Shifting Europe's Transport Infrastructure Towards Sustainability and Justice: The European Rail Network

Adopted in	Lisbon, 7 December 2025

Gathered in Lisbon, a city with little to no train connection to the rest of Europe, we Greens are acutely aware that we must put rail transport at the centre of Europe's mobility. The Portuguese example demonstrates the urgency of this need. Since the 1990s, significant portions of Portugal's rail network have been de-activated, while roads and motorways have expanded massively. Lisbon currently has no direct train connection to Madrid and the broader European network. It will continue without one for the foreseeable future.

Across Europe, there are many similar stories. Public transport and rail networks have been dismantled and left to decay due to under-investment and privatization. Despite a certain renaissance of night trains, some relevant lines have been recently discontinued or left without improvements, reducing alternatives to short-haul flights.

Meanwhile, airports and roads keep expanding. These infrastructure projects contradict the European Green Deal, the Biodiversity Strategy, and the EU's climate commitments. Europe's infrastructure model depends excessively on cars and planes, while trains — the most reliable, sustainable, and socially equitable mode of transport — in most countries remain under-funded and under-developed, leading to decreased quality and safety. This does not only generate a vicious circle of reduced appeal for passengers, financial losses, and under-investment and poor maintenance leading to line closures but also increased incidents and major accidents.

According to a 2023 Greenpeace report, Europe's rail network shrunk by 6.5% (15,650 km) over the past 30 years, while motorways grew by over 60%.

Our societies were built on cheap fossil energy, ignoring its devastating costs. To achieve energy sobriety and sustainable mobility, Europe must rethink how we move and meet. The Greens call for a radical infrastructure shift, placing rail at the heart of European mobility and the green transition.

Shifting EU transport policy to a sustainable model
Europe's current transport model is unsustainable, unjust, and increasingly incompatible with climate goals. The mass use of cars, proliferation of flights, and the high cost of train journeys favour the wealthiest and exclude peripheral and rural areas, exacerbating mobility poverty. At the same time, large destructive infrastructure projects are further increasing emissions, destroying habitats, encouraging Europe's fossil fuel dependency, and undermining the goal of climate neutrality by 2050, while jeopardizing energy sovereignty, geopolitical autonomy, and security.

Cheap flights have facilitated mass tourism reducing access to housing, driving labour exploitation, and increasing environmental impacts for communities.

Increased aviation and road traffic produce high greenhouse gas emissions and noise and air pollution that harm public health. It is regrettable that plane tickets are often cheaper than train fares. Aviation's real climate impact far exceeds the often-cited 2% of global CO_2 emissions, closer to three times higher when non-CO_2 effects are included. With EU air traffic expected to grow by over 5% annually, unchecked aviation is increasingly projected to be a huge driver of ecological breakdown. Despite this, subsidies are flowing disproportionately toward aviation. Kerosene remains tax-free and touristification is rising, while rail operators need to pay track access charge. Road traffic represents as much as 20% of Europe's total emissions, whereas rail is only 0.4% of total transport emissions. Yet governments insist on expanding motorways, inducing further demand, while online shopping and last-mile logistics add even further pressure. Whilst road traffic will be electrified within a few decades, the CO_2 emissions from cars as well as the environmental impacts of traffic congestion and noise are continuing to grow.

We are yet to make flying a sustainable form of travel. Relying on offsets, alternative fuels, or other technological fixes does not currently work to reduce emissions and achieve energy sobriety. In the crucial years ahead, we must reduce flying not just rebrand it. Europe's infrastructure model remains based

on the outdated belief that massive road and port expansion drives economic growth. Human- and nature-centred means of transportation are overlooked and disregarded. Wetlands, forests, and coastal areas are particularly harmed, with irreversible consequences for local flora and fauna. The current model, including the expansion of airports, ports, and motorways, places disproportionate pressure on cities and directly contributes to habitat loss, fragmentation of fragile ecosystems, and biodiversity extermination. The environments of peripheral regions, where access to mobility, economic opportunities and social services remain limited, are particularly jeopardized. The lack of public transportation and cycle lanes results in heavy congestion, noise and pollution. Rural and less connected territories are left behind, further perpetuating inequalities.

