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Railways in Podlaskie

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Summary
The railway network in the Podlaskie Voivodeship has undergone refurbishment and modernization in recent years as part of the ongoing major investment program – the construction of the Rail Baltica line/modernization of LK 6, connecting Białystok with Warsaw. Since the vast majority of lines in the region are non-electrified, the funds allocated by PLK are fairly low compared to other voivodeships. One specificity of the Podlasie region is the presence of transshipment stations with a 1520 mm railway gauge, which is due to the proximity to Belarus. The construction of the Rail Baltica line, i.e., the standard gauge line connecting Poland with the Baltic States, is the biggest investment in the voivodeship, which will cut the travel time and enable increased speeds, and also enable upgrades to outdated railway infrastructure: manual signaling at the Białystok station, single-track sections on LK 6, etc. Further, it will make it possible to modernize stations other than Białystok and Ełk, e.g., Czyżew, Łapy and Szepietowo. Compared to other Eastern voivodeships, Podlaskie has no city rail development programs, unlike those in Podkarpackie (already operational) and Lubelskie (currently in the planning phase). Private operators providing passenger transport services are virtually non-existent on the local market; however, this is beginning to change as of early 2024.

Keywords: Podlasie, Rail Baltica, Białystok, Polish-Belarussian state border

1. Rail network in Podlaskie

Podlasie is a region located in the north-eastern part of Poland (Fig. 1). The density of the railway network, for historical reasons, is 3.76 km / 100 km^2 (the lowest in Poland [1], with the average for the whole country being 6.2 km / 100 km^2. Despite being founded in the mid-15th century, the region's capital, Białystok, only began to develop rapidly after the construction of the Warsaw – St. Petersburg Railway in 1862, advancing from a somewhat marginal town to the capital of the region. Further, after the November Uprising (1831), the establishment of a customs border between the Kingdom of Poland and Russia meant that Białystok became a target for investment by manufacturers from Łódź. Despite having a smaller population than Białystok[2], Grodno (also located on the Warsaw-St. Petersburg railway line), situated several dozen kilometers away, became the capital of the province for political reasons. Since the area belonged to the Russian partition, the railway gauge was 1524 mm from the start (conversion to the normal gauge, 1435 mm, did not take place until 1915–1916, which was done by the occupying German army). After 1945, and the change of national borders, several trunk lines lost their significance and were downgraded to local lines, which manifested itself in such things as the removal of the second track:

- LK 6 (fragment) Białystok – Sokółka – Kuźnica Białostocka (– Grodno);
- LK 32 Białystok – Czeremcha (– Vysoko-Litovsk – Brest);
- LK 31 (fragment) Czeremcha – Hajnówka – Siemianówka (– Svislach – Vawkavysk);
- LK 37 Białystok – Zubki Białostockie (– Byerastavitsa – Vawkavysk);
- LK 38 Białystok – Ełk – Korsze – Bartoszyce (– Kaliningrad), the Białystok – Ełk section was electrified in 1990. While Ełk is located in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship rather than the Podlaskie Voivodeship, it has been included in this article for the sake of clarity in the description of Rail Baltica.

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[2] Currently, the numbers have reversed, with Białystok having a population of 292,600 (2023 Statistics Poland data) and Grodno having 356,900 (2020 data from the State Statistical Committee of Belarus).

Fig. 1. Diagram of the railway network in Podlaskie [author's own elaboration]

The emergence of the Polish-Soviet border in 1945 resulted in sections of LK 6, 31, 32, 37, and 38 located east of the Polish border being converted to a gauge of 1524 mm. In addition, transshipment points for the military were built at border stations (on both sides of the border), which were in operation until the early 1990s[3]. These were the so-called WRP and ZRP (military/alternate transshipment areas), i.e., stations equipped with tracks of both gauges (standard and broad) and used by the Soviet army to transport military equipment (weapons and ammunition), as well as fuel and soldiers from the USSR to/from Soviet garrisons located in Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia. Since most of the WRPs were built at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, and the 1970s saw a decline in the role of railways in potential armed conflicts (due to advances in missile and aviation technology), some of the WRPs were turned over for civilian use. The WRPs were located at the following stations:

- Kuźnica Białostocka (LK 6);
- Zubki Białostockie (LK 37);
- Siemianówka (LK 31).

While Kuźnica Białostocka and Siemianówka stations were upgraded in 2004–2007 and 2021, respectively, Zubki Białostockie station was decommissioned (traffic on LK 37 was suspended around 2000). In addition, broad gauge (1520 mm[4]) lines were laid along several normal gauge lines:

- LK 57 Sokółka – Kuźnica Białostocka (– Grodno), the section between Sokółka and Gieniusze was closed down after 1989, and currently (2023) a fragment of LK 57 is being reconstructed;
- LK 59 Chryzanów / Oskierki / Planta – Siemianówka – Cisówka (– Svislach), mostly along LK 31.

There are border crossings in Podlasie – these connected to the SZhD network until 1991, and now to networks operated by Lithuania and Belarus:

- PKP / LG:
  - Trakiszki – Mockava (1435 mm only) – it is the junction point of the railway network of both gauges (both countries belong to the Schengen area);
- PKP / BC:
  - Kuźnica Białostocka – Broozgi (1435 / 1520 mm), the 1435 mm track is electrified (3 kV DC);
  - Siemianówka – Cisówka – Svislach (1435 / 1520 mm);
  - Czeremcha – Vysoko-Litovsk (1435 mm only), currently closed;
  - Zubki Białostockie – Byerastavitsa (1435 / 1520 mm), decommissioned.

