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## Summer rail infrastructure misery

Extensive and often uncoordinated works on the rail network during the past weeks and months are causing excessive disruptions to the smooth flow of Combined Transport trains along the most important North-South railway axis of the Continent. The resulting train cancellations severely hurt European Combined Transport Operators and undermine market trust in otherwise reliable rail freight.



Earlier this week the already grim situation got suddenly worse, when tunnel construction in the town of Rastatt resulted in unexpected damage to the double track Rhine Valley mainline. The tunnel boring machine that was crossing a few metres below the railway line caused a serious deformation of the tracks, making them unsuited for traffic.

Whereas the initial estimates suggested that the line can be restored in two weeks' time, on a closer examination the German rail infrastructure manager, DB Netze, which is responsible both for the tunnel project and the operation of the mainline above, now estimates that at least 6 weeks will be needed. Subsequently, the Rhine Valley railway route will therefore be likely closed until the end of September.

The disruption to passenger traffic can be addressed by transferring the passengers onto buses along the closed section, however a similar solution is not available to freight trains. There are two lines which could be used as a bypass, though neither offers enough capacity to enable the passage of the 170-200 daily freight trains that normally run through Rastatt. The longer journey times mean that the same rolling stock cannot be used to perform as many trains as normally foreseen. Moreover, there is capacity constraining construction ongoing on the electrified double track Stuttgart-Singen route, while the other option is a non-electrified single track secondary line that requires diesel traction, which is not readily available on the short notice needed.

The prolonged restoration period of several weeks and the constraints of the immediate bypass solutions suggest that additional alternative routes should be explored for international freight trains. The North Sea – Mediterranean Corridor (RFC<sub>2</sub>) and the ScanMed Corridor (RFC<sub>5</sub>) offer the most ideal choices, which however are not fully equivalent as these suffer from profile gauge and train length limitations when compared to the affected Karlsruhe-Basel section. Also, any extensive re-routing of freight trains will require significant additional rolling stock and human resources.



Ralf-Charley Schultze

*"This summer was not the first when planned works and unplanned but man-made disruptions caused significant losses to Combined Transport Operators. UIRR calls on the European railway sector to improve its processes and procedures – across borders if necessary – to enhance the resilience of rail transport and remedy these situations quickly and effectively."* – stated UIRR President Ralf-Charley Schultze on the occasion.

### Who is UIRR?

Founded in 1970, the **International Union for Road-Rail Combined Transport (UIRR)** represents the interests of European road-rail Combined Transport Operators and Transshipment Terminal Managers.

Road-Rail Combined Transport (CT) is a system of freight forwarding which is based on efficiently and economically inserting electric rail into long-distance (road) transport-chains through the use of intermodal loading units (ILU).

Already in June and July more than 1 in 10 trains had to be cancelled due to the disruptions caused by planned works. Delays in the same period also surpassed every previous record. The unforeseen multiple-week line closure in Rastatt and the lack of equivalent alternatives mean major losses for European Combined Transport Operators. The high number of train cancellations are also detrimental to the business of transshipment terminals, as their activities are also halted.

The current situation highlights two significant shortcomings of the European rail infrastructure network:

- The coordination of works and the planning of contingencies along Rail Freight Corridors remain inadequate – even after the Rotterdam Ministerial Declaration and the Sector Statement pledging changes last June<sup>1</sup>. Cross-border coordination remains particularly weak.
- When distributing the remaining infrastructure capacities, long-distance freight trains are dispreferred over passenger traffic despite the easier substitution possibility for passengers by using buses.

Subsequently, UIRR calls on Member States, their rail infrastructure managers, as well as the European Commission to:

1. Improve rapidly and meaningfully the practice of how rail infrastructure works are coordinated among infrastructure managers making up Rail Freight Corridors, and extending coordination to contingency planning and to crisis management.
2. Establish clearly defined priorities that take into consideration the extent of disturbance caused to both types of traffic – passenger and freight – and distribute the burden according to which can be substituted more easily and cheaply.
3. Put in place adequate crisis management procedures and capacities. Remove all obstacles and provide all resources needed to complete the repair works as quickly as possible, especially in case of a major mishap like the one in Rastatt.
4. Define a protocol by which to provide financial assistance to those Combined Transport Operators and transshipment terminal managers, who demonstrably suffer considerable losses due to man-made reasons such as planned works, or man-made engineering mishaps. It should be noted that the losses may be occurring to an entity based in a different country along a Rail Freight Corridor from where the works take place.

The above recommended actions are even more urgent as excessive works have been already announced by Austria, Germany and Italy along the Southern stretch of the Baltic-Adriatic Corridor (RFC5) to take place in 2018. According to present information, these works and the contingency arrangements around them appear insufficient and largely uncoordinated to date.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.uirr.com/en/media-centre/press-releases-and-position-papers/2016/mediacentre/792-ministerial-declaration-and-sector-statement-concerning-international-rail-freight.html>