshop

How to make train travel across borders more consumer-friendly

BRUSSELS, 24.06.2025

Benelux/ITEM workshop: towards more seamless cross-border rail transport

Crossing the border by train? It sounds logical, but in practice it's often still difficult. That's why on 24 June 2025, transport experts, policymakers, and representatives from Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg gathered in Brussels – taking part in the workshop jointly organised by the Benelux Union and ITEM/Maastricht University. The central aim of the workshop was making international train travel simpler, faster, and more customer-friendly. How can we make a train journey from, say, Maastricht to Liège or from Antwerp to Luxembourg just as smooth as a domestic trip?



The status quo: bottlenecks to cross-border rail

The first part of the workshop was dedicated to the broader picture of cross-border passenger rail transport. While on European level, 25 years ago work has been put in order to come to a European Single Railway Area ('SERA'), ITEM-researchers Martin Unfried and Pim Mertens state that this is still far from complete. Rail markets and regulations are still very fragmentated, whether it is about ticketing, safety systems, languages, legal aspects or operational requirements. In his presentation, mr. David Schoenmaekers (Belgian Federal Service for Mobility and Transport) made that clear with the example of the 'Tri-Country Train' between Aachen, Maastricht and Liège. Before having it operational, many technical, operational, regulatory, infrastructural, ticketing and governance challenges had to be overcome. The fragmented responsibility on national, regional and European level might have formed the biggest challenge. Still, since it is operational, the train is facing challenges.

Furthermore, mr. Arthur Kamminga of ALLRAIL (the Alliance of Rail New Entrants) states that new rail entrants are still facing difficulties when entering the national and international rail markets. As of December 2023, the European rail market has been opened up for newcomers and competition. First <u>studies</u> show positive results due to open competition, e.g. in terms of pricing. Kamminga expects that the Benelux intercity rail market could potentially be doubled if open access is fully operational. He asked the Dutch and the Belgian governments to enable market access for new companies, more specifically on the Brussels-Amsterdam trainline.



Transnational developments do not necessarily take into account cross-border needs

The European developments tend to focus more on the transnational infrastructural projects than the cross-border regional needs. In their presentation, Unfried and Mertens highlight that the transnational perspective – as laid down in the EU TEN-T corridors and investments - is not always the same as the cross-border perspective. There are even some indications that transnational high-speed infrastructural investments may hinder the development of cross-border (non-high-speed) needs. The cross-border perspective was brought in by the presentation by Marlies Peeters from the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) of the European Commission. She presented that there are 176 missing or promising railway links in the EU, of which only 33 are within the transnational TEN-T network. Currently a research is issued by DG REGIO to update the status of the 48 most promising missing links. Next to labour market and health care, transport is seen by citizens as one of the most important cross-border obstacles. This is also reflected in the so-called "b-solutions cases", that allowed even a dedicated publication to cross-border public services. The studies of DG REGIO thus clearly shows the work needed to be done on cross-border public transport services.





International rail ambitions within the Benelux countries

Also the representatives and experts from the national ministries working on cross-border and international passenger rail were presented during the workshop. On behalf of the Belgian Federal Service for Mobility and Transport, Mr. David Schoenmaekers presented the Belgian national railway strategy: "Rail Vision 2040". Among others topics, interoperability, European cooperation and coordination, and fostering Brussels as an international hub for rail are put prominently on the agenda.

Mr. Gil Georges presented on behalf of the Luxembourg Ministry of Mobility and Public Works the 'Plan National de Mobilité'. Unique is that 41% of the trains in Luxembourg are crossborder, to Belgium, Germany or France. Also unique to Luxembourg is the fact that public transport is entirely free within its boundaries. This, coupled with high investments on railway infrastructure, resulted in a linear annual increase of passengers. Also on cross-border level, ambitions are presented to raise the frequency, number of trains and level of direct connections to neighboring regions and cities.

Finally, the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Works was represented by Anouk de Reeder, touching upon the Vision for International Rail to be published in Q3 of 2025 and focusing on the implications thereof for the passenger experiences.



Ticketing across borders

Ms. de Reeder also highlighted the implications and imperfections of the rail passenger rights regulation and the Dutch efforts towards the European Single Digital Booking and Ticketing Regulation, that should improve the passenger experience when booking and buying international, multi-operator journeys.

