

Public Sector Actors' Views on Rail Baltica

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Abstract. Transportation infrastructure development in the Baltic States and Poland has concentrated on improving other transportation modes than rail. Although the European Union has selected Rail Baltica as one of the TEN-T priority projects in 2005, major improvements on the corridor have not yet been implemented. This manuscript presents initial findings of the research effort, which studies attitudes of the public sector actors to Rail Baltica. According to the study, cities north to Riga emphasise the importance of connection to the north, while in Lithuania the main benefit is the connection to Warsaw and Berlin. Furthermore, in Estonia, passenger traffic is considered to be more important, while in Lithuania the emphasis is laid on freight.

Keywords: Baltic States, Rail Baltica, railways, transportation.

INTRODUCTION

Although the European Union emphasises the use of railways because of its positive environmental aspects, the bulk of the transportation related loans granted by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Investment Bank and the World Bank in the Baltic States and Poland have been used to improving other modes of transportation (road, sea ports and airports) [1]-[3]. Even though the Baltic States, as economies, have hugely developed since the Soviet times, their road infrastructure was in a better condition and favoured during the Soviet era, and rail was used for the east-west transit [4]. So, the EU accession only fostered development and investments in the road network, leaving cost efficient privatized management for railroads [5, 6]. However, the price tag to improve the situation with the international Rail Baltica connection is at minimum very significant, more than 1 billion Euros (if it uses extensively the old railway network [7], but the more realistic price estimate is above 4 billion [6]).

In this research work, we outline the current status by examining the current rail infrastructure and international rail travel possibilities in the light of the Rail Baltica connection. As is shown, currently there is a very limited possibility for using railways for international travel through the Baltic States, but a potential is clearly there. For example, the sea ferry based passenger traffic between Estonia and Finland has just reached a milestone of 6.7 million passengers (and has grown for decades). Research findings are initially supported by the city and country level interviews, completed during early parts of the year 2011. For example, Estonians and Latvians see Rail Baltica mostly as a passenger transport corridor, while Lithuanians emphasize also freight.

The manuscript is structured as follows: in the next chapter we describe the current status of the railway infrastructure and rail transportation connections in the three states. Chapter 3 presents the research method, which is a semi-structured

interview. The aim of the interview study is to examine the cities expectations in the transportation infrastructure development and especially the attitudes towards Rail Baltica. In Chapter 4, we provide a summary of our main results. In Chapter 5, we conclude our work and provide directions for future research.

CURRENT SITUATION OF RAIL INFRASTRUCTURE AND RAIL BALTICA "EXISTENCE"

A recent description of the railway line across the Baltic States can be found, for example, in the Feasibility Study commissioned by EU in 2007 [8]. Rail Baltica has also been investigated in other projects [9]. The existing railway route from Tallinn to the Latvian border goes through the cities of Tapa, Tartu and Valga. The total length of the line is 275 kilometres. It is mainly a single track; while the 77 kilometres long stretch from Tallinn to Tapa is double track. Only the first 57 kilometres to Aegviidu have electrification. The track parts from Tapa to Tartu and from Tartu to Valga have been improved recently.

In Latvia, the length of the railway connection from the Estonian border to Lithuania is 243 kilometres. The current alignment goes through the cities of Valka, Valmiera, Riga, Jelgava and Eleja. The configuration is mostly single track, basically only the 91 km stretch around Riga (between Sigulda and Jelgava) is double track. The line is electrified between Riga and Jelgava (43 kilometers).

In Lithuania, the length of the current line is 333 kilometers, of which 195 is single track. With the exception of the 10 km stretch north to Kaunas, the line is not electrified. The line from Mockava to the south (8 kilometres long) is of the European gauge (1435), while earlier all the tracks were using the 1520 Russian standard.

In Poland, the total length of the track from the border station to Warsaw is 340 kilometres. The part between Warsaw and Bialystok (171 km) is double track, while electrification has been extended by 41 kilometres from Bialystok to the east.

With regard to Rail Baltica, the most functioning part of the rail based passenger transportation system is located between Berlin (Germany) and Warsaw (Poland). From Poland, upward to the north, traveling with rails becomes increasingly embarrassing (see Table I below). In the Baltic States, railways have experienced a serious collapse of demand in the two decades perspective, they currently serve mostly the domestic needs, and the transportation system is centered towards their own capital cities. Therefore, traveling from Riga (Latvia) to Kaunas (Lithuania) is very time consuming (998 minutes, or more than 17 hours, for the journey, which is directly only approx. 250 km), since the Latvian train proceeds

first to the Lithuanian capital - Vilnius and thereafter traveler needs to change for the train going to Kaunas.

