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Rail Baltica Growth Corridor

Visionaries see a continuous railway connection running from Helsinki via Tallinn, Riga and Kaunas, to Warsaw – Rail Baltica. Travelling by train from Tallinn to Berlin takes today approximately 9 train changes and 60 hours of travelling time, which is twice as much as it was in 1935. This reveals the anti-ideal status of the Eastern Baltic Sea Region's railway network today. It suffers from an outdated railway, un-synchronized timetables, and a poor level of service along the way. The Rail Baltica Growth Corridor – an international project funded by the Baltic Sea Region Program – forms a cooperation platform that brings together different stakeholders that share the vision to see modern Rail Baltica come true.

Towards north-south thinking

The challenge of the vision of Rail Baltica – a continuous railway connection from Helsinki via Tallinn, Riga and Kaunas, to Warsaw – is, obviously, cost efficiency. The huge cargo flows between Europe and Russian and Asian markets are the cornerstone of the Rail Baltica vision, but the railway itself is mapped on the Eastern Baltic Sea Region countries. As these small countries cannot take the prime responsibility of paying for the massive investment, the feasibility of the Rail Baltica plan has become a question of who can afford to pay for it and what is the economic benefit in the long run that will pay back the investment. The Rail Baltica plan is a huge initiative towards green transport development in the EU. But even as such a good cause it is a long and huge investment. Also technically it is a complex palette to make work as countries have different gauge standards let alone they still suffer from major gaps in the level of their logistics services. The political good-will that Rail Baltica has gained is not only useful for the vision – it is vital.

The existing railway network runs for the most part on a west-east axis. This logic dates back to the era of the Iron Curtain when the railway network firstly served the cargo flows from harbors on the Baltic Sea to the big Soviet cities. There also exist railways running in the north-south direction but mainly they are in a poor condition not providing viable option for north-south direction road transport. The improvements of the railway infrastructure have so far mainly focused on the development of national railway lines leaving questions on international connections almost un-tackled. That is even though the development of north-south transport connections in the Eastern part of the Baltic Sea Region is regarded as being far from meaningless. The significance of the direction is currently being demonstrated by the overcrowded road connection – Via Baltica. The reality is in contrast with green thinking: even cargo that could travel by rail is currently travelling by road.

Technically, the key challenge of Rail Baltica draws on the gauge issue: the Baltic States and Finland have a railway network that uses the broad gauge (1520 mm) whereas Poland has the standard European gauge (1435 mm). There are currently two entry points in Lithuania between the two different gauge standards. The three Baltic States have an on-going study that will come to a conclusion by the end of year 2010 about what would be the most feasible way to develop Rail Baltica in these countries and how to overcome the challenges of different gauge standards. Other major bottlenecks along the Rail Baltica route are currently linked to the cross-border sections in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

Rail Baltica is the only railway connection between the three Baltic States to Poland and rest of EU. To the north, the railway is bridged with a ferry connection to Helsinki and the modern and efficient railway network of the Nordic countries. Rail Baltica and the Northern Arc could ultimately form a continuous connection to the North-Eastern sea passage from Asia to the Barents Sea. From Warsaw Rail Baltica continues through Berlin to the major ports of continental Europe, e.g. Hamburg and Rotterdam. Ultimately, the different transport projects around the Baltic Sea Region are building a multimodal transport network that connects all major forms of transport (rail, road, sea, air) in an economically sustainable and environmentally friendly way. Even though each geographical passage competes with each other for cargo and passenger volumes the big picture takes account of the global trade flows. If the overall international trade volumes increase in the Baltic Sea Region, there is more to win for everyone.

Towards faster and greener intermodal connections

Even though looking after the environment is paramount in all fields of society – not least in transport and logistics – ecological solutions are ex-

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pected to be truly competitive. In passenger transport high-speed railways (HSR) are beginning to replace air transport and gaining a stronger foothold all around the globe. At the same time, however, in freight transport traditional railways are still often regarded less competitive than flexible road transport. Asia has for long been the forerunner of HSR whereas in Europe HSR is merely being utilized in more densely populated areas of Central and Southern Europe. HSR is now taking also USA by storm as 10 new high speed corridors are being planned by the initiative of President Obama. More ecological HSR connections are most of all providing alternatives for short flight routes, even replacing them entirely in certain regions.

