

Bulgaria



Historical Train Association since 2008

Jean TALMON

Bulgaria is member of the EU since 2007

- Bulgaria is the poorest country within the EU.
- There is a political instability since many years, with permanent early elections.
- Very difficult to implement a strategy.
- Corruption is also a constant and key factor.

Mission statement

- The mission of our association is to take over the operation of the Septemvri Dobrinishte railway line in Bulgaria, along with its rolling stock, related fixed infrastructure, and the management of the stations located along the route. The National Railways Infrastructure Company (NRIC) will remain in charge of maintaining the fixed infrastructure.

Our primary objectives are as follows:

1. Sustain the operation of the railway line, which is frequently at risk of closure by the Bulgarian authorities. We aim to preserve this vital transportation link in the mountainous Rhodope region, which is still predominantly rural, to maintain social connectivity.
2. Seek support from the municipalities traversed by the line, fostering partnerships to ensure the line's continued operation and the mutual benefits it brings to the communities.
3. Enhance and expand the railway tourism activity by modernizing existing facilities and acquiring new panoramic wagons. Our goal is to attract more tourists and showcase the scenic beauty of the region.
4. Manage the conflict between steam traction and CO2 emissions, implementing strategies to mitigate environmental impact while preserving the unique charm and heritage of steam locomotives.

5. Implement a modern and effective marketing plan to raise awareness of the railway line's tourism potential internationally, promoting it as a must-visit destination.
6. Seek institutional support from foreign diplomatic representations in Bulgaria, fostering relationships to garner additional backing and international recognition for the project.
7. Identify and secure necessary funding from the European Union to realize the aforementioned objectives. We will actively pursue various financing opportunities provided by EU programs dedicated to heritage preservation, cultural tourism, and sustainable development.

Through our association's efforts, we strive to revitalize and promote the Septemvri Dobrinishte railway line as an important cultural, historical, and sustainable tourism asset, ensuring its long-term sustainability and contributing to the socio-economic growth of the region.

Brief introduction of Jean Talmon

I am 70 years old, French, and have been working in Bulgaria for more than 20 years in the transport infrastructure sector. Over the years we have confined ourselves to rail. I have a company with a team of young specialists whose activities are as follows:

- Technical, administrative and commercial assistance to foreign companies whose objective is to win calls for tenders in the construction of railways in the broad sense (civil engineering, track works, electrification, signaling and telecommunications).
- Supervision of the execution of railway works. For example, we are part of the consortia that won the supervision of the two largest railway infrastructure construction contracts: Plovdiv – Burgas and Elin Pelin – Kostenets.
- Project management. For example, we were awarded the complete management of two contracts for the Sofia Volouyak railway section. The first for civil engineering, track works and electrifications. The second for signaling and telecommunications.
- We only work on projects funded by the European Union.

Brief introduction of Jean Talmon

Alongside these professional activities, and thanks to my regular contacts with the Bulgarian Railways, I had the idea in 2008 of organizing excursions on historic trains whose aim was to bring people together in a warm atmosphere. representatives of the diplomatic community in Bulgaria with Bulgarian decision-makers in the field of transport. All the excursions took place mostly between Sofia and Velingrad (with a connection in Septemvri), the last one in May this year. This last excursion was be made with the train of King Boris III, in steam traction, on the section between Sofia and Mezdra with a stop at the Cherepish Monastery, and lunch on the way back.

Brief introduction of Jean Talmon

Over the years we have only been able to note the cruel lack of investment by the Bulgarian authorities in the preservation of Bulgaria's historic railway heritage, which ends up no longer being usable at all in certain cases. For example, the steam locomotive, which Stefano knows well, on the narrow gauge between Septemvri and Velingrad. The Bulgarian authorities even regularly consider closing this route altogether, which nevertheless represents a vital link for the inhabitants of this landlocked region of the Rhodope Mountains and significant tourist potential.

With my small team, we therefore recently decided to create an association which could take charge of the management of all or part of Bulgaria's historic railway heritage, starting with the equipment of the Septemvri Dobrinishte track. This would only concern rolling stock, with the maintenance of fixed infrastructure remaining the responsibility of the public authorities under the terms of an agreement to be signed between the parties.