TABLE 1

ESTIMATED TRAVEL TIME (MINUTES) BY USING RAILWAYS BETWEEN MAIN RAIL BALTICA CITIES (INC. KALININGRAD), YELLOW COLOURED CELLS INDICATE THAT DEUTSCHE BAHN IDENTIFIES THESE CONNECTIONS (I. E. A CUSTOMER COULD PURCHASE ONE TICKET TO TRAVEL THROUGH THESE) [10 - 13]

Time	Helsinki	Tallinn	Riga	Kaunas	Warsaw	Berlin	Kaliningrad*
Helsinki	x	120	1049	2047	2620	3353	2753
Tallinn		x	490	1715	2288	3021	2194
Riga			x	998	1571	2304	1477
Kaunas				x	483	1207	298
Warsaw					x	332	1588
Berlin						x	1970
Kaliningrad*							x

Similar national railway system and necessary travel time consuming exist in Estonia (currently trains of main operator Edelaraudtee do not cross the borders). So, you need to use the local train connection to the Estonian city of Valga. From Valga, a traveller needs to change at the Latvian twin part of the city Valka, and then can proceed forward with the Latvian domestic connection to Riga. Once again, the travelling of approx. 300 kms of direct distance takes an enormous amount of time - 490 minutes (more than 8 hours!). If passenger is having objective to travel from the capital of Finland - Helsinki to Berlin, Germany, it takes 2 days and 8 hours (as shown in Table 1, in total 3353 minutes), if railways are being favoured (certainly the route from Helsinki to Tallinn should be covered by sea ferry, since the hinterland connection between the two countries does not currently exist). I very much doubt that there is a person who is willing to sacrifice more than two days for this journey, especially when comparing with the air connection (with very competitive and reasonable pricing).

Even though Kaliningrad, Russia, is often not included in the Rail Baltica studies, it is worth of further analysis. The Kaliningrad area has the population of 938 000 people [16], and is, therefore, an important and significant area, as compared to the three Baltic States. Interestingly, traveling to Kaliningrad by using rail is also troublesome – all trains seem to go through Vilnius, and journeys are extremely time consuming.

So, generally speaking, with the current railway system, Rail Baltica will not meet the modern time demands of travelers. Therefore, the increase of international traveling by rail will not materialize without major changes. The needed changes are not only related to infrastructure, but are also organizational ones. The Baltic States need to agree and establish a joint venture passenger transportation company to make international schedules and venture reality. With the current locally centered arrangement, this can hardly be achieved. Another alternative is that some for-profit operator (from the region or outside it) starts scheduled traffic within Rail Baltica. However, the risk of volumes, currently unknown routes and large-scale rolling stock investments will not make this a low risk business for a new entrant.

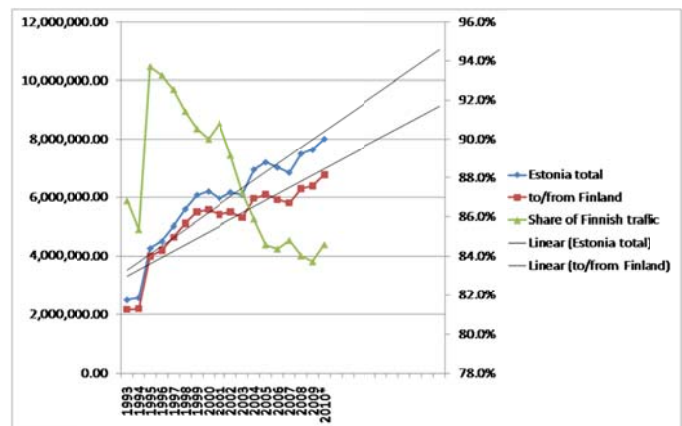


Fig. 1. Passenger transport volumes through Estonian sea ports, and share of Finland during year 1993-2010 (* is an estimate) [14].

In the positive side to support the Rail Baltic connection, there is the tourism industry development in Estonia (a very popular destination for Finnish visitors for decades; in the Soviet era, Finnish visitors were the most significant group [15]). This is also clearly supported by the passenger statistics, as in 2010 the passenger volumes of Estonia reached 10 million (to and from), the Finnish direction still accounting for nearly 85 % (in mid 90s this share was even higher - 92-93 %). However, as Figure 1 shows, the growth trajectory of Finland transport volumes through Estonian sea ports is slower than in the entire Estonia, and in the future (the next decade is estimated in Figure 1) it is expected that the proportional share of Finland will somewhat decrease. This is natural, since the interest among Swedish tourists has been increasing over the years (has nearly tripled during the previous decade), and also economic ties between Sweden and Estonia have become stronger during the decade (e.g. in banking, but Estonia still holds the position of an important source of manufacturing for both Sweden and Finland).