Mobility is crucial to everyone, every day. It connects people, communities, and businesses. We welcome the European Commission's High-Speed Rail Action Plan for a faster connection of European cities and new cross-border links, but there is an urgent need to improve conventional train networks. Sustainability should not be an economic privilege but an essential part of life in Europe necessary to exercise fundamental rights.

A just transition must recognize that aviation's impact is driven by a privileged few: 1% of people cause half of all emissions, while 80% have never flown. Yet those least responsible, often the poorest, will suffer most from climate breakdown. Rail transport generates around 150 billion euros in added value annually for the EU economy and plays a key role in achieving climate targets by reducing transport sector emissions by up to 75% compared to road transport.

If Europe continues the model of road and airport expansions, it will remain geopolitically fragile, economically inefficient and socially unequal. It will be impossible to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, mitigate climate change, and protect life on Earth. A fundamental shift toward sustainable public, accessible and affordable transport centred on rail is essential to protect the planet, ensure energy independence, and guarantee fair mobility for all citizens.

Gathered in Lisbon the European Greens demand:

- A massive European investment plan in the rail network, ensuring connections between European cities with more than 100,000

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inhabitants to a rail hub, rural-urban and cross-border connections, harmonization and standardization of infrastructure and the renaissance of night trains connecting European cities. This also entails an end to cuts to and discontinuations of existing night train connections.

- The establishment of comprehensive high-speed rail network linking European capitals and major regional centres.
- Legally binding modal shift targets for passenger and rail freight, enabling the creation and delivery of long-term plans and maximizing the benefits for communities, industries and economies.
- Affordable train prices to make rail competitive with cars and planes.
- Investment in more cycle-friendly infrastructure and public transport alternatives.
- An end to unfair aviation subsidies, including for private jets, with an exemption for public service obligation flights to isolated regions and islands.
- An end to fiscal exemptions for flight tickets and kerosene and the regulation of low-cost flights.
- Aligning tax and spending policies with climate goals: reward low-emission transport by exempting trains from taxes and supporting cross-border and night services.
- An end to short-haul flights where a rail alternative under 4 hours exists, extending to routes under 8 hours by train by 2030 with the exception for emergency services and areas with geographical constraints.
- An immediate moratorium on airport expansion and for port construction and expansion not crucial for enabling green transition, resilience and security of supply.
- An immediate end to night flights to airports in urban areas except for essential services and supplies.
- Developing stronger tools for shifting goods from road to rail and the prioritization of rail freight and local distribution hubs with electrified last-mile deliveries instead of endless last-mile delivery vans.

The European Greens propose to:

- Introduce a progressive frequent-flyer levy targeting excessive air travel without penalizing occasional passengers.

- Build a modern, fully electrified, and inter-operable European rail system that guarantees widespread access to affordable mobility in full safety, connecting people across borders, protecting biodiversity, and reducing Europe's dependence on fossil fuels.
- Learn from countries that have efficient and innovative public transport systems, and which pioneered the shift to rail.
- Create a well-organized, up-to-date European train route schedule and an easily accessible common European booking system for all trains and services with the goal of a single-ticket system, including for night trains and bike transport.
- Build rail lines in ways that minimize environmental damage, e.g. through bridges and tunnels, and ensure accessibility and sufficient space for people with disabilities and impairments.
- Strengthen the instruments for EU investment in public transport in the next EU budget for 2028-2034 (Multiannual Financial Framework, MFF) to make rail the backbone of Europe's transport system, both for people and freight, replacing short-haul flights and reducing car and truck dependency wherever alternatives can exist.
- Consider the rail industry as an important pillar of European industry with the goal of a functional supply chain and competitiveness with regards to price and delivery time.
- Create an EU-funded pool of rolling stock (including for night trains) available for leasing by undertakings.
- Recognize that Europe's Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) and Outermost Regions (ORs) face unique geographical constraints that make rail-based infrastructure infeasible and call for a Mobility Justice Framework to ensure that sustainable mobility investments also support islands and overseas territories.
- Call for EU mobility policies and funding mechanisms that ensure OCTs are not disadvantaged by strategies centred on rail through the decarbonization of aviation and maritime transport and that support resilient infrastructure adapted to extreme weather events, natural disasters, and social and industrial incidents.
- Re-introduce international rail connections to countries currently lacking regular and reliable passenger connections to neighbouring countries.
- Develop specific investment plans for rural and regional rail systems, including electrification and re-opening of lines to ensure rural areas are not left behind.

