

## Can Europe Wake Up the Sleeper Train?

Article by Ashley Parsons

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Despite being touted as an important element in the European green transition, night rail travel remains riddled with problems: passengers must contend with messy booking systems and last-minute cancellations, while providers struggle with low rail capacity, strained budgets, and a shortage of rolling stock. Can Europe find a way to address these issues and make night trains a reliable and accessible option for travellers?

From Basel to Berlin, Strasbourg to Stockholm, on the night of 12 December 2025, a dozen European train stations saw activists and travellers gathered on platforms in their pyjamas, toothbrushes in hand, to protest the slow death of European night trains. Organised by [Back on Track EU](#), [Stay Grounded Network](#), and [Aterra](#), these sleep-in protests were a direct response to a string of high-profile cancellations – notably the Paris-Berlin line – and a growing frustration with a system that seems to be sabotaging its own green transition. These actions were also a public indictment of a political deadlock that has left the European night train map looking more like a series of [disconnected islands](#) than a unified continent.

Once a key element of the Green Deal's [sustainable mobility strategy](#), the night rail “renaissance” was also part of the post-Covid mobility dreamboard. But the reality is different: night rail is currently being strangled by three distinct bottlenecks that make international night travel a high-stakes gamble. This is despite [86 per cent of Europeans stating they'd like to see night trains developed further](#).

The first block is poor or nonexistent cooperation across borders: a fragmented booking landscape where national operators guard their data, making cross-border tickets nearly impossible to find on a single app, and a lack of cooperation between track managers from one country to the next. Second is a hardware vacuum: a scrap metal war where legacy rail operators are still using ageing stock, and night rail startups are left scavenging for 70-year-old carriages because newer stock is either too expensive or strategically scrapped by incumbents. Finally, a priority trap on the tracks ensures that when the rails become congested, the night train is the first to be sidelined for freight or maintenance.

Together, these forces create a sort of soft sabotage that pushes even the most climate-conscious travellers back toward the airport – I myself being one of them, after a disastrous Paris-Berlin cancellation two hours before departure, with no rebooking possible. So, is there hope for a functioning network of European night trains, or has that locomotive run out of track?

### “Problem explainers, not problem solvers”

The first wall a traveller hits when travelling by night train is made of code. Victor Gérard, co-founder of the travel media outlet [Voyager En Train](#), argues that current cross-border train travel, specifically night train travel, is defined by booking platforms and reservation management systems that protect national monopolies at the expense of the traveller.

The dysfunction can feel surreal, as Gérard found on a recent trip on the Paris-Vienna line. “We were

receiving SMS alerts every hour saying our train was cancelled,” Gérard explains. “But the train was running perfectly – we were actually sitting inside it! There must be significant internal communication issues within the operators.” The tools used by operators like Nightjet and infrastructure managers like SNCF Réseau remain compartmentalised.

When asked why national platforms like SNCF Connect often fail to display or sell international sleeper routes, Gérard suggests that technical excuses often mask a deeper protectionism. While a new industry standard called OSDM (Open Sales and Distribution Model) is being rolled out to harmonise cross-border and multi-operator booking, technology alone won’t solve the problem.

“The main obstacle is political,” says Gérard. He is pointing to the stalled MDMS (Multimodal Digital Mobility Services) initiative, a proposal that would mandate data sharing across borders. “If the EU mandated that all companies must sell all available tickets, it would break this lock once and for all.”

This lack of cross-border coordination has a secondary consequence: the erosion of passenger rights. When systems don’t talk to each other, re-routing becomes a manual nightmare for the passenger. Gérard notes that while EU passenger protections exist on paper, they are rarely applied to international journeys because the systems are too complex for the average traveller to navigate alone.

In 2025, independent railway commentator Jon Worth released a detailed report about cross-border rail travel in Europe. To Worth, large public railways (SNCF, DB, and Renfe) simply lack the will to make international travel work.

“The big state-owned railways (...) do not want to make the effort. If they wanted to, they would find ways around all of the hurdles,” Worth says. “There is a general problem in the rail industry that they are problem explainers, not problem solvers.”

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While operators often blame “government funding,” Worth argues the failure is one of imagination: “For SNCF, that night train [Paris-Berlin] was too much bother, so they did not lobby to keep the subsidy. And the government wanted to ditch the subsidy. So, it was easy for SNCF to then blame the government. I think SNCF not having the imagination to think about anything that doesn’t run at 300km/h killed it.”

