

Office of Rail Transport

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Narrow-gauge railways in Poland in 2020: the impact of the pandemic on tourist traffic

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The COVID-19 epidemic hit the tourism industry hard. Drops in tourist traffic and sanitary restrictions also had impact on narrow-gauge railways, which in 2020 transported 38.4% less passengers than in 2019. In 2020 most tourists travelled on the Bieszczady Forest Railway. However, when compared to 2019, it was a decrease by 13%. A drop in the number of passengers was also recorded by the Nadmorska Kolej Wąskotorowa Railway, which in 2020 transported 40% less passengers than in 2019.

WYKRESY !!!

In Poland in 2020 there were 25 (out of 29 existing) narrow-gauge lines in operation with a total length of tracks of 420.3 km. The transport services offer of narrow-gauge railways in 2020 did not differ significantly from that of the previous years. The data obtained from 23 operators show that - despite the growing interest in narrow-gauge rail services over the years - in 2020 they transported 564.6 thous. passengers, i.e. 352.3 thous. less (38.4%) than in 2019.

Fig. 1. The number of passengers of narrow-gauge railways in 2007-2020 (in thous.)

In Poland the operation of narrow-gauge railways is seasonal. Most of them run on weekends between May and October and every day in July and August. In 1Q 2020 passenger services run sporadically. In April narrow-gauge railways stopped functioning entirely. From May on, along with lifting of restrictions, the narrow-gauge railways gradually launched services. However, some of them did not perform any transport services in 2020. These were the Starachowice Narrow-Gauge Railway, Wyrzyska Powiat Railway, Rogowska Narrow-Gauge Railway, Nadwiślańska Kolej Narrow-Gauge Railway and Przeworska Narrow-Gauge Railway.

Fig. 2. The number of narrow-gauge rail passengers in 2020 compared to 2019 (in thous.)

In 2020 the highest number of passengers (137 thous.) travelled by one of the main tourist attractions in the Bieszczady Mountains - the Bieszczady Forest Railway. In 2020 the famous

"Bieszczady choo-choo" transported 20.1 thous. (13%) passengers less than in 2019. The second result in 2020 was achieved by the last year's leader, the Nadmorska Narrow-Gauge Railway in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, which transported 103.5 thous. passengers. When compared to 2019 it was 70.3 thous. (40%) less passengers.

The results above 50 thous. passengers in 2020 were recorded by the Maltanka Park Railway in Poznań (73.5 thous.) and the Żuławska Commuter Railway (64.8 thous.). When compared to 2019 drops were 64.6 thous. (47%) and 9.4 thous. (13%) passengers respectively.

Fig. 3. Number of narrow-gauge rail passengers in 2020 compared to 2019 (in thous.)

However, in 2020 not all narrow-gauge railways recorded a decline in demand for transport services. For example, Pleszewska Commuter Railway in the Greater Poland Voivodeship transported 7.1 thous. passengers - 6.3 thous. more than in 2019. The railway from Pleszew (Pleszew Miasto railway station) to Kowalew (Pleszew Wąskotorowy railway station) is the only narrow-gauge railway in Poland which provides transport services throughout the year. The number of passengers of the Kalisz Commuter Railway amounted to 5.1 thous. in 2020, which is over 2.8 thous. (123%) more passengers compared to 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic was not the only challenge which the Przeworska Narrow-Gauge Railway had to face. In June 2020 during violent storms and floods a section of the line and the bridge on the Przeworsk - Dynów route were destroyed and the services on this route were suspended. However, the railway managed to obtain funds for the renovation of the line and in June 2021 they resumed services. The revitalization of this line is also planned. In March 2021 an agreement was signed by the Podkarpackie Voivodeship and the Przeworsk County. The project will be implemented under the Regional Operational Program of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship for 2014-2020, priority axis V Transport infrastructure. As the regional authorities point out, the investment will contribute to the development of tourist services in the voivodeship.

Narrow-gauge railways are not only for railways enthusiasts. A journey on a narrow-gauge is an interesting way of spending free time, watching the nature or visiting interesting places in our country. - comments Ignacy Góra, President of the Office of Rail Transport. During the pandemic narrow gauge railways faced a major challenge. Data we obtained from the operators shows that despite the crisis all narrow-gauge railways in Poland have survived this difficult period and are recovering. They are also taking advantage of the growing popularity of domestic tourism and the opportunities created by the introduction of restrictions when travelling abroad. There is no doubt that the potential of narrow-gauge railways in Poland is significant and with appropriate support from local and regional governments and institutions, they will perfectly complement the existing tourist offer in their regions - he adds.

The data provided by narrow-gauge operators show that in 2020 narrow-gauge railways received subsidies in the total amount of PLN 4.3 m. Thanks to the additional support it will soon be possible to reactivate the Świętokrzyska Commuter Railway (also called: Narrow-Gauge Railway PONIDZIE).

Every region in Poland has its own narrow-gauge railway, which is a unique local tourist attraction. More information about narrow-gauge railways in Poland you can find at www.dane.utk.gov.pl