Border crossings are single-track (with either a 1435 mm or 1520 mm gauge or dual gauge) and non-electrified: only the Kuźnica Białostocka – Broozgi crossing is electrified. Furthermore, before 1989, passenger traffic was only routed via the Kuźnica Białostocka – Broozgi crossing. After 1991, passenger traffic was also launched through the following crossings:

- Czeremcha – Vysoko-Litovsk (PKP trains ran between border stations), transport has been suspended since 2010;
- Trakiszki – Mockava, currently in operation.

Only freight traffic was and is allowed through the other border crossings.

Today, the main line passing through Podlasie is LK 6, electrified in 1983, which is now part of the Rail Baltica trunk line. LK 6 is being upgraded to accommodate speeds of up to 160 km/h with the help of EU funds. Rail Baltica will connect Poland to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and, once funding is secured for the construction of a tunnel under the Gulf of Finland, to Helsinki. Rail Baltica will have a gauge of 1435 mm along its entire length and will be electrified at 25 kV 50 Hz within the LG, LDZ, and EVR networks.

Apart from LK 6 and LK 38, the majority of the region's railways are non-electrified. Due to the relatively short distance to Warsaw (172 km, about 2 h travel time), there is no civil airport in the vicinity, and passengers use airports in Warsaw (Okęcie, Modlin). The border with Belarus means that infrastructure for the handling of bulk goods like propane-butane gases, timber, metal ores, and others has been built at border crossing stations. In the case of Lithuania, the railway intends to take over at least some of the goods currently transported by road by launching trains carrying semi-trailers between Germany and Lithuania. It has involved establishing LTG Cargo, a company that now runs rail services on the PLK network. The program for the modernization and refurbishment of the railway network in Podlaskie was launched after EU funds were obtained under several programs (OPI&E, CEF, OP Eastern Poland).

As Podlasie's industry is mostly concentrated in Białystok, the local railway lines are mainly used for

[3] Until the withdrawal of the Soviet (by then, already Russian) army from Central European countries was completed, i.e., in September 1993.

[4] In May 1970 brought a change in the gauge standard for Soviet railways from 1524 mm to 1520 mm (–4/+8 mm), which also applied to metro systems, while the gauge standard for tram systems remained at 1524 mm. The 4 mm difference did not require conversion of rolling stock or infrastructure, but did cause serious problems during the transition period because of dramatically increased wheelset wear.

passenger traffic. Apart from the modernized LK 6, the remaining lines have been refurbished (operating speed < 120 km/h), which is less costly and simpler than modernization (operating speed < 160 km/h). Main local lines are now refurbished, which has made it possible to raise speeds and reduce journey times. The Podlaskie Marshal's Office has also acquired new vehicles, limiting itself to diesel multiple units and motor coaches, while electric vehicles, i.e., EN57, were modernized to the AKM standard. One of the reasons was probably the previous maximum speed on LK 6, which was 120 km/h, and the deadline for completing the modernization of LK 6, which was associated with a reduction in the line's capacity – something that would most affect local passenger traffic. The following lines were refurbished before the modernization of LK 6:

- LK 32 (Białystok – Czeremcha), the line had numerous zones with speed limits of up to 30 km/h [2];
- LK 52 (Lewki – Hajnówka);
- LK 36 Łapy – Ostrołęka, completed in mid-2018: the condition of the track superstructure on the above-mentioned line was clearly poor, making it impossible to ensure freight traffic on detour lines.

The condition of the superstructure on LK 31 (Siedlce – Czeremcha) was relatively good, so only spot repairs to the infrastructure were needed (a total of about 7 km), as well as some repairs to level crossings and the construction of new stops and renovation of existing ones. Between 2017 and 2019[5], the LK 52 Hajnówka – Lewki (– Bielsk Podlaski) line was refurbished, with passenger traffic restored in January 2021 (freight traffic was restored in October 2018).

The modernization of the station and railway station in Białystok is noteworthy (Figs. 2 and 3). Apart from a comprehensive replacement of the superstructure at the passenger and freight station, PLK decided to build platform shelters for the passenger section. Another visible change is the installation of a modern traffic control system (Local Control Center) and the replacement of manual signaling with traffic lights[6]. Station buildings in Czyżew, Ełk, and Szepietowo were modernized. System train stations were created at several locations, including Czeremcha and Bielsk Podlaski. Station buildings in Łapy, Grajewo, Suwałki, Augustów, and others are still awaiting modernization. In early 2024, the existing station building in Sokółka was demolished to replace it with a Municipal Transfer Centre (the station building had previously been taken over from the PKP by the local government).

Fig. 2. Białystok station before modernization (15 July 2020) [photo from PLK's collection]

Fig. 3. Białystok station during modernization – new track layout [photo by A. Lewandowski/PLK]

1.1. Construction of Rail Baltica line / Modernisation of LK 6

In January 2022, a new road viaduct over the tracks in Szepietowo was commissioned, which is one of 25 grade-separated road junctions with the railway line between Czyżew and Białystok. In addition to the viaducts in Szepietowo and Uhowo, which are already in operation, the remaining grade-separated intersections and more than 60 km of access roads are under construction. In January 2023, regional train services were restored on the Białystok – Czyżew route (70 km), and in September 2023 on the Czyżew – Warsaw section (Fig. 4–6).

[5] Including the construction of new passenger stops.

[6] Until the modernization of Białystok station, it was the largest railway station in Poland, equipped with manual signaling.

