INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORTATION IN CENTRAL EUROPE AFTER 1989 – ORIGINS AND DIRECTIONS OF CHANGES

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Abstract. Central Europe may be thought to possess a favorable location in terms of transcontinental transportation. The location of the region makes the growth of the transportation sector quite feasible – especially international transportation. However, the region is decades behind in terms of infrastructure such as highways and airports, which does not allow it to use its full potential. The purpose of the research is to identify the direction and scale of changes in international transportation in the region since its transition to a market economy in 1989.

Introduction. Recently observed phenomena of globalization such as hypermobility lead to an increase in demand for international transport. Availability of cities or regions on a global scale has become one of the key determinants of growth. The Central European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) tested within the scope of passenger transportation represent different levels of development of both the amount of traffic crossing their borders, as well as the infrastructure necessary for its operation. The aim of this article is to identify the main directions of change which the international traffic was subjected in these countries after 1989.

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Conditions for the development of international transport in Central Europe. Central European countries meet a number of conditions, giving them the opportunity to develop dynamically the international communication. This is affected both by the traditional factors that accounted for the power of cities such as Cracow or Prague in the Middle Ages, as well as new factors related to European integration and freedom of movement, which determine their chances for development in the twenty-first century.

Their geographical position relative towards the traditional trade routes linking the western and eastern parts of Europe as well as the northern and southern part of the continent was one of the first major development impulses. Thanks to this, the towns of Central Europe had a chance to develop the features of trade and commerce centres and now they are driven towards the role of transport hubs even of the intercontinental importance. The role of this factor shows and reminds both the concept of Pan-European transport corridors, which largely consisted of researched Central European countries, as well as adopted by the European Union plans to develop the Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T), which are also largely just taking into account the cities and regions of states located in the central part of the continent.

Changes in the political map of Central Europe had a significant impact on the functioning of the international traffic in the region (Hall 1993). In connection with the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, the connections that to late 80s have had national status, currently are functioning as international – between Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In addition, thanks to the changes initiated in the late 80. and 90. of the XXth century the transport links established with the countries of Western and Southern Europe have taken of a new meaning. First of all, they have become just possible and available due to the normalization of relations connected with the end of the Cold War. Socio-economic ties in this direction have been strengthened both by the migration flows coming from countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia as well as foreign investment in these countries.

The previously mentioned concepts and investment programs should be expected to lead to overcome one of the biggest barriers currently faced by Central European countries, that is the accessibility issues in different spatial scales (Trzepacz 2008). Accessibility in an international or even global dimension is now vital for determining the rank of cities, or even countries in the global system.

It should be also noted in the context of international traffic development conditions in Central Europe, that the analyzed group of countries is highly variable both in terms of socio-economic development and the characteristics of the settlement, as well as the degree to which the natural environment determines the possible development of transport. In this group Austria is a country of very wealthy economy, while in the other countries the problem concerns the profound interregional disparities. Although in all tested cases the dominant element of the settlement is the capital city, however, these countries differ with respect to the rank of regional centres and their opportunities to develop a function of the node in the international transport. Central European countries are largely of mountainous nature, which is an impediment to the development of infrastructure. Regardless of
the size of these countries and other conditions, their common feature is the increase of international transport importance.

**International bus (coach) transport.** The dynamic development of the international bus transport in case of Poland and Slovakia, has even anticipated the moment of entry of these countries into the EU (Figure 1). The people migrating from these countries to the UK and Ireland often decided to use this mode of transport. The decision on the choice of such mode was purely of a practical nature as it was associated with the need to transport larger loads conditioned by travel destination and purpose (permanent migration associated with taking up employment) (Trzepacz 2010). For migrants opening of labour markets in these countries meant, that the threat of arrival end before passing the English Channel has been eliminated. The buses departing from the smaller cities of the poorest regions in Poland, marked with a sign "London Victoria" constitute a symbol of this exodus, in which could participate from 1 to up to 2 million people and have become quite typical phenomenon even in the provincial landscape. The only researched country, in which after accession to the EU the buses transported most passengers of international traffic is Slovakia. The overall high result for this transport mode in this case, is the result in part achieved due to the popularity of connections with so-called near abroad countries (which include mainly the neighbouring Czech Republic) which are usually carried out just by bus and rail (in many cases as typical commuting).

**International rail transport.** For the rail as a mode of international transport in the case of the Central European countries, the transition period was clearly divided into two phases (Figure 2). The first phase lasted from the fall of communism in the region up to the first years of the XXIst century is a period of drastic and permanent decline in the number of passengers. The second phase is characterized by stability and durable approaching of performance achieved in this respect by Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland (about 2 million passengers per year).

Austria clearly stands out from the surrounding post-socialist countries. 6 million passengers a year is an achievement resulting both from the importance of rail transport between Austria and neighbouring Germany, but also the high quality of travel offered by Österreichische Bundesbahnen.

**International air transport.** The Central and Eastern Europe countries in terms of the dynamics of the development of air transport can be classified as emerging markets. By analyzing this indicator you can easily identify the course of the former Iron Curtain (Figure 3). These results are largely a reflection of the success of low-cost carriers operating in these markets (Dobruszkes 2009, Rekowski 2011). It is worth noting that just the Hungarian Wizz Air has had its significant share in this fact. Meanwhile in case of Hungary itself, the previous market structure so far has not shown any dominance of LCC. Following the collapse of Malev, the national carrier, their share in 2012 will significantly increase.
Figure 1 – Passenger growth according to the modes of international transportation in Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia during transition period


Figure 2 – Rail transportation in Central Europe (mln of passengers)

The changes in the popularity of transport modes in the researched region have different character for international traffic than domestic one. This may be illustrated by an example of Cracow – one of the most important tourist centres in Central Europe (Figure 4). As in the case of foreign tourists you can see a clear increase in the importance of air transport at the expense of rail and the individual transport, so in the case of domestic tourists the transport is dominated by affection to their own cars.

One of the key features differentiating a group of studied countries is the geographical aspect of the international traffic functioning (Figure 5). Poland,
Hungary and Slovakia are the countries that are communicatively oriented mainly to serve the western destination, supplemented by important migration and tourism oriented connections and links to Scandinavia and Southern Europe. Eastern direction (especially in the context of air transport) is marginal. In case of the Czech Republic and Austria, this disparity also exists, but is significantly smaller. Especially in the case of Austria, certain balance exists in the importance of international traffic directions. This is a response to the aspirations of Vienna to take up the role of a key interchange node in Central Europe.

**Conclusion.** The analyzed group of the Central Europe countries is characterized by the rapid development of international traffic. This may be evidenced by, among others, results and performance achieved by the different modes of transport as well investments corresponding to them. The most visible and perceptible change is, however, a record growth of air transport, which is partly at the expense of rail or bus transport in international traffic. Countries of the studied region are still considered far inferior to other EU countries in terms of international transport results. This confirms the exception, which is Austria, which, although both in terms of population, and the area is much smaller country such as Poland, however, still gets much better results in terms of passenger volume of international traffic.

**REFERENCES**

Figure 5 – Top directions in international air travel from Central Europe in 2004 and 2011

Source: author’s elaboration based on Eurostat database