

## Railways in the Czech landscape - ecological relic of the 21st century?

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The Czech railways are well known in Central Europe for two reasons: they have the densest network in the whole region and they record a huge loss every year. There is surely a link between these two features.

But we should also ask ourselves whether our railways do not also provide us with a unique historical opportunity. Perhaps they could serve as a laboratory for assessing a culture more friendly to the environment than the Western one. I think we really do have a laboratory; but the results established by it may be very different from those we expect.

This dense network was created in the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Bohemia was then the most industrialised part of the Austrian Empire, and railways the most important public resource. They were a necessary condition for the development of any region, and a place without a nearby station was doomed to recession and poverty.

The railway was necessary for industry, agriculture, big machinery factories as well as for small textile factories and the food industry. The tracks were built to last. This meant that, without any large-scale investment, they survived until the end of the 20th century (though for the most part in a rather dilapidated condition).

The communist regime which ruled from 1948 to 1989 paid close attention to railways. They were considered to be a necessary means of transport for the huge communist armies which would be required, when the time came to invade the West. However, the communists preferred mainline tracks, branch lines being useless for their military purpose. And in spite of their care even the mainline tracks deteriorated substantially during their rule. The result was a network, preserved almost in its entirety, functioning but poorly maintained.

### Public good, private bad?

The communists had another policy, and this time one that would be admired by environmentalists today. They preferred public to private transport, just as they preferred public to private everything. Their original theory was that there was no need for private cars since public transport can fulfil all the travel needs of the people. Hence they created a very dense public bus service – much more so even than the railway network.

However the people was of a different mind (I use ‘was’ intentionally – the communists said *lid* in the singular, not *lidé* in the plural – a fact which bears witness to their underlying philosophy). The people used this public facility for everyday purposes to commute to its work. But it wanted to go by its own car (or at the very least its own motorcycle) to its private weekends.

As [Miroslav Pospíšil](#) [0] has eloquently described on **openDemocracy**, the Czechs created and depended upon the culture of the *chata*. A *chata* could be anything from a small wooden garden

house to a huge country estate with all the facilities of civilization like bathrooms and swimming pools – though inevitably most were, and are, tiny.

Every Friday evening the roads would fill with cars leaving the cities in slow streams for the countryside, and every Sunday evening the great caravan would crawl even more slowly back (often not moving for hours at a time). Good public transport was on offer even at the weekends. But the people preferred its cars.

The regime understood this mood of its people and launched a massive programme of car production in Skoda in 1964. As a result of this initiative the number of cars per Czech inhabitant was the highest in Eastern Europe. But the people was not rich. A new car was a very expensive item. And you had to wait for several years (though much less than in other communist countries) before being granted the right to buy one.

Hence people maintained old cars. Everyone was a mechanic and an engineer. I have an example in my brother, who is a physician and for whom, therefore, a car was indispensable for his profession. He kept two cars all the time, so as to be sure that at least one was running. I am an engineer by profession, but my brother achieved practically the same level of expertise from sheer necessity. He ventured to undertake tasks where even I would have hesitated.

Many Czechs spent their weekends in their *chaty* not engaged in sport or gardening but repairing their car. Engines, brakes, clutches, etc. were frequently lifted out and worked on, and corrosion was being constantly removed or patched. If there was nothing to repair there was still a permanent need to polish. For cars were not merely an indispensable means of transport for the Czechs but also a source of personal pride. Hence many charming veteran models have been preserved until today, in full use, and in their original condition.

It was difficult to be without a car. One fine summer evening the engine of my car broke down. It took several weeks to repair it and I was completely blown out of my regular life. I had to go to my *chata* by bus: there were things there that I needed at home and vice versa. Although this happened some fifteen years ago, I remember it vividly, since it was one of my most difficult periods during those communist years, which were difficult enough at the best of times.

### **Freedom in variation**

I am describing all this because it shows that, even under communism, the theory of one solution for all the needs of the people (I mean one people) did not work. I am therefore pessimistic that it could work in a free society.