Fig. 4. Czyżew station on LK 6 (111.838 km mark) during modernization (15 September 2022) [photo by A. Kupińska / PLK]

Fig. 5. Szepietowo station on LK 6 (127.376 km mark) during modernization [photo by A. Lewandowski/PLK]

Fig. 6. Racibory station on LK 6 (140.474 km mark) during modernization [photo by A. Lewandowski/PLK]

Double-track train traffic has been in effect on the Czyżew – Racibory section (28 km) since early 2023; it has also been the case for the Kietlanka – Czyżew section since the first quarter of 2023. In April 2023, the modernization began the of the Łapy – Białystok section, which includes the reconstruction of railway stops in Uhowo, Bojary, Niewodnica, and Klepacze, as well as the construction of a station in Baciuty to replace the existing stop [30]. One of the biggest challenges will be the construction of a new bridge, measuring nearly 200 m in length, over the Narew River in Uhowo. Apart from the Białystok station, a railway link has been built in Starosielce, which will connect the line from Ełk with the line to Bielsk Podlaski. New platforms, a railway viaduct, and access roads were built at Czyżew station. It was continued at Szepietowo station, similarly to Czyżew, with two viaducts planned to be constructed. Since February 2023, a new signaling control equipped with a digital traffic control system has been in operation at Czyżew. There are also plans to rebuild 38 platforms and construct underground passings in 14 locations on the Czyżew – Białystok section. In December 2022, work was being carried out on 16 of the 25 planned road and rail viaducts, including at Klepacze, Niewodnica, Barszczówka, Porośl-Kije, Jabłoń Kościelna, and Czyżew. In January 2023, most of the work at Czyżew and Szepietów stations had been completed, but it continued at Racibory, Łapy and Białystok stations [1]. In September 2023, platforms at Bojary, Baciuty, Trypucie, and Niewodnica stops were undergoing reconstruction, and work was being carried out on 24 engineering structures – bridges, viaducts, and underground passings [33]. Work also began on the construction of new road viaducts at the following locations: Czyżew, Dąbrowa-Łazy, Jabłoń-Dąbrowa, and Porośl-Kije [31]. A passings under the tracks will be built at the Bojary railway stop. Apart from the commenced investments, work is already advanced on 19 engineering structures – bridges, viaducts, and subways; progress has also been made on a new viaduct between the villages of Barszczówka and Baciuty. Construction or modernization work for the following infrastructure is planned on the Czyżew – Białystok section:

- 6 stations;
- 12 stops (including a new one – Zielone Wzgórza);
- 17 road viaducts;
- 8 railway viaducts;
- 2 road tunnels;
- 14 underground passings;
- 10 railway bridges.

At the end of 2023, the Łapy – Białystok section (23 km) was completed, excluding the Łapy and Białystok stations, where work is continuing [42]. Work was completed at 12 stops and 4 stations on LK 6, as well as at the Uhowo bridge over the Narew River (Fig. 7). The cost of building the bridge was PLN 46 million. Each bridge consists of two spans resting on a support in the middle of the structure and abutments on the banks [32, 38]. The supports of the old bridge were left in place for the duration of the work and are being used to move the structure into place. Approximately 50 people worked on the construction project. The truss structure, weighing some 1,500 tonnes, was moved almost 10 meters to the side

using special actuators and hydraulic pumps. This specialized operation took dozens of hours. Previously, the bridge had been gradually slid over the river for several months as construction progressed. This construction technology enables twin railway bridges to be built at once. The new crossing over the Narew River has a truss structure, consisting of two steel bridges (one for each track) resting on common abutments and a reinforced concrete support. The new bridge enables the passage of trains with an axle load of up to 22.5 t at speeds of up < 200 km/h. After being slid across the river, the completed structure of the first bridge will be moved to the side to make room for the construction of the second bridge. This will enable both bridges to be constructed on the same site. The work was scheduled for completion in 2023. Train traffic on the Warsaw – Białystok line was previously carried out using one of the old bridges. Travelers will also be able to use the newly built platform in Uhowo, to which a temporary access route has been laid out. The opening of the bridge and platform will enable the next stage of work on the construction of another part of the subway and a second platform to begin.

Fig. 7. Uhowo on LK 6 (156.265 km mark), construction of a new bridge over the Narew River [photo by Ł. Brylowski/PLK]

The completion of the reconstruction of the Łapy station, where new platforms and three underground passings are being built, was also planned for 2024. An important part of the modernization of the Podlasie section of the Rail Baltica line is the construction of two-level crossings. Twenty-five grade-separated junctions are planned for the Czyżew – Białystok section. Similar facilities have been commissioned in Czyżew, Łapy and Niewodnica. Sixteen junctions are under construction. There will also be 14 subways on the Podlaskie section of Rail Baltica, with underground passings already in use at the Białystok Zielone Wzgórza stop and at the stations in Szepietowo and Czyżew. Work is underway at eight locations and was scheduled to commence at another 3 locations in 2024: Jabłoń Kościelna, Zdrody Nowe, and Trypucie. The project is being carried out as part of the „Work on the E75 line, Czyżew – Białystok section" program. The value of the entire Rail Baltica project is almost PLN 3.4 billion, co-financed by the *Connecting Europe Facility* (CEF).

Train traffic on the Białystok – Warsaw line is maintained at all times. However, work carried out on one of the two tracks on the section from Łapy to Białystok required a change in the timetable. On the Białystok – Szepietowo section, rail replacement bus service was introduced for the majority of POLREGIO regional trains. Trains were replaced by bus service instead of one IC train on the Białystok – Warsaw section. Once all the work is completed, the shortest train journey from Białystok to Warsaw will take around 90 minutes.

The investment program for the construction of the Rail Baltica line includes the construction of a second track on the Białystok – Ełk section (about 90 km) and raising the maximum speed to 250 km/h (i.e., modernization of stations and stops). The construction of a Zatyki–Norki junction is envisaged as well; this would allow trains to run on the Olecko–Suwałki section without having to change the front end. The investment project for the Ełk – Trakiszki section was completed by December 2023, with construction work scheduled for 2024–2027. The investment project has been divided into 2 stages [15]:

- "Work on the E75 railway line, Białystok – Ełk – Olecko – Suwałki – Trakiszki (– State Border) section, stage I: Białystok – Ełk section", valued at PLN 587 million;
- "Work on the E75 railway line, Białystok – Ełk – Olecko – Suwałki – Trakiszki (– State Border) section, stage II: Ełk – Trakiszki (– State Border) section".

