



The European transport policy: Its main issues

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on a limited number of European transport policy issues, that nevertheless are probably the most relevant ones. Given the great complexity of the transport sector (several competing modes, infrastructure and services, public and private players, efficiency and equity objectives, etc.), and the diverse impact of the European policy in different countries and at different times. The issues are selected as for a) their acknowledged economic and political importance, b) their relevance across transport modes. An overview of the EU transport policy principles is also provided together with an assessment of the consistency of actual policy actions with those principles. The selected issues are: (i) planning and promotion of new infrastructure; (ii) competition and regulation policies; (iii) environmental policies.

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1. Objectives, structure and methodology of the paper

As a case study, the European transport policy encompasses a very wide spectrum of relevant issues. The paper focuses just on the main ones, and attempts at assessing the consistency of the actual outcomes with the EU stated policy objectives. We shall try to overcome the difficulty of measuring outcomes in objective terms and we are fully aware that value judgments are inevitably intertwined with our kind of ex post analysis.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2.1 presents a brief overview of the main EU transport policy documents, whilst Section 2.2 attempts at distilling the cornerstone principles and the underlying theoretical assumptions. Section 3 discusses all the selected policy issues: the planning and promotion of new infrastructure is dealt with in Section 3.1; an in-depth focus on competition and regulation policies for either services and infrastructures is provided in Section 3.2 for each mode of transport, along with a tentative evaluation of outcomes. Section 3.3 deals with those transport policies aimed at the environment and at enhancing safety. A general assessment, including distributive impacts of policies, will be attempted in the conclusions (Section 4), with some recommendations, and hints for further research.

The methodology is broadly based on welfare economics. However tentative explanations for successes and failures will be mainly based on loose “political economy” considerations. This

implies, for instance, assuming the existence of political “hidden agendas”, “capture” mechanisms, “asymmetry of information”, egoistic objectives on the part of both political principals and regulated agents, etc. Political scientist would probably stress the consensus process building, and would derive positive or negative judgments mainly from the level of consensus achieved thanks to the implementation of a given policy. This is a highly relevant approach, although it is not the one followed in the present paper. We maintain that a strict political analysis of EU transport policies could beautifully complement the one advanced in the present paper; however it is well beyond our limited capabilities.

2. Policy principles

2.1. From the Treaty of Rome to the 2011 White paper

Transport is one of the European Union’s (EU) foremost common policies. It is governed by Title VI (Articles 90 to 100) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The Treaty is mainly concerned with fixing what the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission are supposed to do as for 1) “the rules applicable to international transport to or from the territory of a Member State or passing across the territory of one or more Member States” (art. 91); 2) the prevention of discriminations of “carriers of other Member States as compared with carriers who are nationals of that State” (art. 92); 3) the limitation of subsidies to the reimbursement of public service obligations (art. 93, 96); 4) the progressive reduction of “charges or dues in respect of the crossing of frontiers which are charged by a carrier in addition to the transport rates” (art. 97). In short, the Treaty makes clear that

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in transport, as in any other sector, the main focus should be on removing border charges, duties and discriminations between Member States and (by so doing) on contributing to the free movement of individuals, enterprises and goods.

As the opening section of the 2001 White Paper (“European transport policy for 2010: time to decide”) states explicitly, “for a long time, the European Community was unable, or unwilling, to implement the common transport policy provided for by the Treaty of Rome [...] Later on, the Treaty of Maastricht reinforced the political, institutional and budgetary foundations for transport policy. [...] Moreover, the Maastricht Treaty included the concept of the trans-European network, which made it possible to come up with a plan for transport infrastructure at European level with the help of Community funding” (CEC, 2001).

The first White Paper on the future of the common transport policy was issued in the same year of the Treaty of Maastricht (1992). The guiding principle of that document was the opening-up of transport market along the lines traced in the famous 1985 White Paper “Completing the internal market”. When the 2001 White paper was drafted, the Commission reckoned that the market opening objective was generally achieved except in the rail sector (*ibidem*). Despite these alleged successes the Commission admitted “distortions of competitions resulting from lack of fiscal and social harmonisation” (CEC, 2001), unequal growth in different modes of transport, “congestion on the main roads and rail routes, in towns and at airports” and “harmful effects on the environment and public health, and of course the heavy toll of road accidents” (*ibidem*).

