Authorising trains to run on EU tracks
EU lawmakers are backing trains to cut transport emissions, setting ambitious goals to double both high-speed rail traffic and the share of rail freight by 2030.

To achieve these targets, a slew of new rail vehicles must be entered into service across the bloc, from locomotives to passenger and freight cars.

The European Union Agency for Railways (ERA) is empowered to authorise these vehicles, ensuring they are suitable to operate on the European rail network.

EURACTIV looked at why countries increasingly turn to the EU agency for rail vehicle authorisation.
EU agency seeks to boost train travel by simplifying rail rules

Railway companies turn to EU agency to get new trains on tracks

One Europe. One Railway. One institutional process.
EU agency seeks to boost train travel by simplifying rail rules

By Sean Goulding Carroll | EURACTIV.com

The European Union Agency for Railways (ERA) is striving to make Europe’s patchwork of national railway regulations fit for pan-European travel, working with national authorities to delete rules that hamper border crossings.

ERA hopes to shift railway regulations from national silos to operations fit for a single European rail area.

Europe suffers from a “very fragmented system, with different technical rules in the various countries”, according to Josef Doppelbauer, the executive director of the ERA, in an interview for EURACTIV.

The rail situation would not be acceptable to drivers, he said.

“Imagine you have a car and you live in a small country such as Belgium. You can drive with your car in Belgium, but when you want to cross the border to France or the Netherlands, you can’t because your car is not authorised to run in these countries,” he said.

“This is, of course, hampering the development of rail transport, a policy objective of the European Union,” he added.

Bringing an end to this fragmentation will achieve a better connected Europe and aid Europe’s environmental aims, Doppelbauer
said.

“If we simplify cross-border rail by eliminating national rules, by harmonising operational rules, by having one authorisation process, then we contribute to an increasing modal share of rail, which will, in turn, allow us to decarbonise the European transport system.”

**Authorisations**

One of the chief tasks of the ERA is to authorise train vehicles for operation in the EU, ensuring they meet safety requirements.

Previously this was carried out exclusively by national authorities. However, new rules introduced in 2019 saw the ERA take on the role of cross-border approvals.

As part of the authorisation process, the ERA checks the vehicle’s compatibility with standards across the bloc.

“Imagine before 2019, you wanted to operate a locomotive that runs in 12 countries, and you need to apply to 12 different organisations, in 12 different languages, using 12 different templates for the documents. That was complicated, costly, and took a long time,” said Doppelbauer.

“Now, there is one application to one authority, and we need to accept the application in any of the 24 official languages of the European Union. It’s a massive simplification for the applicants, and it is a massive step forward towards the creation of the single European railway area.”

**Pushback**

While the ERA strives to cut regulations, there can be pushback from member states. This is understandable, Doppelbauer feels, as rules are part of the “collective knowledge” of that country’s rail operations.

“Rail operation started in the first half of the 19th century. Whenever a problem occurred, such as an accident, people invented rules to prevent further occurrences of such accidents.

“I have full understanding that you cannot just, with one stroke, eliminate a rule without understanding the background of why it has been introduced and what would be the consequences of removing the rule,” he said.

If the ERA feels a rule is redundant, it will ask the country to repeal it, sending a technical opinion outlining the justification. The European Commission will launch a formal process if the member state refuses.

“It’s always a negotiation process. It always requires analysis. What has been the intention of the rule? Why is it there? What is the consequence of removing that rule? And in the end, there needs to be a follow-up of the outcome so that the rules are indeed removed,” explained Doppelbauer.

In addition to repealing out-of-date regulations, the ERA aims to prevent new rules from flooding in.

“You should imagine [new rules] like mushrooms in the autumn. Whenever it rains, you go to the forest, and you see the mushrooms coming up, and it is our task as ERA to make sure that we pluck these mushrooms before they become too many,” he said.

As a result of European pushback, Doppelbauer aims to prevent new rules from flooding in. He recently reported that 50,000 authorisations have been completed.

The ERA **celebrated its 50 thousandth rail vehicle authorisation** at a ceremony in Brussels on 27 April.

The event, according to Doppelbauer, was an opportunity to show that fears the ERA would fail to execute the role of national authorities were unfounded.

“We wanted to demonstrate that not only the rail world has not come to a standstill, but we now have more than double the vehicles authorised by us than the totality of the national safety authorities,” he said.