Septemvri – Dobrinishte narrow-gauge line (760 mm.)

- In the list of the TOP 10 of the most beautiful tourist trains in Europe <https://partir-en-europe.com/blog/top-10-plus-beaux-trains-touristiques-europe/>
- Length: 125 km – Built between 1926 and 1937 – 22 stations
- Route through three mountains chains: Rhodopes, Pirin and Rila
- Elevations Septemvri 238 m – Dobrinishte 834 m – Highest station Avramovo 1,267 m
- Max gradient: 3.2% - Minimum curve radius 60 m
- 35 tunnels (total length of 2,858 m) Just after tunnel Nr 16, the track passes a stone arch bridge over the river and begins its four-level way on the north side of the valley through 16 tunnels, two spirals and one 180° turn. The line passes under itself two times in tunnels Nr 18 and 24. In this section, the train changes its traveling direction 6 times.
- Structures are mostly in steel, some of them in stone.

Sofia – Cherepish Monastery – May 18,2024

This trip is not only the opportunity to discover some parts beautiful of Bulgaria in a very different way, but also to communicate in a friendly environment with some Bulgarian top executives involved in the Transport Sector. Among others, the Minister of Transport, the Chairman of BDZ (Bulgarian Railways) and the Chairman of NRIC (National Railways Infrastructure Company) attended together with the Prime Minister of Bulgaria and the heads of numerous diplomatic representations in Bulgaria, and International Financing Institution.

The excursion is not open to the public. By invitation only, and free of charge.

Sofia – Cherepish Monastery – May 18, 2024

It was the 10th edition of our excursions, and the crew driving our steam locomotive included the US Ambassador to Bulgaria, H.E. Kenneth Merten, who got a special licence for this occasion. As Stefano did in 2008!

We had also on board, the Metropolitan Grigorii Vrachanski of Vratsa will accompanied us on the train for part of the excursion and in particular for the visit of the Monastery of Cherepish

Metropolitan Gregory was acting vice-president of the Holy Synod and serving as Metropolitan of Sofia, until the election of a new Bulgarian Patriarch which occurred this month of July.

Sofia – Cherepish Monastery – May 18, 2024

We have used an outstanding train which has been designed and put in service for King Boris III just before the second world war.

Our train was trailed by the 89-years old locomotive 01.23, a beautiful machine, made in 1935 in Winterthur, Switzerland.

The coaches consisted of four wagons. Three originate from the King's Boris III train (“Crown Express”), produced in Germany between 1938 and 1939. These include one restaurant wagon and the wagons specifically designated for Queen Johanna and King Boris III. The fourth wagon is also a restaurant car, sourced from the “Vitosha Express” train, custom-built for former Bulgarian head of state Todor Jivkov in 1975.

CO² emissions – Notice on our donation boxes

Dear friends,

We are very happy to share this unique experience with you aboard our historic train. However, we are aware that this journey, although exceptional, will have an impact on the environment due to the carbon emissions generated by the steam locomotive.

We strongly believe in the importance of protecting our planet, and we recognize that every action counts.

In addition to your generous donation to our Historical Train Association, we invite you to consider, each on your own, a voluntary contribution to a carbon offset project. These projects aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by investing in initiatives that promote low-carbon energy production.

This will allow us to enjoy this incredible experience while minimizing our impact on the environment. We thank you for your understanding and your support in this process aimed at making our trip more respectful of the environment.

With all our gratitude,

Our current challenges

Beyond any agreement to be reached with the Ministry of Transport, we are actively working on the following topics:

- Have the line classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site? Example of the Rhaetian Railways <https://whc.unesco.org/fr/list/1276/>
- How to reconcile the intensive use (with groups for example) of historic wagons with the preservation of heritage (avoiding degradation)?
- How to reconcile the use of steam traction with the problem of CO² emissions?

Our current challenges

- How to keep existing know-how from existing employees (volunteers or not)?

Photo gallery

You can also have a look at a selection of photos by following this link:

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/kaqz1zEY2QWAzhqF9>

And you are obviously all invited to our next excursion!

When? I don't know.

It depends mostly on my available cash-flow...