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# Covid-19 Crisis and European Mobility: What lessons have been learnt? And what of the future?

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Who would have thought that the European Commission, a year and a half after the start of the pandemic, would introduce a "European Covid certificate", a sesame allowing people to travel without difficulty within the European Union?

The global impact of the Covid-19 health crisis led to this science-fiction scenario, after turmoil of unprecedented violence, which first shook the foundations of European unity and then damaged, probably permanently, despite the tangible success of the vaccination campaigns, all forms of European mobility and the various ecosystems linked to it.

In this summer of 2021, synonymous with hope but also with nagging doubts, what initial conclusions can be drawn from the seismic event that the pandemic has caused for the mobility of European citizens, and what new positive prospects are opening up for the various mobility sectors, all of which are facing a before and after Covid-19?

## 1. FEBRUARY 2020: BORDERS WERE CLOSING, AND EUROPE SEVERELY SHAKEN

The mobility of people is a fundamental value of European integration and the Schengen area, a pillar of the European project, is its framework. Since its creation in 1995 and with the abolition of passport control within this area, the right to free movement within the European Union has become a reality for all European citizens, who can live, study, work and retire anywhere in the Union. This possibility of free movement across borders is therefore the foundation of European unity and, of course, a very fertile ground for the development of the European single market, as mobility is central to economic exchanges.

Yet, as soon as the Member States were convinced of the seriousness of the coronavirus pandemic, the European Union's foundations trembled with unilateral decisions taken to close borders, without prior information from the Commission or consultation within the European Council. On 17 February 2021, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, declared, in view of the major risk of destabilisation, that internal border control measures "*do not stop the virus, but considerably damage the internal market*". Reminders about freedom of movement within Europe continued, including a letter to the 27 Ministers of Justice and Home Affairs in February 2021 from EU Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders and Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson, following further border closures in some Member States.

Increased European coordination gradually took over, but the crisis demonstrated, not only in the brutality of the first few months, but also as the pandemic progressed, the fragility of what seemed to be a definitive achievement: the mobility of its citizens, based on European law. The European Union's lack of competence in the field of public health, which is the responsibility of the Member States, then became glaringly apparent, initially ruining the necessary coordination efforts. The Covid-19 crisis has fractured Europe.

Beyond the major repercussions of these disorganised border closures on European unity, the crisis has also undermined the coordination of global decisions in the face of the pandemic and, consequently, multilateralism, while the need for a

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global response, commensurate with the speed of the virus' spread, should have been obvious. This is evidenced by the lack of impact of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) declarations on the uncertain efficiency of border closures.

## **2. AFTER THE SHOCK, THE EUROPEAN UNION'S RESPONSE**

### ***2.1 - The "Green Lanes" initiative for the movement of goods and services and the survival of the internal market***

Safeguarding the free movement of goods within the EU is the real cornerstone of the single market and border closures can potentially cause major disruptions to supply chains. With a view to protecting the cross-border movement of goods, the Commission quickly defined, as early as 23 March 2020, freight guidelines to ensure continuity of supply during border closures. "Green Lanes" were then set up, mainly at trans-European transport network (TEN-T) crossing points.

Even though the unilateral closures implemented by Member States led to traffic jams, sometimes keeping goods vehicles at land border crossings for 24 hours, these "green lanes" helped trade to continue to flow smoothly after this phase of chaos, in particular by limiting checks and health examinations for transport workers to 15 minutes. This "Green Lanes" initiative was, of course, crucial in the management of the health crisis since it allowed for the smooth flow of medicines and medical equipment.

### ***2.2 - The European digital COVID certificate, the new key to the free movement of people?***

As the vaccination campaigns have progressed, Brussels has turned its attention, in an effort to boost the mobility of European citizens and support a tourism sector that suffered disaster in 2020 (as evidenced by the 66.4% drop in hotel occupancy in Europe in July 2020), to the development of a system that will allow for the free movement of people with the highest possible level of security, while the virus is still circulating.

After dismissing the idea of a vaccine passport as too restrictive, the European Commission's strategy focused on the development of a "*Digital Green Certificate*", renamed the "*EU Digital Covid Certificate*", seeking a unified and coordinated approach between the 27 Member States. This initiative is designed to avoid isolated decisions. For example, if a Member State continues to impose restrictive measures, such as quarantine or tests on arrival on its soil, on the holder of a Covid certificate, it must inform the European Commission and the Council and justify its decision.

