

Integrated Development along the Orient/East-Med Corridor: A Critical Reflection and some Recommendations

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Bernd Scholl

16 INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT ALONG THE ORIENT/ EAST-MED CORRIDOR: A CRITICAL REFLECTION AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

For 4 years now, experts from public administration, academia and practice, gathered in the ARL international working group, have been collaborating to highlight the important aspects of the Orient/East-Med (OEM) Corridor development. As a result, a first integrated assessment for the entire corridor system, as well as the draft strategy have been prepared. Of course, this is just a beginning and should be further developed by additional initiatives to create an organizational framework that will allow intensified collaboration on the corridor, which is so important for the cohesion of Europe. Moreover, we hope that our insights will not only stimulate the development of the OEM Corridor, but also initiate similar research on other European corridors.

It was a long and interesting journey with a lot of inspiring meetings in and discussions about the hot spots along the corridor. We distilled the growing knowledge of corridor development in a position paper, which was discussed with the OEM Corridor Coordinator in June 2018. It brought us to the conclusion that our main assessment positions and recommendations are a solid base for further initiatives and research. The following conclusion is therefore, as agreed with the ARL international working group, mainly based on this position paper (ARL 2019).

The initial research point was a great diversity of languages, cultures and patterns of thinking along this particular corridor of Europe. Due to the Iron Curtain until 1989 and the wars followed by the Balkan conflicts in the 1990s, actors of this corridor did not have the time to develop a culture of collaboration as in other parts of Europe. We found large discrepancies between joint projects of common interests and a clear strategy for spatial and transportation development. Sustainable spatial development based on railway development as the strategic backbone is not clearly recognized along the OEM Corridor. There was no focus on concentrating further settlement development in the catchment areas of railway stations instead of a car-oriented extension of settlements with low densities, leading to urban sprawl. Consequently, the spatial strategy on inward development before outward development is not elaborated or sufficiently implemented along the Corridor countries. Keeping all this in mind, we concentrated on the interrelationship between settlement and railway development as 'two sides of the same coin'.

While in the northern parts including Austria, and namely Vienna as the gateway to the Balkans, transit-oriented development is state of the art, the Balkan countries including Greece expand settlements in a rapid manner and favor car-oriented transportation with large investments in the road and highway infrastructure. Nevertheless, countries like Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Hungary try to improve existing railway networks, but very often without a clear strategy and only loosely coordinating trans-

port policies with those on spatial and settlement development. Therefore, the big challenges do not refer to the poor capacities of the transport system, but to ways of reducing travel times for interregional and international trains, implementing improvements for intermodal freight transport, and, finally, initiating inward development through regenerating urban brownfields.

We also considered inefficient flows between southern maritime ports and their hinterland. As the global freight flows from and to Asia tend to increase, strong investments into the southern part of the OEM Corridor could lead to a better balance in the flow of freight traffic inside Europe: with better connections to the southern ports, not only would the Balkan countries be better served, but also the important metropolitan regions of Europe, Vienna and Budapest. On the one hand, this would relieve the northern ports' over-capacity hinterland connections and the people living in the hinterland from transit traffic. On the other hand, it would generally provide a better land connection from central Europe to Turkey and Iran. As we have learned from logistics experts, the strong development of Piraeus in the past years has already influenced the growth rates of the port of Hamburg.

For long-distance motorized traffic from the Balkans to north and southeast Europe, the same short travel times have been achieved as in other European regions. There are, however, numerous routes in southeast European rail traffic where the duration for a trip of the same distance takes nearly twice as long as in other European regions: e. g. Prague–Vienna (4 hours) and Sofia–Thessaloniki (8 hours) are both roughly 300km apart from each other. Large increases in travel time also occur through considerable waiting times at national borders for cross-border freight transport. When shortening travel times, it must be ensured that the targeted sections for long-distance passenger transport are roughly 3–4 hours apart. This would produce sustainable alternatives to air travel and motorized traffic.

For an international corridor like the OEM, the European added value is of particular importance: this value can be defined as the net benefits occurring in all countries together besides the benefits of a country from a particular investment. European added value can be induced by enhancing cross-border corridor sections, connections to the overall network, as well the removal of the abundant administrative or technical bottlenecks.

Finally, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the new Chinese Silk Road demonstrates that a strong EU response is needed. COSCO (Chinese Ocean Shipping Group Company), supported by strong political leadership, invested several hundred million euros in the Piraeus freight harbors followed by additional money in the Piraeus passenger harbor, the largest one in Europe. Nowadays, the container volume in the freight port is five times higher than in 2010 (from 800,000 to nearly 4 million TEUs) when COSCO took over the lead for the next 35 years. New piers and the modernized port facilities allow operations with containerships of the newest generation (20,000 TEU per ship) (Österreichische Verkehrszeitung 2018). All this also created 1,500 new jobs. With such a strong and strategic investment, China maintains an important gateway to Europe. The Chinese Prime Minister calls Piraeus the 'Rotterdam of the South'; in addi-

tion, the development of Piraeus lays the base for a freight Balkan route via Serbia to the north – China will invest, construct and probably maintain a high-speed railway line between Serbia and Hungary which could reduce travel time from currently more than 8 hours to less than 3 hours. As Serbia is not a member of the EU, China uses it as a platform for its activity in the Balkan region. Moreover, with its 16 plus 1 initiative, China offers the countries of central and southeast Europe loans and investments. However, the EU has as yet made no strategic answer to China's activities. To hinder investments by demanding European standards in Hungary is not enough and demonstrates the dilemma of the EU in terms of a coherent strategy for southeast Europe. The region should be supported by strategic investments in railway development, which have always been of strategic importance and will be in the future. Improving the railway situation is definitely in the common interest, as it will support a more balanced flow of goods throughout Europe in the long run. The seaports in southeast Europe will play an important role because the main maritime trading flow is oriented towards Asia.

