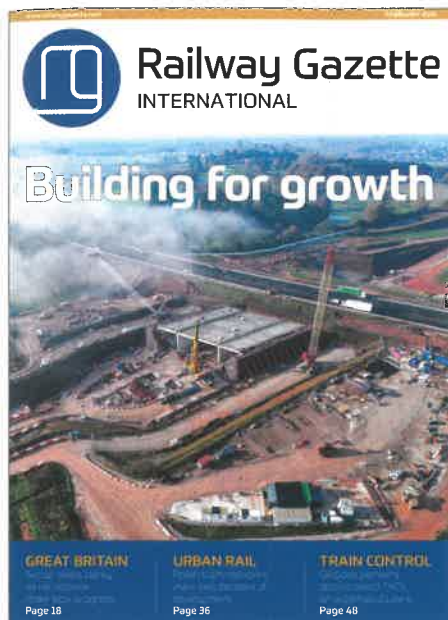


## Volume 181 No 2



Construction is forging ahead on the first phase of the **High Speed 2** link between London and the West Midlands, but a further project review has been commissioned in an effort to control the spiralling costs (p23). Meanwhile, questions remain as to whether the much-truncated scheme will be able to deliver the capacity benefits needed to relieve Britain's heavily utilised rail network.

Photo: HS2 Ltd

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Two prototype CR450 high speed trainsets designed for a maximum speed of 450 km/h and an operating speed of 400 km/h were unveiled in Beijing by CRRC and China Railway on December 29. CR said the event was 'significant for building China's high-level self-reliance and strength in railway science and technology.'

The CR450AF and CR450BF have been developed under the CR450 Science & Technology Innovation Project launched in 2021. Each eight-car trainset has four powered vehicles, using water-cooled permanent magnet traction systems, while the braking systems have been designed so the stopping distance is comparable to existing trains running at lower speeds.

The CR450 is reported to be 10% lighter than the previous CR400. Measures to reduce drag include bogie enclosures. The nose of one train has been inspired by an arrowhead, and the other by an eagle in flight. CRRC said the design prioritised passenger comfort, with advanced noise-reduction technologies ensuring a smooth and quiet ride, even at 400 km/h.

# COMMENT

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## Beware of the DOGE

**A**s cries for help go, this one is not especially subtle. With Donald Trump back in the White House and speculation mounting about what that means for federal funding, the California High Speed Rail Authority has launched a quest to find external specialists in a range of rail-related disciplines.

As we went to press, the authority was preparing to hold a two-day forum on January 30-31, seeking 'industry leaders and innovators to join us for in-depth, one-on-one discussions' to 'obtain expert industry feedback on critical technical topics.' These include Funding & Financing — including private investment; track design; tunnelling; and 'infrastructure cost estimation'.

This comes despite the fact that around two-thirds of the initial 275 km Merced – Bakersfield starter section is already under construction. CHSRA reported on December 10 that 'full environmental clearance' had now been obtained for 745 km of the planned route 'from the Bay Area to downtown Los Angeles'.

It is not hard to discern a very real concern about what Trump and — perhaps more importantly — his allies have in store for a project that, rather like Britain's High Speed 2 programme (p23), has become a lightning rod for criticism. Towards the end of 2024, media outlets in California carried a flurry of reports that the new administration would axe federal funding for CHSRA, as Trump had sought to do during his last term.

Now he arguably has more weapons in his arsenal, most notably the Department of Government Efficiency, an ostensibly advisory body tasked with reviewing every facet of federal government spending. DOGE is to be co-chaired by tech entrepreneur Elon Musk and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy.

Posting on Musk-owned platform X, Ramaswamy described the California high speed line as 'a wasteful vanity project ... with little prospect of completion in the next decade,' suggesting that the projected cost was now 'between \$88.5bn and \$127.9bn'.



His post soon attracted other critics, with Representative Kevin Kiley, a member of the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, commenting that DOGE had 'homed in on the single greatest example of waste and inefficiency in American history. I look forward to killing this project, once and for all.'

According to *The Sacramento Bee*, Representative John Garamendi, another member of the Committee, felt 'the billionaires are being given an incredible amount of influence over government spending decisions.' He warned that there were [at that point] only 45 days left 'to secure the funding of not only high speed rail' but every other federal transportation and green energy programme.