The principle of this "*health pass*" is simple: any proof of vaccination (by one of the four vaccines recognised by the European Medicines Agency), negative PCR test or cure of the Covid-19 virus issued by a Member State will be recognised by the 26 others, as well as by Switzerland, Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein, via a QR code. Valid in all EU countries, this certificate can be presented to anyone who requires it (border police, airlines or railways).

Approved by the Member States on 14 April 2021, this certificate was then given the green light by the European Parliament on 28 April, a swift decision applauded by professionals in the transport and tourism sectors. The Parliament and the Council finalised their agreement on 20 May, and the regulation was officially adopted on 14 June by the three European institutions. The "*European Covid Certificate*" has been operational since 1 July. In two and a half months, the European inter-institutional process has demonstrated that it works well in an emergency.

All Europeans now have the same travel rules, they must provide the same proof and the same interoperable tool for all destinations within the Union. Very importantly, the "*European certificate*" is not compulsory to travel within the European Union. It is not a precondition for free movement, which is a fundamental right in the EU. But people travelling without this '*health pass*' are likely to be subject to the Member States' existing requirements for testing

and quarantine measures. The European certificate is therefore supposed to be less discriminating than a vaccination passport, but the subject is still a difficult one, given the differences between Member States in the management of the crisis and vaccination campaigns.

The risk of a "worrying patchwork of approaches" within the EU was highlighted by Europe's major airlines and airports in a recent letter to national leaders. They stress the importance of a uniform approach and the fact that additional checks and improved equipment for reading QR codes are needed.

In the European Parliament, there have been many questions, with the guiding theme being the risks of discrimination that this system may create between vaccinated and immunised people and those who are non-vaccinated and who may be carriers of the virus. What about medical secrecy or respect for privacy when, in order to travel within the EU, one's state of health must be disclosed?

For many months now, the Covid-19 crisis has accustomed European citizens to restrictions on individual freedoms that would have been unimaginable a year and a half ago, but this partially recovered intra-European mobility, secured and controlled on public health grounds shared by the greatest number, is not the least of these restrictions.

Concerned about the risk of fragmented, "variable geometry" mobility, which could weaken European unity, the Commission is multiplying initiatives to protect the movement of people as much as possible, despite a still fragile and uncertain health context.

On the occasion of the presentation of the revised industrial strategy on 5 May 2021, it announced the presentation, in 2022, of an "emergency instrument for the single market", which will ensure the free movement of goods and people in the event of a crisis, and thus avoid the scattered closure of borders as was the case at the beginning of the pandemic. A repetition of this sequence of unilateral decisions by

the Member States, in the event of new pandemics in the years to come, would simply sound the death knell of the Schengen area

On 2 June 2021 in its communication "*For a stronger and more resilient Schengen area*", the Commission sent an unambiguous message: "*Whatever the circumstances, Schengen must be consolidated because the very existence of the European project depends on it*". This warning is essential, because despite the progress of a harmonised tool of control embodied by the digital Covid certificate, the situation remains tense. Member States want to have the final say on movement within their territory and want impose restrictions on arrivals and departures depending on the health situation.

The "Delta variant" looms like a Damocles sword and the first cracks appeared at the European Council on 24 June, with Member States expressing concern that Greece is beginning to ease health restrictions on tourists and Germany recently took the decision to ban travel to and from Portugal altogether, where the health situation is again deteriorating, and Malta is planning to allow only vaccinated travellers to enter its territory, even though a vaccination certificate cannot be a precondition for the free movement of people in the European area.

### 3. A STORM ON COLLECTIVE MOBILITY ECOSYSTEMS

In addition to blocking and then controlling individual freedom of movement, the health crisis has had a very brutal effect on all collective mobility ecosystems. From planes to trains to urban public transport, all the players in European mobility have faced unprecedented upheaval. The figures speak for themselves.

In Europe, according to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the estimated loss of revenue for airlines since the beginning of the crisis amounts to \$92 billion for international traffic. Eurocontrol estimates losses for airlines, airports and air navigation service providers at €140 billion

## Covid-19 Crisis and European Mobility: What lessons have been learnt? And what of the future?

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in 2020. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) estimates that countries such as France, Germany and Belgium have lost 74% of their air passengers and considers that global air traffic will not return to normal before 2024.