What is interesting about the passenger volume statistics is the sustainability and strength of volumes during the 18 years of the observation period. Typically a predictable growth is seen from year to year (in some years even a high double digit growth, like in 1995, 1997, 1998 and 2004), with small exceptions of the years 2001, 2003, 2006 and 2007. However, these declines have been at the magnitude of 2-4 percent from

the previous year, and it can be concluded that the future passenger transportation clearly has the robust growth ahead, with a minor risk of downside. It should be noted that during our observation period the world has gone through three major economic crises – the Asian currency crisis in 1997-1998 (which severely affected also Russia), the IT bubble burst after the year 2000 and the US led credit crunch in 2008-2009. In the forthcoming decade, we may expect that Estonian Finnish passenger transport will reach the level of 8 million – this means a very lucrative market for Rail Baltica high speed connections, even if the potential of this overall market for RB will be 10-20 %.

RESEARCH METHOD

The aim of the interview study is to examine the cities expectations with regard to the transportation infrastructure development and especially the attitudes towards Rail Baltica. The target group for the study consists of all main cities located along the different routing options [8] (there are still several alternative routings for the Rail Baltica). The semi-structured theme interview structure had been used in earlier studies and it was modified for the purpose of this study. The themes included in the structure consisted of the:

- 1) Background information about the city,
- 2) Importance of the logistics sector for the city,
- 3) Current level of the infrastructure,
- 4) Description of the national decision making process and the role of the city in the process,
- 5) Co-operation between the national and the city level decision making,
- 6) The role of the EU,
- 7) Co-operation with the private sector,
- 8) Baltic Sea Region development and marketing,

Respondents targeted for the interview were primarily mayors and vice mayors. These groups were selected because of their high authority to declare the official view of the city. The contact information was found on web pages of each city.

The first contact was made by sending an email expressing the wish to make an interview with the possible interviewees, accompanied by general information on the study. In case there was no response, a reminder was sent after some days delay. If there was no response, the next contact was made by phone.

A couple of days before the actual interview date, the theme structure of the interview per se was sent to the respondent in order to enable him/her to prepare for the interview.

In the interview, permission to make a recording was asked. Afterwards the respondent had the opportunity to check the written memo of the interview for possible errors or other unwanted material.

RESULTS

The main results from the interviews on the country level are presented in Table 2 below. The summary is based on 11 interviews in total, of which five have been completed in

Estonia, three in Latvia and three in Lithuania. The results are combined under the main themes.

In Estonia, the main interest towards Rail Baltica on the city level is on the passenger transportation side. This might be due to the change in the industrial structure after the Soviet times. In Latvia, cities emphasise both passenger and freight traffic. The freight transportation connection could serve both local production and the development of logistic terminals. In Lithuania, freight transportation is seen as the main driving force of Rail Baltica, although passenger transportation is also mentioned.

The overall condition and the development of the infrastructure seem to be different in the countries. In Estonia, the section between Tallinn and Tartu and further south to Valga has recently been improved. The Latvian railway infrastructure is regarded to be in good shape, although no major investments have been carried out recently. In Lithuania, the infrastructure has been improved and also new freight transportation related facilities are currently being built or are in the planning process. However, it should be emphasized that railways serve mostly the east-west transit, and, therefore, it was hard to get mindset and actions towards the south-north route. This was also apparent in the interviews; railways exist in the Baltic States because of freight transport and transit of east.

In all three countries, cities regard their role in the railway infrastructure development as minimal. Although the national decision-making is centralised, Estonian and Latvian cities consider that regions are treated equally on the national level. As the demographics of the population in the capital region differ from the rest of the country in both cases, there has been tension between the national government and the capital city. In Lithuania, personal contacts and the political background play an important role in decision making.

The position of the cities towards EU is positive, although some claim that bureaucracy is involved in the procedures. The cities regard the main role of EU to be a source of funding. The cities do not have direct connections with EU. The EU membership has made crossing the national borders easier. In Lithuania, the EU membership has improved the possibilities to co-operate with Russia and Belarus.

According to the cities, the needs of the private sector are taken into account in city planning. The most typical way of supporting industrial development is to reserve land for industrial use. Currently Public Private Partnership (PPP) projects are still an exception. Some companies have built roads, which serve their specific needs.

