

## Railway statism vs. open European market

EDITOR'S NOTE

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The attempts of building a single European railway area based on the competition between service providers (led by railway operators), but also between manufacturers, are hindered by barriers that are difficult to remove. Today, an intra-European confrontation marks the new step necessary to the liberalisation of the passenger transport market – market based on regulated competition. The Fourth Railway Package, the next step taken by the European Commission to reposition on new values the railway transport sector and to offer new stimulus to competition and innovation inside and between sectors hits against a conservatory opposition among pan-European classical structures. Even today, when this text is inked, a huge pressure is exerted over a European Parliament in the final stages of its mandate in order to block the passenger-oriented evolution of national railway markets.

These attempts are not surprising if placed in the context of other events important for opening the railway

transport sector. After a promising start, 2013 seemed the great year of state capital retreat from several smaller and medium markets, by selling stakes in the national freight transport operators. As time passed and the 2013 autumn came and even in early 2014, procedures have failed one at a time. The arguments for supporting the cancellation of sales are various, the public space being invaded by arguments pro and against the sale of stakes. There were not few those who transformed from critics of the intention of selling a state "pearl" into bitter critics of failure and capitulation, thus proving that political interest is still very much involved in controlling railway companies. The sure thing is that, on the short term, state protectionism has once again triumphed, foreshadowing the strong pressures to be exerted in order to block tenders on contracting public service obligations as well.

And probably, this bitterness against transparency and assuming responsibility (for example, the obligation of presenting

the transport programme and comfort requirements before tendering services) is one of the reasons for which the Fourth Railway Package is blocked.

Last but not least, this state protectionism/destruction is also reflected in the industrial sector. The opposition that the research programme SHIFT2RAIL has known is the answer the conservators give to any attempt of identifying alternative solutions. And this happens in the context of a boost in international competition in the market of railway products and solutions. As Chinese technologies advance and the European policy focuses on smallest price acquisitions, notwithstanding quality, the threat to European competitors is strong. And so, in full endless crisis, we ask ourselves once again: should we boast about a weak state portfolio or about a competitive society which naturally finds its own way?

