

Office of Rail Transport

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Railway Safety Forum - how we are dealing with the pandemic

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Over the last year, our view of rail transport has been dominated by the coronavirus epidemic. Our basic goal, which is to guarantee safe transport, has acquired a new important dimension - our health - said Ignacy Góra, President of the Office of Rail Transport, opening the 7th Railway Safety Forum (RSF). The Forum is an annual conference devoted to railway safety in Poland, co-organized by Tor-Audytor and the Office of Rail Transport.

In RSF gathered over 30 rail experts. Josef Doppelbauer, Executive Director of the European Union Railway Agency, and Andrzej Bittel, Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Infrastructure gave opening speeches. During three RSF sessions the following topics were covered: Polish railway sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, implementation of the 4th railway package, professions in rail industry and generation gap.

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland, the Office of Rail Transport was taking measures to protect rail transport and its users. The Office initiated them even before the first case of infection in Poland was confirmed. The first initiative was a meeting in March 2020 with the Chief Sanitary Inspector, rail passenger operators, infrastructure managers, the Railway Security Guard and representatives of the embassies of all neighbouring countries. During the meeting scenarios, methods of operation and cooperation, predictions on COVID-19 epidemic in Poland were discussed.

The Office of Rail Transport was monitoring rail transport since the beginning of the pandemic. The representatives of the Office participate in meetings of the government crisis management team at the Chancellery of the Prime Minister and the crisis management team at the Ministry of Infrastructure. In 2020 the Office prepared almost 300 daily reports on the basis of data provided by rail operators, which covered train occupancy rates, train cancellations and detected COVID-19 cases among railway personnel. It allowed to monitor the pandemic on an ongoing basis, but also to take appropriate precautionary measures. The Office publishes information on the impact of COVID-19 on railway market on an ongoing basis.

The Office of Rail Transport participated in the first distributions of disinfectants and personal protection kits, which were provided by the Material Reserves Agency since they were not widely available on the market then. The Office also cooperates with the Border Guard, providing it with lists of railway employees who cross the border during their work. The Office also organized a meeting with public transport authorities to discuss financial support for them. Moreover, the Office regularly publishes information about new legislation on COVID-19-related measures, restrictions and bans.

During RSF debate all participants commended the Office of Rail Transport for its involvement in combating the pandemic and close cooperation with railway companies.

In 2020 there was a significant decrease in the number of rail accidents as compared to previous years. The number of accidents at railway sidings and at level crossings also dropped. The reasons for this can be found in the unusual conditions brought by the coronavirus epidemic. Due to epidemic restrictions and economic slowdown the demand for transport services dropped, which in turn resulted in reduction in traffic on the railway network. As emphasized during the RSF debate, an unforeseen result of epidemic restrictions were drops in the number of rail accidents and increased train punctuality, especially in rail freight.

The most reliable indicator of the safety level on railway network is the accident rate, which relates the number of accidents to the operational performance. In 2020 the accident rate was 1.79 and the lowest recorded.

- The pandemic-related activities of the Office of Rail Transport gathered very positive reactions from rail companies and passengers – summed up Ignacy Góra, President of the Office of Rail Transport. - Throughout the pandemic our Office worked without break. Both the organization of work and technical equipment allow us to do our job efficiently, also under these unusual conditions – he added.

Another important topic discussed during RSF sessions were legal changes in train drivers' training. Each train driver candidate who starts training to obtain a train driver's license after 1 January 2023 or starts training before the issuance of their first train driver's certificate will take the exam in accordance with the new regulations. The form of the theoretical part of these exams is changing - from paper to computer tests, and the certificate exam will include the simulator test. An simulator exam based on a specific scenario will allow to check the reaction of a trainee to a typical rail traffic situations, but also to emergency and dangerous situations, including, for example, driving in difficult weather conditions or applying appropriate procedures in emergency situations.

Moreover, the National Electronic Register of Train Drivers and Drivers of Railway Vehicles will also be introduced. Each train driver will have easy access to a complete set of information on

the course of their employment or qualifications. They will be able to view the activities of their employer, review issued documents or verify the validity of medical examinations.

- People responsible for the safety of passengers and property should be trained and tested in accordance with one unified system. Their knowledge, abilities and health should be verified by one set of criteria - said Ignacy Góra, President of the Office of Rail Transport, summing up the discussion on new regulations on train drivers training. - The next project on which we will focus is introduction of state exams for another professional group - train dispatchers. - he declared.