The value of the contract for design work is PLN 58 million. Olecko station will be rebuilt – this will involve changing the track layout and constructing new platforms.

1.2. Białystok station

In December 2021, PLK submitted three variants of the Białystok Northern Bypass railway corridor for further analysis [16]. Public consultations were conducted from autumn 2019 – they included five information meetings with residents, a video conference in August 2021, and 3,217 questionnaires submitted. As a result, PLK selected three corridor options for the new railway line (W6, W12, W13) for further analysis. In the next stages, detailed technical solutions and environmental and economic analyses were developed. They resulted in the selection of the most advantageous route for the bypass in 2022. All study work was completed in the second quarter of 2023, as scheduled. The development of design documen-

tation was then commissioned, along with obtaining the necessary administrative decisions. Construction work is planned for 2027–2030. The "Construction of the Białystok Northern Bypass" project is financed from the state budget.

The contractor expanded the scope of work at the Białystok station in April 2023. Apart from the platforms, around 30 km of old track and overhead line have been dismantled to date. The site was prepared for the construction of underground passings under the tracks (until then, access to the platforms was possible via a footbridge over the tracks or a level crossing). Walkways equipped with ramps will be built to enable access from the station building to the platforms.

In September 2023, three new platforms equipped with a stylized hall were partially opened to travelers (Fig. 8). The platforms of the new Białystok Zielone Wzgórza stop were commissioned in stages. To date, 35 km of superstructure and 104 turnouts have been replaced at Białystok station (with up to 55 km of superstructure and 144 turnouts to be replaced in total) [34]. Work on the construction of platforms and the subway was completed in 2024, and the station became fully operational. In October 2023, a signaling control equipped with digital signaling equipment (Local Control Center) was put into operation, replacing six existing signal boxes in Białystok (Figs. 9 and 10) [37]. To illustrate this, train routes are now created with a single mouse click, without the need to manually move the turnouts directly on the tracks. One vital element of the system is devices installed on the tracks, i.e., electric switch motors, light signals, and axle counters, which record the number of trains passing through the station. The Local Control Center will become fully functional with the completion of the modernization of LK 6, and the station masters will be able to use computer displays to supervise train traffic on a total of 70 km of the line. The centralized supervision will cover such stations as Czyżew, Szepietowo, Racibory, Łapy and Baciuty. A further section of the Rail Baltica line from Białystok to Grajewo and the line from Łapy to Łomża will be connected to the LCC later on.

Fig. 8. The new platform hall at Białystok's main railway station (6 April 2024) [photo by Rakoon / Wikimedia Commons]

Fig. 9. The mechanical equipment in the old signaling control at Białystok station (5 October 2023) [photo by T. Lotowski / PLK]

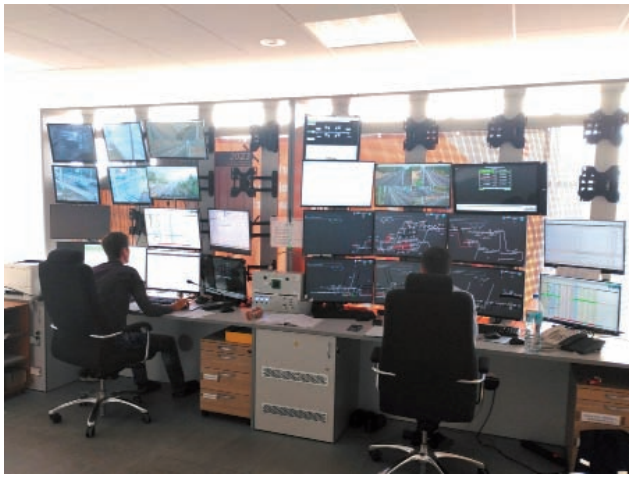

Fig. 10. Białystok LCC (5 October 2023) [photo by T. Lotowski / PLK]

1.3. Stations in Ełk

Work commenced on the stations in Ełk in December 2021. Both of the city's stations (Ełk and Ełk Towarowy) were completely rebuilt. The superstructure was replaced: 70,000 tonnes of crushed stone, 2,500 tonnes of rail and reinforcing steel, and 40,000 sleepers were used to lay several kilometers of track and set up a 10 km overhead contact line, as well as 70 support structures. New platforms with canopies and non-slip paving were also built, and new benches, bright lighting, as well as longer subways were provided at the passenger station (Fig. 11) [14]. Care was taken to ensure that the work carried out did not interfere with the scheduled running of trains within the station. All three platforms have been raised and widened, and lifts have been installed to facilitate access for people with reduced mobility. PLK's investment project, with an estimated net cost of PLN 587 million, is co-financed by EU funds under the Con-

necting Europe Facility with approximately EUR 116 million, i.e., 85% of the total cost. The modernization also applies to the Ełk Szyba Wschód stop, where two 200-meter-long single-sided platforms are planned to be built. Ełk Towarowy station was rebuilt to accommodate 740m-long trains. New railway viaducts were built over Towarowa Street, Kolejowa Street (the structures replaced single-level crossings), and the railway Street viaduct over Suwalska Street. The railway bridge over the Ełk River has been modernized (Fig. 12): the existing structure was gradually dismantled using a cutting rope. The contractor for the design and construction work is Budimex [29, 35, 36].