This institutional lack of interest manifests for the passenger as a ticketing nightmare. I recall my own “broken border” experience trying to book a sleeper from Switzerland to Prague – spending hours on the phone with Swiss, Austrian, and Czech operators who each blamed a different country. Finally, I gave up and booked a bus. When asked who has a real incentive to fix this digital and administrative void, Worth’s answer is blunt: “No one. These are cross-border problems, so you need the EU to help provide fixes, but even that is hard because the EU does what the rail industry lobbies it to do.”

The CER (Community of European Railway and Infrastructure Companies), which represents these incumbent operators, frames the issue differently. They argue that the failure isn’t one of will, but of a fundamentally broken competitive landscape. According to CER director Alberto Mazzola, the playing field is currently tilted against rail because of tax exemptions for aviation and a lack of internalised external costs. In economic terms, this means that while rail operators are directly charged for their infrastructure use and energy, the broader societal “bills” of air travel (carbon emissions, noise, and air

pollution) are currently paid by the taxpayer rather than reflected in the ticket price. He maintains that for night trains to survive, European legislators must prioritise creating an “equitable framework for intermodal competition”.

Mazzola points to the EU’s upcoming [Capacity Regulation](#) as the solution to “optimise the use of existing rail infrastructure” and “improve coordination among infrastructure managers”.

For startups, the same lack of coordination is a hard barrier to entry; a challenge that Louis Lammertyn, co-founder of the Belgian startup Moonlight Express (now merged with European Sleeper), knows intimately. He is currently launching [BookBetter](#), a platform that aims to make aviation more sustainable. In 2020, his team attempted to launch a route connecting the heart of Europe to the Mediterranean, but they were met with a wall of administrative silence that made coordination impossible.

“When we were planning a route – Brussels-Barcelona – after six months of trying to talk with the right people in Spain and France, we realised that it was going nowhere with Spain,” Lammertyn recalls. “They literally ignored us. There was no communication at all.”

This ghosting by national operators creates “grey zones” on the map that remain isolated because, as Lammertyn notes, startups are forced to “avoid France, which is known to be complicated, and Spain, which was just ghosting us.” He notes that the situation with France has changed over the past few years, as the country has opened itself to new carriers and shown a willingness to improve night train access.

Without an EU-level mandate, national operators have no incentive to cooperate, leaving passengers to navigate booking via multiple train operators for a single journey, a level of friction that practically gifts the market back to aviation.

## **Political will (or won’t)?**

The European Union’s primary response to the capacity bottleneck strangling night trains is the Rail Capacity Regulation (2023/0271/COD). Voted by the European Parliament in early 2024 and having reached a pivotal political agreement in late 2025, the regulation aims to replace Europe’s fragmented, manual track allocation system with a harmonised digital framework designed to improve cross-border coordination.

To understand what the regulation does – and does not – change for night trains, the *Green European Journal* spoke with Tilly Metz, Green member of the European Parliament and a long-time advocate for sustainable transport. She underscored a central shortfall: the regulation acknowledges the systemic failures facing night trains but fails to guarantee their protection.

Crucially, the new law does not mandate priority access for night trains. As Metz explains, “There are no mandatory requirements with priority rules for certain train services. The ultimate decision will still be taken by the infrastructure manager.” In practice, this means an infrastructure manager can argue that a freight train carrying car parts has greater economic weight than a night train transporting 200 passengers, and when they both want access to the same track, it’s the passenger train that ends up on the cancellation board.

The regulation also establishes European frameworks for capacity and crisis management, yet enforcement remains weak. “These frameworks are to be seen as guidelines and rules for the infrastructure managers to do their utmost to follow; however, they are not legally binding,” Metz notes.

The current compromise relies on a “wait-and-see” mechanism: only if the Commission can demonstrate that guidelines are being systematically ignored can it propose binding secondary legislation. Until then, compliance depends largely on goodwill.

The regulation does introduce penalties for last-minute cancellations, a measure designed to curb the routine sidelining of passenger trains. However, exemptions remain for “unavoidable emergencies” – a category that can be interpreted generously.

Asked what prevents routine maintenance from being reclassified as an emergency, Metz points to one of the Parliament’s hard-won concessions: infrastructure managers must now provide evidence that capacity restrictions are genuinely necessary to restore safe operations. If enforced, this requirement could finally limit last-minute disruptions. Still, whether it will be applied consistently across borders remains an open question.

