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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

on the implementation, results and overall assessment of the European Year of Rail 2021

1. Introduction

2021 was designated as the European Year of Rail (EYR) by Decision (EU) 2020/2228 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 December 2020 ('the EYR Decision')[1]. The general objective of the EYR was to encourage and support the efforts of the EU, Member States, regional and local authorities, and other organisations to increase the share of passengers and freight moving by rail. This general objective was broken down into a number of specific objectives[2].

The present report provides an overview of the implementation, results, and overall assessment of the initiatives taken under the EYR 2021, in line with Article 7 of the EYR Decision. The report assesses the success of the communication and awareness raising activities in reaching the targeted audience. To evaluate those initiatives, the Commission identified the following campaign-level criteria, which were translated into measurable key performance indicators (KPIs) with the help of an external contractor, as follows:

- Reach: reaching the relevant target audience through relevant channels, measured by the number of people that have seen EYR content (per communication channels and total numbers);
- Engagement: engagement with and multiplication of the campaign's content and messages, measured by the number of interactions people had with EYR content (digital footprint from the EYR website, newsletter, social-media content and events);
- Awareness: measured by mentions on target media, social-media indicators, and desk research (as a result of the EYR events).

2. Implementation of the EYR 2021

2.1. Governance

As was the case for the European Year of Cultural Heritage in 2018, a decentralised approach was adopted to implement the EYR 2021, in line with the EYR Decision.

At national level, the coordination of activities linked with the EYR was ensured by national contact persons, representing all Member States. A few EYR-related initiatives also took place in non-EU countries, such as Norway, Switzerland and Turkey.

At EU level, the implementation of the EYR was a joint effort of the European Commission (including several directorates-general and representations in the Member States), Member States, institutional partners and stakeholders.

[1] Decision (EU) 2020/2228 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 December 2020 on a European Year of Rail (2021), OJ L 437 of 28.12.2020.
[2] As detailed in Article 2 of Decision (EU) 2020/2228.

The Commission coordinated the EYR at EU level, and convened eight meetings of the national contact persons, at which representatives of the European Parliament participated as observers. The Commission also convened four meetings of a core stakeholders' group, composed of representatives of organisations or bodies active in rail transport and reflecting the diversity of the sector. More generally, the Commission engaged in countless bilateral and multilateral meetings with the many authorities and stakeholders committed to EYR activities, such as rail operators (both incumbents and new entrants), infrastructure managers, logistics organisations, the rail supply industry, associations representing passengers, including those with disabilities and reduced mobility, trade unions, stakeholders active in the field of education, culture and tourism, or international organisations.

2.2. Resources

Due to the late adoption of the EYR Decision, it was not possible to secure a dedicated budget for the EYR in 2021 and thus to fund any call for proposals that could have supported selected stakeholder initiatives. In spite of this, the Commission mobilised resources as much as possible from existing programmes, under the 2020 and 2021 budgetary procedures, and according to the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework. Funding was allocated from the DG MOVE budget, in particular to: the EYR communications campaign; the Connecting Europe Express; events such as the ceremony for the Women in Rail Award; and feasibility studies. Several other directorates-general, Commission's representations in the Member States[3], Shift2Rail Joint Undertaking and the EU Agency for Railways also contributed to the common effort. The Commission does not have detailed information on the resources devoted to the EYR by Member States or stakeholders.

3. Evaluation of key EYR activities

3.1. EYR communications campaign at EU level

A communication campaign was organised at EU level aiming to encourage the use of rail. The main target audiences for this campaign as the potential customers for rail-transport services included: young EU citizens (aged 16-25), holidaymakers, commuters, business travellers, and businesses. The communications campaign relied on multipliers such as institutional and sectoral stakeholders at European and national level as well as the media.

The communications material was made available to all EU Member States and partnering stakeholders, with key materials in all EU official languages (except Irish). It included: a visual identity specifically designed for the EYR; a slogan ('Hop On!'); the hashtag #EUYearofRail; key messages; infographics on rail; social-media visuals; Instagram filters; videos; and GIFs. All of these could be used free of charge as part of EYR-related activities. A dedicated website[4] was created and managed by the Commission throughout the EYR,

[3] In particular, the Commission's representations organised or facilitated 49 EYR-related events in 14 Member States.

[4] https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20220704145452/https://europa.eu/year-of-rail/index_en

giving information about the various initiatives, and illustrating the campaign messages with 'European Year of Rail Stories' – testimonials, video clips and articles revolving around careers in rail and travel inspiration. A newsletter was set up to keep EYR partners and multipliers informed about the highlights of the campaign and reached 1 341 subscribers.