Fig. 11. Ełk station during modernization [photo by D. Strzemkowski / PLK]

Fig. 12. Construction of the bridge over the Ełk River [photo by P. Chamera / PLK]

1.4. LK 40 Sokółka – Suwałki

In February 2023, PLK signed contracts for the modernization of platforms at 9 locations on the Sokółka – Suwałki line, totaling around PLN 18 million [28]. These projects are financed under the „Government Program for the Construction or Modernization of Railway Stops for 2021–2025". In the first quarter of 2023, PLK signed contracts for the reconstruction of platforms at stations in Augustów (Fig. 13) and Dąbrowa Białostocka. The work will also cover other locations like Gliniszcze, Sidra, Różanystok, Balinka, Augustów Port, Szczepki, and Płociczno near Suwałki, and has already been contracted out. The work was scheduled for completion in autumn 2023. The process involves the construction of higher platforms, 120 m long and 0.76 m high, equipped with ramps and anti-slip surfaces, as well as shelters and benches, clear signage, notice boards, and LED lighting. In the Podlaskie Voivodeship, the „Government Program for the Construction or Modernization of Railway Stops for 2021–2025" covers a total of 15 stops. In September 2023, PLK announced a tender to carry out work at the last three locations: Kamienna Nowa on the Sokółka – Suwałki line, as well as Podbiele and Repczyce Zalew (new stop) on the Białystok – Czeremcha line [13]. The work was scheduled to be completed in 2024. In August 2023, PLK announced a tender for the construction of an LCC for LK 40 at Augustów station [12]. In addition, 7 level crossings are planned to be repaired or upgraded. The project is expected to be financed under the National Recovery Plan and implemented under the program „Digitization of railway infrastructure through the installation of modern devices and systems – stage I". The LCC was scheduled to be built in 2024.

Fig. 13. Augustów station after modernization [photo by T. Lotowski / PLK]

1.5. LK 32 Białystok – Czeremcha, LK 31 Czeremcha – Siedlce and LK 36 Ostrołęka – Łapy

The modernization of LK 6 as part of the Rail Baltica project also includes the refurbishment of lines that can be used for detours (especially for freight traffic). These include three non-electrified lines:

- LK 31 Czeremcha – Siedlce, double-track line;
- LK 32 Czeremcha – Białystok, single-track line; the superstructure was replaced virtually along the entire line; when completed, the speed was increased from 60 km/h to 120 km/h, and journey time was significantly reduced.
- LK 36 Ostrołęka – Łapy, double-track line.

Refurbishment work was carried out on a total of 235 km of lines, and after its completion, these lines took over some of the trains (especially freight trains), enabling LK 6 to be relieved during the modernization of the Sadowne – Czyżew and Czyżew – Białystok sections. The contract for the refurbishment of the abovementioned line was signed in late January 2017 [8]. The value of the contract was PLN 208 million gross, and 10 months were allocated for implementation.

During the revitalization of LK 36, work was first carried out on the closed section, which included the installation of signaling equipment and the repair of defects in the track superstructure. PLK replaced a total of 95 km of track superstructure, including over 150,000 sleepers and several turnouts. Forty level crossings were rebuilt, with new automatic crossing signaling devices installed at 30 of them. Twelve bridges, viaducts, and ten culverts qualified for renovation. The work carried out has made it possible to significantly increase operating speeds and reduce journey times.

In September 2017, Torpol signed a contract with PLK for the refurbishment (design and construction) of three railway lines in Podlaskie [41]:

- LK 31: Voivodeship boundary – Czeremcha – Hajnówka section;
- LK 32: Białystok – Bielsk Podlaski – Lewki section;
- LK 52: Lewki – Hajnówka section.

The total value of the work is PLN 385.6 million gross. The completion date was set at 20 months from the date of signing the contract, with a warranty period of 72 months (6 years). The refurbishment of LK 31 included the renovation of the superstructure along a total length of 37 km, as well as the replacement of switches and signaling equipment (Fig. 14). Ten platforms were rebuilt on the Siemiatycze – Hajnówka section (Fig. 15), and new shelters, benches, clear signage, and timetable boards were installed. A total of 40 level crossings were rebuilt, and repairs were carried out on 28 existing engineering structures – bridges, viaducts, culverts, and footbridges. New bridges and culverts were also built.

In January 2017, PKP S.A. signed a contract with the „An Archi Group" design studio to develop documentation for the redevelopment of Czeremcha station (the existing building was constructed in 1989), including reducing the building's area by around 200 m^2 and setting up a connecting link (~300 m^2). PKP S.A. signed the relevant contract in Q3 2017, with a completion deadline of 12 months and the designer's supervision over the project. The new station is one of the 10 facilities scheduled for modernization (construction or reconstruction) under the OP Eastern Poland, along with neighboring facilities in Siemiatycze (to be reconstructed; LK 31) and Bielsk Podlaski (system railway station; LK 32). In January 2020, a new station in Czeremcha – built using the Innovative System Station formula – was commissioned (the old facility was demolished) [19]. The new station features a modern passenger information system, adapted for people with reduced mobility, and a separate room for mothers with children. The station received solar collectors, energy-efficient LED lighting, and heat pumps, as well as a rainwater (greywater) harvesting system. The work was carried out at a gross cost of PLN 13 million, with funding from the EU under the Operational Program Eastern Poland (OP EP) and from PKP S.A.

