

Infrastructure Capacity: are the Railways a viable Alternative?

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Introduction

In this paper, I shall seek to examine, in succession:

- Transport growth and congestion
- The proposals by the European Commission for dealing with the problem of inadequate infrastructure
- The assessment by the IRU of the EU Commission proposals regarding the modal split for freight transport
- the case of the Alpine routes
- how to make better use of existing road infrastructures.

I. Transport Growth and Congestion

1.1 Industrial regions and distribution

As from 1 May 2004, the European Union and the economic area it represents will consist of 487 million inhabitants occupying 4.76 million square kilometres from Portugal to Poland. The outlook for demographic change has altered dramatically in view of this programmed geo-political expansion.

However, the population of Europe is very unevenly distributed. The major industrial regions, contain high concentrations of population and the highest levels of urbanisation.

The IRF AIMSE study (published with the cooperation of the IRU) saw two major distribution corridors: the corridor extending from England through the Ruhr to Northern Italy, and a parallel one in the east running from Hamburg to Leipzig, Prague and Budapest. Several discontinuous corridors are also evident: for example, between Rouen and Marseilles via Paris and Lyons; between Bremen and Munich via Hanover and Nuremberg.

In the huge remaining areas, there are isolated pockets of industry and population as, for instance, in the Mediterranean Basin.

This demographic and industrial landscape governs the main flow of people and goods and therefore determines major European infrastructure requirements.

This paper examines in turn

- transport growth and congestion
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- the case of the Alpine routes
- how to make better use of existing road infrastructures.

It concludes by considering that, while combined road-rail transport may provide a viable alternative to pure road transport over distances exceeding 1000 kms, it will not provide a panacea to the increasing problem of road congestion.

Governments should embark on low-cost measures to facilitate road haulage which will be highly beneficial to congestion on certain road infrastructures.

They should carefully consider the respective benefits of investment on road and in rail infrastructure in increasing transport capacity to meet future demand, being aware that the huge sums planned to be introduced in the railways are unlikely to have the desired effect and that investment in road infrastructure is much more cost-effective.

1.2 Congestion

The White Paper on European Transport Policy for 2010, published by the European Commission in 2001, recognises that the European Union began to suffer from congestion in certain areas and on certain routes in the 1990s. The problem is now beginning to threaten economic competitiveness.

Paradoxically, congestion in the centre goes hand-in-hand with excessive isolation of the outlying regions, where there is a real need to improve links with central markets so as to ensure regional cohesion within the EU.

Already in the 1993 EU White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment, it was pointed out that "Traffic jams are not only exasperating, they also cost Europe dear in terms of productivity, bottlenecks and missing links in the infrastructure fabric; lack of interoperability between modes and systems".

If most of the congestion affects urban areas, the trans-European transport network itself suffers increasingly from chronic congestion: some 7,500 kms, i.e., 10% of the road network is affected daily by traffic jams. And 16,000 km of railways, 20% of the network, are classed as bottlenecks.

Because of such bottlenecks, there is a serious risk that Europe will lose economic competitiveness. The 2001 White Paper indicates that "The most recent study on the subject showed that the external costs of road traffic congestion alone amounted to 0.5% of Community GDP". Traffic forecasts for the next 10 years show that, if nothing is done, road congestion will increase significantly by 2010. The costs attributable to congestion will also increase by 142% to reach EUR 80 billion a year, which is approximately 1% of Community GDP.

In the study carried out for the IRU by the Hague Consulting Group in 1998, the largest reported impediment for freight hauliers and traders in Italy and the United Kingdom was