In the Eastern Baltic Sea Region HSR is not at the moment a feasible alternative due to the considerably small population in the Region. Yet, the potential for fast train connections in the Baltic States are being explored in the Feasibility study coordinated by AECOM. European gauge Rail Baltica would provide a faster link between the capital regions of the Eastern Baltic Sea Region and to Central Europe, making Rail Baltica a more viable alternative for inner-Region flights and also in passenger traffic.

The characteristics of the different transport modes differ greatly in terms of capacity, flexibility and environmental impacts. Often an intermodal combination of different transport modes can provide the most viable transport solution, enabling the exploitation of the specific advantages of each mode. Currently the countries of the Eastern Baltic Sea Region are heavily dependent on sea transport. The Eastern part of the Baltic Sea Region is lagging behind Central and Western parts both in the versatility of transport routes and corridors, as well as in the level of services. Sweden for example has a functional land link to EU core via the Öresund Bridge. Yet, they are continuously investing on the further development of the railway system and new alternative routes to European markets. High-speed trains will start operating from Stockholm and Gothenburg to Central Europe as early as in 2018, when the new bridge connecting Denmark to Germany will be completed.

In addition to securing accessibility with versatile modes of transport, also the protection of the environment is encouraging Eastern BSR countries to introduce new alternative routes to supplement sea transport. At the same time the heavy dependence on sea transport of these countries is causing new stricter environmental regulations to be introduced in the shipping business. Tightening regulations not only on sulphur but also NO_x and CO₂ discharges will inevitably increase the costs for sea transport in the near future. In order to assure realistic transport costs and thus, competitiveness against European counterparts, countries of the Eastern Baltic Sea Region should together invest on planning and developing new alternative transport routes to the EU core.

Rail Baltica Growth Corridor

Since 2005, Rail Baltica has been one of the TEN-T Priority Projects (Nr. 27) with Mr. Pavel Telička as the European Coordinator. Building on this work, the development of the trans-European transport network Rail Baltica received considerable new impetus, as the Ministries of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland signed the 'Rail Baltica' Memorandum of Understanding at the TEN-T Days in Zaragoza in June 2010. The occasion was hosted by Vice-President of the European Commission Siim Kallas. Through the MoU, the countries commit themselves to support the overall development of Rail Baltica. The countries recognize the importance of inter-modality and inter-operability of the transport network and Rail Baltica as a means to better connect the countries to the internal market of EU. The Rail Baltica Growth Corridor (RBGC), initiated by the Baltic Metropolises, is identified in the MoU as a development strategy that brings the major cities along the route into closer collaboration. In June 2010, RBGC was approved by the Baltic Sea Region Program as a project to be financed during its 30 months duration with a project budget of EUR 3.6m.

RBGC creates a cooperation and transport service platform that meets the needs of both the transport sector and customers in line with the green growth corridor principles. RBGC brings benefits for cities and regions, the transport sector and citizens by improving the competitiveness and economic potential of the Region. It makes an important contribution by producing new knowledge about the decision-making processes concerning Rail Baltica in each country among the public and private sectors. This knowledge is then applied in the development of a transnational Transport Information Network for passengers, and to improve the inter-operability of logistics centers. As a cooperation platform RBGC genuinely brings the different stakeholders together to develop a solution for a real need. In this way the international cooperation platform can overcome national obstacles, as witnessed in several stakeholder interviews.

The focus of RBGC covers the Rail Baltica countries with a comprehensive project partnership. The total 21 partners include partner cities of Helsinki (Lead Partner), Vantaa (FI), Tallinn (EE), Kaunas (LT), Warsaw, Lodz, Poznan, Bialystok (PL), and Berlin (DE). St. Petersburg is linked as an Associate Organization. The regional partners are Uusimaa, Häme (FI), Harju (EE), Lodz and Mazovia Voivodships (PL) and Fläming-Havelland (DE). Logistical expertise is represented by six research/transport planning organizations. The list of Associate Organizations includes national Ministries and national railway operators, among others. RBGC has close cooperation with three important transnational transport projects – TransBaltic, Bothnian Corridor, and East West Transport Corridor II, as well as with the Priority Area No 11 flagship project leaders who work for the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.