Fig. 14. Czeremcha station after modernization (6 June 2020) [photo by M. Graff]

Fig. 15. Hajnówka station after modernization (21 August 2021) [photo by M. Graff]

1.6. LK 49 Śniadowo – Łomża

In July 2023, PLK signed a contract with the Marshal's Office of the Podlaskie Voivodeship for the implementation of projects under the „Government Local and Regional Infrastructure Supplementation

Program 'Railway Plus' until 2029". [10]. The contract, signed by representatives of PLK and the Podlaskie Voivodeship's local government, provides for the refurbishment of the railway line from Łapy via Śniadowo to Łomża. Notwithstanding occasional incidental services, the final scheduled passenger train departed from Łomża in 1993 (Fig. 16). Thanks to the line's refurbishment, over 60,000 residents of Łomża and approximately 22,000 residents of four municipalities located along the line will gain access to rail transport. The refurbishment assumes the restoration of a maximum speed of 80–100 km/h. The shortest journey time by train from Łomża to Białystok, after all the work has been completed and the necessary approvals have been obtained, is planned to be 1 hour 35 minutes (77 km). It is estimated that about 24,000 passengers will use the rail connection each month. There are also plans to rebuild the railway infrastructure to handle both local and long-distance passenger traffic at the following stations: Konarzyce, Koziki, Śniadowo (new stop – Śniadowo Łącznica), Czachy-Kołaki, Kulesze Kościelne, and Sokoły. A 1 km long connector will be built (reconstructed) in Śniadowo, which will eliminate the need to change the direction of travel on the Białystok – Łomża route. In addition, a passing loop is planned to be built in Czerwony Bór. The budget for the work planned under the project amounts to PLN 430 million, including nearly PLN 366 million from the state budget (85%) and PLN 64.5 million (15%) from the funds of the voivodeship local government. The tender for the preparation of design documentation and work is scheduled for the third quarter of 2023, and construction work is planned for 2025–2028. In mid-June 2023, PLK announced its abandonment of the plans to electrify LK 49 and a section of LK 36, i.e., Łomża – Śniadowo and Łapy – Śniadowo sections, respectively, and that the freed-up funds would be allocated to other PLK projects, including the modernization of the line from Bielsko-Biała to Cieszyn in the Śląskie Voivodeship [2].

Fig. 16. Łomża station [photo by T. Lotowski / PLK]

1.7. LK 59 State border – Siemianówka – Chryzanów (1520 mm)

In April 2018, PLK issued a tender for the refurbishment of LK 59 (single-track, 1520 mm) on the State Border – Siemianówka – Chryzanów section (20 km), as well as the railway border crossing at Siemianówka. The work was carried out using EU funds under the Podlaskie Voivodeship Regional Operational Program 2014–2020, the Railway Fund, and the state budget. PLN 86.8 million was allocated for the execution of the work, and PLN 109 million for the purchase of rails and sleepers [21]. The completion deadline was set at 23 months. The speed after refurbishment was raised to 60 km/h, with a maximum axle load of 24.5 kN per track. The refurbishment of LK 59 was combined with the replacement of the signaling equipment on LK 31 Hajnówka – Siemianówka (the previous tender that did not include LK 31 was not awarded). The scope of work included the reconstruction of 6 bridges over the Narewka River and 13 level crossings, as well as the modernization of the signaling control in Siemianówka, which was fitted with modern digital equipment. The work was carried out between 2018 and 2021 and included the replacement of the superstructure at Siemianówka station (1435 mm and 1520 mm); the value of the work was PLN 32 million. The refurbishment of Siemianówka station was completed in August 2021 [11]. Both projects were included in the "National Railway Program until 2023" under the program called „Improvement of the technical condition of railway infrastructure at (eight) border crossings, including the broad gauge track".

1.8. LK 57 Kuźnica Białostocka – Geniusze (1520 mm)

In June 2018, PKP PLK announced a tender for the refurbishment and reconstruction of LK 57 Kuźnica Białostocka – Geniusze (28 km), including LK 923 Buchwałowo Wschód – Buchwałowo (2.6 km), which is a branch of LK 57 (Fig. 17) [20, 24, 40]. The project's value is PLN 194.9 million net, with part of the funds coming from the Podlaskie Voivodeship Regional Operational Program 2014–2020. Plans are in place to install 34 switches at the following stations: Kuźnica Białostocka, Sokółka, Geniusze (an additional track will be built at the latter station), replace signaling equipment, and rebuild 16 level crossings, 10 bridges, and 15 other engineering structures. It will allow speeds to be increased to 60 km/h with an axle load of 245 kN per axle. On LK 923, it was planned to replace the superstructure and install three new switches on the Buchwałowo siding, where the PKN Orlen fuel terminal is located. The work was completed in 2021.

Thanks to the investments made, it became possible to receive trains of up to 1050 m in length. It should be noted that the Sokółka – Geniusze section of LK 57 was decommissioned in 1992.

Fig. 17. 1520 mm tracks at Kuźnica Białostocka station (16 April 2016) [photo by M. Graff]

2. Border station upgrades (1435 / 1520 mm)

In August 2021, PLK reported on the status of the modernization program for border crossings that include broad-gauge tracks and normal-gauge tracks [27]. Carried out under the National Railway Program, the relevant work was carried out using state budget funds totaling PLN 280 million. In the Podlaskie Voivodeship, work was carried out at three border crossings:

- Siemianówka – Svisloch – work totaling about PLN 79 million was carried out at the Siemianówka border crossing. The stations can now receive and handle heavier and longer trains with axle loads of up to 245 kN per axle (25 t per axle) and up to 1050 m in length (e.g., goods trains running on 1520 mm track). At Siemianówka station, the superstructure and track of both gauges were replaced. The signaling control at Siemianówka station was fitted with digital signaling equipment, as was the new signaling control at Zabłotczyzna station (completed in late 2022). The work complemented the modernization of LK 59 (1520 mm) on the section between the state border in Siemianówka and Zabłotczyzna and was implemented with funds from the Podlaskie Voivodeship ROP.
- Kuźnica Białostocka (– Broozgi): the station was adapted to accommodate heavier and longer freight trains – with axle loads of up to 245 kN per axle (25 t per axle) and up to 1050 m in length. PLK built additional tracks for around PLN 10 million. The project is linked to the renovation of the railway line from Kuźnica Białostocka to Geniusze station, which is being carried out under the Podlaskie Voivodeship ROP. The work was completed in late 2023.
- Czeremcha – Vysoko-Litovsk: in April 2018, PKP announced that traffic through the Czeremcha – Vysoko-Litovsk crossing would be restored in autumn 2018 and that the crossing would be used not only for local passenger traffic but also for freight traffic [9]. Freight traffic includes mainly container traffic, and this option would relieve the burden on the existing Brest – Terespol – Małaszewicze border crossing. While a short section (approximately 5 km) from Czeremcha to the state border was refurbished, the lack of approval by Polish customs authorities proved to be an obstacle – they demanded that a scanner be installed to enable the inspection of railcar and container contents without opening them. Thus, the announced opening date is unknown (it is not clear how funding for the purchase and installation of the scanner should be obtained).

In mid-April 2023, the Polish central authorities extended the ban on passenger services between Poland and Belarus, which was formally motivated by the SARS-Covid-19 pandemic [6]. Train services between the two countries were suspended in March 2020 with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic and the restrictions on public transport travel, especially international transport, applicable to countries outside the EU. Although certain restrictions have been lifted, some are still in place [39]. Political relations between Poland and Belarus are more than likely to remain strained, as the Belarusian central authorities provoked an immigration crisis on the border with Poland and, in February 2022, supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The further restrictions announced by the Polish Ministry of the Interior and Administration on crossing the border with Belarus, and even the intention to close the border completely in response to the position of the highest Belarusian authorities, show that the restoration of passenger rail links between Poland and Belarus is a rather distant prospect [7].

3. Cooperation with Lithuania

Working under the Polish-Lithuanian Infrastructure Group established in 2021, representatives of the Lithuanian railway infrastructure manager AB LTG Infra visited Poland in mid-June 2022 [22]. The Group

itself is a forum for cooperation and exchange of experience, aimed at improving the quality of railway traffic on cross-border sections. The Group's members work together to improve rail communication between Poland and Lithuania. Discussions were held on strengthening cooperation in the provision and maintenance of railway lines and the possibilities of increasing transport operations between Poland and Lithuania (Fig. 18). Experiences related to the implementation of investment projects were also discussed, particularly about the Rail Baltica international construction program. An important part of the meeting was a technical visit to the construction site at Białystok station and the railway bridge over the Narew River. The Lithuanian delegation was particularly interested in hearing about the construction of the Rail Baltica line, especially regarding the development of common approaches and technical solutions used. The Group's activities include the implementation of new technical and operational solutions and the introduction of the European Rail Traffic Management System.

The SA133 series vehicles purchased by the local government were used in traffic with Lithuania until December 2022, which required the installation of LTG's safety system in the SA133s, the addition of information in Lithuanian aboard the vehicles, and the training of LTG personnel (the change of conductor teams takes place at Trakiszki station). SA133 vehicles operated on the Białystok – Suwałki – Kaunas route on weekends. Long-distance traffic, on the other hand, has been carried out since December 2022 with an interchange at the Mockava station, where passengers change from the Kraków – Warsaw – Mockava train to the Mockava – Kaunas – Vilnius train or vice versa. Trains on the latter section run entirely on 1520 mm track and are diesel multiple units along the whole route.

4. Railway Stop Program in Podlaskie

In the Podlaskie Voivodeship, a total of 15 stops are planned to be built or modernized as part of the "Government Program for the Construction or Modernization of Railway Stops for 2021–2025" [25]. Accordingly, railway stops on the following lines were modernized by 2023:

- LK 40 Sokółka – Suwałki (as above);
- LK 32 Białystok – Czeremcha: Kleszczele, Suchowolce (Figs. 19, 20), Gregorowce Południowe (new stop); tenders are underway for the modernization of the Podbiele stop and construction of a new one – Repczyce Zalew.

The total cost of the work carried out to date as part of the Railway Stop Program in the Podlaskie Voivodeship is over PLN 21 million. The maintenance work in the Podlaskie Voivodeship in 2023 included the refurbishment of almost 100 kilometers of tracks and the replacement of 62 turnouts. A total of 7,700 sleepers and 40,000 tonnes of crushed stone were used. 18 railroad crossings were modernized. A contract was signed with the contractor for the work in Hajnówka. New platforms were built at the station, and new signaling equipment was installed, increasing the capacity of the station. In 2021, 17 locations in the Podlaskie Voivodeship were included on the basic list of the Railway Stop Program. Apart from Kleszczele and Suchowolce, these are Czarnowo-Undy, Czerwony Bór, Jamiołki, Łubnica Łomżyńska, Kołaki, Kulesze Kościelne, Roszki Leśne, Wnory, Płonka, Sokoły, Śniadowo, Sokole Białostockie, Żednia, Zajezierce, and Waliły. In addition, more than 30 sites were included on the reserve list.

Fig. 18. PKP Cargo's ST44-1259 with UZ tank cars (on 1435 mm track) at LTG Mockava station, Lithuania (20 November 2022) [photo by V. Bigelis]

Fig. 19. Suchowolce stop on LK 32 (13.007 km mark) before modernization (21 April 2021) [photo by E. Lewkowicz / PLK]

Fig. 20. Suchowolce stop on LK 32 (13.007 km mark) after modernization [photo by T. Lotowski / PLK]

5. "Railway Plus" Program

Thirty-five projects submitted by local governments from 11 voivodeships have been selected for implementation under the „Railway Plus" Program. The Program covers towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants that currently have no passenger rail connections or where connections need to be improved. The „Rail Plus" Program will provide around 1.5 million people with improved access to passenger railway services. The Rail Plus program provides for:

- 12 programs concerning the refurbishment of lines with a total length of approximately 372 km;
- 13 programs concerning the reconstruction or extension of lines with a total length of approximately 484 km;
- 7 programs concerning the construction of new lines with a total length of approximately 189 km;
- 3 programs for the development of documentation for about 183 km of railway lines.