In all countries, Rail Baltica is supported on the city level. It is considered as the most important forthcoming logistic related infrastructure project in the region. In the Southern part of the region, the most important connection provided by the corridor is the link to Poland and further to Berlin. In the Northern parts of the region, also the connection to Finland is seen as important. Rail Baltica is considered as an important tool also for marketing: for a city, it provides 'a place on the map', similarly to an international airport.

CONCLUSIONS

It is widely known that the European Union emphasises the use of railways because of its numerous positive environmental aspects. Although the three Baltic States have been members of the European Union since 2004, and the European Union selected Rail Baltica as one of the TEN-T priority projects in 2005, major improvements on the corridor have not yet been implemented. The transportation infrastructure development in the Baltic States and Poland has mainly concentrated on improving other transportation modes.

The status of the rail infrastructure in the Baltic States has been outlined in several studies during the recent years [8], [9]. Although some partial improvement steps have been taken quite recently, our study on passenger travel times shows that the service level on Rail Baltica is not competitive in providing international connections. However, based on the presented increased ferry traffic between Finland and Estonia, the increased number of airports and (even local) flight connections (not presented) in the area, it can be claimed that there is a potential demand for an improved railway service.

The interview study reveals that on the city level there is the undivided support for Rail Baltica. In Estonia, the main

interest towards Rail Baltica on the city level is on the passenger transportation side. In Lithuania, freight transportation is seen as the main driving force of Rail Baltica, although passenger transportation is also mentioned.

In the Southern part of the region, the most important connection provided by the corridor is the link to Poland and further to Berlin. In the Northern parts of the region also the connection to Finland is seen as important.

The study presented is a part of an ongoing research which aims at understanding the public decision making process in each of the countries related to Rail Baltica, both on the regional and national levels, as well as on the EU level (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Germany). The first step involves completing the city interviews in all remaining countries. In the next steps, ministries, regional authorities, infrastructure providers, owners and administrators will be interviewed. The picture on the public sector decision making will be completed by interviewing the European level actors, such as DG TREN and DG REGIO, by using similar research methods, later in 2011.

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS OF THE CITY INTERVIEWS

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Importance of logistics sector	Cities stress passenger traffic. Although the industrial structure has changed since the Soviet times, some companies are using rail transportation.	The cities stress both passenger and freight traffic. Freight transportation is important for both local production as well as development of logistics terminals.	Freight transportation is seen as the main driving force of Rail Baltica. Also passenger transportation is mentioned.
Infrastructure	The connection between Tallinn and Tartu and further south to Valga has recently been improved.	Railway infrastructure is regarded to be in good shape, although no major investments have been carried out recently.	Railway infrastructure has been improved as also new facilities are built.
National decision making	National decision making is centralised. The role of the cities is small.	National decision making is centralised. The role of the cities is small.	National decision making is centralised. The role of the cities is small.
Co-operation between the national and city levels	The national government might not be aware of the specific needs of the rural areas. As such, the cities think that the regions are treated equally. Typically, there has been political tension between the national government and the government of Tallinn, where the share of the Russian population is higher than in the rest of the country.	Cities think that the regions are treated equally. Currently the main purpose is to improve the connections between centres of national regions. Typically there has been political tension between the national government and the government of Riga, where the share of the Russian population is higher than in the rest of the country.	Personal relations and political background are important in decision making. Major investments have been undertaken on the Klaipeda–Kaunas–Vilnius axis.
Role of EU	The cities do not have direct connections with EU, which is mainly seen as a source of funding. The collapse of the Soviet Union has reduced transportation between the Baltic States. The EU membership has made crossing the borders easier again.	EU is seen as a source of funding. The collapse of the Soviet Union has reduced transportation between the Baltic States. The EU membership has made crossing the borders easier again.	The EU provides the main source of funding. The position is positive, although bureaucracy is involved in the procedures. EU membership makes co-operation with Russia and Belarus easier.
Co-operation with the private sector	Private companies have invested in roads which serve their specific needs. Cities have been active in attempting to acquire international airports.	Cities claim to be aware of the needs of the private companies. The main means of supporting the industry development is by reserving land for industrial use.	There is lively co-operation with the private sector and universities. Some PPP projects have been undertaken
Baltic sea region development and marketing	In the north, the importance of the connection to Helsinki is stressed, while in the southern part of the country the connection to Riga is also seen as vital. The capacity of Via Baltica (road) is regarded to be insufficient in the future. For the cities, Rail Baltica provides a place on the map.	Rail Baltica is regarded as an important transportation related investment in the Baltic States. Some cities stress the importance of the connection to Finland to provide sufficient volume for the corridor. Improving the passenger train connection between Riga and Moscow has been discussed lately. Rail Baltica is seen as a tool for international marketing.	The benefit of Rail Baltica is seen mainly in the connection, which it provides to Warsaw and Berlin. The capacity of Via Baltica is regarded as insufficient (road).

