

ABS Europe Conference 2016 – Article proposal from Lepur – ULg

Title:

The reinforcement opportunities of a cross-border train connection: the example of the railway between Liège (Belgium) and Maastricht (Netherlands)

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Key words: cross-border train connection – railway interoperability – urbanization – train station neighborhoods – Wallonia – Netherlands

There is a desire to strengthen the cross-border train supply of services between Liège and Maastricht, two cities located in the valley of the Meuse river, one in Wallonia (the French speaking southern part of Belgium) and the other one in the extreme south of the Netherlands (the Dutch Province of Limburg) (Tritel, 2011; Arcadis, 2013; Leblanc et al., 2015). In this regard, projects do exist in both countries, but have different objectives: Belgium wants to develop a Rail Regional Express Network with frequent stops (Aménagement SC, 2013; Leblanc et al., 2015), whereas the Netherlands wishes to create an intercity rail link, with the cities of Liège and Brussels as main origin or destination (Lambotte, 2008; Arcadis, 2013). Since the project would imply high exploitation costs, e.g. related to an increase in railway access charges and constraints due to its trans-border nature, it is necessary to study beforehand the socio-economic profitability of this connection and pay special attention to the actual demand and potential of trans-border travel in the region.

The presentation is structured in three parts: (i) the characteristics of the supply, with a focus on the question of interoperability; (ii) the actual and potential demand for this connection; (iii) pathways to increase the volume of passengers.

From the supply-side viewpoint, the interoperability is the main issue of concern: the homologation of the materials, the infrastructure of the “border checkpoint” between the

Belgian and Dutch networks, the French and Dutch language capabilities of the staff, the regularity problems, and the fare integration all constitute obstacles and represent direct and indirect additional costs that would need to be taken into account (Tritel, 2011).

Regarding the demand, a significant increase in the use of the railway between Liège and Maastricht has been observed the last 10 years. The reasons of this increase are examined, with a particular focus on cross-border home-work commuting, including the cross-border commute of new residents in Wallonia from Dutch origin (Harmsen, 2006 ; Stevens, 2009 ; Bianchet et al., 2014) and on other travel reasons like shopping, school or tourism (e.g. Dutch residents travelling towards Brussels and Paris via Liège).

Finally, the presentation aims at highlighting different possible directions that would help to increase the travel demand on this specific rail link and that would also succeed in creating a balanced transport offer, satisfying all involved stakeholders. This offer would concern especially (i) the densification of train station neighborhoods on both sides of the border, concerning both residential and economic aspects (Wilmotte, 2015), (ii) the valorization of the touristic potential and educational attractiveness of the two urban centers (Arcadis, 2013) and (iii) the development of trans-border employment towards Maastricht.

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