Europe must lead the next generation of high-speed and digital rail

Europe has built up considerable experience in high-speed rail, facilitated by leading railway companies, infrastructure managers and rail manufacturers. The achievements made in Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Finland, Sweden and the future development of services in Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, the Czech Republic and further EU Member States show how high-speed is able to connect regions, bridge and enlarge job markets, and enhance the competitiveness of regional and national economies.

Yet other countries in the world are developing their networks at a higher pace, mainly because of stronger public support, more impactful investments and more decisive authorisation. Europe therefore needs to step up its game, delivering projects faster, scaling innovation across the network and strengthening the competitiveness of its rail supply industry.

The European Commission published its High-Speed Rail Plan in November 2025. That vision must become reality, with a network linking capitals and major metropolitan regions, no gaps at border crossings and multimodal connections. And it should be planned as a truly European network rather than as a series of separate national projects.

The forthcoming financing strategy known as the High-Speed Rail Deal must help turn a pipeline of projects into construction and operation. Sufficient and predictable public funding will be essential, particularly for cross-border sections and projects with high European added value, with both the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) and the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPP) mobilised in a complementary and coordinated manner to this end, while also driving the build-up of the industrial capacity needed to deliver the pipeline of projects at scale. Private and institutional capital must be enabled to add to this funding whenever the conditions are suitable. At the same time, financing costs and track access charges must not make high-speed services commercially unviable.

The High-Speed Rail Deal must not only support the development of new infrastructure: trains, signalling, communications and traffic management must be addressed too, with a holistic approach ensuring the security of such critical infrastructure and projects. In particular, the deployment of ERTMS, including FRMCS, as well as digital capacity-management tools needs to be faster and better coordinated. Stable technical specifications and workable migration plans are necessary to control costs, protect existing investments and avoid further fragmentation.

Europe also needs to improve and accelerate the link between research and practical use on the railway. CER and UNIFE therefore support a strong, standalone European rail partnership under the next EU research programme, covering research, demonstration and pre-deployment. Its priorities should respond directly to the implementation needs of high-speed rail and the wider digital transformation of the railway system. This must include dedicated support for the research and industrialisation of state-of-the-art conventional high-speed rail rolling stock, so as to optimise the cost per seat and make high-speed services more affordable, competitive and scalable across the network.

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The European Commission and Member States should agree on which projects come first, how they will be financed, who is responsible for delivery and when the main steps must be completed, while ensuring the long-term continuity and stability needed to sustain the roll-out and provide certainty over its underlying funding and financing. Nonetheless, railway undertakings, infrastructure managers, the rail supply industry and financial institutions should be closely involved in this work.

CER and UNIFE stand ready to work with all EU institutions to turn the High-Speed Rail Plan into a single European network — not a patchwork of national projects, but a common infrastructure worthy of a continent that once again wants to lead.

About CER

The Community of European Railway and Infrastructure Companies (CER) brings together railway undertakings, their national associations as well as infrastructure managers and vehicle leasing companies. The diverse and comprehensive membership made up of long-established bodies, new entrants and both private and public enterprises, covers the large majority of the rail infrastructure network, rail freight business and rail passenger operations in EU, EFTA and EU accession countries. CER represents the interests of its members towards EU policy makers and transport stakeholders, advocating rail as the backbone of a resilient, competitive, and sustainable transport system in Europe. For more information, visit www.cer.be or follow us on LinkedIn.

About UNIFE

Based in Brussels since 1992, UNIFE is the Association representing the European Rail Supply Industry at EU and international level. UNIFE gathers more than 120 direct company Members – from numerous SMEs to major industrial champions from all over Europe – active in the design and manufacture of rolling stock (i.e. trains, metros, trams, freight wagons) as well as rail signalling and infrastructure equipment. UNIFE also brings together 13 national rail industry associations. For more information, visit www.unife.org or follow us on LinkedIn.

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