According to the Community of European Railways (CER), European railways lost €26 billion in revenue (passenger and freight) in 2020 overall, and the association of rail regulators estimates that the pandemic has caused an average 48% drop in train use in Europe. Passenger services have been more affected than freight, but the pandemic has taken its toll on all sectors. While freight seems to have been able to mitigate losses somewhat in the second half of 2020, the situation for passenger services started to deteriorate again in the autumn after the short recovery in the summer of 2020, reaching record revenue losses of -50% in December.

Europe's iconic high-speed rail links, Thalys and Eurostar, have been hit hard. Thalys posted a 70% loss of revenue in 2020 and does not expect a return to 100% of its offer before next year. Eurostar lost 80% of its turnover in 2020 and was on the verge of insolvency. A finance agreement reached in May 2021 between its shareholders and its banks allowed it to escape bankruptcy.

Urban public transport saw its networks emptied of passengers during the lockdowns and, despite a rebound and considerable efforts by organising authorities and transport operators to restore passenger confidence, has so far been unable to restore normal levels of ridership. According to the International Association of Public Transport (UITP), the losses incurred by the sector in 2020 are estimated at almost €40 billion. For example, the loss of revenue due to the reduction in ticket sales in urban public transport in Germany totalled around €6 billion in 2020 and the cumulative 2020/2021 losses of Ile-de-France Mobilités, the regional transport authority in Ile-de-France, are around €4 billion.

As they faced this unprecedented shock, the European institutions reacted quickly and continued their aid

over time. The Council agreed to waive slots from 30 March 2020 to help airlines cope with the drastic fall in traffic.

As the decrease in rail traffic continued into the first half of 2021, the European Commission published a delegated regulation on 28 June extending until 31 December the mechanism allowing Member States to reduce the infrastructure charges paid by railway undertakings, while compensating infrastructure managers for the loss of revenue caused.

Above all, in an innovative move, the Commission decided to suspend State aid control from 20 March 2020, to give the mobility sector the breathing space it needs to survive. Air transport is benefiting on a large scale, as shown by the approval of the government's €4 billion aid plan for Air France, which has been hit by the collapse of passenger traffic. In total, more than €35 billion of state aid to air transport has been approved by the Commission. Rail transport has also benefited, but on a smaller scale (around €7 billion). This exceptional measure has been extended until 31 December 2021.

### **4. WHAT FUTURE FOR MOBILITY IN EUROPE? BETWEEN PARADIGM SHIFTS AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES - THE EXAMPLE OF URBAN MOBILITY**

Major crises are always moments of profound change in behaviour and modes of operation, which can bring their share of new opportunities. This is the case for mobility in this time of pandemic and we will take the example of urban mobility to illustrate these upheavals.

#### ***4.1 - Teleworking and its impact on the public transport business model***

With the repeated lockdowns, the practice of teleworking has become increasingly an integrated part of the daily lives of a significant number of citizens. Before the pandemic began, according to Eurostat, only 15% of employees in the European Union had ever worked from home, and only 7% of French employees had done so. Now, according to

Eurofound's first estimates, almost 40% of people working in the EU worked from home full-time at the peak of the crisis.

While the improving health situation is allowing a gradual return to "office" work in many Member States, it is still unclear to what extent remote working will become a permanent feature. However, it is almost certain that the way work is organised will change in many sectors, with an increased share of work at home or in co-working spaces close to home. This sustained increase in teleworking will have significant consequences for urban mobility, especially in large cities where commuting times are often long for people living on the outskirts of the city centre.

As an example, on a network the size of the RATP in the Ile-de-France region, a 5 to 7% drop in public transport use is anticipated, corresponding to two days of home-based work per week. The extension of the transport offer will undoubtedly compensate for this loss of income but, combined with the powerful development of e-commerce and the temporary drop in tourist numbers, the impact will be significant, requiring a development strategy that goes beyond simple mass public transport (new mobilities, multifunctional urban spaces, energy, connectivity, urban logistics, etc.).

Air and rail transport will also undoubtedly face the development of remote working and, in particular, its impact on business travel, probably to an even greater extent than urban transport.