The threat to the California project is perhaps a symptom of a much bigger story about the return of the 'MAGA crew', emboldened and in a potentially far stronger political position. Evidence from Trump's first term points to a significant antipathy towards passenger rail and public transport in general, although more recently the president has expressed his admiration for China's vast high speed rail network.

Perhaps this explains the relatively calm initial response from US passenger rail advocates, one of whom noted that Trump's pick for Secretary of Transportation, Sean Duffy (p13), was 'not anti-rail'. Looking at the broader transit sector, academic and blogger Yonah Freemark predicted in early January that 'transportation policy won't be a major feature of [Trump's] first year'. The main federal transport funding legislation does not come due for

renewal until the second half of 2026, but 'the administration could [still] have a major influence on competitive grants, probably meaning more money going to road expansion and less to transit'.

This uncertain outlook comes after a buoyant few years for the US rail supply chain, which has seen significant investment in factories and local subsidiaries by global players such as Siemens Mobility, Hitachi Rail and Stadler.

Must the brakes now be applied? Not necessarily, because city and state authorities still have access to funding outside the federal structure. For example, Tim Mulligan of New York MTA is openly courting suppliers to invest in his state rather than elsewhere (p32).

And then there is the elephant in the room. By far the dominant segment of the US rail sector, the freight railroads could see Trump's 'drill, baby, drill!' mantra as an opportunity to carry more commodities to support mining and fracking. And it is hard to see them complaining if regulators were to take a more robust approach to how Amtrak and the commuter operators can access tracks owned by the Class I's. Welcoming Duffy's nomination, Association of American Railroads' President Ian Jefferies suggested that the AAR would be 'focusing on shared priorities essential to our nation's success: ensuring safe, efficient transportation that reduces costs, bolsters domestic manufacturing, and enhances competitiveness'. Meanwhile, the nomination of former Pan Am Railway President David Fink for Federal Railroad Administrator could also presage a more freight-centric approach to regulation.

Either way, the rail sector will surely be expected to deliver on an 'America First' agenda. With much of his predecessor's Green New Deal agenda already junked in Trump's first few days, touting green credentials is unlikely to gain much traction in the USA in the years ahead. The big risk is that this message starts to lose its potency in the rest of the world too. 🌐

“Evidence from Trump's first term points to a significant antipathy towards passenger rail and public transport in general”

## Briefing

With effect from January 1, Swiss Federal Railways has been using electricity entirely from **renewable** sources to power its trains. Previously around 90% of SBB's electricity needs were met by hydropower and the remaining 10% from nuclear. The nuclear energy is now being sold on the open market, with SBB purchasing an equivalent amount of electricity from certified renewable sources.

**Northumberland Line** passenger services between Newcastle, Seaton Delaval and Ashington began running on December 15, and the reopened line in northeast England carried more than 50 000 passengers in the first month of operations. Intermediate stations at Newsham, Bedlington, Blyth Beside and Northumberland Park are expected to open during the course of 2025.

The African Development Bank has approved a US\$150m loan to **Mauritania's** state-owned iron ore company Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière to support a US\$467m programme to double the capacity of its heavy haul railway by 2030. Plans include the acquisition of up to 36 locomotives and 1 743 wagons.

Work to modernise and electrify the 187 km single-track Vinkovci – Vukovar line in **Croatia** was concluded with a ceremony on December 18 attended by Minister of the Sea, Transport & Infrastructure Oleg Butković. The €61m project was 85% co-financed by the EU.

The European Bank for Reconstruction & Development has approved a €300m loan to help finance the acquisition of electric locomotives by **Ukraine's** national railway Ukrzaliznytsia, in order to ensure uninterrupted transport of agricultural exports and critical imports. The deal will be co-financed by a parallel grant of up to US\$190m from the USA, administered by the World Bank.

# New Operail owner aims to kick-start freight growth

## ESTONIA


Tiigi Keskus plans to expand the activities of Estonia's privatised rail freight business Operail, with management board member Richard Tomingas suggesting that container transport should be a priority. 'Looking to the future, the importance of rail will increase,' he predicted. 'More goods must be transported along railways than on highways to meet national climate objectives.'

