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Green East-West Dialogue - Ljubljana, 11 April 2008

Laying Tracks from East to West - Laying Tracks for the Environment

A future-oriented transport policy must support environment-friendly mobility option and foster the rail-links between old and new member states

Four years after EU enlargement and almost 20 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, **rail connections to Eastern Europe** are still in a bad state. In the White Paper on European Transport Policy, the EU is committed to moving traffic off the roads and onto rail, but this good intention played no role in the preparations for accession in 2004 and 2007. Even though the accession talks were under way for a decade, the European Commission did not identify this shortcoming until early 2003, when it set up a High-Level Group, chaired by former Transport Commissioner Karel van Miert, to review the priorities of the trans-European transport network.

This was an essential move, for in the field of transport policy the Iron Curtain is still with us. **It takes 60 hours to travel by train from Berlin to the Estonian capital Tallinn, the distance being 1700 km.** That works out at less than 30 km an hour. You have to change trains nine times, the train stops at 60 different stations, and the Estonian-Latvian border has to be crossed on foot. **In comparison, the same journey by steam train in 1935 took just 27 hours.** In other words, you would have reached your destination in less than half the time.

At one time, the journey from Berlin to Wrocław took only two and a half hours; now it takes six. I could give you other examples. In view of the growing volume of traffic, especially freight, between the old and new EU Member States, this situation is untenable.

The High-Level Group's report was published at the end of 2003. It is an extremely disappointing document in which egotistical national interests and complete indifference to environmental issues have won the day. Although the report gives 'high priority' to the development of major rail links – such as the Helsinki-Tallinn-Riga-Kaunas-Warsaw line – there are no practical measures to back this up. The governments concerned have not given their approval to the start of construction before 2010, which means that the route is highly unlikely to be completed until 2016 at the earliest.

So - can the dramatic increase in the volume of traffic – especially in the wake of EU enlargement – be managed effectively, or will we all suffocate from exhaust fumes in gridlocks? This will largely depend on the course adopted in transport policy. Furthermore, under the Kyoto Protocol, the EU is committed to cutting its CO₂ emissions by 8% by 2010. After industry, emissions from transport are the second largest source of greenhouse gases.



The aim of radically reducing the number of road deaths in the EU – 40 000 people die on EU's roads every year – can only be achieved through a shift from road to rail as well.

Europe needs an extensive and modern rail network to meet this challenge. The **trans-European transport network (TEN-T)** – which in effect is Europe's transport infrastructure plan – clearly prioritises the task of **revitalising Europe's major rail lines** and identifies some of the measures required in this context. However, implementing the **smaller-scale cross-border connections** must also be a priority, e.g. between Germany and its new EU neighbours, Poland and the Czech Republic or between Austria and Slovenia, Hungary and Slovakia.

The Greens therefore want to set **clear priorities**, in favour of rail connections between the old and new EU Member States, for **rail projects which contribute to the unification of Europe**. From our perspective, the **TEN-T priority projects** are as follows:

- **the Berlin-Warsaw-Vilnius-Riga-Tallinn rail connection** (TEN-T priority project no 27)
- **Paris-Strasbourg-Stuttgart-Munich-Freilassing/Salzburg-Vienna-Bratislava** (TEN-T project no 17)
- **Athens-Sofia-Budapest-Vienna-Prague-Nuremberg/Dresden** (TEN-T project no 22).

At present however, the list of **TEN-T projects** includes a number of **dubious prestige projects**, which have equal status with the urgently needed connections but which absorb vast amounts of money and whose transport policy benefit is questionable. The Greens in the European Parliament have been recently launching a website naming those trouble spots: www.greens-efa.org/ten-t

We need **modern West-East connections** that are capable of transporting **goods** and **passengers** at speed and in comfort, both over long distances and at local level. Germany in particular, as Europe's main transit country, has a vital interest in ensuring that freight flows are handled by the most environmentally compatible method possible, the railways. At present, rail freight – with its average speed of just 13 km an hour – cannot possibly compete with road transport. No wonder it accounts for only 14 % of the goods transport market. Yet it doesn't have to be this way, as we see from the US. There, about 40% of goods are carried by rail. The rail links between Western, Central and Eastern Europe will also become more important in the 21st century because intercontinental rail freight between Asia and Europe offers significant time benefits compared with cargo shipping.

In the interests of a united Europe's cultural integration, personal contacts among the European nations are essential. For this purpose too, we need fast and efficient rail connections that bring the neighbours on both sides of the former Iron Curtain and the cities of Eastern and Western Europe closer together. If we want to strengthen Europe's internal unity, we must create the parameters for mobility that encourage this process.

