



**Connect European Capitals and People by High-Speed Rail**  
100<sup>th</sup> European Citizens' Initiative  
Commission registration number: ECI(2023)000004  
<https://www.connect-capitals-hsr.eu/>

President of the European Commission  
Attn: Mrs Ursula von der Leyen  
Rue de la Loi 200  
1040 Bruxelles  
BELGIUM

Also sent by email

Cc:

- Valdis Dombrovskis
- Adina Vălean
- Paolo Gentiloni

Amsterdam / Brussels, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2024

Dear Mrs Von der Leyen, dear Ursula,

Today is the last day of the 100<sup>th</sup> European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) that your Commission approved last year to connect all European Capitals by High-Speed Rail (<https://www.connect-capitals-hsr.eu>). We started the initiative to enhance Europe's ambitions, and solve the challenges Europe faces today:

1. Enable faster travel on 200 – 800 km distances;
2. Connect capitals, regions and unite its people;
3. Enhance economic growth and prosperity for both capitals and regions;
4. Strengthen Europe's competitiveness;
5. Increase sustainable travel;
6. Lower passenger fares due to increased railway competition;
7. Substitute short-haul flights by high-speed trains and relieve airports; and
8. Decrease traffic jams.

### **Results**

With a great team of 7 citizens from different EU-countries, we concluded the ECI with more than 40,000 signatures. Every team member worked on the project on top of his/her full-time job, and although we would have been able to gain more signatures in the instance that everyone had been available full-time, we obtained a more important and lasting impact than the signatures.

### **High-Speed Rail Netherlands Foundation**

Registered at the Dutch Chamber of Commerce under number 86530445  
<https://www.highspeedrail.nl>



### **A shift in European thinking**

In most countries, we noticed people were not aware that HSR could solve the challenges Europe faces today. By our website, lectures, interviews and other media exposure, Europeans got aware of the tangible solutions for Europe's economic, competitive and sustainability challenges. After hearing the benefits, people communicated back that our capitals and regions should have been connected by high-speed rail decades ago, and wondered why we as Europeans act so late. It is even more remarkable since the European countries Italy, France and Spain have demonstrated the success of long-distance HSR for decades, while we somehow fail to roll out the success at a pan-European level.

### **Uniting politicians**

Not only did our effort change European citizens, it equally turned our politicians. More political parties favor high-speed rail today than they did a year ago. For the upcoming EU Parliament Elections in June, 50% of the participating political parties in the Netherlands state today that they support the construction of high-speed rail for international connections; while another 45% mention they foster international train travel to decrease short-haul flights without explicitly mentioning HSR.<sup>1</sup> Like Europe's citizens, who support the initiative irrespective of their background, nationality or education, political parties from both the left and right side support the idea, uniting politicians over a wide political spectrum as a result.

### **Europe losing its competitive edge**

Global players like China started building HSR decades after France, Italy and Spain did, but currently have overtaken Europe's high-speed rail in scale, speed and development. China's HSR now connects and unites its multi-cultural population, enhances the country's economic competitiveness, includes more regions in its economic growth and contributes to the country's overall sustainability.

In recent years, we have witnessed countries like Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia accomplish high-speed rail networks with operational speeds above 300 km/h as well, and have maintained this momentum by continuing to expand these networks.

### **The threat of moderate ambition**

The faster a train travels, the more successfully it competes with cars and planes. It slashes travel times, a factor enhancing economic growth. In addition, shorter travel times enable more flight-destinations over longer distances to be substituted by train, and provide more people access to modern transportation.

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<sup>1</sup> Of the 20 political parties from The Netherlands participating in the EU Parliament Elections:

- 10 political parties explicitly mention that they favor the construction of high-speed rail (although a few think they can do so on a bi-lateral basis, so without EU coordination / support);
- 9 others state that they fully support more and better international rail connections in Europe (without explicitly mentioning high-speed rail, but since travel times will not become shorter by train than by plane without HSR it is hard to imagine achieving these objectives without HSR-construction);
- only 1 political party does not mention to support high-speed rail or cross-border train travel.



Europe's biggest threat to progress is not that our continent won't build a pan-European high-speed rail network: the benefits are so clear that it is inevitable that Europe will start construction one day. A bigger risk will be that we continue our current struggle and start construction 10 years from now, further widening the competitive gap with economic powers like China in the meantime. But probably the biggest risk lies in Europe's incapability to "think big" and its default moderate ambition.

For instance, some EU-countries are building track for medium speeds (speeds between 200 – 300 km/h, also known as semi-highspeed rail), or add too many intermediate stops. This will result in longer travel times and erase the benefits of faster travel, economic growth and enhanced sustainability. After the semi-high-speed rail projects are completed, it will be difficult to rebuild again later to convert the moderate solution to something that truly makes Europe competitive.

#### **Future**

While more people are supportive of HSR today, our capitals and regions haven't been connected yet. As such, we will continue our effort to make our continent more competitive, modernize its transportation both in decreased travel times and sustainability, and increase its prosperity - and we will do so with passion and true ambition. We hope that the European Commission will do the same and will be delighted to continue working on it with you.

Sincerely,

Rogier Vergouwen  
Amsterdam, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2024

Afryea Uiterloo  
Brussels, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2024