

## Getting back on track after COVID with Anna Deparnay-Grunenberg

**Cláudia Pinto:** All on board to your new weekly favourite podcast, *Next Stop*, where you will find out all there is to know about trains. 2021 is the European Year of Rail, a year to remind us that the journey is as important as the destination. Trains are intertwined with the development of regions and cities, they are connected to culture, to art, and honestly, just bring out my best Erasmus memories. I am Cláudia, and this is Next Stop, a podcast by the spring 2021 trainees of the European Committee of the Regions.

Starting from small steam locomotives, they now connect entire regions, entire countries and even continents. The longest train ride in the world is between Portugal, where I am from, and Vietnam with approximately seventeen thousand kilometres and would take 13 days to complete.

Joining us today is the member of the European Parliament: Anna Deparnay-Grunenberg, an MEP from the Greens, from Germany, to talk about the relaunch of transport after the pandemic. Anna is a forestry and environmental scientist from Berlin. She is a member of the European Parliament since 2019, where she is in the Committee on Transport and Tourism. Anna is also the rapporteur for the European Year of Rail. Anna, herzlich willkommen. Thank you so much for taking the time to be here with us today. Summer is approaching, even though it doesn't quite seem like the case in Brussels, where it's raining all the time. The restrictions are being lifted, vaccinations are gearing up. So, Anna, how was your last train ride and how much are you looking forward to your next one?

**Anna Deparnay Grunenberg:** Hello, everybody. Thank you very much for having me here. To be honest, I was traveling by train last week. I went to Berlin and I had my vaccine there. And so I was really happy and I met some colleagues from the Bundestag. The trip was really easy and peaceful. Of course, we all know: with the mask is not so nice as without it. Although it's necessary in those times. I'm looking forward to be more active and travel more by trains. I want to go to Strasbourg and to Brussels and to all places I want to visit in my activity as a member of Parliament. For example, we are working on forests and on illegal logging, and I plan to go to Romania to have a look there. It will be good if we do that by train, maybe by night train, we will see.

**Cláudia Pinto:** We, as young people, we are attracted to traveling, and we are a generation marked by Erasmus and by international mobility. So I have to say, at least on behalf of the CoR trainees, we are also very much looking forward to our train rides, obviously always respecting the COVID restrictions this year, especially because it's the European Year of the Rail (and you are the rapporteur of this project). My next question to you is: what is your assessment of this initiative so far and what are your expectations for the months yet to come?

**Anna Deparnay Grunenberg:** The pandemic made it difficult for this European Year of Rail. A lot of events, of course, had to be postponed or cancelled. But I think, as a parliamentary, I really wanted to improve the rail system and to make a positive narrative for not only the present, where rail brought us today, but also where it can bring us in the future. So we put a lot of really concrete political statement in the paper, for example the track access charges, to make it more fair in the future and to try to make the trains more affordable. We want to have a more harmonized way of systems so we don't have to change the booking. We want for young people, and for everybody, to have thorough ticketing so you can have one ticket and travel all over Europe - like you're doing when you're taking a flight ticket, and not to make it so

complicated like it is today. However, we are a little bit disappointed and concerned about the rail passenger rights, because we have now the *force majeure* coming in, the new regulation, which means it's not so secure for passengers to see that their rights are really being respected. We try to extend the European Year of Rail until 2022 due to the pandemic. We want to see the revival of this pleasure to travel, like you told me, that people are feeling when travelling by train and really feeling the European Year of Rail.

**Cláudia Pinto:** Yes, that's so true. Also, it's so important for our listeners and for the citizens to have their rights upheld and it's very good to hear that our politicians are paying attention to that and trying to do the best they can to make citizens' rights being upheld. Because, obviously, we have been living with restrictions in the past year, the railway sector has been severely impacted. Do you think that institutions and the member states are addressing enough funding either through the recovery and resilience plans or the multiannual financial framework to recover, but most importantly, renew the transport sector?

**Anna Deparnay Grunenberg:** Definitely not. We have to change our perspective on investments. When you see how much money is spent for roads and for the aviation sector, meanwhile, less money is put in the railway system... Also, we know that train transport is more climate friendly. There is a real problem in that. So with the recovery and resilience plan, we have a good start because we have at least 37% of the expenditure from the climate investment, which should be done by the member states. It's a good signal. We know that few countries already said that they're going to invest a lot in the digital systems for making the rail system better. We have to be careful where to spend the money in the transport sector. We have a great potential of change for every Euro we're investing. It will play a significant role in delivering the investment needed to make rail fit for the future. We hope that the young people, like you, are going to push in that way the decisions for the future.