The €19m sale completed on December 9 marked the state's withdrawal from the rail freight

and rolling stock maintenance markets. All operations, assets and contracts, including the Operail Repairs business, have been transferred to the property and food group's RailProject subsidiary.

Estonia's national freight operations had previously been sold to the Baltic Rail Services consortium in 2001, but were bought back by the state in 2007 following a dispute over access charges. The government took the decision to privatise the business again in February 2024, deeming rail freight to be non-strategic.

Noting that traffic volumes had

dropped 'dramatically' following Russian aggression in Ukraine, Minister of Infrastructure Vladimir Svet said Estonia was a small country, but rail transport was 'a volume-based business where profits increase with the volumes of goods and the distances they must travel'. Selling the business would allow the government to focus its resources on strategic activities, while the private owner could continue to develop Operail, 'supporting the sustainability of rail as the most eco-friendly and the safest manner of transportation in Estonia'. 

# China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan railway launched

## ASIA

President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Japarov and representatives of the Chinese and Uzbek governments launched construction of the US\$8bn China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan railway with a ceremony at Tosh-Kutchu in the country's Jalal-Abad region on December 27. Main works are expected to begin in July.


The long-planned line would provide a significantly shorter route from China to Central Asia, and a route from Asia to Europe and the Middle East avoiding Russia. A 523 km alignment has been selected, running from Kashgar in China to Andijon in Uzbekistan via Torugart, Arpa, Kosh-Dobo, Makmal and Jalal-Abad.

China and Uzbekistan will be responsible for building their 213 km and 50 km sections. China's 1435 mm gauge will be used for the 344 km from Kashgar to Makmal, while the rest will be laid to 1520 mm gauge.

A trinational joint venture will be responsible for financing, construction and operation of the 260 km section through Kyrgyzstan, which is expected to cost about US\$4.7bn. The high-altitude line will



include 20 stations, 48 bridges totalling 16 km including a 122 m high bridge over the River Kok-Art, and 27 tunnels totalling 103 km.

Commercial operations are projected to begin in 2030. The line will have a capacity of 15 million tonnes of freight per year, and passenger services are under consideration. The single-track line will be designed for 120 km/h operation, initially using diesel traction but with the potential for future electrification. 

# High speed funding approved

## VIETNAM


Investment in a proposed 1 541 km north-south high speed railway between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City has been approved by Vietnam's National Assembly. The 1 435 mm gauge line designed for 350 km/h operation would reduce the end-to-end journey time to around 5½ h.

The line has been under discussion for 18 years, but a recent pre-feasibility study concluded

that conditions in Vietnam were now suitable for work to start. The project has an estimated cost of US\$67bn and is expected to span a number of budget periods.

Construction is scheduled to begin in late 2027 on the first sections, from Ngoc Hoi in Hanoi to Vinh, and from Nha Trang to Thu Thiem in Ho Chi Minh City. Civil works on the central section between Vinh and Nha Trang is expected to follow in 2028-29. The

government aims to complete the line by 2035.

Minister of Transport Tran Hong Minh said the historic decision in favour of a 'dynamic and symbolic project' would create momentum for the economy and help to bring the country into a 'new era of national growth'. Chair of the Economic Committee Vu Hong Thanh added that the railway would provide a 'breakthrough' in socio-economic development. 

## Paris – Berlin direct

### EUROPE

A daily high speed train linking Paris Est and Berlin Hbf was launched on December 16. The cross-border service is operated through the Alleo partnership of SNCF Voyageurs and DB using DB Class 407 Velaro D trainsets with French and German crews.

The train uses high speed lines from Paris to Strasbourg and from Frankfurt to Berlin, calling at Strasbourg, Karlsruhe, Frankfurt Süd and Berlin-Spandau. End-to-end journey time is just over 8 h. The service is targeted at both leisure and business travellers, with the operators highlighting the environmental benefits of rail travel compared to flying.

Marking the first departure from Paris, SNCF CEO Jean-Pierre Farandou said sales were doing well, with an 80% occupancy rate. DB reported that almost three-quarters of bookings covered the entire route, noting that additional trains could be added if the service proved a success.

