

Summary

of the [Ombudsrail_Jaarverslag_2025_NL](#) [Ombudsrail...ag_2025_NL | PDF]

Overview

In 2025, Ombudsrail, the Belgian Ombudsman Service for Rail Passengers, experienced a significant increase in admissible complaints, reflecting both growing public awareness of the ombudsman service and persistent structural issues within the rail sector. While the total number of contacts remained stable at 4,111, the number of new ombudsman cases rose by 28% to 1,396, the highest increase in recent years. These cases contained 2,855 individual complaints, and together with ongoing files from previous years, Ombudsrail handled 1,725 cases and 3,569 complaints in total.

The report highlights recurring concerns regarding administrative fines, service disruptions, inadequate communication, overcrowding, accessibility barriers, and challenges in international rail travel. While constructive dialogue with railway operators, particularly NMBS, has produced improvements in individual cases, many systemic issues remain unresolved.

Key Complaint Trends

Most complaints concerned post-sale services, including complaint handling, compensation claims, refunds, and customer support. Complaint handling alone represented almost 40% of domestic complaints. Administrative fines accounted for approximately one-third of domestic complaints, while delays, cancellations, and missed connections remained major sources of dissatisfaction.

In international rail travel, three issues dominated:

- Delays, cancellations and missed connections.
- Poor complaint handling and slow responses.
- Refusal to reimburse consequential expenses such as hotel accommodation, replacement tickets, meals or missed flights.

Ombudsrail's Intervention Results

During 2025, Ombudsrail closed 2,442 complaints. More than half resulted in a satisfactory outcome for passengers, while a further 12.7% achieved a partial resolution. However, many disputes required formal opinions, and railway companies often declined to follow Ombudsrail's recommendations. Of the 42 formal opinions issued in 2025, only 21% were fully implemented.

Major Structural Issues Identified

1. Administrative Fines

Administrative fines remain the most problematic and contentious area. Ombudsrail identified several recurring concerns:

- Passengers often receive notifications through Belgium's eBox system without being aware of this or without receiving alerts.
- Procedures continue even while mediation is ongoing.
- Opportunities for proportional solutions are limited.
- Payment plans are unavailable until a file reaches a debt collector, increasing costs for passengers.
- Questions remain regarding identity verification and the handling of cases involving identity fraud.

Ombudsrail calls for legislative reform to improve legal certainty, strengthen the role of mediation, and ensure fairer procedures.

2. Timetable Changes

The December 2024 timetable changes generated substantial dissatisfaction throughout 2025. The removal of direct services between the Waasland region and Brussels and the reduction of direct connections between Antwerp and Brussels led to increased travel times, difficult transfers, and overcrowding. Ombudsrail expressed concern that international services may increasingly compete with domestic passenger capacity.

3. Strike Disruptions

Rail strikes resulted in 26 strike days during 2025. Although minimum-service arrangements reduced the impact, many passengers faced severe travel disruptions. Ombudsrail welcomed NMBS's willingness to provide compensation in several mediated cases but noted that alternative services frequently failed to meet passengers' mobility needs.

4. Capacity Problems

Overcrowding remained a frequent complaint, particularly on commuter routes to and from Brussels. A shortage of rolling stock reserves and ongoing infrastructure works contributed to reduced train formations and passenger discomfort. While NMBS continues to introduce new M7 trains, capacity constraints remain significant.

5. Station Skipping

Passengers increasingly reported trains bypassing scheduled stops to recover delays. Ombudsrail considers this practice harmful to passenger confidence and recommends better monitoring, transparency, and a reduction in its use. Complaints involved not only small stations but also important interchange stations such as Leuven, Aalst and Louvain-la-Neuve.

6. Accessibility

Accessibility remains a major challenge for passengers with reduced mobility. Key issues include:

- Inaccessible stations and platforms.
- Limited or unavailable assistance services.
- Assistance cancellations during strikes.
- Difficulties travelling with mobility aids such as scooters.
- Long delays in accessibility improvements at several stations.

Although NMBS aims to make 176 stations fully accessible by 2032, Ombudsrail stresses that many passengers continue to encounter barriers that restrict independent travel.

Fare Reform

In October 2025, NMBS introduced a major fare reform, including:

- The new Train+ discount card.
- Distance-based pricing.
- Peak and off-peak differentiation.
- Replacement of several traditional discounted tickets with a new discount structure.

While NMBS argues that most passengers benefit or remain unaffected, Ombudsrail noted confusion among passengers, especially seniors and families, who find it difficult to determine the most advantageous fare products.

Safety Concerns

A notable disappointment was the cancellation of plans for a silent alarm system allowing passengers to discretely report safety concerns via SMS, WhatsApp or an app. Ombudsrail considers this a missed opportunity to improve the perception of safety, especially for vulnerable passengers, and continues to advocate for the introduction of a discreet digital reporting channel.

International Rail Travel

International travel generated a growing number of complex complaints. The most significant issue is "contract segmentation", where passengers purchase what appears to be a single journey but later discover that different segments are covered by separate contracts. This often leaves passengers without adequate protection when disruptions occur.

Additional concerns include:

- Inadequate information about service changes.
- Insufficient assistance during disruptions.

- Unrealistic connection times offered by journey planners.
- Poor coordination between operators.
- Frequent refusal to compensate consequential losses.

Ombudsrail therefore calls on European institutions and railway operators to strengthen passenger protection, improve transparency, and ensure better coordination across international rail services.

Conclusion

The 2025 report demonstrates that Belgian rail passengers continue to face significant challenges throughout the customer journey, ranging from ticketing and communication to accessibility and disruption management. Despite positive cooperation with NMBS in certain cases, many structural issues persist. Ombudsrail's central message is that railway operators and policymakers must place passengers more firmly at the centre of decision-making through clearer communication, fairer procedures, more accessible services, and stronger protection of passenger rights.