As the flagship event, the Commission organised a special EU train that criss-crossed the continent for 5 weeks (the 'Connecting Europe Express', see Section 3.3). An influencer campaign saw 11 influencers travel the continent by train – including 9 of them on the Connecting Europe Express. These influencers informed their audience about rail-travel opportunities in Europe and encouraged them to take the train more often. Several journalists were invited to join the Connecting Europe Express journey.

Media partnerships were set up with Reuters and Politico. A sponsored Reuters article[5] disseminated the key messages of the EYR, while banners on the Politico website directed readers to the Commission's action plan to boost long-distance and cross-border passenger rail[6], which was presented at the end of the EYR. An overview of the EYR communications' campaign is presented in the Annex to this report.

According to the evaluation by the contractor (mc Group), the social-media campaign reached some 64 million people, most of whom were young people (those aged 16-25 accounted for approximately 64% of people reached). In 2021, the hashtag #EUYearofRail appeared 26 064 times on social-media platforms (Twitter, Instagram and Facebook). The EYR campaign was integrated in the Commission's corporate communication activities. For example, it featured in Europe Day 2021, during which the EYR was represented in a virtual exhibition, with an interactive info-wall and a quiz targeting young people. The central Commission social-media accounts organised live streams with the EYR influencers on Instagram. An EYR quiz and photo competition were distributed on DG EAC's Instagram channel 'European Youth', giving out Interrail vouchers. Draft social-media posts were also distributed to all relevant directorates-general. A 26-track EYR playlist in 24 EU official languages was created on the EU Spotify account. An EYR banner was also displayed on the Commission's Charlemagne building in January and February 2021.

The EYR communications campaign, which lasted 13 months from January 2021 to January 2022, was assessed against the above-mentioned KPIs, according to the analysis carried out by the contractor. The results of the assessment are set out in the bullet points below.

- Reach: the total reach of the social-media campaign was 64 million unique users who saw campaign content across all campaign social-media channels: Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.
- Engagement: the total number of people who actively engaged with the campaign's social-media channels via posts was 230 000, either through liking, sharing, commenting or clicking through on the posts. Engagement varied from month to month, with September 2021 achieving the highest amount of engagement, when it

[5] https://www.reuters.com/article/sponsored/connecting-europe-by-train
[6] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0810&from=EN

engaged 86 000 people (linked to a specific campaign on the Connecting Europe Express).

– Awareness: the total number of 'impressions', or overall times that campaign content was viewed by social-media users (whether these views were paid for or unpaid) was 87 million[7]. The number of social-media impressions reached a peak in September, October and November 2021, thanks to the influencer campaign for the Connecting Europe Express, with a total of 17 million impressions per month in those three months. Another increase occurred in December 2021 and January 2022, when the Commission implemented a dedicated communications plan involving 'organic' social media (i.e. without a paid promotion) and paid media campaigns[8]. The total of all awareness and impressions, not only from social media but also from offline (print) and online/digital (websites, blogs, paid media partnerships with Reuters and Politico for example) paid media, as well as 'owned' media (i.e. owned by the Commission and appearing on the campaign website for example), was close to 89 million.

3.2. EYR launch and closing events

The EYR was officially launched at EU level during a full-day event organised on 29 March 2021 in Lisbon[9], in hybrid format, as part of the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union. The programme included several high-level speakers from EU institutions and Member States, as well as industry and civil society representatives. In particular, Transport Commissioner Adina Vălean announced the 'Connecting Europe Express' on that occasion (see Section 3.3). Social-media engagement was very high throughout the day[10], and the campaign hashtag #EUYearofRail was trending on Twitter in Belgium (it was temporarily the top-trending hashtag on Belgian Twitter).

The official closing of the EYR took place on the occasion of the Railway Summit on 21 February 2022, near Paris[11], also in hybrid format, as part of the French Presidency of the European Union. This was an opportunity to take stock of the EYR's achievements and lessons learnt, to launch the Europe's Rail Joint Undertaking and to pass on the torch to the European Year of Youth 2022.

[7] The difference between reach and impressions is unique user views vs total views – impressions will count every single time the content has been viewed – i.e. one account could have seen the same post three times which means three impressions, although its only one unique user.