Suggesting that 'good German-French co-operation is the backbone of a united Europe', DB CEO Richard Lutz described the direct ICE as 'a symbol of this'. German Transport Minister Dr Volker Wissing commented that it was 'not just an additional rail service', but was 'about encounters, exchanges, growing together and mutual understanding'.

## Baltic capitals linked

### EUROPE

The national passenger operators of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have launched co-ordinated services to provide easier rail travel between Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn with effect from January 6.

'By co-ordinating the train schedules in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, we are creating regular train connections between these three countries, which has not been the case for almost 30 years', explained Erlon Chair Lauri Betlem. 'Although it was theoretically possible to travel

by train between the capitals before, the new schedules will make the transfers much more convenient.'

Raitis Nešpors, Chair of Latvia's Vivi, said the operators were pursuing a common goal to improve connectivity between the Baltic States, adding that 'the work that has been started to promote mobility between the states will be continued'.

End to end journey time from Tallinn to Vilnius with changes in Riga and Valga is about 10½ h, but it is hoped that the completion of infrastructure repairs in Estonia could reduce this by an hour.

National tax requirements and differing IT systems mean that separate tickets must be bought for each leg. Work is under way to develop a simpler ticketing system for rollout during the first quarter of 2025.



## EuroCity Direct launched

### EUROPE

A premium EuroCity Direct inter-city service connecting Brussels and Amsterdam was launched with the timetable change on December 15.

The hourly cross-border trains provide a limited-stop service linking Brussels Midi, Antwerpen Centraal, Rotterdam Centraal, Schiphol Airport, and Amsterdam Zuid. Several trains each day are extended to Lelystad Centrum, calling additionally at Almere Centrum and Buiten. Journey times between Brussels and Amsterdam are 2 h at weekends and 2 h 8 min on weekdays,

with an extended stop in Antwerpen.

The Direct services are mainly operated with eight-car Alstom Coradia Stream EMUs of Class ICNG-B, designated Class 3300 by NS (RG 722 p24). These three-system trainsets with seats for 410 passengers have four powered bogies and a continuous rating of 3390 kW to suit 200 km/h operation.

Pending delivery of all 21 sets, the ICNG-B units are being augmented by the older push-pull formations of Belgian III coaches top-and-tailed by Traxx locomotives. These also operate an hourly EuroCity train calling at intermediate stations between Brussels and Rotterdam; each service provides 16 trains each way per day.



Photo: Bart Van Tricht

## Room for growth at St Pancras

### UK

International passenger capacity at London St Pancras could be more than doubled to improve the user experience and potentially facilitate new train services, according to a study commissioned by station operator HS1 Ltd from customer experience design agency Active Thinking.

The study found that expanded infrastructure and enhanced border security processes could increase capacity from 1800 to around 2400 passengers/h over the next three to four years.

Reconfiguring the international area could permit a further increase up to 5000 passengers/h in the longer term.

The current arrangements at St Pancras have led to long queues for check-in, security and border checks, and there have been concerns that the problems could be exacerbated by changes to border control protocols, including the forthcoming introduction of the EU's Entry Exit System.

Enabling more passengers to be processed would reduce the need for travellers to arrive well before departure time, and provide

capacity to accommodate the potential launch of additional international services. HS1 Ltd will now develop an operational delivery plan and undertake a design study looking at how to implement the proposed changes whilst respecting the heritage of the Grade I listed station.

In November the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Rail Group was told that Channel Tunnel concessionaire Getlink believed the rail industry had reached a 'turning point' that could finally enable the launch of new operators competing with Eurostar. Virgin

and Evolyn were among those developing proposals to introduce cross-Channel services.

In its Final Determination on HS1 Ltd's spending plans for the five years to March 31 2030, the Office of Rail & Road has directed the high speed line concessionaire to lower its access charges for passenger and freight trains on the route from London to the Channel Tunnel. The regulator said overall charges should come down by 3-8% (£5m per year) compared to HS1 Ltd's proposals published in November. The determination assumes long-term growth in passenger traffic, including new operators, and ORR said it hoped that the lower charges would support such growth.

