A matter of life and death

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The TER4RAIL project, financed by the EU-backed SHIFT2RAIL initiative, is working on a research programme titled "Rail as Benefit to EU Society," and has carried out surveys, data-mining, and analyses of future change drivers. However, a new factor has recently emerged, the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), bringing about implications that simply cannot be omitted.

The current situation has profoundly changed daily habits, altered or even halted mobility, put constraints on personal freedom, and left many wondering whether returning to pre-pandemic status quo is even a thing. All of a sudden, EU citizens, not least the transport & logistics community, have started feeling insecure about the future. Have we just witnessed the rewriting of the game rules?

Critical yet exposed

Although the vast majority of EU Member States have imposed lockdowns, the freight transport system has demonstrated incredible resilience. Whereas millions of people isolate themselves at home, while many business activities have been almost instantly shut down, ships, trucks, trains and aircraft continue to deliver goods to shops, pharmacies, hospitals, etc. In that sense transport & logistics vividly marked its position as critical for the proper functioning of modern societies. Effective lockdowns couldn't be implemented if it weren't for all those people shipping consumables and medicines, in many cases up to our doorsteps. Who knows, maybe the general public will change its perception of transport being nothing more than just pollution, noise, and traffic jams.

That said, the industry has been impacted by the pandemic, too. Road transportation – which in recent decades has proved invincible in terms of efficiency, punctuality, flexibility, and adaptability to changing business conditions – has been for the first time exposed to fundamental vulnerabilities caused by border closures, increased health checks, and the risk of contracting and spreading the virus as truck drivers cover hundreds of kilometres and have direct contact with many people, including end customers in the case of couriers. As a result, the supply chain suffered from substantial disruptions such as border queues as well as high levels of stress, with truckers fearing to undergo quarantine after crossing a border, if not in the destination country then surely back home. Vehicle productivity has gone down, effectively bringing up transportation costs.

To a certain extent, the situation isn't new. In the past, the road sector had to cope with transit permits. In those days, in order to overcome the transit limitations, the change of tractors relay was organized using domestic drivers to uncouple/couple the trailers, hence cover the lack of permit distance. This system was particularly put to use across long hauls going between the South (Mediterranean) and the North (Scandinavia), but also on some West-East corridors before the introduction of the rolling motorway concept for transporting trucks by rail. Are we then up for the reintroduction of such a system? One could ask whether this wouldn't oppose the EU founding principles of free movement of goods.

Getting the priorities straight

Rail freight – or intermodality in general, including inland waterways – seems to find itself better suited to continue its more or less business as usual operations in conditions laid forth by COVID-19. Industrial services, say from a mine to a power plant or berth, have experienced little to no change, the fear of decreasing demand being their main concern rather than that people will get infected.

It is widely known that rail is reducing the transported unit cost progressively in proportion to distance, unlike road which produces the opposite effect. Modern logisticians may not be too proud of their solutions since everything had already been invented, like when Italian wine was transported in the 19th century through the Gotthard Pass up to Basel with the use of horse-pulled carts and then northbound

on-board barges. Today, the same is done across the North-South Rail corridor, only trains have replaced carthorses.

The million-dollar question is as follows: will the pandemic pressure supply chain organisers to make a greater shift from road onto rail, even if it would compromise punctuality? However, is on-the-dot delivery still a deciding factor under COVID-19 trading conditions and thereafter? Will just in sequence or the push-pull strategies be left unaffected, especially at a very low cost? Will putting rail transport more in the centre bring about more benefits as opposed to the fragmented situation we have today? Last but not least, what can technological developments and the EU Green Deal do to base freight transportation on rail's back, all in order to make the transport system and people working in it more resilient and safer should a deadly and infectious micro-organism rapidly spread around the world again.

No turning back?

Curiously, COVID-19 has resulted in certain environmental gains, just as choosing rail over road does. No cars – most importantly, no private passenger vehicles – no emissions, no gases, no particles, no congestion, no noise. While people are trapped indoors, fresh unpolluted air is out there enjoyed by nobody except for police officers and ambulance crews, deserted in unreal silence of the empty streets (note that I'm reporting this from northern Italy, quietness not being the hallmark of my fellow countrymen). Somebody with a knack for conspiracy theories could accuse Greta Thunberg of plotting the whole thing. Jokes aside, will the pandemic spark afresh the debate around how urban transportation should be organised to be more eco-friendly, the combination of trains, trams, and metro considered the most proper choice? On the other hand, there's a real risk that people will fear public transportation; thus, individual car traffic will rebound or even go beyond what we were used to for good (safety) measure.

It's vitally important to assess whether the current situation is indeed a game-changer. If so, what are the rules we should be playing by now, hence what new solutions – up to those encompassing entire transport corridors and systems – should take the place of the old ones? This is, by all means, no trivial task; since a couple of months now we've been becoming shockingly aware that transport & logistics isn't only about same-day delivery of a new smartphone – nowadays, it's also a matter of life and death. ■

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