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Learnings from Rastatt disaster: Infrastructure Managers must strengthen their support for international services

The seven-week interruption of the Rhine Valley freight route caused by the DB Netz incident in Rastatt has made 2017 a black year for European rail freight, both operationally and financially. The lack of contingency plans and incompatible, underperforming re-routing options caused significant damage to the whole value chain of rail freight transportation as well as to the industries that have entrusted their volumes to the ecologically sustainable rail system.

Train operations were difficult and in many cases nearly impossible on the diversion routes proposed by DB Netz and the neighbouring infrastructure managers:

- Re-routing via Germany, France and Austria were two to three times as long as the normal route along the Rhine Valley, requiring two to three times more locomotives and locomotive drivers. Despite all efforts, railway undertakings could only generate additional resources to a small extent.
- The re-routing via France and Austria required completely different resources in terms of types of locomotives authorised for running on those networks, train driver skills and terminal capacities. On top of that the profile gauge was inadequate on the diversion routes and the electrification was partly lacking. Only a small number of compatible locomotives and staff with the required skills in terms of route and language knowledge could be provided from other countries, other transport sectors such as passenger traffic and other companies operating on the deviation routes.
- Operations were extremely challenging despite the efforts of all involved staff. Delays of several days as well as last minute train cancellations were the norm. This exasperated the already critical resource availability and severely affected the supply chain of end customers.

Because of the Rastatt disruption, railway undertakings were forced to refuse transport orders by their customers and incurred extremely high costs to perform less than half of their normal volume. Intermodal operators, terminals and transport companies were faced with the same problems. The end customers widely appreciated the efforts of the railway undertakings under these difficult conditions, but nonetheless suffered severe consequences.

DB Netz is now analysing the incident and making proposals on how to prevent such a catastrophic situation as caused by the Rastatt disruption. The sector associations ERFA, NEE and UIRR appreciate and fully support this process. We recommend focusing on the major problems such as interoperability – deviation routes have totally different regulations and demands in terms of locos, drivers, language and train parameters – and improving contingency plans instead of blaming the railway undertakings for not being flexible enough: this diverts from the responsibility of DB Netz to offer a stable and marketable service to its customers.

DB Netz has a clear responsibility and liability towards the railway undertakings and their customers who base their business on the assumption of unhindered access to a rail infrastructure. DB Netz is responsible for the construction works in Rastatt and the risks that were taken. After the incident, DB Netz decided alone on the duration of the interruption without consulting the rail freight sector about the possible operational and financial damage and the effects on the supply chain of European industry.

We now request DB Netz to take full liability for the damages in the freight sector and to propose a clear, fair and easy structured financial settlement of the Rastatt incident within a short time. The freight sector expects a major contribution by DB Netz to rebuild the lost trust and to support the extra efforts in convincing customers that rail is still a reliable partner in the supply chain.

The sector associations ERFA, NEE und UIRR see the Rastatt disruption as a symbol of a still incomplete and non-harmonized European single rail freight market. We now have the chance to thoroughly analyse the failings and to take the necessary measures to be better prepared in the future. The benchmark for European infrastructure managers must clearly be road transportation where infrastructure and access for vehicles and drivers are almost totally harmonised.

Based on the Rastatt experience, we propose the following priority measures:

1. Strengthen operations of international freight traffic

Infrastructure managers must switch from their historically national orientation to an international management of rail freight traffic. Traffic control centres in individual countries must designate international or cross-border specialists who team up with their counterparts in the traffic control centres of other infrastructure managers on the international corridors in order to handle operations of international rail traffic more efficiently.

2. Introduce risk management and contingency plans for freight traffic

Infrastructure managers must improve their risk management related to international freight traffic and strongly improve the international coordination of construction plans. In case of planned or unplanned interruptions, pre-compiled contingency plans need to secure re-routing with equal access parameters for at least 80% of the volume. ERFA, NEE and UIRR also look forward to the results of the ongoing European Commission initiative to coordinate the development of a European template for an infrastructure contingency plan.

3. Create reserve capacities, interconnect rail freight corridors

Transport ministries and infrastructure managers need to foresee reserve capacities in the infrastructure systems in order to guarantee reliability as a prime requirement of end customers to accelerate modal shift. In this specific case, the Rhine-Alpine and North Sea-Mediterranean corridors need to be developed as integrated, interchangeable transport systems with harmonised train parameters (740-m-trains, 4-m-profile) and cross-acceptance for locomotives and drivers.

4. Overcome the language obstacle

Language is one of the main obstacles for flexible railway production. To facilitate access of drivers on the main corridors, a second operational language must be introduced both for train drivers and for traffic controllers. Either a technology-based solution or English as the second operational language should be pursued. The on-going work of ERA and the upcoming revision of the Train Driver's Directive should play a key role in driving forward a workable solution. Changes should be implemented in any case on the main corridors by 2020 at the latest.

5. Improve international crisis management

International rail freight needs to receive a high traffic priority for every European infrastructure manager during normal operations and especially during disruptions and crises. In case of disruptions, a professional, high level international crisis management must be immediately implemented, involving the crisis management decision-making infrastructure managers, transport ministries, railway undertakings and every affected train operator from all affected countries.

ERFA, NEE and UIRR are fully engaged to cooperate with DB Netz and all other European infrastructure managers, with the Rail Freight Corridors, the Rotterdam Sector Declaration signatories as well as with the European Commission in order to make rail freight the preferred transport system in Europe.

Contact:

ERFA	Julia Lamb Secretary General	julia.lamb@erfarail.eu +32 2 513 60 87
NEE	Peter Westenberger Director	Westenberger@netzwerk-bahnen.de +49 30 53 14 91 47 – 3
UIRR	Ralf-Charley Schultze President	rcschultze@uirr.com +32 2 548 78 92