

PRESS RELEASE

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BELGIUM risks becoming the Museum of European Railways

Recently, the Belgian Transport Minister François Bellot said that, due to performance problems, it should “no longer be taboo to talk about the re-integration of the Belgian infrastructure manager Infrabel and the state passenger rail incumbent SNCB/NMBS”¹.

Belgium is located at the heart of European geography and politics. Therefore, the rail operator members of ALLRAIL are **disappointed to hear such a regressive proposal**.

Re-integration carries the major risk of protectionism. Soft instruments can be applied, such as unequal access to facilities or manipulating track access charges to drive up costs for 3rd party operators – just like what happened last year in Poland².

Belgium’s incumbent passenger rail operator has performance problems and also needs massive subsidies. However, the EU Commission – also based in Brussels – has been suggesting a proven solution for years: **further rail market liberalisation**.

Elsewhere in Europe, competition between different passenger rail operators has led to **(1) Improved quality, (2) ‘Can-do’ attitude to performance (3) Reduced burden on passengers and taxpayer³, and crucially (4) More people taking the train**.

Furthermore, some 3rd party operators report positive dealings with infrastructure manager Infrabel since it became independent – it has become more client orientated and pushes for growth of the rail sector as a whole, not just at SNCB/NMBS. The numbers confirm this: passenger ridership grew 3% in 2017.

Unfortunately, **the only taboo for the Belgian Transport Minister seems to be further rail market liberalisation**. Indeed: Mr Bellot plans to protect SNCB/NMBS for fourteen more years - by continuing the directly awarded taxpayer subsidy until 2033.

ALLRAIL’s Secretary General Nick Brooks says: “It is crucial that Mr Bellot introduces the EU’s rail market liberalisation packages as soon as possible. Otherwise - instead of being at the cutting edge of European railways - **Belgium risks becoming the Museum of European railways**”.

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¹ <https://fr.metrotime.be/2019/08/16/must-read/le-ministre-francois-bellot-est-pour-la-fusion-entre-sncb-et-infrabel/>

² https://www.mazowieckie.com.pl/sites/default/files/docs/rynek_kolejowy_pl_2018_04_06_czeslaw_sulima_plk_chce_podniesc_stawki_dostepu_dla_linii_lokalnych_pdf%280%29.pdf

³ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:0f7c7e73-b211-418a-88dc-e211a3e21c17.0001.05/DOC_1&format=PDF