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Meeting the needs of regional train travelers: a comparison of four regions in Europe

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Abstract

Regional train services are largely organized at the regional level in Europe, but the objectives, strategies and implementation details vary widely from one country to another. This paper relies on a comparison exercise performed within the evaluation of the Rhône-Alps Region's train policy, comparing four regions in four European countries, all responsible for organizing and financing regional passenger train services: the metropolitan region of Barcelona in Spain, the Rhine-Ruhr area in Germany, the Canton of Zurich in Switzerland, and the Rhône-Alps region in France. It shows how strategic and tactical decisions taken on transport issues are shaped by local and national contexts. How do the authorities get value for money from the train operators? And how do they meet the needs of the regional travellers? The comparison shows that good results (in terms of satisfaction of passenger and policy makers, and of value for money) can be obtained by the application of a regime of competition for the market, as well as through direct negotiation without any competition. However, the way in which the system is implemented is vital for its success in both cases.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, more and more regional governments in Europe have become responsible for organising and financing regional passenger train services, which in many cases was a national responsibility before. Among the objectives they are trying to achieve, two are particularly important:

- making regional train travel as attractive as possible, especially to attract car users to regional trains;
- to obtain such train services for the lowest cost to the public budget.

In its evaluation of ten years of responsibility of organising and funding its regional train services, the Rhône-Alps Region in France asked our team how regions with similar tasks in other European countries were performing (Euréval, 2013). To this effect, a comparison was made with three other regions in three different countries (Baanders, 2013):

- the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona in Spain,
- the Rhine-Ruhr area in Germany,
- the Canton of Zurich in Switzerland.

Comparing Rhône-Alps against other regions that were seen as ‘success stories’ was a way to understand how other authorities had answered the problems identified by the evaluation, and therefore contribute to translate strategic recommendations into ‘proposals for concrete actions’ (Pitarelli and Monnier, 2000). This approach, though less comprehensive than recommended benchmarking practices in a technical setting (e.g. World Bank, 2011), was more suited to the needs of the Région Rhône-Alpes and better complemented the other instruments of the evaluation.

Following the two objectives mentioned above, the two main questions for the comparison were:

- What measures are taken by these regions to meet the needs of the regional travellers?
- How are they ensuring to obtain value for money from the passenger train operators?

These are also the main questions for this paper.

The second question is important for the regional authorities, as it is in most cases not possible to operate regional trains at a profit, and compensation for the operators, who have a public service obligation (PSO), is necessary. This is the case in all four countries studied. For this, there are basically two alternatives:

- Direct negotiation with the train operators to obtain low costs and PSO compensations. This requires an insight by the regional authority into the cost structure of the operator, which in many cases is a source for tension.
- Organising competition ‘for the market’ between train operators. This makes it easier to choose the most advantageous offer from the operators for a given contract period, but it has an important transaction cost. The other form of competition used in public transport is competition ‘in the market’, but this can only be used when there is no PSO compensation involved.

Both alternatives are found in the regions studied.

Sections 2 to 4 of this paper describe each of the four regions: its institutional and political setting, its regional train network, and its strategy for meeting the needs of the travellers. Following the thinking developed in the ‘Thredbo series’ of conferences on competition and ownership in public transport, we distinguish here three levels of decision making in public transport (Macário, 2001):

- the strategic level: definition of mobility policy reflecting the needs of the citizens, which is usually performed by the political authorities,
- the tactical level: design of the transport system and defining the respective policies by translating strategic goals into operational specifications,
- the operational level: production and consumption of transport services.

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