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Thorough European revision ERTMS rollout necessary

European Commission in the 'Green Deal' and 'Sustainable and smart mobility strategy' laid out measures for a sustainable transport system in Europe. An ambitious objective for transport decarbonization is to achieve significant growth in the modal share by rail (freight and passenger) transport. This can only be achieved with competitive (intermodal) transport by rail, which entices shippers and travelers to make more use of rail. And with sufficient railway capacity to significantly increase transport volumes. To this end, it is necessary to realize the Single European Railway Area in a timely manner, with a fully interoperable and affordable Trans European Railway Network (TEN-T) that complies with the TEN-T regulations laid down in 2013, including 740 meters train length, electrified railway lines, 22.5 tonnes of axle load and a European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS). ERTMS needs to be deployed not only on the core TEN-T network, but also on the new extended core network, and the comprehensive network.

ERTMS is increasingly seen by EU Member States and their rail infra managers as the digital system replacing national 'Class B' systems, rather than an add-on solution permitting interoperable transport operations. Focus and grip on full technical and operational interoperability and full rollout of ERTMS in transport corridors (without islands with only class B systems) are insufficient. Customer value is not central to the approach of national ministries and their rail infra managers. There is no fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of the implementation of ERTMS between the various stakeholders. The foregoing ensures that the intended benefits of ERTMS for rail users will not be realized in the next decade. Continuing the current and diverse approach in the European Union will lead to a deterioration in the competitiveness of rail transport, especially in the coming decade. A revision is necessary.

As a priority, the EU and its Member States need to focus infrastructure deployment of ERTMS on existing (planned) gaps (i.e. class B islands in partially with ERTMS upgraded rail transport corridors) and close them as soon as possible. This enables operations with 'ETCS only' and has a positive effect on the business case for rail transport carriers on the long term. It is high time that the European Commission, the European Railway Agency (ERA) and the EU Member States and their rail infra managers effectively change course here. Instead of continuing to orate and report that the existing ERTMS approach is the panacea to make rail transport in the EU (Member States) more competitive and to obtain a larger share in the modal split.

ERTMS deployment must be coupled with a hard regulatory deadline for the decommissioning of Class B systems trackside, which must also be enforced by the European Commission. This decommissioning will bring about significant maintenance savings for the rail infra managers, as rolling out ERTMS and keeping additional signaling systems trackside for a prolonged period is costly. This always combined with a corridor rollout of 1 fully interoperable ERTMS without Class B islands in rail transport corridors. For the EU Member States with the highest number of track kilometers to be deployed, the ERTMS in operation rate is low: 9 % in France, 3% in Germany, 11% in Italy, 18% in Poland, respectively 13% in Sweden. These percentages increase to 16%, 23%, 43%, 46%, respectively 25% in 2030 according to the European Commission. Additional deployment efforts should be made in many EU Member States. But also, in countries such as the Netherlands, which by 2030 will still have major trans-European railway lines full of ATB (class B) islands in transport corridors while 'ERTMS only' is only partly being rolled out, and where the important rail freight corridor North Sea - Baltic via border crossing Oldenzaal/Bad Bentheim is not in the national rollout plan of ERTMS is included. Things are not much better on the German side. Now, EU allows this. Furthermore, the continuous development of new levels and baselines must be stabilized because this is unaffordable for the carriers and their customers and unfeasible for the supply industry (which earns well from the ERTMS rollout).

If EU and its Member States continue with the current policy and approach, only just above half of all vehicles will be equipped with ETCS by 2030. Highest priority needs to be that rail transport carriers (and not just state-owned public transport operating companies) and rolling stock owners must be fully compensated for the unprofitable top of the necessary retrofit, upgrade, and replacement of locomotives if EU Member States opt for an 'ERTMS only' rollout instead of 'dual signaling' (an ERTMS overlay over the Class B system). This during the long-lasting migration from the national Class B systems to ERTMS. Also, a simplification of the authorization process of locomotives upgraded/retrofitted for new versions of ERTMS (which must be backward compatible) is needed. An additional opportunity is that the older fleet of locomotives can be renewed and replaced and give rise to a green and digital rail transport sector. A shortage of workshop capacity for ETCS conversion needs a decisive approach. A thoroughly revised European on-board strategy is desperately needed.

The ERTMS rollout must be decomplicated and a decisive revision of the European approach to the ERTMS rollout in the various EU Member States is necessary. Only then the ERTMS will finally become a cheaper technology with benefits for interoperability, affordability and reliability (for the users of the railways!), railway capacity, and safety of transportation. If the decision makers bury their heads in the sand, in 10 years' time the question will be asked when and why the train was missed and the road network is over congested with all the negative effects that entails.