

The European Traffic Policy from the 1950s to the 1980s – Development and implementation of political interests among Germany and the European Union

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1. Goal

The goal of the European policy in the area of transport was to develop a transport system that could bring the integration of the common market forward. Such a system had to develop a market organisation. It had to co-ordinate the technical standardisation and it had to find a way to connect national traffic infrastructures.

The market organisation turned out to be the most difficult challenge. Negotiations about the Roman Treaties in the area of transport led to a compromise without outlines. Even the most basically question – were transport services part of the Common Market or not – was not answered. In the first case, the articles about the freedom of services would apply on transport and a free market for transport services would be the last consequence. In the second case, the allocation of transport market between the public and the private sphere remained open.

2. Market Organisation

2.1. First Initiatives

From 1958 on institutions of the Communities and particularly the Commission of the European Economic Community developed an agile activity and tried to coordinate the different authorities to elaborate a concept for a European transport policy.

In 1961 the Commission presented an extensive expose on the subject. The staff of commissioner Lambert Schaus had worked out a plan that expressed three goals on traffic policy:

- abolishment of all obstacles for the common market
- free transport services for the European Community
- creation of a general transport system for the Community

Market organisation planned by the Commission was far more liberal than it was in any of the member states. For this reason the negative reaction of the Council surprised anybody – besides the staff of the Commission. Ministers of transport discussed the expose and declined it in many points.

The year 1962 brought the first decision of the council on transport policy, but the future basics of the policy were still not known.

The Commission's action program on transport, which was a follow up of the 1961 expose was not a success as well. While the European Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee agreed to this program, national governments were less positive. For most of them it was still too liberal and for the proponents of a liberal transport market, otherwise, planning was too imprecise and transition periods were too long.

However, this expose and this action program were points of discussion about a European transport policy for more than two decades. The Commission papers had another consequence: They brought the negotiations about a European transport policy on a new level. On a long term, liberalisation of the transport market was no longer to question. Indeed, it was obvious that a liberalisation without a harmonisation of taxes, tariffs and social rules would not reach the goal of a rational market.

2.2. Harmonisation vs. Liberalisation

The open conflict concerned the primacy of harmonisation or liberalisation resulted in a standstill for the common transport policy since 1962. Proponents of an early liberalisation argued that liberalisation would cause harmonisation. Opponents of the liberalisation refuted, that as long as the conditions for transport services were not harmonised, a free market could not be installed because competitors from states with lower or non public aids and higher petroleum, road and transport taxes would never be competitive. Particularly the government and the companies in Germany were afraid, that their transport services would not be competitive.

For this reason, Germany did not agree to a system of free price allocation. Along with the German government a majority of the member states wanted to install a system of fixed tariffs or a margin tariff system – fixing the maximum and minimum price for transport connections. Unfortunately, Dutch governments did not agree to a solution that includes public intervention to the international transport on the Rhine. Without the integration of the Rhine – Europe's most important transport connection – it was impossible to develop a common transport system.

In May of 1965 it was the first time that the ministers of transport seemed to find a way out of this dilemma. Two months later the "empty chair" policy of France ended this attempt. When the ministers of transport came together more than one year – and some national elections – later, they had to start from the beginning.

During the 1970s the Council of the European Communities was so discordant about transport policy that not even detailed questions were negotiable for a long time. For this reason more than 40 proposals and reports about harmonisation of freight transport transmitted by the Commission to the Council between 1975 and 1982 led to no sustainable results. This standstill just ended, when the European Court of Justice blamed the European Council for inefficiency concerning the common transport policy in 1985.

3. Technical Standardisation

When the European Communities were founded in 1957, the technical specifications for lorries, railroads and ships were different from state to state. The maximum length of a lorry e.g. ranged from 16,5m in Germany until 22 meter in Belgium. An electrified trains had to change to another voltage at any border and on inland waterways there were more than hundred different types of ships. Standardisation of these specifications was one of the major working fields of the Community during the 1960s. The European Conference of Ministers of Transport (ECMT) and the UN Economic Commission for Europe had tried this before. Together – and sometimes against – the efforts of the European Communities the work of these institutions went on.

Different approaches of these institutions failed. Confident with their technical superiority, national railway companies were not willing to equalise their electrification programs. Harmonisation of weights and measures of lorries appeared easier. The Commission's approach of 1960 was close to a compromise that every member state could accept, but in the end it failed at the veto of three member states concerning the maximum axle load. Concerning about questions in detail the negotiations went on until 1984, when the Council already came to a decision.

Standardisation of traffic on inland waterways was also a long struggle when the Council finally came to a decision. Although the high grade of organisation of inland waterway companies and the natural internationality of waterways made the work of the Commission easier it took until 1980, before a decision about the harmonisation of international inland waterway transport became effective.

4. Infrastructure Policy

Policy on transport infrastructure was not efficient. After World War II a new orientation of transits was necessary in Western Europe. Particularly Germany had to change its traffic infrastructure and had to find a new place in a Western European traffic system. During the 1950s Germany changed its road and railroad system from an East/West to a North/South axis. At the same time traffic routes were developed to connect Germany with its Western neighbours. In the beginning economic interests and aims in foreign policy brought some positive results for the internationalisation of transport. But in general, European transport infrastructure policy remained a national concern, with an international dimension based on bilateral contracts. Deconstruction of railway lines and massive extension of the road system were a result of these national policies, as the competitive advantage of the railway on longer distances could in Europe never be exerted on a national level. In the 1990s the European Union started to develop a constructive policy on transport infrastructure. But until today, high-speed train connections which can only run on high speed on one side of the border, motorways which are continued in small roads in the neighbouring countries and overloaded junctions are reminders of the failures of the past.

5. Conclusion

European transport policy during the period 1957–1985 can be characterised as a policy of missed chances. Different conceptions proved to be contradicting. Deviating positions of the member states and the institutions of the European Community are well documented in the contemporary economical literature. The conceptions of railway politics and the co-ordination problem between the high numbers of international and supranational organisations were further difficulties that inhibited the development of a common transport policy in the European Community for a long time.

Some positive exceptions should not be forgotten. So was it possible to abandon a lot of discriminatory tariffs, together with the ECMT and the Economic Commission for Europe at least the standardisation of lorries worked out and the E-road system were a step to the Trans-European Networks (TEN), that are nascent today. But these exceptions could not change the general result. The European states have lost decades in the development of a common transport system.