Our assessment of the corridor confirmed some remarkable developments, but also illuminated the poor quality of railway connections and lack of an integrated and coordinated spatial and railway development, as well. Therefore, the main recommendations, according to the position paper, are as follows:

- > Sufficient capacity for freight and passenger transport
- > Speeds as fast as required, not as fast as possible
- > Separation of freight and passenger transport in densely settled metropolitan regions
- > Stepwise development of passenger transport
- > Joint strategy for railway development
- > Joint strategy for integrated spatial and transport development
- > Complementary informal processes

Sufficient capacity for freight and passenger transport

It is important to base further investments to improve railway development on some key figures. The number of trains, both passenger and freight, is crucial. Using the experience gathered in the construction of the Gotthard and Lötschberg base tunnel system in Switzerland, we deem the construction of a double-track corridor for a capacity of ca. 250–280 trains as reasonable and necessary. As a realistic mix of passenger and freight transport, the following train numbers are examined per day and in both directions:

- > 130–150 freight trains, of which 100 are estimated to be in transit (150 freight trains correspond to about 25% of the capacity over the Alps after the opening of the Brenner Tunnel, including the Gotthard and Lötschberg tunnels)

- > 30–40 long-distance trains
- > 40–80 local trains

The OEM Corridor runs continuously through EU Member States from Budapest via Arad, Craiova and Sofia to Thessaloniki. This route is 265km longer than the connection via Serbia and the Republic of North Macedonia. The low transport volume in the southern part of the route indicates that a future update of the single track is sufficient. Instead of investing in an expensive double track line here, the existing single track from Niš via Skopje to Thessaloniki should be improved simultaneously. This would allow a more effective use of European investments by providing more and redundant connections and therefore more reliable accessibility to the whole region.

Speeds as fast as required, not as fast as possible

Passenger service speeds should be developed based on a border crossing operational concept that predefines desired travel times and necessary capacities between important nodes for a long-time horizon. Based on such a concept, single lines should not be designed with speeds as fast as possible, but as fast as required to offer regular and convenient connections for train passengers at the node stations.

Separation of freight and passenger transport in densely settled metropolitan regions

For safety and capacity reasons, a separation of passenger and freight traffic in densely settled agglomerations is necessary and recommended.

Stepwise development of passenger transport

Experience shows that with travel times of up to 4 hours, railway routes can be very competitive even with air transport. Accordingly, travel times on important transport sections should be reduced stepwise to a max. of 4 hours in the long-run.

Joint strategy for railway development

The working group ascertains that upgrades and improvements on the corridor will enable considerable reductions in travel time. Single sections will be part of the European high-speed train network. On most sections, however, continuous travel speed for passenger trains of 160km/h appears to be sufficient and reasonable. We suggest establishing a concept timetable that includes all nations involved along the entire corridor. This concept also determines internationally coordinated time slots for freight trains. Based on these, the detailed allocation of train paths further on can be assigned by the existing coordination platform of the Rail-Freight Corridor No. 7.

Joint strategy for integrated spatial and transport development

A consistent and continuous strategy is essential to push this corridor as a backbone for development and as a contributor to cope with population decrease in the crucial countries and with other corridors in Europe. Thus, action is needed to steadily develop the OEM. The OEM Corridor provides integrated international interconnectivity for Romania and Bulgaria but with its branch via Serbia it further has the potential to offer a capacity for fast and direct connections from mainland Greece to the hinterland for freight and passenger rail.

Complementary informal processes

In our opinion, to continue the promotion of an integrated spatial and railway development strategy, intensive exchange and effective communication as well as cooperation and coordination are required. To achieve these goals, the formal planning processes foreseen in the respective national planning laws are not sufficient in all aspects: A prime example for a failed coordination process is seen in the huge protests against the construction of the Offenburg–Basel section of the Rhine-Alpine Corridor. After many years of political resistance and in consequence of the protests, a project advisory board was arranged. The advisory board finally found an integrated solution for the project, yet with a delay of 10 to 15 years compared to the original plan.

Based on previous assessments and preliminary identified recommendations for the further development of the OEM Corridor as defined by this ARL project, we propose the following tasks:

- > Preparation of the European added value study on the corridor development from Hamburg to Athens taking into due account both of its branches
- > Preparation of studies on existing transport capacities along the corridor
- > Estimations of possible investments necessary for the realization of stepwise development
- > Feasibility studies for freight bypasses in metropolitan regions
- > Study for a double-deck corridor from Thessaloniki via Romania to Budapest
- > Study of transport chains (modal split, time-saving and lower fares) from northern European ports to Greek harbors

The upcoming EU framework (2021–2027) for financing research on transnational cooperation will provide new resources. But, as learned from the Rhine-Alpine Corridor, more intensified cross-border collaboration amongst different institutions and disciplines is a necessary prerequisite. A European Grouping on Territorial Cooperation is the organizational framework for such a collaboration. It has already been established for the Dresden–Prague axis and should be extended in order to adequately address future research on sustainable spatial and transport development along the OEM Corridor.

Literature

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