Development of the Community's railways

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Given the series of observations, arguments and analyses which accord with the unanimous assessments made by the Economic and Social Committee in its earlier Opinions on rail transport reform, one can take the view that the time has come for further liberalization of the sector, but only if such liberalization is correlated with a consistent, harmonized political choice on the overall reform of the sector in all its aspects - economic, social and managerial, and in particular: - management autonomy; - financial retrenchment; - taking problems of external costs into account; - development of intermodality; - interoperability problems; - definition of public service requirements at the European level; - harmonization in the social field, especially as regards employment problems and working hours; and - the framing of safety standards and rules at European level. More particularly, as regards the proposal for a Council Directive amending Directive 91/440/EEC, the Economic and Social Committee, while endorsing it and acknowledging its logical consistency with the overall approach to transport reform in the single market and with the need to increase the competitiveness of the rail sector, considers that harmonization among the Member States by national implementation of the Directives already adopted and those still awaiting final adoption by the Council of Ministers would greatly facilitate achievement of the stated aims. Moreover, the Committee calls upon the Commission to stimulate greater consultation of the social partners in order to quantify the impact on employment should the Directive, thus amended, be rapidly adopted, and avoid likely negative social consequences through a Community support programme to be agreed with the social partners. In this context the Committee also asks the Commission to speed up the presentation of its Communication on public services. Finally, the Committee wonders whether it would not be useful, given the complexity of the problems connected with rail transport reform, to have a timetable for reference, as in the case of telecommunications, iron and steel or other equally complex sectors.