#### **4.2 - Restoring confidence in public transport: a crucial factor for the sector**

During the first wave of the pandemic, the use of public transport systems in Europe dropped dramatically, with traffic decreasing by up to 90%. For many months, many customers continued to perceive public transport as a potential source of contamination, a feeling that was sometimes strengthened by public statements such as the French Academy of Medicine's recommendation that people

should no longer talk or phone on public transport, or Bavaria's decision in January 2021 to impose FFP2 masks on public transport – the latter are more costly and convey a more anxiety-provoking message.

However, the compulsory wearing of masks is particularly respected in public transport. In France, the Union des Transports Publics (UTP) has indicated that 95% of passengers comply with this obligation. Interactions between passengers are rare, and stations and rolling stock are regularly disinfected and ventilated.

Logically, numerous studies have shown that public transport is not a source of contamination: in Germany, the Robert Koch Institute published an article in August 2020 indicating that 0.2% of traceable clusters in Germany were linked to public transport. In October 2020, a study by Santé Publique France, based on data collected between 9 May and 28 September, stated that only 1.2% of Covid-19 outbreaks were linked to public transport (compared to 24.9% regarding workplaces).

Despite these facts and the gradual return of passengers to the networks, full confidence has yet to be rebuilt and public transport operators are committing budgets and innovative solutions to reassure their customers. For example, to reduce the risk of the virus spreading as much as possible, the RATP has implemented daily nebulisation procedures, a cutting-edge technique used in the aeronautics industry that consists of spraying virucidal products on all surfaces; it has also created the "HoloStop" system, a holographic button that allows passengers to request the bus to stop without physical contact.

This newfound confidence can be comforted by the findings of the World Health Organisation, which considers that air pollution is most likely to be an aggravating factor in the spread of the Covid-19 virus, since polluted air, which inflames the lungs and causes respiratory and heart disease, is a vulnerability factor. Urban public transport makes an obvious contribution to reducing air pollution: for every kilometre travelled, taking the metro or

urban transport emits 60 times less CO<sub>2</sub> than using a private car.

#### **4.3 - The return to urban solo driving: a danger for the Green Pact**

If confidence in the use of public transport is not fully restored, a massive recourse to the use of the private car would lead to a return of congestion and urban pollution, particularly in the major metropolises. One of the strategic aspects of the European Green Pact, the sustainable city, would then be undermined.

According to Eurostat in Europe during the crisis, the private car was preferred for 51% of journeys, followed by walking (38%). In France, during the first lockdown, 66% of public transport users resorted to car use, and the UTP estimated, in its 2020 edition of the Mobility Observatory, that almost a third of travellers wanted to partially or totally abandon public transport.

The environmental emergency has led to the exponential development of electric cars in the automotive industry, which is of course a positive phenomenon in terms of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and noise pollution. But electric car ownership is still car ownership and will not solve the problem of congestion in cities and urban areas. Moreover, more and more questions are being raised about the recycling of the batteries in these electric cars and the unsustainable nature of their manufacture, as the batteries are made of rare metals whose extraction increases the carbon debt of electric cars. Although an undeniable progress, the electric car is not a panacea for urban mobility and must be considered as an individual complement to green, intelligent and safe public transport networks.

#### **4.4 - The rise of soft mobility as a complement to mass transit**

The development of soft urban mobility was already a reality before the pandemic, as evidenced by the first meeting of the 28 European transport ministers in 2015 with the development of cycling on the

agenda. With the health crisis, the phenomenon has gained momentum. On 21 April 2020, the WHO recommended that where possible, cycling or walking should be preferred. Many public authorities are encouraging cycling and walking by creating new pedestrian "green zones" or cycle paths.

In Milan, in the summer of 2020, the municipality proposed the transformation of 35 kilometres of streets into pedestrian zones or cycle paths. In May 2020, the city of Paris introduced 50 kilometres of new cycle paths, known as "*coronapistes*"! In Finland, the cities of Helsinki and Espoo decided to bring forward the opening of the city bike season, despite climatic constraints. In Barcelona, bicycle use increased by 82% during the crisis.

These modes of urban travel, which are environmentally friendly and beneficial to health, are likely to be consolidated after the trauma of the pandemic. For example, in May 2020, the Road Risks and Mobility Observatory indicated that 58% of French people wanted to change their travel habits in the long term, with 24% considering walking more and 13% wanting to switch to cycling.

This undeniable progress, the development of soft urban mobility - which is not, however, accessible to everyone, particularly people with reduced mobility - must be considered as a complement to public transport networks (urban train, metro, tramway, bus), integrated into sustainable urban travel plans. This soft mobility is also a spur for the organising authorities and transport operators to commit themselves resolutely to the implementation of integrated and multimodal digital systems for urban and peri-urban mobility, which is now called *MaaS (Mobility as a Service)*.