In the 2001 White Paper the Commission advanced no less than 60 measures aimed at developing a transport system capable of shifting the balance between modes of transport, revitalizing the railways (whose share – in terms of tonne-km – of the goods market fell from 21% to 8.4% between 1970 and 1998) mainly through liberalization and technical harmonization measures, promoting transport by sea and inland waterways and controlling the growth in air transport.

In 2000 road accidents killed over 40,000 people in the European Union. On road safety, the Commission proposed:

- a new road safety action programme covering the period 2002–2010 to halve the number of deaths on the roads, harmonization of penalties, road signs and blood-alcohol levels,
- development of new technologies such as electronic driving licenses, speed limits for cars and intelligent transport systems.

On fuel tax, the Commission proposed:

- separating fuel taxes for private and commercial uses,
- establishing harmonized taxation of fuel used for commercial purposes.

The review of the White Paper (“Keep Europe moving: a transport policy for sustainable mobility”), released in 2006 (EC, 2006), outlines the orientation of the European Commission for the future transport policy. Next to actions foreseen in the 2001 White Paper, such as boosting rail and maritime connections for long distance freight transport, additional instruments were said to be needed to achieve these objectives. They include a freight logistics action plan; intelligent transport systems to make mobility greener and more efficient; promoting a debate on how to change mobility of people in urban areas; an action plan to boost inland waterways and a programme for green powering of trucks and cars.

In March 2011 the European Commission presented the White paper “Roadmap to a Single European Transport Area. Towards a Competitive and Resource Efficient Transport System” (EC, 2011a).

Forty initiatives are singled out in order to preserve mobility, remove major barriers in key areas, fuel growth and employment, cut carbon emissions in transport by 60% by 2050 and lower Europe’s dependence on imported oil. Once again a modal shift is advocated for both passengers and freight transport, along with the development and deployment of new fuels and propulsion systems, a better use of information systems and market based incentives (such as the application of “user pays” and “polluter pays” principles). Conventionally fuelled cars and trucks should be phased out from cities; road traffic death should be halved by 2020 and near-zero casualties should be achieved in road transport by 2050.

In air transport, the initiatives include the completion of the Single European Sky, the deployment of the future European air traffic management system (SESAR), as well as revising the Slot Regulation to make more efficient use of airport capacity. In rail transport, the initiatives include the development of a Single European Railway Area, opening the domestic rail passengers market to competition, and establishing an integrated approach to freight corridor management. In maritime transport, the “European Maritime Transport Space without Barriers” should be further developed into a “Blue Belt” of free maritime movement both in and around Europe, with waterborne transport being used to its full potential.

The Commission therefore proposes a regulatory framework for innovative transport, including standards for CO₂ emissions of vehicles in all transport modes and vehicle standards for noise emission levels. One of the White Paper’s top priorities is still to complete the trans-European transport network already envisaged back in 1992: the so called TEN-T.

2.2. The inspiring principles

The main principles that are explicitly stated for the European transport policy conform to the social-market economy model which is typical of (continental) Europe.

The first principle is linked with the one of the pillars of the Union itself: the tenet that competition and a wider market are essential conditions for both efficiency and accelerated technical progress (and therefore competitiveness). Nevertheless, this principle is mitigated by the objective of social protection of the possibly affected workers and citizens.

Even the trans-European transport network dream can be traced to the first principle: the TEN-T network is allegedly aimed at making intra-European transport faster and, consequently, transport costs lower and competition more effective. In this case the first principle is also reconciled with the “golden rule” of public finance, according to which deficit spending is to be accepted as far as it is limited to investment aimed at increasing the social capital bequeathed to future generations. It cannot be maintained that the trans-European transport network policy has a Keynesian inspiration as it is conceived as a long run supply-side policy with limited possibilities for short run fine-tuning or cycle-smoothing.

The second principle relevant for transport is related to the pricing of infrastructure: the Social-Marginal-Cost-Pricing (SMCP) principle that states that economic efficiency requires that users pay all but only those costs that they generate directly to the society using the infrastructure, i.e. a pricing that maximizes social surplus, leaving long-term costs (i.e. investments and fixed costs) to be paid for by the public purse. This attitude seems to be short-lived: the growing fiscal constraints of many European states apparently has compelled the EU to a less demanding approach; so the SMCP principle seems to be gradually substituted by the need that users pay also for a substantial part of the investment and fixed costs (Social Average Cost Pricing, SACP), i.e. for something

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