**Cláudia Pinto:** Yes, definitely. We are at a time that we have to harness the potential for change and this generation is very active with their ideas and they really are true change makers. So we also want to see a stronger and more resilient transport sector. We are very thankful for all the work that you have been doing so far. At the same time, the railway sector has been less impacted than other sectors, for example, the aviation industry. How do you think that these two sectors can work together to create a greener, more resilient and stronger transport system?

**Anna Deparnay Grunenberg:** Of course the aviation sector is going to have difficulties to prove that they are green, because they are not. At the same time, we cannot travel to other continents without planes. What we can do is cooperate better between railway system and aviation regarding the long distance flights. So, the short haul flights are really the most impacting the environment, when comparing the number of kilometres, you are doing. We have to reduce them. Of course we have to provide some alternatives, some good ones. So the night trains are what can really connect Europe and permit to create connections up to a thousand kilometres, which would connect Europe cities. We also have to look that the infrastructure is good for high speed train connections, and also for the regional and local, because you have to start where you are living or where you're working. Of course, nobody or just a few of us, are living close to the main station. So we have, of course, to have a look on the regional public transport, a different way to go to the station. So that's the way we can do a new transport system all over Europe. Of course, we have to pay attention to the fuel and to the energy sector and aviation to put some clean energy in that. We will see, I suppose the aviation sector will become a little bit more expensive. But I hope we're going to have a lot of good alternatives with train connections.

**Cláudia Pinto:** Yes, I definitely hope so, too, especially for the local and regional level. That's very important. I really appreciate you bringing those examples. They are very important for the members of the Committee of the Regions. It's very important also to address the issue of sustainable mobility. It's also very crucial for the local and regional level, and it's one of the nine pillars of the European Green Deal. So maybe you can give us more examples of how we can make the railway sector, especially at local level, more convenient for the citizens, because it's not just about telling our citizens to switch off their cars and take the train. We also have to make those connections viable and efficient.

**Anna Deparnay Grunenberg:** First of all, we need a better ticket platform. Even better would be a EU platform, where you could have all relevant information about all systems, you could maybe apply some filter, so you could whether you want your connection to be quick, or cheap, or if you want to be really comfortable, so you could really choose and you have all the offers of all different railways taken into account, but you would also be able to mix them maybe with some alternative like the bus. So you could really make your journey from A to B and C and use this platform to choose what would be the best for you. We need a unified ticket sales system across the EU. So you know that your ticket is really valid from A to B and you're taking with you your rights, even if maybe sometimes you're missing a connection, you can take a next one and your ticket is valid for that, too. We have to make public transport more affordable in the country and in the regions. We have to think about alternative ideas about the last miles, maybe some local taxi or bus - in the better way with electric engine. So you can do the last mile to go to your place and you can really plan your journey. If necessary, of course, the countries have to subsidize the economically irrelevant areas, because we need to have the whole system, so we could say to people: "now there are alternatives - look at them". You can do some really interesting stuff when people are moving. We know, from the psychology of transport, that people, when they are moving, getting a new job, having family, those are the key moment when they're thinking about their mobility. When you're moving, it would be really nice option to have, for instance a card for one month you can use public transport for half price or maybe just for free. Also just to rent a bike and so on. So we are just catching people when they are moving and giving them the opportunity. Those are the things we can do to make an innovative and resilient sector and to put just possibilities for people.

**Cláudia Pinto:** Those examples are very, very interesting and I really like the fact that you brought the aspect of psychology of transport. I personally wasn't aware of those examples and I feel like I learned a lot from them. I also really appreciate you bringing the aspect of making public and public transport more affordable, because, for young people, that's so important for us. We have to pay, as well as the workers, we have to pay the pass to go to work, to go to Uni. That can be a huge expense in our budget in the end of the month.

Unfortunately, we are running out of time. We have to come to an end of this podcast interview. So we just want to ask you if you have any final message for our listeners, so they can engage in the European Year of the Rail. What do you hope to be the impact of this initiative for the coming years as well?