 Asked if April’s rail tragedy in Greece, in which 57 people lost their lives, has influenced the regulatory approach to rail, Doppelbauer argued that it is more important to apply existing rules than to introduce new ones.

“I’m now speaking in general terms because we do not yet have the independent assessment of the Greek accident, but it is often the case that an accident happens because rules have not been applied properly,” he said.

“The biggest movement now is to ensure that the existing rules are applied and that the institutional framework works properly.”

**50,000 authorisations**

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The European Union Agency for Railways (ERA) has overtaken national bodies as the primary authoriser for train vehicles, with a 60% share of all applications for new trains between June 2019 and April 2023.

More than 50,000 vehicles were authorised for service in the EU by the ERA during this period.

Before a new or modified railway vehicle can operate on the European Union (EU) railway network, it must be authorised to ensure it complies with applicable regulations.

The applicant and the other entities involved in the vehicle’s design, manufacture, and validation must also have fulfilled their obligations.

The ERA is “authorising almost twice as many vehicles as all the National Safety Authorities together”, stated Josef Doppelbauer, the executive director of ERA, who called it “a major achievement”.

Previously, only the National Safety Authorities of the country where the vehicle was intended to operate could grant authorisation.

However, in 2016, the EU introduced the 4th Railway
Package, which aimed to harmonise rail vehicle authorisation and safety certification across Europe, creating a single European rail area and introducing greater interoperability in the network.

Since 2019, the ERA has the authority to authorise all types of railway vehicles, including locomotives, freight wagons, and passenger wagons.

More and more companies are choosing to obtain “European” authorisation even for vehicles intended for national use.

To date, almost 54% of the authorisations processed by the agency are for rail vehicles operating throughout the EU. 27% of the authorisations are for vehicles that operate in more than one member state, while almost 19% are for vehicles operating in a single member state.

According to ERA, operators prefer to submit their applications with the agency because the process is more streamlined, harmonised, and accessible.

The application can be submitted electronically through a One-Stop Shop, guidance is available from the ERA, and only one application is necessary regardless of the number of countries where the vehicle will operate.

Celebrating vehicle number 50,000

The fifty thousandth vehicle authorised by ERA at the European level was for the National Railway Company of Belgium (SNCB), an AM96 trainset which can operate in two member states: Belgium and France.

To mark this milestone, on Thursday, 27 April, ERA and SNCB organised a joint event in Brussels on Platform 5 of the Belgian capital’s Midi Railway Station.

“Our choice to celebrate this major milestone in Brussels, in one of the major railway stations in Europe, is a powerful metaphor, a symbol of our work and its positive impact, visible on the tracks, bringing added value to European businesses and citizens,” Doppelbauer said during the event.

Train travel remains the most environmentally friendly mode of motorised passenger transport in Europe — regarding greenhouse gas emissions — compared to travelling by car or plane.

A harmonised European rail traffic management system will help to improve the position of rail transport as the backbone of sustainable mobility in Europe, according to Gerd De Vos, executive director of technics at SNCB.

“Rail is the safe, sustainable and comfortable mode of transport par excellence, and crucial to meeting the climate objectives,” he stressed during the event in Brussels. “By delivering vehicle approvals and safety certificates, and by acting as a one-stop shop, ERA contributes to reinforcing passengers’ trust in rail transport.”

Harmonising the rules

Railways in Europe were initially national projects and had different technical specifications from each other, resulting in fragmentation among EU countries. However, decision-makers are now taking steps towards harmonising the market.

The ERA, as rail authority, is also tasked with reducing national rules and creating an integrated package of Technical Specifications for Interoperability (TSIs) to further aid in market harmonisation.

Gradually, national rules are being replaced with regulations based on Common Safety Methods and TSIs, which are set as common standards.

From 14 thousand national rules in 2016, today around 600 remain, Doppelbauer explained.

“This is a massive reduction,” he stressed.

However, “there is still a long way to go because you have many other issues,” Doppelbauer added, mentioning the differences in language, operational rules and safety rules among countries.

“We have made tremendous progress, but we still have a lot of work ahead of us. But I would like to use a metaphor: the train has started to roll, and it is very difficult to stop this train now. So we will get there,” he said.
As an outcome of the 4th Railway Package, the authorisation process for rail vehicles is harmonized across Europe, accessible, transparent, and predictable. An institutional locomotive that takes us every day closer to a railway system without frontiers.

Josef Doppelbauer is the Executive Director of the European Union Agency for Railways.

