



2026: A Delivery Year for Europe's Rail Freight System

by Gilles Peterhans

As the European Commission's mandate moves into its delivery phase, 2026 will mark a shift in how the EU is judged. The focus will move away from announcing new initiatives towards something far more demanding: implementation. For rail freight, this is a defining moment. Safety, competitiveness and decarbonisation can no longer progress on parallel tracks. They must advance together if Europe is serious about delivering on its objectives.

Rail freight is increasingly recognised as strategic infrastructure. It underpins Europe's industrial competitiveness, strengthens supply chains' resilience, and plays a central role in reducing transport emissions. But this strategic role will only translate into results if rail freight is safe, predictable, and genuinely European in its operation. That requires more than good legislation, it requires consistency, coordination and trust across borders.

Regulatory stability and coordinated implementation

UIP approaches 2026 with a clear priority: strengthening a rail freight system that delivers high safety standards while reinforcing the Single Market and supporting the EU's climate and competitiveness agenda. Ambition alone will not be enough. The real test lies in execution.

This is particularly evident in the field of safety. UIP supports the harmonised European approach developed through the Joint Network Secretariat (JNS) under the European Union Agency for Railways. The JNS provides a framework for Member States and sector stakeholders to address safety concerns collectively, adopt common measures and avoid unilateral actions. While such actions may appear reassuring at national level, in practice they fragment the Single Market, weaken cross-border operations and erode confidence in the rail freight system.

The publication of the JNS final report following the 2023 Gotthard Base Tunnel accident confirmed that Europe already has a robust rail safety framework in place. The challenge for 2026 is not to reinvent it, but to apply the proposed measures consistently all over Europe and beyond. Consistency is not a technical detail; for wagon keepers, it is a fundamental condition for safe and predictable railway operations.

In this context, UIP supports a stronger coordinating role for the European Union Agency for Railways (ERA). With more than half of rail freight operations crossing at least one national border, effective European oversight is not optional – it is essential. The expected revision of ERA's mandate, together with the implementation of the framework for common safety methods ('CSM ASLP') offer concrete opportunities to reduce divergence, strengthen implementation and reinforce trust in the system across the network.



Capacity management and strategic EU investment

Beyond safety, 2026 will also be a decisive year for rail infrastructure capacity. The agreement on the new EU rail capacity regulation is an important step towards a more predictable and efficient use of the network. Predictability is not an abstract goal: it is a prerequisite for reliable freight services and for attracting additional traffic to rail.

At the same time, negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (“the EU Budget”), will serve as a credibility test for the EU’s transport and climate ambitions. If rail freight is expected to deliver on competitiveness and decarbonisation, it must be backed by sustained and targeted investments in modernisation and deployment. Continued support for rail research and innovation, including through a successor to Europe’s Rail Joint Undertaking, is essential to ensure that innovation materialises into real-world solutions.

Technologies such as digital automatic coupling (DAC) show what is possible when policy ambitions are matched by investment and deployment. They improve efficiency, safety and transparency across the rail freight system. In parallel, the Connecting Europe Facility must continue to support modern infrastructure and innovative upgrades. These investments remain critical to building a more integrated, sustainable and competitive European rail freight network.

A year of responsibility

For UIP, 2026 is therefore a year of responsibility. Working closely with EU institutions, ERA, and national authorities, wagon keepers will continue to support a European approach to safety, promote proportionate and evidence-based regulation, and contribute to a rail freight system that delivers for industry, citizens and the environment.

Because real change in complex systems does not come from more rules alone — it requires both a foundation of trust that transcends borders and our collective ability to move from high-level policy to disciplined, pan-European execution.

About UIP

Founded in 1950, **UIP – International Union of Wagon Keepers**, with its seat in Brussels, is the umbrella association of national associations from 14 European countries, thus representing more than 250 freight wagon keepers and Entities in Charge of Maintenance (ECMs). As the voice for more than 255’000 rail freight wagons which perform 50 % of the rail freight tons-kilometers throughout Europe, the UIP represents half of the whole European wagon fleet and one of the most important resources for rail freight transportation in Europe.