The example of the 'Tri-Country Train' is also a best practice when it comes to ticketing. Ms. Hanna Kroll from Aachener Verkehrsverbund presented the 'Easy Connect'-project. Easy Connect is one app, that allows planning and ticketing of cross-border public transport between Cologne, Aachen and Maastricht, and possibly soon also to Liège. The Easy Connect initiative combines the national systems and calculation methods into one app. The advantage is that the system could avoid investments in physical check in devices that are for instance part of the Dutch ticketing system. It is a clear best-practice example of cross-border ticketing, that now might be extended to other regions, with the help of the Benelux Union.



Importance of cross-border cooperation

The example of EasyConnect shows the importance of cross-border cooperation. Bottom-up initiatives from the local level, such as Easy Connect, can only arise if partners across the border have long standing good working relations. Ms. Kroll also presented the Interreg Meuse-Rhine project TRANSIT, that explicitly is targeted at making cross-border cooperation in the public transport sector stronger in the long-term. Also Unfried and Mertens emphasise that the level of cross-border cooperation is connected to the level and quality of cross-border public transport services in cross-border regions. That is also why the Benelux Union and its cross-border regions is already performing relatively well, and where the EU via for example Interreg but also the new BRIDGEforEU Regulation can play an important supporting role.



The Benelux: next steps

Also currently, the European priorities are more set on high-speed transnational rail. Therefore, the challenge is the ownership of <u>non</u>-high-speed cross-border connections, as the workshop made clear that on the *local* level excellent cross-border initiatives are employed but often lack the connection with the ambitions and support on the *national* level. Here, cross-border cooperation is key between all levels. In fact, according to the analysis of ITEM there is a need for connecting and coordinating the local cross-border initiatives and ambitions with those on the national level regarding international rail. In fact, many opportunities and improvements may already be made by better cooperation and coordination between Member States and service providers, even without infrastructural investments. Therefore, as prof. Anouk Bollen (director of ITEM) concludes, ITEM recommends to think of a 'Benelux Single Railway Area'. As Mr. Kamminga earlier mentioned: "Think about the Benelux rail market. What train services do we want?" The work currently performed within the Secretary-General of the Benelux Union on Mobility as a Service should not only be continued, but could be intensified – allowing for even more coordination across regional and national rail and public transport strategies.

Mr. Frans Weekers, Secretary-General of the Benelux Union, highlighted that the Benelux will continue its work on cross-border rail, by first of all continuing to bring together all the right stakeholders around the table and by offering them a neutral platform for exchange and negotiation. Mr. Weekers also announced the drafting of a compact 'Benelux vision' on cross-border rail which should guide the Benelux through the future steps in this domain.

We would like to thank all speakers and participants to the programme and we are looking back on a successful event!



SPEAKERS & PROGRAMME

The organisation thanks all speakers for their valuable contribution. The speakers and programme:

- 09.30 Doors open registration
- **10.00** Introduction by Prof. Dr. Anouk **BOLLEN**, director of ITEM and Jan **MOLEMA**, director at the Benelux Union

Introduction of ITEM by Martin UNFRIED (moderator) and Pim MERTENS

10.15 Session 1: Improving international and cross-border train travel – obstacles and initiatives

- Mr. Arthur KAMMINGA of ALLRAIL, The Alliance of Passenger Rail New Entrants
- Ms. Marlies **PEETERS** of the European Commission (DG REGIO): Obstacles to attractive crossborder rail services – recent studies and experiences
- Short presentation of the respective national railway strategies of the national ministries of transportation
 - For the Netherlands: Ms. Anouk **DE REEDER** for the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Waterways
 - For Belgium: Mr. David **SCHOENMAEKERS** for the Belgian Federal Service for Mobility and Transport

11.30 Session 2: Ticketing: Best practice for cross-border train travel and how to move forward?

- Continuation of the presentation of national railway strategies:
 - Mr. Gil **GEORGES** for the Luxembourg Ministry of Mobility and Public Works, with a focus on the effects of free public transport in Luxemburg
- Best practice of cross-border public transport coordination:
 - Ms. Hanna KROLL from Aachener Verkehrsverbund (AVV):
 - Better ticketing: the EasyConnect-project: an innovative digital ticketing system across the border (collaboration NL-BE-NRW)
 - Better long-term governance in cross-border public transportation: insights into the Interreg Meuse-Rhine project 'TRANSIT'
- **12.15** Plenary discussion on the current initiatives, challenges and the way forward as well as possible roles for the Benelux Union and ITEM
- **12.45** Closing remarks by Prof. Dr. Anouk **BOLLEN**, director of ITEM and Frans **WEEKERS**, Secretary-General Benelux.
- 13.00 Networking lunch
- 14.00 End of program