Source: made by authors.

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Further information

The study presented is a part of the project called Rail Baltica Growth Corridor (RBGC), which aims to improve the competitiveness and accessibility of cities and regions in the Eastern Baltic Sea Region through increased interaction and cooperation. The EU funded (INTERREG IV B) project started in January 2011. RBGC creates a cooperation and transport service platform that observes the needs of both transport sector and customers in line with the green growth corridor principles. RBGC brings benefits for cities and regions, transport sector and citizens by improving the competitiveness and economic potential of the Region. The project partnership consists of 21 Partners representing cities, regional authorities, and research institutes, as well as ministries and national railways as associated organizations. The project web site can be found at <http://www.rbge.eu/>.

Juha Saranen, Olli-Pekka Hilmola, Milla Laisi. Valsts sektora dalībnieku viedoklis par Rail Baltika.

Transporta infrastruktūras attīstība Baltijas Valstīs un Polijā tika koncentrēta uz citu transportēšanas veidu attīstību nevis dzelzceļu. Kaut arī Eirpas Savienība izdalīja Rail Baltica kā vienu no TEN-T prioritāriem projektiem 2005. gadā, galvenie koridora uzlabojumi vēl joprojām nav realizēti. Faktiski, uzlabojumi dzelzceļu tīklā valsts līmenī tika veikti un tiks īstenoti tiuvakājā nākotnē. Taču jautājums par liela mēroga investīcijām koridora attīstībai vēl nav izlemts. Tomēr, kā parādīts šajā pētījumā, Rail Baltica ir vajadzīgas investīcijas vairāk nekā infrastruktūrā, kamēr Baltijas valstīs dzelzceļa kompanijas lielāku daļu savas darbības koncentrē uz vietējām operācijām, starptautiskie savienojumi (dienvid – ziemeļu ass) sastāda niecīgu daļu un kavēšanas ir patiesi gara.

Šīs raksts prezentē sākotnējos pētniecības rezultātus par valsts sektora dalībnieku attieksmi pret Rail Baltica. Saskaņā ar pētījumu, pilsētas uz ziemeļiem no Rīgas uzsvēr pieslēgumu pie ziemeļiem kā svarīgu, kamēr Lietuvā lielākais ieguvums ir savienojums ar Varšavu un Berlini. Turklāt, Igaunijā pasažieru pārvadājumi uzskatīti par svarīgākiem, kamēr Lietuva uzsvēra liek uz krāvu pārvadājumiem. Projekts Rail Baltica tiek atbalstīts pilsētu pašvaldību līmenī visās valstīs. Projekts Rail Baltic tiek uzskatīts par svarīgāko ar loģistiku saistīto infrastruktūras projektu reģionā. Projekts nodrošina pilsētām "vietu uz kartes", līdzīgi kā tas notiek ar starptautiskmā lidostām.

Юха Саранен, Олли-Пекка Хилмола, Милла Лайси. Мнение действующих лиц государственного сектора о Rail Baltica.

Развитие транспортной инфраструктуры в странах Балтии и Польше было сосредоточено на улучшении других видов транспорта, нежели железной дороги. Хотя Европейский союз выбрал Rail Baltica одним из TEN-T приоритетных проектов в 2005 году, значительные улучшения по коридору до сих пор не реализованы. На самом деле, постепенные улучшения на сети железных дорог были сделаны на уровне стран или будут достигнуты в ближайшем будущем – однако, масштабные инвестиции в улучшение коридора еще не определены. Однако, как показано в этой научно-исследовательской работе, Rail Baltica требует больше инвестиций в инфраструктуру, так как в странах Балтии железнодорожные компании в большинстве регионов сосредоточились на внутренних операциях, а международных соединений (с юга на север) не хватает, и задержки действительно крупные.

Эта статья представляет первые результаты научно-исследовательской работы, которая изучает отношение государственных структур к Rail Baltica. Согласно исследованию, города на севере от Риги подчеркивают важность соединения с севером, в то время как в Литве главным преимуществом является соединение с Варшавой и Берлином. Кроме того, в Эстонии более важными считаются пассажирские перевозки, в то время как в Литве акцент делается на грузовые перевозки. Проект Rail Baltica рассматривается как наиболее важный предстоящий проект, связанный с логистикой, инфраструктурный проект в регионе. Для городов реализация проекта обеспечивает "место на карте" аналогично влиянию международного аэропорта.