The basic conditions for the implementation of projects under the Programme are as follows:

- The provision of co-financing in the amount of > 15% of eligible costs by reporting entities and co-financing of non-eligible costs (where applicable);
- The submission of a transport organizer's declaration for the given connection, at least four pairs of trains for > 5 years;
- The conclusion of an investment project contract between the applicant and PLK.

The "Rail Plus" Program is scheduled to be wrapped up by the end of 2029. Run by the Ministry of Infrastructure, the Program is valued at some PLN 13.3 billion, including PLN 11.2 billion from the state budget and around 2 billion from local authorities.

6. Operation of regional connections

In mid-March 2024, the Białystok – Ostrołęka route – serviced by two pairs of trains per day – was reactivated, with POLREGIO as the operator [26]. The costs of launching the trains and maintaining the connections until the end of 2024 are estimated at PLN 4 million, which will be covered by local authorities. Attractive fare prices have been set to encourage school and university students to use railway services. At present, the connections are serviced by SA133 DMUs. At the time of suspension of services around 2000, trains consisted of 3–4 railcars hauled by SU45 series locomotives. Nonetheless, there have been suggestions that the number of connections – one in the morning and one in the afternoon – is too low in relation to actual demand, even compared to the number of trains operating on other lines in the Voivodeship [4]. The Marshal's Office authorities have noted that this is a pilot scheme, rejecting claims that it was part of an election campaign ahead of the local government elections in April 2024. One idea is to request co-financing from the Mazowieckie Marshal's Office, since a portion of LK 36 is located in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship; however, this would require changes to the timetable [3].

Another issue is the selection of an operator for regional routes, to be serviced (presumably) by diesel units. One entity that may lease such vehicles is SKPL Cargo, a private operator. The Podlaskie Marshal's Office has interested in leasing two SN82 and SN83 vehicles – a one-unit vehicle and a two-unit vehicle, respectively – for service on such routes as Łapy – Ostrołęka [5]. In addition, SKPL Cargo has already leased 4 of its own vehicles to POLREGIO: 2 vehicles each in Lubuskie and Pomorskie Voivodeships, and performs transport services in the Podkarpackie region as a subcontractor on behalf of POLREGIO.

In early February 2024, the Podlaskie Marshal's Office announced the repetition of the unsuccessful tender for the selection of an operator, originally announced in September 2023 [18]. Two bids were submitted for the operation of transport in 2025–2029 under the procedure; however, both turned out to be too expensive considering the funds reserved for this purpose (PLN 367 million). This marked the first time that Arriva entered the tender process alongside POLREGIO, submitting a lower bid than the existing operator. Services would be provided on the following lines:

- LK 6 Białystok – Szepietowo – Czyżew – Małkinia;
- LK 6 Białystok – Sokółka – Kuźnica Białostocka;
- LK 6, LK 40 Białystok – Sokółka – Suwałki;
- LK 38 Białystok – Grajewo – Ełk;
- LK 32 Białystok – Bielsk Podlaski – Czeremcha;
- LK 32, LK 52 Białystok – Bielsk Podlaski – Hajnówka;

- LK 31 Hajnówka – Czeremcha – Siedlce;
- LK 6, LK 36 Białystok – Ostrołęka;
- LK 37 Białystok – Waliły.

The local government will loan its vehicles to the winning bidder:
- SA133 (type 218Mc), 8 vehicles: 001,002, 009÷012, 019, 020;
- SA105 (type 213Ma): 103;
- SA108 (type 215M): 007, 009;
- EN57AL (type 5B/6B), 6 vehicles: 1529, 1536, 1543÷1544, 1551, 1555.

Additionally, POLREGIO operates two SA106 series vehicles (type 214M) in the Podlaskie Voivodeship – 007 and 015 – which were repurchased from the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Marshal's Office in May 2021.

The planned maximum operational mileage will be 12,547,189.348 train-kilometers, an increase of 9.4% from 11,733,187.764 train-km, and the minimum will be 10,907,883.444 train-km.

7. Conclusions

The last few years in Podlaskie have been marked by intensive modernization and refurbishment of the railway network and the upgrading of selected stations, particularly those along LK 6. The latter is part of the Rail Baltica trunk line, which will connect Poland with the Baltic States in the next 5–10 years. This is a good example of how the outcome justifies the expenditure incurred. The modernized line will be used not only for domestic traffic (including broadly construed defense), but also for international traffic. Apart from raising the travel speed and capacity on LK 6, the current investment program makes it possible to raise the operating parameters on many non-electrified secondary lines, which make up the vast majority of lines in Podlaskie. One example of the fact that railway network refurbishment is not just an empty claim made by PLK, i.e., a centrally (rather than locally) managed company, is the strong interest in passenger transport services among travelers on LK 36, even with the operator's offer – at least initially – being rather modest (two pairs of connections per day). The crisis in political relations between Poland, Belarus, and Russia has led to a reduction in freight transport, and many local companies involved in the transshipment of coal, propane-butane gases, timber, and other bulk goods at border stations have been forced to suspend their operations. Still, it can be said that the local authorities support the development of railways by reactivating traffic on lines that were previously closed (e.g., LK Białystok – Waliły), as well as through a program of rolling stock refurbishment and modernization. Indeed, the ongoing investment projects are helping to eliminate restrictions dating back to the partition era of Poland.

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