But we still have a long way to go to make these plans a reality, and we face one major obstacle: that Member States - especially the new ones - focus too much on street projects and too little on railway links. Looking at the EU cohesion and structural funds we must notice that 60% of the requested money for the transport sector is spent for road while only 20% is spent for rail- or public transport project.



However, if we are to achieve a modal shift and encourage the use of rail, the investment in to rail infrastructure will not be effective on its own. A key prerequisite is the implementation of a fair competition, especially between road and rail, but also in respect to the ever growing air sector. This is especially necessary since transport is one of the key problems to be solved in the context of climate change.

Transport in the European Union now accounts for almost 30% – and growing – of CO2 emissions which are harmful to the climate. Despite this, the wrong political course seems to have been set across the board: large subsidies for the climate culprits motor vehicles and aeroplanes, yet more and more new barriers and burdens for the railways. Consequently, transport continues to grow, and nullifies the expensive emission reductions achieved in other sectors where we can notice a reduction of 10 % since 1990. This makes a convincing case for a sea change in transport.

The problem can be simply illustrated by the example of a yoghurt pot. By the time it has reached supermarket shelves, a strawberry yoghurt has travelled almost 10 000 km on our roads. And despite its long journey, it only costs around 40 Eurocents. Prawns from Scandinavia are peeled in Morocco before they reach plates in Paris, London or Oslo. Although transport has a high cost for the environment and thus for the public – on the road and in the air – it is not a cost factor for business. The result is an ever growing transport sector. Food transport has doubled in the last 20 years, and heavy traffic on German roads has tripled since the 1980s. Between 1993 and 2000 the number of air passengers in the EU rose by around 10% a year. Transport in Europe is too cheap – it is only the environmentally friendly options that are too expensive. Consequently, the modal shift of traffic from the roads to the railways is thwarted by the framework conditions.

A closer examination of our mobility reveals an anachronism: the climate-damaging modes of transport reducing are highly subsidised in everyday life, whereas the more environmentally friendly ones are subject to tax. As a result of this framework the share of road transport has been rising.

The railways are indisputably among the most environmentally friendly means of mobility. As such, they should actually be encouraged and supported, but the opposite is the case. In the EU it is mandatory for tolls to be levied on all trains on all rail tracks in the form of route prices. And yet for its keenest and most polluting competitor, road transport, however, tolls are charged mostly only on motorways and as a rule only for lorries above 12 tonnes. There is an upper limit on these tolls, external costs may not currently be internalised, and toll charging is voluntary for the member states. Poland and Slovakia have the highest rail tolls for freight transport, while the roads are toll-free or nearly toll-free. It is not surprising that freight transport in particular is at home on Europe's roads.

The situation with air transport is also anachronistic. The tax exemption for kerosene – introduced more than half a century ago as a financial boost to help the infant air transport industry get started – currently permits airlines to transport their customers at a 'taxi price' between major European cities. As a result, not only their competitors, the taxpaying railways, fall by the wayside, but also the climate, which suffers in the extreme as a result of booming air transport. Aircraft emissions in the stratosphere are three to four times more harmful than those of industry and ground transport. Yet air transport is still exempted from the emissions trading system, while the railways are included in the system via the electricity price.



For the necessary turn in Europe's transport policy some major tasks have to be fulfilled:

- **Introduction of a European climate-protection tax on aviation fuel.**
This revenue of 14 Billion € a year is necessary for the funding of international rail connections. It is common experience today that express railway services tend to reduce air traffic and may even replace it. Ever since high speed trains have come to operate between Berlin and Hamburg, Paris and Lyon or Brussels and London, the shift has become reality. At a good 1 euro per 100 km of air travel, the cost to the consumer is acceptable – particularly when compared with the cost of billions which would be incurred by doing nothing and allowing unchecked climate change.
- **Increase of European lorry tolls** based on the polluter pays principle, with the social cost of road haulage factored into the charges, reduction of the liability threshold to 3.5 tons and gradual extension of the toll system to the entire road network. In this context I am looking forward to the review of the Eurovignette directive and the proposals of the EU commission to internalise external costs in June this year.
- **Air and sea transport must be included in CO2 emissions trading under Kyoto II.** Tax privileges, subsidies and grants, including those for inland waterway transport, must be eliminated. Especially ships on oceans are so far rather waste incineration plants than efficient modes of transport since they run with heavy oil. Here strict emission limits are needed.