### **5. INNOVATION CAN EMERGE FROM A GREAT CRISIS**

Like any major crisis, the pandemic has the potential of being a source of innovations that will restore confidence in public transport and lead to a rebound in smarter, more sustainable mobility.

### **5.1 - The MaaS, for seamless, digital and sustainable urban mobility**

The concept of *Mobility as a Service (MaaS)* was born of the following observation: users have a wide choice of mobility services at their fingertips, ranging from public transport, VTC or taxi, walking, cycling, car-sharing and car-pooling, and soft mobility (self-service scooters), and travellers very often have to juggle between several applications to find their way. MaaS therefore aims to offer a simplified solution for improving intermodality, with a single platform bringing together the various possible choices for "door-to-door" mobility, using several modes of transport and allowing payment for the multimodal journey in the same application.

MaaS has illustrated a second, important advantage in the health crisis: it can be a useful tool to restore users' confidence in public transport. With the economic recovery and the gradual return of on-site work, passengers may fear a lack of respect for social distancing, especially in public transport at peak times. The interest of MaaS is to offer the possibility of being alerted in real time in the event of disruptions (road traffic, public transport), to inform on the gauges of affluence and to propose alternative solutions.

In the longer term, MaaS, in the uncertain post-Covid environment, has the potential to positively influence mobility patterns and behaviours in a smarter and more sustainable way (smart and sustainable mobility), helping to prevent cars transporting just the driver, as well as the phenomena of congestion and pollution. It is therefore an instrument of resilience, with considerable potential, encouraged by the European Commission, which will give rise in the years to come to exchanges of good practice between mobility organising authorities and transport operators.

### **5.2 - Greener planes and trains: the renewal of mobility will require environmentally friendly modes of transport**

By grounding aircraft, the health crisis has had a major impact on the air transport economy. However, it has also accelerated the sector's thought into how to move aviation resolutely towards a more sustainable model, as expected by passengers.

The pandemic will most probably lead to a strengthening of ecological concerns and, for this mode of transport which emits a lot of CO<sub>2</sub>, a real revolution must occur. Short-haul flights will be questioned; according to the European Investment Bank, in its 2019-2020 climate survey, 62% of Europeans would be in favour of a ban on short-haul flights in favour of rail! Similarly, the use of sustainable fuels for aviation will become essential, as shown by the joint declaration on 8 February 2021 by eight Member States (Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden) asking the European executive to encourage the use of sustainable aviation fuels or the recent proposals made by the Commission regarding the "ReFuelEU Aviation" project to gradually increase the share of sustainable fuels (25% in 2035, 32% in 2040, 63% in 2050, including 28% synthetic fuels).

Rail transport is also placing increasing emphasis on sustainable innovation, with experiments launched on the hydrogen train, which generates its own electricity and whose only emission is water vapour. In France, the SNCF plans to have 12 to 14 hydrogen-powered Regional Express Trains in commercial service by the end of 2025.

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Mobility is a pillar of the construction of European unity and the keystone of openness to the world. Shaken to the core by the health crisis, which has challenged many established patterns and which

## Covid-19 Crisis and European Mobility: What lessons have been learnt? And what of the future?

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will leave deep scars, mobility will resume once the pandemic is fully under control, as it is intrinsically linked to access to employment, culture and the discovery of others. European social links are at stake here.

But this post-Covid mobility will be different: safer because the renewal of passenger confidence requires it, more intelligent because it is a melting pot of digital innovations, greener because it is a European and global expectation. We can therefore believe that the trauma of the health crisis will lead to progress in mobility.

For young Europeans, who have been forced into successive lockdowns in the age of travel and discovery, this new and improved mobility will be synonymous with hope. Let us not forget that border closures, university closures and travel restrictions have had a heavy impact on mobility programmes with which young people are particularly familiar, and which embody the European Union, such as Erasmus +. In May 2020,

25% of student exchanges were cancelled due to the pandemic, 37.5% of students had problems with their exchange programme (inability to return home, accommodation problems) and 50% of students had to take their courses online.

Struck in the heart, then becoming resilient, the European Union will bounce back from the crisis and our youth will regain confidence in the future!

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