[8] Social-media advertisements (with GIFs and videos with topics around the holidays, night trains, and a description of the influencers on the Connecting Europe Express) were created to encourage the target audience to choose rail as their mode of transport during the holiday season and to promote night trains throughout Europe.

[9] https://www.2021portugal.eu/en/events/kick-off-of-the-european-year-of-rail-2021/

[10] Organic social-media footprint for 29 March 2021: 520 000 reach, 18 000 engagement, 1 million impressions.

[11] https://railwaysummit2022.site.calypso-event.net/en/

3.3. The Connecting Europe Express

The Connecting Europe Express, a special train which criss-crossed 26 countries over 5 weeks in September-October 2021, was the flagship initiative of the EYR, and was initiated by the Commission. This was a truly collective European achievement, as it brought together national, regional and local authorities, society at large, and the rail sector (from new entrant operators and incumbent operators to infrastructure managers and the rail-equipment and rolling-stock industry). More than 40 partners from the sector joined forces to combine an Austrian sleeper coach with an Italian dining coach, a Swiss panoramic coach, a German seating coach, a French conference coach, and a Hungarian exhibition coach. To these coaches, all of which ran on standard European gauges, were added a train running on the Iberian gauge and another train running on the Baltic gauge. The Community of European Railways and Infrastructure Managers (CER) coordinated the technical and operational running of the trains with over 40 railway actors involved.

Throughout its journey and over 200 stops, the train hosted several conferences and a mobile exhibition. It also welcomed school classes, policymakers, stakeholders, and members of the public on board, a total of about 1 500 passengers over the 5 weeks. Many conferences and welcome events were organised along the way, and the stops coincided with key events, such as the informal meeting of transport and energy ministers in Brdo, Slovenia, as well as the first-ever Western Balkans Rail Summit in Belgrade. Passengers witnessed digital automatic coupling for freight wagons in Halle (Saale), Germany, as well as intermodal operations at the Bettembourg terminal in Luxembourg. The Connecting Europe Express also raised awareness of the remaining barriers to cross-border rail. For example, it was the first train to connect Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in recent history, as no such trip had taken place in more than 20 years.

The Commission also organised thematic conferences including: (i) in Lisbon, on city-to-city rail connections; (ii) in Bucharest, on funding and financing rail projects; (iii) in Brdo, on the revision of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T); (iv) in Berlin, on European long-distance rail services; and (v) in Bettembourg, on rail freight.

To provide maximum visibility across Europe, the entire train was covered with stickers displaying the EYR visual identity. Apart from the DG MOVE Twitter account, a dedicated website[12] and blog reported every day on the journey of the Connecting Europe Express and related events. Nine EYR influencers also travelled on board the train and documented their experience. With the support of the EU Agency for the Space Programme, interested members of the public could follow the train's journey via a live tracking tool. A communication toolbox including templates and visuals was available for partners to use. Regular exchanges and information sharing with communication experts from national, regional, and local organisations and businesses helped to reach wider target groups via the press and social media.

The Connecting Europe Express was a great opportunity to reach out directly to the European public and help regaining trust in shared transport in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[12] https://www.connectingeuropeexpress.eu/

It was also a rolling laboratory, revealing in real-time the many achievements of the Single European Rail Area and the TEN-T network, but also what could still be achieved in the rail sector. The lessons learnt[13] from the journey have been informing the Commission's work on rail-related initiatives in 2021 and beyond.

3.4. Other events and initiatives at EU, national, regional and local level

Despite the difficulties imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the EYR was welcomed with great enthusiasm by a great variety of stakeholders, and in particular the rail sector, which made all possible efforts at various levels to engage in EYR-related actions. The Commission received more than 350 proposals for events and activities from stakeholders and authorities throughout Europe, including from those not involved in rail. More than 70 of those proposals came from local and regional authorities, building on the cooperation the Commission established with the Committee of the Regions. While most events in the first half of the EYR took place in a digital format, the successful roll-out of the vaccination campaign in Europe encouraged more hybrid and physical events from summer 2021 on. Because a number of events in early 2021 had to be postponed due to the pandemic, and because of requests from many stakeholders, some flexibility was given so that stocktaking events could still be organised in the first half of 2022.

There were many interesting events and initiatives[14] organised in partnerships or individually in the context of the European Year of Rail. The bullet points below describe some of them.