# GySEV refocuses

## HUNGARY

The Ministry of Construction & Transport is aiming to increase the role of cross-border railway group GySEV in public transport operations, it confirmed to *Railway Gazette International* on December 18.

Following local media reports that GySEV was to take over services on 800 route-km from national operator MÁV-Start, the ministry said the details had not yet been decided, 'but our goal is indeed to have GySEV participate in the operation of public transport in western Hungary to a greater extent in 2025'.

Routes being considered for transfer are:

- Székesfehérvár – Szombathely;
- Veszprém – Győr;
- Keszthely – Tapolca – Boba;

- Pápa – Csorna;
- Bajánsenye – Zalaegerszeg – Boba;
- Zalaszentiván – Nagykanizsa (– Gyékényes).

Established in 1872, GySEV maintains and operates 439 route-km in Hungary, and owns 70 route-km in Austria, where it is branded as Raaberbahn. In October 2024 the Hungarian government purchased the 6.1% stake in the group previously held by construction company Strabag. That brought its holding to 71.8%, with the remaining 28.2% held by the Austrian state.

'By purchasing Strabag's stake in GySEV, the Hungarian state in practice gained access to two railway companies, MÁV and GySEV, in which it exercises management rights', the ministry explained.



'We consider the co-ordination of the operations of the two railway companies not only an opportunity, but also an obligation and a responsible strategy'.

On December 23 GySEV signed an agreement to sell a 62.5% stake in its rail freight business GySEV Cargo to Hungarian logistics company Waberer's International. Subject to regulatory approval, the transaction is expected to be completed by the second half of 2025.

Waberer's said it was committed to a further capital increase of HF2bn in GySEV Cargo, which would increase its stake to 70%. In 2024 the company acquired a 51% stake in Hungarian rail and road logistics operator Petrolsped Group, and it was 'now able to provide long-distance rail transport services in Romania, Hungary and Austria with its own rail fleet', according to Chairman & CEO Zsolt Barna. 

# Ouigo reaches Brussels

## EUROPE

In what the two incumbents termed 'a co-operation between historic operators', SNCF and SNCB launched a low-cost hauled Ouigo service between Paris and Brussels on December 17.


SNCF's Chief Executive for TGV-Intercités Alain Krakovitch said the move was a response to 'high competition with carbonised transport like cars and coach'.

Since the launch of high speed services between Paris and Brussels in the mid-1990s, conventional passenger trains between

the two capitals have steadily withered. Competitors including Flix Mobility and Trenitalia floated proposals for open access services but little progress was achieved.

The Ouigo service provides three trains each way per day with an end-to-end journey time of around 3 h. Intermediate stops are made at Creil, Aulnoye-Aymeries and Mons, and from April one train in each direction will also call at St-Quentin. Thalys ceased serving Mons in 2015, citing a lack of rolling stock fitted with the necessary train protection equipment.

The Brussels service is the first expansion of the Ouigo Train Classique concept outside France. The trains are formed of Belgian I11 coaches powered by Siemens Class 18 multi-system electric locos, while drivers and train managers are being provided by both operators.

Fares start at €10 for a single Paris – Brussels journey, and SNCF reported that 50 000 tickets were sold in the first two weeks after bookings opened in November. 

Read the latest news at [www.railwaygazette.com](http://www.railwaygazette.com)

## Briefing

Funding agreements for the **Moskva – St Petersburg** high speed rail project were signed on December 23. Total cost of the 629 km line and rolling stock is now estimated at 2.35tr roubles. Sberbank will organise two syndicated loans totalling 1.79tr roubles for infrastructure construction and the acquisition of the rolling stock. VTB will invest more than 400bn roubles in construction. The 21-year infrastructure loan will be provided to VSM Dve Stolitsy, which holds a 40-year concession for the project awarded by federal railway agency Roszheldor. The 25-year rolling stock loan will go to state transport leasing body GTLK.

The European Commission has approved under EU **state aid** rules a €41m Dutch scheme to promote modal shift of freight from road to rail by providing direct grants for the installation of upgraded versions of ETCS onboard equipment. The scheme will run from January 1 2025 to October 1 2029, providing up to €200 000 per vehicle or a maximum of €2m for projects requiring development.



Photo: Christophe Masse