

Answer given by Mrs de Palacio on behalf of the Commission

(25 April 2003)

As already indicated in the Commission's answer to Written Question E-0473/03 ⁽¹⁾ by the Honourable Member, the first set of technical specifications for interoperability (TSIs) for high-speed train services was adopted by the Commission on 30 May 2002. The technical specification for rolling stock contains several fire safety provisions, including the one mentioned by the Honourable Member concerning fire resistance. These TSIs apply to all new rolling stock and, under certain conditions, upgrading/renewal projects. They will, in future, ensure not only greater standardisation of rolling stock and better movement across frontiers, but also genuine competition on markets which traditionally used to be de facto monopolies. However, change will take place gradually over several years, and it is quite normal that there are anomalies such as those mentioned by the Honourable Member.

With regard to the adoption by a Member State of safety rules stricter than the Community rules and the possible resulting distortion of competition, this problem is being discussed in the context of the second railway package ⁽²⁾ presented by the Commission on 23 January 2002 on which the Transport Council reached political agreement on 28 March 2003.

⁽¹⁾ See page 134.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 126, 28.5.2002.

(2003/C 242 E/156)

WRITTEN QUESTION E-0583/03**by Erik Meijer (GUE/NGL) to the Commission**

(28 February 2003)

Subject: Various characteristics of high-speed lines that prevent their use by high-speed trains of a different type

1. Can the Commission confirm that following the differences in track gauges in the early years of the railways and the wide variations in voltage existing since electrification, there is now a third generation of obstacles to interchangeability and cross-border movement of rolling stock, caused by the fact that high-speed trains of one type seem to have difficulty running on tracks designed for trains of a different type, even when these trains are equipped to use power from overhead cables with different types of voltage?
2. Is the Commission aware that this problem first became apparent on the new high-speed line opened in 2002 in Germany and Belgium, in that no trains except the German ICE-3 can run on the new line between Cologne and Frankfurt Airport, while on the Frankfurt-Brussels line this same ICE-3 cannot at the moment make use of the new line between Liège and Leuven, so that the journey takes 14 minutes longer, although, in addition to seven train pairs, a Thalys train with a maximum speed of 300 km/h and frequent internal Belgian trains with a maximum speed of 200 km/h make use of this line?
3. Is it apparent from this that the technical specifications of the various high-speed trains that have been designed in Europe over the past 25 years are so divergent that there is no possibility at present of fulfilling the EU ambition of interoperability?
4. How does the Commission intend, in respect of intra-European long-distance rail passenger transport, to bridge the period between the present unsatisfactory situation and the time when the current differences, resulting in limited accessibility, are over?

Answer given by Mrs de Palacio on behalf of the Commission

(8 April 2003)

The problem of rail interoperability raised by the Honourable Member is not new. The Maastricht Treaty called on the Community to take the necessary measures to promote the interoperability of the trans-European transport network. This launched a process of formulating Community rules, firstly with Council Directive 96/48/EC of 23 July 1996 on the interoperability of the trans-European high-speed rail

system⁽¹⁾, then with Directive 2001/16/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 March 2001 on the interoperability of the trans-European conventional rail system⁽²⁾. These Directives introduced a procedure for adopting technical specifications for interoperability (TSIs). The first generation of TSIs for the high-speed system was adopted by the Commission on 30 May 2002 and has applied to all new projects since 1 December 2002.

Given that the railways have, throughout their history, been developed on a purely national basis, harmonisation of the rail system is a major undertaking. That is why the Community has chosen a gradual, step-by-step approach, tackling the top priority issues: loading gauge, track gauge, power supply voltage, line safety, and operating and maintenance rules.

Achieving interoperability involves a complex migration strategy for each of the technical aspects involved. The more rapidly the TSIs are available the shorter the transition period will be, especially if the TSIs are accompanied by appropriate action at Community level.

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 235, 17.9.1996.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 110, 20.4.2001.

(2003/C 242 E/157)

WRITTEN QUESTION E-0584/03

by Erik Meijer (GUE/NGL) to the Commission

(28 February 2003)

Subject: Danger to passengers escaping from fires represented by the power supply running alongside underground railway tracks in narrow tunnels without footpaths

1. Is the Commission aware that most metro systems for underground public transport in cities work on an electricity supply carried by a third rail running alongside the rails on which the trains travel, and that some of these raised electricity rails, although partially covered by wood (Hamburg) or synthetic material (most cities), nevertheless represent a contact risk which would be fatal to human beings?
2. Is the Commission also aware that although in the event of fire in metro tunnels caused either by technical faults or deliberate attempts to cause disasters, passengers must be able to escape quickly, *inter alia* because of the rapid burning up of the already scarce oxygen supply in tunnels, no underground railway tunnels built before 1980 have a special raised footpath for escaping passengers?
3. Does the Commission recognise that passengers who have to make their escape through old, narrow tunnels over rails running alongside the live current rail run an unacceptably high risk because they not only have to escape quickly from the fire, but also have to avoid any contact with the power rail that acts as a low fence?
4. Does the Commission agree with me that this is not a purely local problem, but a Community safety problem of growing importance, which is present in many European cities, and that we cannot wait for local solutions, which are usually only sought after a disaster has occurred in any given city?
5. Is the Commission prepared to ensure that before a date to be decided all underground railway tunnels in the EU must have a safe escape path that is not identical with the railway, and that where tunnels are too narrow or cannot be widened, the power supply may only come via an overhead cable (as in the case of a tram or electric train) or through an overhead power rail (like the one in Madrid)?