- Exhibitions and festivals were held focusing on rail heritage and the future of rail. These included performances in train stations and along railway tracks. For example, the 2021 edition of the Europalia festival entitled 'Trains & Tracks'[15] consisted of more than 70 multidisciplinary projects spread across artistic institutions, stations and trains in Belgium and in neighbouring countries. Europalia also featured, policy-related talks with young people and representatives of EU institutions. The highlight of the Europalia festival was the exhibition 'Tracks to Modernity' at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels.
- Competitions and awards took place, such as: (i) the Women in Rail Award[16]; (ii) the RegioStars Award, where the EYR was chosen as the topic of the year[17]; (iii) the ERCI Innovation Awards[18]; (iv) the award for Best European Rail Tourism Campaign 2021[19]; and (v) the European Railway Award[20]. 'Hackathons' were also organised, for example those hosted by Shift2Rail[21] and UNIFE[22]. Competitions for students were

[13] https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20220623044203/https://europa.eu/year-of-rail/news/connecting-europe-express-journey-may-have-ended-our-work-has-only-just-begun-2021-10-07_en
[14] Most of the EYR events and initiatives can be retrieved at: https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20220704151145/https://europa.eu/year-of-rail/year-rail-events_en
[15] https://europalia.eu/en/trains-and-tracks/about-this-edition
[16] https://www.cer.be/events/cer-events/1st-women-rail-awards
[17] See the press release about the RegioStars Award 2021 edition: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_6475
[18] https://eurailclusters.com/2021/10/28/winners-of-the-erci-innovation-awards-2021/?cn-reloaded=1
[19] https://etc-corporate.org/best-european-rail-tourism-campaign-2021/
[20] https://www.europeanrailwayaward.eu/
[21] https://rail-research.europa.eu/news/hack-2-rail-join-shift2rails-online-hackathon/
[22] https://uic.org/events/uic-trainrail-hackathon-26-november-2021

held, such as the rail innovation challenge run by Fer de France[23] or the competition for young people launched by the Pomeranian Voivodeship in Poland. It is also worth noting that the 2021 edition of DiscoverEU[24], an action of the Erasmus+ programme promoting sustainable travel, doubled the number of free travel passes awarded to young people, amounting to 60 000 tickets. In addition, the 333 758 young people who applied for a DiscoverEU travel pass in 2021 had to answer a quiz question on the EYR in order to be selected. Finally, as part of a two-day DiscoverEU 'meet-up' in Brussels, an event organised in cooperation with Europalia gathered 100 young people and policy makers in March 2022.

- Many promotional campaigns were rolled out. For example, campaign posters were put up in 30 train stations across Germany, and EYR-branded containers were installed in central locations of seven major German cities to promote rail freight. In Croatia, five trains were branded with the EYR visual identity, while EYR stamps and greeting cards were issued by the post office in Poland. In Belgium, commemorative coins were produced and the Belgian rail sector launched an EYR social-media campaign. In Spain, the national lottery issued an EYR lottery ticket, which was mentioned during the prime-time television news programme of the Spanish national broadcaster (RTVE). There were also a number of special editions of TV shows on board trains.
- Initiatives were launched to identify the skills gaps and skills needed for tomorrow's rail workforce through various EU-funded projects. These projects included: Employability in the Railway Sector in the light of Digitalisation and Automation (EDA Rail); and the Skill Training Alliance for the Future European Rail system (STAFFER Blueprint project). Other initiatives sought to attract more women into the rail profession, as illustrated by the Women in Rail Agreement signed by the European social partners in November 2021[25]. The sector also arranged 'open doors' guided tours in rail-control centres and terminals, in particular for students to discover rail professions.
- Conferences and debates on the various dimensions of the rail sector, including with non-rail specialists and young people.
- Project demonstrations, showcasing innovative prototypes.
- Train trips to events, for example the 'climate train' to the COP26 conference[26].
- Unveiling new rail connections to connect regions, crossing borders.

All those events and initiatives promoted rail to various audiences, in particular the young people, in an innovative and appealing way. As opposed to the communications campaign as such, it proved challenging to assess the EYR-related events and initiatives organised by stakeholders against the above-mentioned KPIs. This was due to the low level of response by the organisers to the questionnaire circulated by the contractor once the events and initiatives had ended. The replies only covered 23% of the identified events, which is not representative enough to make it possible to draw meaningful conclusions on that sole basis.

[23] https://challenges.ferrocampus.fr/en/challenges/rail-innovation-2
[24] https://youth.europa.eu/discovereu_en
[25] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=85&newsId=10097&furtherNews=yes
[26] https://railtothecop.com/climate-train

4. Feasibility studies

In the EYR Decision, the European Parliament and the Council asked the following of the Commission.

