

Editorial

Special issue: Institutional, economic and demographic transition and its impact on the transport system

Martin Lanzendorf and Matthias Gather

EJTIR, 5, no. 3 (2005), pp. 135-138

During the last 15 years most central and east european countries faced an era of institutional, economic and demographic transition. With the fall of the wall and the end of the Soviet Union, the former socialist countries transformed their political, economic and social institutions; today, some of them are already a member state of the European Union. The reunificated Germany was not only affected by this process in its eastern part, the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), where the political and institutional structures were entirely exchanged; with the end of the “Rheinische Bundesrepublik”, the incarnation of a welfare and growth oriented Fordist society, also former West Germany had to adapt to this transition and still is facing a process of institutional modernisation.

Economically these changes are very much interlinked with the European political integration process which also meant an extensive liberalisation of markets within the European Union. Although globalisation is the most discussed issue concerning both structural and regional shifts in national economies, in European countries this process of a common market and the recent enlargement of the Union above all is challenging the national economies and aggravating regional and national disparities. Furthermore new information and communication technologies fostered a world-wide reorganisation of production and service networks, the advent of the information society. This process is widely accompanied by a liberalisation of social institutions like weekly office hours, working conditions or the opening hours of shops. Economic patterns and locations have become highly volatile, competition transcends former spatial barriers.

Finally, demographic changes due to decreased birth rates and higher life expectancies raise new challenges for policymakers in various countries. In Germany, despite of a considerable amount of international immigration, the overall population is forecasted to be shrinking and ageing over the next decades. But the demographic changes are not equally distributed over time and space. On the one hand, due to inter-regional migration, birth rates below average and a rapidly ageing population, most regions in eastern Germany and the old-industrialized regions in western Germany are already and will continue shrinking over the next decades. On the other hand, high competitive regions like Munich, Hamburg, Rhine-Main or Rhine-Neckar continue growing. Thus, after decades of growth, the recognition of shrinkage poses completely new challenges for regional planners and politicians.

For the settlement and transport system, two strands of relevant research fields emerge: first, how will the institutional, economic and demographic changes affect the settlement system,

the distribution of land use functions, the personal travel behaviour and the transport of goods and commodities; and, second, how should the federal, state or local governments respond to these challenges with adequate policies for achieving a more sustainable development. In this thematic issue of the EJTIR, Scheiner and Achen refer to the first and Haefeli to the second research field.

Scheiner, more specifically, asks about the effect of the reunification on the action spaces and the destination choice of people living in Berlin both east and west of the former wall. His empirical analysis shows the further existence of an “inner wall”, thus the tendency of people living close to the former wall of staying within “their” respective half of the city. However, the frequency of crossing the former border within Berlin depends on subjective experiences and perceptions. Scheiner shows the importance of attitudes, lifestyles, biographical experiences and long-term spatial orientations for destination choices and, thus, factors that are frequently overseen by an analysis of mere objective factors like infrastructure, distribution of opportunities or socio-demography. Thus, from the historically probably unique event reunification, Scheiner draws conclusions on relevant factors for the understanding and explanation of travel behaviour in other contexts.

Achen analyses the destination choice for grocery shopping in the former GDR after the reunification. Starting from the observation that a rapid increase in car ownership rates and in shopping centres were some of the most immediate consequences after the fall of the wall, Achen asks about how these trends interacted. Retail centres at the outskirts of cities were the first wave of suburbanization even before housing or other commerces spread to suburban areas. While the retail supply in the former GDR was everywhere with the same quality, almost uniformly distributed over all areas and easy to access by non-motorized modes, this changed with the reunification quickly. Different types of retail stores offered different qualities and quantities to customers who in turn were driven to completely new consumption patterns. In particular hypermarkets and discounters were very successful in the new “laender”. Regarding destination choice, Achen finds that for an important share of the population the distance to the next retail store is relatively unimportant. However, another share of the population uses the nearest retail stores and, thus, a good provision with retail stores may reduce the amount of distances travelled and delivers some justification for planning mixed uses.

While the first two authors ask about the implications of the German reunification for travel patterns, Haefeli takes a different viewpoint by asking about what institutional conditions may foster the future development of the transport market. From a comparative analysis of the cities of Berne in Switzerland and Bielefeld in Germany, Haefeli concludes by a historical analysis of the past five decades of development that the decisions made by the urban governments may yield long-lasting effects for the future development of a city. While in Berne, major investments in transport infrastructure stopped with the beginning of the 1970ies and more demand management policies were favored, Bielefeld continued to invest money in highways and underground light rail, mainly a consequence of decisions made in the 1960ies in course of the above mentioned technocratic political approach in Germany. By evaluating the success of these policies in both cities in the light of their objectives of increasing the number of public transport users, Haefeli shows that the policies in Berne were more successful. Moreover, Haefeli finds that the policies in Berne were more cost efficient

since the deficits of the public transport supplier per trip are much lower than those in Bielefeld.

The articles in this issue certainly can only deal with a small section of the relevant research questions in the context of institutional, economic and demographic transition and its impact on the transport system. However, they provide interesting empirical findings for travel behaviour research as well as for political assessment and thereby give some insights into recent approaches of transportation research in German speaking countries.