People (I mean the plural now) want to move around: whenever they want and wherever they want. Public transport can answer their needs in many cases, but surely not in all. There should therefore be options, and the options must be economically sustainable.

This means, for example, that when there is a need for something more than half of a bus at some period during the day, there should be a bus (or a minibus). But it also means that where a bus regularly has no more than 3 or 4 passengers we should think of another solution – a taxi perhaps – since in such circumstances public transport wastes public money, while inhibiting the necessary cost-cutting initiative.

People were accustomed to using public transport during the communist regime. They used it everyday, most travelling by bus, a minority using the trains, and all taking advantage of the extensive system of urban transport. But whenever they could, people preferred to travel in their own cars. The fall of communism did not change this trend.

During the first years of freedom people frequently travelled abroad, very modestly, with little money but with understandable interest and enthusiasm. Many have since acquired a new habit of going to Spain, Italy, Greece, or Turkey, while others have returned to their former routing of vacations in Croatia. And after several years of *Wanderlust* many have returned to their old *chaty*, where they can be close to nature and near their friends for little cost and without all the trouble of travelling.

They cannot give up their cars and, although not everyone has a better model in these days of increasing prosperity, almost everyone has a car of some kind. The Czechs still use public transport if necessary; but the total number of those doing so is constantly decreasing. This in turn leads to a fall in the size of public services, which in turn causes a decrease in the number of passengers: a well-known vicious circle.

### **Beyond ideology and nostalgia**

This brings me to the railways. The state subsidy per passenger is about 20 to 40 times higher on the trains than on the buses (no mistake here – though the average train journey is about twice the distance of the average journey by bus). This is not surprising at all; roads have to be maintained in any case, whereas the rail track is a one-purpose device, and a very expensive one.

The leader of the Czech railway workers' union, Jaromir Dusek, has estimated that regional railroads (I would rather say local ones in view of the European dimension to our decision-making) require investment to the tune of 8 billion *koruna* (some \$200 million). This compares with a total state subsidy to public bus transport of some 2 billion *koruna* per year. So a comparable investment in the bus sector would bring a public transport system meeting all reasonable requirements, and would bring it to all the inhabitants, not merely to the 10% that are lucky enough to live near a railway station.

I say this not out of any hostility to the railways. On the contrary I am nostalgic and I very much enjoy the old-world feeling that you experience when travelling by rail – and especially the atmosphere of the small Czech railway stations, which still radiate some of the dignity and discipline of the Habsburg public services. But when deciding important economical (and ecological) questions, one cannot afford to be guided by nostalgia.

Railways have their importance whenever the flow of people or freight (or both) is so large that it can justify the expense of the track – which inevitably means the main tracks and the suburban networks. But to serve the different and individual needs of people in small villages, buses or minibuses are surely the most appropriate means of public transport. Using these makes the public network much more flexible, more user-friendly and cheaper.

Hence the decision-making on regional transport in our country is now being transferred to the newly established regions. It is up to them to use the money as they think fit. They are to acquire their transport services through public tender – he who provides the best and the most suitable service wins. No one will decide between rail or bus in advance, and certainly not on ideological grounds. We know that decisions made on ideological grounds are wasteful at best, and generally oppressive.

### **Which route shall we take?**

My conclusion from the Czech experience is that public transport cannot be imposed on people against their will. Only a flexible public transport system providing a high standard of services

can persuade people to take this option. But it must be economically proportionate to the need, otherwise it will eventually kill the idea of public transport altogether.

Rail must surely form an important part of such a system, but only in cases where the investment can be justified. The fate of the old local railways must therefore be decided case by case by local authorities and industry. We must get used to the idea that many of these tracks will eventually not survive, and that in any event many transport needs will not be publicly provided for, so that cars will remain the only option.

The way to protect the environment is by technical improvements aimed at lowering fuel consumption, and by a good road infrastructure, but not by a ban on cars. Even the communists dared not impose such a ban on their people, and no-one can say that they were reluctant to ban things.

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