The Commission shall consider initiating, during the European Year: (a) a study on the feasibility of creating a European label to promote goods and products transported by rail so as to encourage businesses to switch their transport to rail; and (b) a feasibility study with a view to introducing a rail connectivity index, with the aim of categorising the level of integration achieved through the use of services on the rail network and showing the potential of rail to compete with other modes of transport. By 31 March 2021, the Commission shall inform the European Parliament and the Council of its plans.

As the Commission informed the European Parliament and the Council on 30 March 2021, the idea of the European label for rail has been associated with the Commission's new initiative on the harmonised framework for greenhouse-gas (GHG) emission accounting (linked with actions 28, 33 and 34 of the sustainable and smart mobility strategy[27]). The initiative, referred to as 'CountEmissionsEU', aims to facilitate behavioural change towards transport solutions across all modes, both in freight and passenger segments, that emit fewer GHG-emissions. The initiative is based on a common reference methodology for calculating GHG emissions. The results of the open public consultation on 'CountEmissionsEU' are being processed[28], and the Commission's proposal is planned for 2023.

The Commission also procured a study on the feasibility of a rail connectivity index, to follow-up on the study on long-distance passenger rail. The study examined the desirable features of a rail connectivity index and produced a prototype of such an index that, for most NUTS3[29] regions in Europe, quantifies the connectivity of the region based on: (i) the frequency of services; (ii) the length of time taken to travel to other NUTS3 regions; (iii) the reachable population; and (iv) the number of transfers required. Figures are calculated based on 2022 rail timetables. The final report resulting from this study is currently being finalised and its results will be discussed in order to define the next steps.

5. Policy context at EU level

During the EYR, the Commission took several initiatives in the field of rail transport, in line with the sustainable and smart mobility strategy[30]. In particular, on 14 December 2021, the Commission presented the efficient and green mobility package. This package included an action plan to boost long-distance and cross-border passenger rail, a key document for EU rail policy in the years to come that directly results from the discussions carried out and experiences made during the EYR. The action plan identifies existing obstacles for rail

[27] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 'Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy – putting European transport on track for the future., 9.12.2020, COM(2020) 789 final.

[28] https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13217-Count-your-transport-emissions-CountEmissions-EU_en

[29] According to the NUTS classification (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics). Further details available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts.

[30] https://transport.ec.europa.eu/transport-themes/mobility-strategy_en

services and puts forward proposals to address these obstacles, for example through: better managing infrastructure capacity; coordinating timetables; more customer-friendly ticketing; and improving infrastructure. The package also included the proposal for the revision of the TEN-T Regulation, aiming to ensure good-quality rail infrastructure for freight and passengers[31].

The lessons learnt from the EYR also fed into the Commission's work on further initiatives to improve the framework conditions for European rail services, which will be unveiled in 2023. These include an initiative to improve rail capacity[32] and the revision of the Train Drivers Directive[33].

6. Conclusion

Despite all the challenges faced in 2021, in particular the COVID-19 pandemic, the EYR was successful in promoting rail transport as a sustainable, innovative, interconnected, intermodal, safe and affordable mode of transport. The EYR was also successful in maintaining and developing good relations between the EU and its neighbouring countries. It also highlighted the European, cross-border dimension of rail and rail's contribution to the EU's economy, industry and society. Through the many varied events and initiatives that took place in 2021, the EYR contributed to the positive perception of rail overall. It also created significant political momentum, bringing together public authorities, politicians and stakeholders at all levels and across Member States, with the common goal of strengthening rail. It is important to note that the EYR mobilised an unprecedent number of stakeholders contributing actively to its program, such as rail operators (both incumbents and new entrants), infrastructure managers, logistics organisations, the rail supply industry, associations representing passengers, including those with disabilities and reduced mobility, trade unions, stakeholders active in the field of education, culture and tourism, or international organisations. The significant efforts put into the EYR-related activities by all parties involved and the relevance of the discussions held on those occasions proved extremely useful in achieving the EYR objectives. Further efforts are now needed at all levels to improve the framework conditions for rail, complete the Single European Rail Area and increase its attractiveness and use in the future.

[31] https://transport.ec.europa.eu/news/action-plan-boost-passenger-rail-2021-12-14_en

[32] https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13134-International-freight-and-passenger-transport-increasing-the-share-of-rail-traffic_en

[33] https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13169-Train-drivers-improved-EU-certification-scheme_en