Background

Airport expansion and night flights

As a result of airport privatization in Portugal, Lisbon has witnessed an increased number of flights, including night flights during the night. Many citizens, organizations and movements are calling for an end to night flights between 11PM and 7AM.

According to the NGO ZERO, Lisbon airport has over 80 flights per night which directly affects inhabitants' sleep. Around 400,00 people are affected by noise pollution from night flights reaching about 45 dB(A) (ie. over 10% above World Health Organization guidelines).

In 2019, the Spanish and Catalan governments approved a plan from Barcelona Airport to enlarge its third runway. This plan would destroy the remaining wetlands of the Llobregat River Delta (a Natura 2000 protected area). Despite the protests of civil society, the plan has been tendered in 2025.

In the Valencia region the two main airports, Alicante-Elche Airport (L'Altet) and Manises Airport, are located in densely populated metropolitan areas, contributing to noise and air pollution for local residents and fuelling an unsustainable tourism economy.

In 2024 a capital expenditure programme to support the expansion of Fiumicino Airport was announced which will require the removal of protected-area boundaries to build a fourth runway. This project poses a serious threat to nature in the Roma Coastal State nature reserve and a risk to public health due to an increase in noise and air pollution.

In December 2024, Centralny Port Komunikacyjny (CPK) and Polish airports (PPL) signed an agreement to collaborate on the construction of a new central airport set to become a regional and global hub in Warsaw.
In November 2025, Heathrow Airport's planfor a third runway, which involves moving the M25 motorway, was chosen by the government as the successful bid to deliver airport expansion.

Ports

The expansion of the Port of Valencia threatens the Albufera Natural Park, a RAMSAR wetland and Biosphere Reserve. A port breakwater extends 2

kilometres out to sea, altering the coastal dynamics and the shoreline of the wetland.

The Royal Caribbean cruise port planned for Fiumicino threatens to destroy a delicate terrestrial and marine ecosystem and undermine the habitability and cultural heritage in coastal areas.

Motorways and bridges
The Austrian government has announced significant plans for motorway expansion including the Lobau-Autobahn and the development of the A8 motorway into 8 lanes amongst other projects which threaten wildlife and nature reserves.

Seismic analyses conducted by ISPRA and INGV have demonstrated that the Messina Strait Bridge, proposed by the Meloni government, would stand directly on an active seismic fault posing a danger to both human life and wildlife and that the proposals are wholly inadequate.

Train services
In Spain, the Mediterranean Corridor has been significantly slow to develop, despite its potential to connect nearly 50% of Spain's population. This project would significantly boost economic activity with proper investment.

Due to the withdrawal of government subsidies in France from 2026 onwards, Nightjet was forced to discontinue the Vienna-Berlin and Vienna-Paris night train connections from 14 December 2025.

Best practices on public transport
Many countries offer key innovative learnings for good public transport practices. Japan, South Korea and Switzerland who have all sought to simplify affordable access to public transport. In Luxembourg all public transport has been free since 2020.

Introduced in 2021, the Austrian Klimaticket is a flat-rate, year-long subscription that significantly lowers the cost of public transport, promoting climate-friendly travel.

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