

Distinguished Vice President, MEPs, Ministers,  
Participants of the trans-European transport network days,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The first rail connection crossing the Estonian-Latvian border (Pskov-Riga) was opened in 1889 after 15 years of planning and construction. Last year when I went for a state visit to Latvia, we took the train from Tallinn to Riga, because that is how people have travelled between those two cities for a long time. In 2012 the trip of 320 kilometres took 5-6 hours, and during our trip we had to switch drivers on the border. To get to Lithuania - 601 km from Tallinn to Vilnius, one has to switch train drivers, and possibly also engines, twice – and it takes some 10-12 hours to get there.

Cargo ships still must stop for customs control on intra-European borders that people can freely cross without showing their passports.

We talk a lot about a united Europe, but examples like these show us that we are far from united when it comes to physical infrastructure, transportation of people and goods.

It is almost 25 years since the Wall fell and the cold war ended; and ten years since the last big enlargement of the EU. Yet looking at maps of EU transport infrastructure, there remains a visible wall between the parts of Europe that 25 years ago were divided by the Iron Curtain. With a new kick start 20 years ago and an eager young generation in the driver's seat we have leapfrogged older democracies and bigger countries in digital infrastructure, traffic and services that can be delivered over broadband. We now need to catch up with our physical infrastructure as well.

There is now funding to finally bridge the gap between the well-connected and less well connected parts of Europe – what we need beyond finance is the political will to do so. We must work on roads and especially railroads, but also on laws and regulations that currently make it hard for trains to cross free and open intra-European borders without hours of delay each time. In practice, no single European Transport area is yet functional. Agreement on new common rules has not followed the market fast enough; the existing rules still limit the options that our internal trade could provide.

We in small countries, on the edges of Europe, are especially dependent on well-functioning transportation networks, so as not to remain isolated. After all, it is like the circulatory system, not only for us but also for larger ones, facilitating, among other things, new investments, the industrial development, jobs creation, social welfare and economic growth. Unless we are genuinely connected to each other and to our European neighbours (and their neighbours), the single market exists in theory only, and will not be able to give our economies the boost we badly need in all of Europe. Much has already been done – e-g. to improve the functioning of cross-border air and rail traffic. Of course I couldn't say otherwise, because the European Commissioner for Transport comes from the country that I know best.

But – to use one of the most common phrases in the Commission jargon, much remains to be done. I'm sure you've heard and will be hearing a lot on Rail Baltic during these days. I hope you'll hearing much more in the years to come.

I hope things will move a little faster than 150 years ago.

Welcome to Estonia.