Metz herself acknowledges that regulation alone will not rescue night trains from the current impasse. “The night trains need to be supported, regardless of the Rail Capacity Regulation,” she says. “We would also like to see an EU-funded pool of rolling stock [locomotives and wagons] for night trains which could be available for leasing.” In other words, legal harmonisation, even when ambitious, arrives too slowly for a sector already fighting for survival.

The CER is championing the Capacity Regulation, which it sees as a necessary step to optimise the use of existing rail infrastructure. It is currently working with the European Network of Infrastructure Managers (ENIM) to shape frameworks for traffic management that provide “predictability to the passenger operators” while maintaining flexibility for freight.

But the most consequential feature of the regulation is its timeline, with binding provisions only entering into force starting in 2030. This may appear to be a reasonable transition period for policymakers: for instance, the CER argues that this legal basis is required to create a Single European Rail Area that can actually deliver quality services.

For an entrepreneur, however, the 2030 implementation date is an eternity away. “Four years is definitely too long for a startup to navigate,” Lammertyn notes. “It’s a matter of being creative and doing things that can materialise within 1-2 years max.”

## **Staying on track**

Lammertyn warns that the financial barrier to entry is nearly insurmountable for new players. “As a startup, you just don’t get tens or hundreds of millions of euros.”

To generate cash flow and credibility, European Sleeper opted to operate first and modernise later, a strategy Lammertyn describes as pragmatic: “You generate cash flow and start transporting passengers immediately. And if you have cash flow, you can show a leasing company that you can repay the cost of leasing newer coaches.” By adopting this model, European Sleeper has managed to transport more than 250,000 passengers.

Lammertyn even suggests a provocative technical rescue: China. While coaches from Siemens might cost up to 3 million euros, Chinese alternatives could cost significantly less. Still, “certification of Chinese coaches is slow, and it’s difficult for geopolitical reasons” for state operators to buy from China, though it remains an option for private entrepreneurs.

Thibault Constant, the founder of a Berlin-based night train startup called Nox, is pushing forward anyway. His vision deviates from the typical public transport role assigned to trains, and aims to adapt to the current system that does not protect night trains.

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“Rolling stock remains one of the most significant barriers,” Constant explained to the *Green European Journal*. He pointed out that European Sleeper, a pioneer in the sector, is forced to operate coaches nearly 70 years old. “The quality of the remaining assets is often incompatible with modern reliability and comfort expectations,” he noted.

According to Constant, this isn't just a market shortage – it is a strategic blockade. While some companies sell off old stock, others have chosen to “block new entrants by scrapping second-hand rolling stock altogether.” This creates a hardware gap that is nearly impossible for startups to bridge, especially as major manufacturers have shifted away from traditional locomotive-hauled coaches to expensive, integrated “multiple-unit” platforms.

But Mazzola disputes the idea of deliberate obstruction. He states that CER members “do not scrap night trains' rolling stock” unless forced by environmental or safety regulations – most notably, the presence of asbestos in older fleets. Furthermore, he points out that the financial barrier to entry is staggering for all rail operators, not just startups. The CER is currently lobbying the European Commission to modernise the Railway State Aid Guidelines. Its goal is to make it easier for EU member states to fund the purchase, renewal, and retrofitting of rolling stock through clearer and more flexible provisions.

Faced with regulatory delay and equipment scarcity, Constant has opted to pivot at Nox. Rather than chasing second-hand sleeper cars, the company is refurbishing high-speed daytime coaches capable of reaching 200 km/h. This is not only a response to availability but a tactical move to secure better track slots on saturated corridors. Nox follows the “Express” model, which connects large city centres without intermediate stops.

“We avoid intermediate stops during the night and concentrate arrivals on a limited number of key destinations. This approach reduces operational complexity and provides infrastructure managers with greater flexibility in capacity allocation,” Constant explains. The strategy minimises delay risk and aligns with the discretionary framework described by MEP Tilly Metz, whereby infrastructure managers have the legal leeway to decide which trains get priority. However, it also comes at a cost: smaller cities lose access in the name of operational survivability.

Constant agrees that while the 2030 Capacity Regulation will provide a “predictable, harmonised, and enforceable framework,” startups cannot wait four years for the law to catch up. For now, the strategy is “clear, early, and transparent coordination” with track managers.

Until political ambition matches the reality of cross-border operations on booking platforms, rolling stock, and congested tracks, the situation will remain precarious for Europe's struggling night trains. Still, one

thing is clear: the pyjama protests, the determination of new entrants, and the Capacity Regulation show that the night train renaissance may yet materialise.

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