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Good night - good train!

A plea to revitalise European night trains

Within the rail industry, over-night services have been a trademark and feature characteristic of European travel culture for over 100 years. Developing railways within the public transport system is an investment into the future of our societies, regions and people. However, throughout the last couple of years, there has been a tendency across Europe to discontinue and cut back cross-border and long distance conventional train services, including night trains, Intercity (IC) and Eurocity (IC) connections. Business and leisure passengers – not restricted by specific time windows and/or considering prices (hotel and travel costs combine) – used to be able to opt for travelling by night trains, amongst others, from Paris to Berlin, Hamburg and Munich; from Barcelona to Paris; and from Amsterdam as far as Prague and Warsaw. Unfortunately, all of these connections have been affected by the recent cuts. Companies such as Deutsche Bahn, RENFE and SNCF are phasing out night sleeper trains, claiming that these services are not economically profitable. Increased competition from short-haul air travel and high-speed day connections replacing night-time services are also cited as playing into the decision. The move is at odds with the demands of many long distance travellers who value the availability of different options, appreciate the time efficiency of sleeper trains, or prefer train travel in general as an alternative to aviation due to its lower carbon nature. Many citizens have publicly voiced their concerns at the cuts and are calling for night-time services to be reinstated. After Deutsche Bahn and their partners in Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and France announced the discontinuation of night trains running from Copenhagen to Amsterdam, Basel and Prague as well as services between Paris and Berlin, Hamburg and Munich by the end of 2014, Jordens Vänner/Friends of the Earth Sweden launched a Europe-wide campaign urging train operators to reconsider their decision. Despite the support of around 7000 people, Deutsche Bahn and their partners still closed down several night train routes in December 2014. The newly formed international coalition for night trains, Back on Track, will continue the campaign targeting the EU and its Member States. Last November, the European Green Party adopted a resolution on night sleeper trains in Europe at the EGP Council meeting in Istanbul. This includes a paragraph that specifically calls for investment in the rolling stock and infrastructure of night trains (for example the cost of rail-track charges) to continue to be a viable and affordable alternative for travellers to European destinations as it has been in the past, retaining or reactivating routes as necessary. Continuous cuts to railway services instead of efforts to build an interconnected European railway system also show that the EU and its Member States are failing to promote urgent measures needed to realise the shift to more environmentally friendly transport modes that are necessary in order to achieve the low carbon economy envisaged by the EU's 2020 Energy and Climate Package. According to Friends of the Earth, a train journey causes less than ten percent of the carbon emissions of a flight for the same distance. Interested passengers can calculate the considerable difference between various modes of transport

themselves by using Deutsche Bahn's Environmental Mobility Check. Night trains can indeed offer an attractive alternative to high-speed services and aviation. Some of the still existing night services, for example the connection from Zurich to Cologne and Vienna, offer high service standards in terms of rolling stock, interior equipment, cleanliness, breakfast and showers. These are very well frequented and popular with passengers and thus clearly show the great, unrecognised potential of reliable, punctual and comfortable night train services as a niche market. While European operators seem to be oblivious to this potential, others appear keen to fill the gap. Operator Russian Railways (RZD) has recently changed the timings of its Paris-Berlin-Moscow service to provide an attractive overnight service between the capital cities. The first night train is scheduled to depart on 19 June 2015.

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