**Anna Deparnay Grunenberg:** What everybody can do is get in touch with the political decision makers at the local level to visit and organize events by yourself and contribute to the debate with the ideas and concerns about railway travels. What is really useful is to spread your experience: that's really important, to have really personal experience by traveling by train or night train, to share maybe on social media and just to speak out loudly what you want a society from tomorrow to be and maybe put the hashtag #EUYearOfRail. We want to celebrate and to

promote rail for both reasons: cultural significance and every day importance. I would like to invite everybody to just ask for improvements for passengers and to engage locally, and -I hope that will be my last sentence- that the study we put on, as the Greens, for the EU Commission and is coming out in autumn, we are going to have really good answers how to create fair competition between modes of transport and put all the externalities, so the extent of pollution is reflected in the price, so we really can compare which kind of transport is the best for our citizens and for the future.

### **Pop Wagon section**

**Mila Ćorić, Xavi Miró, Jose Manuel Llopis Ortiz:** We are Mila, Xavi and Jose.

**Jose Manuel Llopis Ortiz:** We welcome you to the Pop Wagon. The cultural section of Next Stop. In the next episode we will show you that trains are present in our lives in more ways that you think.

**Xavi Miró:** Trains are actually everywhere.

**Mila Ćorić:** Trains have been part of our society's cultures and lives for almost two centuries, leaving the marks of the rails everywhere. Sit in our cultural wagon and discover them with us!

**Jose Manuel Llopis Ortiz:** One good example is the presence of trains in film. These vehicles have been represented many times on the screen. In fact, trains have been connected to movies since the dawn of the 7th Art. One of the first movies ever made was the *Arrival of a Train* from 1896. This short film, made by the Lumière Brothers featured a close up shot of a steam train pulling into a station. According to the legend, during the premiere at Paris, the audience panicked and went for the back of the theater, thinking they were going to get crushed.

**Mila Ćorić:** Very funny, but that's not true.

**Jose Manuel Llopis Ortiz:** Oh, come on, it is.

**Mila Ćorić:** Nope.

**Jose Manuel Llopis Ortiz:** Party pooper.

**Xavi Miró:** Another guy who panicked in relation to trains, was tsar Nicholas II. During the First World War, Russia went through a very turbulent period, with the Soviets taking control over the whole country. In March 1917, the tsar was returning to the capital in his personal train when, after the fall of Petrograd he was forced to resign by his own military staff, while still sitting inside the train. He was forced to abdicate.

**Jose Manuel Llopis Ortiz:** Poor guy.

**Mila Ćorić:** Yes, and I'm sure that when they captured him, they didn't respect the social distance or the use of facemasks.

**Jose Manuel Llopis Ortiz:** As we promised, the world of trains never ceases to amaze us.

**Mila Ćorić:** Indeed.

**Xavi Miró:** It is fascinating.

**Jose Manuel Llopis Ortiz:** That's why we want to recommend you a museum and we will do so in each episode. Today, we bring to you: *Train World*, a museum which opened very recently in Brussels, where this podcast is being recorded. It is the official museum of the National Railway Company of Belgium, and it displays twenty-two historical locomotives.

**Mila Ćorić:** Well, I haven't visited it yet.

**Jose Manuel Llopis Ortiz:** Really?! It's here in Brussels. We should go now, when we finish the program.

**Mila Ćorić:** Let's go then!

**Xavi Miró:** Wait, wait! Before finishing, we wouldn't like to say goodbye without presenting our quote of the day.

*It doesn't matter which side of the track you're from. The train still rolls the same.* From the handicapped sportsman: Robert M. Hensel.

**Mila Ćorić:** For sure, tsar Nicholas would not agree with these words. On one side of the track, he was the emperor of one of the great European powers, on the other side he got imprisoned and he didn't end well. But OK, let's not think that holds literally.

**Xavi Miró:** Great. I'll take your advice. I hope you do, too.

**Mila Ćorić:** Also, we hope you've enjoyed our first trip with the Pop Wagon.

**Jose Manuel Llopis Ortiz:** Stay tuned to our podcast and discover more about the world of trains.

**Cláudia Pinto:** The European Year of Rail is an initiative by the European Commission to raise awareness to the many advantages related to trains. Trains are comfortable, they are more accessible, more affordable, and most importantly, they are more sustainable and a key player if we want to lower our carbon emissions. From the European Committee of the Regions side we also want to highlight the importance of trains in bringing regions and cities together, especially those which are far away from the main capitals. So, get on board and the CoR trainees will take you on a journey through the cities and regions of Europe.