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European Agreement on Main International Railway Lines

Background, Benefits and Accession

Note by the secretariat

I. Introduction

1. With the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) driving decision making across the globe it is important that transport does its part and makes the shift to more sustainable modes of transport. The mode of transport that most meets the needs of a sustainable future is rail. It is also the mode that best serves the needs of long-distance freight operators that require the movement of goods over long distances without excessive cost or excessive time. Therefore, investing in rail will further help achieving the SDGs.

2. To facilitate this, the development of railways needs international frameworks under which cross-border rail investment can be done in a more effective and efficient manner, among others, to address the challenges from the past, when railways were developed to serve specific connections at a country or a regional level. These past practices lead to poor international connections resulting from different technical parameters being adopted in neighbouring countries.

3. As part of harmonization efforts aimed at reducing these cross-border difficulties, member States of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe decided to develop a network of main international railway lines on which international transport could be facilitated through the development of similar standards. This was done through the creation of a European Agreement on Main International Railway Lines (AGC) signed in Geneva on 31 May 1985. A total of 27 member States are currently contracting parties to the agreement and are regularly involved in amending and updating the text.

4. The latest, consolidated, version of the AGC, Revision 4, was agreed by the Working Party on Rail Transport (SC.2) at its seventy-third session in November 2019 and is available on the ECE website at www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/trans/doc/2019/sc2/ECE-TRANS-63-Rev.4e.pdf.

5. The current COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of a well-functioning rail network, supported by harmonized regulations in delivering the much-needed supplies to countries across the ECE region.

II. Text of the agreement

6. The AGC is composed of:

- the main text of 15 articles covering the main legal provisions;
- Annex I listing the railway lines of major international importance;
- Annex II specifying the technical characteristics of main international railway lines.

III. Objective of the agreement

7. The objective of the agreement is to facilitate and develop international railway traffic in the ECE region through a coordinated development and construction plan for the railways. Such a plan is essential to meet the future needs of railway traffic. This was of key importance when the agreement was established to facilitate the breaking down of barriers at borders within the ECE region. This is even more important today as long-distance rail freight traffic grows in importance and many ECE member States are key transit routes for freight flows along Euro-Asian transport corridors.

IV. How to achieve the objective

8. To facilitate this objective the agreement identifies, and numbers railways of international importance – E-Rail lines – in the same manner that has been done for the E-Road network (in 1975) and then subsequently the E-Waterways network (in 1993). These lines represent the key trunk routes where international rail transport is to be facilitated for the movement of both freight and passengers. The agreement also identifies eleven technical parameters for these lines: the number of tracks, vehicle loading gauge, minimum distance between track centres, nominal minimum speed, authorised mass per axle, authorised mass per linear metre, test trains, maximum gradient, minimum platform length in principal stations, minimum useful siding length and the presence of level crossings.

V. Why accede?

9. The importance of the AGC has been repeatedly highlighted at the international level and has, over time, become the basis for a number of important international processes. For example, the European Union Trans-European Network for Transport (TEN-T) within Central Europe is largely based on the network set out in the AGC and the Euro-Asian Transport Linkages project also relies on the corridors using the main international railway lines in the AGC.

10. The identification of the lines themselves is only the first step in facilitating international rail traffic movements. The second step is working towards the harmonization of key technical parameters. This is where Annex II of the AGC comes in. As mentioned

above, the railways suffer from a lack of interoperability between countries (and also sometimes within countries). The technical parameters within the AGC provide target values that member States should strive to achieve to facilitate the movement of freight and passengers. It is important to note that, in becoming contracting parties to the agreement, member States are committing to upgrading their existing, or building new railways that are compliant with these parameters. There are, however, no time limits by when these target parameters have to be reached for all national components of the AGC (that is there is no deadline by which the networks need to be updated), nor is there one exclusive standard that must apply across the entire network. Over the years, contracting parties to the AGC have extended the scope of these technical parameters to cover different forms of freight traffic and to allow for the construction and use of high-speed railways. These amendments have also referred to the inclusion, modification and/or removal of lines within national borders for example as a result of a new line being constructed and the downgrading of a parallel line.

11. The harmonisation of international railway parameters across the AGC network will ensure that long distance transport by rail is facilitated, limiting the barriers that currently exist at borders. For example, the standardisation of railway infrastructure to a common, higher speed on key international corridors as set out in the AGC will reduce the travel time from Asia to Europe. As will the upgrade of key lines to remove speed restrictions limiting the capacity and freight flows. A harmonised network from China to Europe will lead to significant travel time on this route, thus considerably reducing the cost of transportation and also making rail transport more attractive to those freight flows that currently travel via maritime routes.

12. The AGC also provides certainty to policy makers that international rail transport routes will be built and maintained to a certain level to ensure the goods that can be moved efficiently and effectively between member States.

13. In addition, member States that are contracting parties to the AGC also have the ability to influence the manner in which the agreement develops going forward with the aim of making it even more relevant to the future needs of the sector.

VI. Links with other agreements

14. The AGC does not exist in a vacuum. In particular, it is closely tied to the European Agreement on Important International Combined Transport Lines and Related Installations (AGTC). This agreement is of particular importance as it provides the bridge between the rail sector and other transport modes. In particular it identifies the rail lines to be used for combined transport and the key terminals and other facilities necessary to allow for freight that has travelled on rail to make its last mile journey on other modes of transport. The large majority of the AGTC network overlaps with the AGC network although there are some sections which are exclusively for the AGC and/or exclusively for the AGTC.

15. A number of other agreements, under the auspices of the Inland Transport Committee of UNECE, also relate directly to the rail sector, including:

- International Convention to Facilitate the Crossing of Frontiers for Passengers and Baggage carried by Rail (1952)
- International Convention to Facilitate the Crossing of Frontiers for Goods Carried by Rail (1952)
- Customs Convention Concerning Spare Parts Used For Repairing EUROPE Wagons (1958)

- European Convention on Customs Treatment of Pallets Used in International Transport (1960)
- International Convention on the Harmonization of Frontier Controls of Goods (1982)
- Convention on Customs Treatment of Pool Containers Used in International Transport (1994)
- Convention on International Customs Transit Procedures for the Carriage of Goods by Rail under cover of SMGS Consignment Notes (2006)
- Convention on the facilitation of border crossing procedures for passengers, luggage and load-luggage carried in international traffic by rail (2019).

VII. Process of accession

16. ECE member States and those or have been admitted to the Commission in a consultative capacity wishing to accede to the AGC need only submit their document of accession to the Secretary General in New York. According to national legislative requirements they may need to pass a law which confirms their intention to adhere to the requirements of the AGC.

17. Accession to the AGC also allows member States to be actively involved in ensuring that the agreement itself is kept up-to-date and meets the requirements of a modern railway and a sustainable transport sector. This is of particular importance when considering the technical parameters of the AGC and the coverage of the network. For example, a contracting party can propose amendments to the agreement to add/substitute/delete key lines of international importance.

18. Over the years, the AGC has also been complemented by the introduction of additional, correlated, features. A primary example of this is the online tool that has been developed showing the AGC/AGTC Inventory of Standards for the rail network (<https://apps.unece.org/WP24/>). This allows the user to identify the key parameters for the rail network along the AGC/AGTC routes on such things as the number of tracks, loading gauge, authorised mass per axle. This tool is currently being updated to create an integrated application that can be accessed in an interactive format thus increasing the transparency of information available to all railway stakeholders.

19. As part of this integrated application information on key investment projects will also be added and all the activities brought together with a Geographical Information System interface to facilitate accessibility of this data.