Four years ago, on 16 June 2019, a successful institutional story has begun with the implementation of the Technical Pillar of the 4th Railway Package, that took the European rail to new levels of cross-border cooperation.

The European Union Agency for Railways (ERA), together with the National Safety Authorities and the Notified Bodies, have created a functional and performant system, allowing EU rail businesses to benefit from a transparent, accessible, and predictable system. This inter-institutional cooperation has led to an increased pace towards the creation of the Single European Railway Area, facilitating rail to become the backbone of multimodality, as the greenest way of transport.

With the 4th Railway Package, the Agency has been mandated to issue vehicle authorisations, single safety certificates, and to grant ERTMS Trackside approvals that are valid in several EU Member States. Instead of having to apply to multiple national authorities, now a single application to ERA, via the
OSS – the One-Stop-Shop, is sufficient for authorisation, certification, and approval in several Member States. For the first time, we have such harmonised processes for rail in Europe, clearly proving its added value for the EU citizens and businesses.

There were many who were afraid of the changes this would bring – some even feared that the world of railways in Europe would stand still, after 16th of June 2019. In fact, the 4th RP is a giant leap forward.

Now, as we look at the achievements, at the number of authorisations, certificates, and approvals we have issued, we can say that these fears have not been justified – ERA has up to now authorised more than 57 000 vehicles, issued 149 single safety certificates, and has granted 10 ERTSM trackside approvals.

Three factors have fuelled and pushed forward the successful implementation: first, ERA staff, whose commitment and technical knowledge represents the greatest asset, and the main vector of reaching and even overachieving our strategic goals. At the same time, equally important was and will be the inter-institutional cooperation, allowing swift exchanges, and clearly defined workflows, bringing clarity to all sides involved. And making the applicant the actual winner of all these processes.

An essential role in this system plays the One-Stop-Shop, an electronic portal operated by ERA through which all applications, be it for ERA or the NSAs, are submitted now. What gives us high hopes is the positive feedback from the users, as ERA staff strives every day for excellence, and the team’s mindset is to provide top notch services, considering our mission and vision.

Of course, as the processes implied by the 4th Railway Package are continuously improving, the same applies to all the tools used, from the One Stop Shop portal to registers such as ERATV or ERADIS, and to all project management and technical aspects that lead up to the authorisation for placing on the market of the vehicle. Thanks to all these aggregated efforts, ERA is already authorising more than 60% of the vehicles in the EU - a percentage that reflects the important progress that the rail sector has made towards the Single European Railway Area.

We can in fact see in our daily operations that the impact of the new processes is real, making railways work better for society across the EU. In April 2023, we have organized in Brussels, in one of the main railway stations in Europe – South Station, an event marking an important milestone: the 50 000th vehicle authorised by ERA, a vehicle operated by SNCF. On the track it was presented an AM96 trainset, operating in France and Belgium, fitted with ERTMS – the European harmonised signalling system, and equipped with GSM-R – the EU digital radio system. Originally, the vehicle was dedicated to national operation within the borders of Belgium only, and when its area of use needed to be extended to France, this is when our collaboration with SNCF started. In fact, ERA has been processing all vehicles from SNCF’s retrofitting campaign of the AM96 fleet, and the collaboration between our colleagues and SNCF was going very well. And the same feedback we receive from all our stakeholder, and this makes us happy – because feedback from both sides is also part of the European process.

We all know that rail is a business of long-life cycles of assets. Upgrading rail assets therefore is common practice in the rail sector, as it is a consequence of their longevity. Upgrading and renewal saves money, helps rail digitalisation, and, as such, is perfect for reaching the climate goals.

2023 is a vital year for European railways. The Member States have recently approved, on the 30th of March, the TSI revision package, which provides an overhaul of the technical specifications for the European railway system, including for the first-time a legal basis for Combined Transport, and introducing the new approach of Unique Authorisation of passenger coaches. The TSI 2023 package also includes the so called “game changers” for ERTMS, including features such as Automatic Train Operation, and readiness for the future mobile radio communication system FRMCS. We will not stop our efforts to continuously improve the efficiency of our processes – an important step for this year will be to make ERA a registration entity for rail vehicles.

Encouraged by the results obtained four years after the 4th Railway Package entered into force, we continue to have a clear vision of what the future of European railways shall look like. Railways must be connected, efficient, interoperable across borders and language barriers – and offer an attractive service for passengers and freight. The instruments to achieve this vision are in place – now we need to elevate the European mindset and commitment of the national decision-makers to put it in place.
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