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Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

## UPTAKE ARTICLE

# ESPON Peer Learning Workshop on Sustainable Transport Infrastructure in the Strategic Urban Region Eurodelta (STISE)

Virtual

27 April 13:30-17:30 (CEST)



## Introduction



The Centre for Mobility and Spatial Planning of the Ghent University (AMRP-UGent) organised a Peer Learning Workshop (PLW) on the 27th of April 2022, in the frame of the ESPON-TNO programme 2020-2022, to present key conclusions of the STISE (Sustainable Transport Infrastructure in the Strategic Urban Region Eurodelta) project.

The STISE project was set up by several public authorities and stakeholders within the Strategic Urban Region of the Eurodelta (SURE) to address the complicated problem of implementing sustainable transport infrastructure. The project elaborated a strategic policy roadmap focusing on four main policy measures: the aviation shift on short- to midrange distances, the installation of Zero Emission Zones (ZEZ) in all major cities (> 100,000 inhabitants), improvements of cross-border public train transport, and an integrated approach on Mobility as a Service (MaaS). After a first introductory session presenting the ESPON consortium and the general findings of the STISE project, this PLW delved into the first two policy measures, the aviation shift and the installation of ZEZ, in two separate sessions. The workshop concluded with exchanges and reflections of the Belgian policymakers from the involved Belgian governments and EU administration: Brussels Mobility, the Flemish department of Mobility and Public Works, the Belgian Civil Aviation Authority, and the Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport of the European Commission (DG MOVE).

A maximum number of 49 attendees were present during the event (out of 52 registered). The largest part came from Belgium (31) followed by Luxembourg (5) and Poland (5). 21 attendees identified themselves as policymakers of which 13 operate at the regional level, 4 at the national level, 5 at the local level, and 1 at European level. The other profiles of the attendees were academics (12), from the private sector (11), or identified as “others” (7). The post-event survey gathered 7 answers (as of the 6th of May 2022). The average satisfaction rate was quite satisfied (4 on a scale from 1 to 5). The event was complimented especially for the roundtable session including the discussion with some key stakeholders. In addition, the emphasis on policy recommendations and implementation was praised. One attendee thought it was unfortunate that not all of the key stakeholders were present (e.g. railway and environmental institutes) and another attendee thought the event was too long and the audience too passive.

## Summary

**The event began** with a welcome word from Prof. Luuk Boelens (AMRP-UGent), the organiser of the event, followed by Dr. Wiktor Szydarowski, director of the ESPON EGTC. Dr. Szydarowski presented his enthusiasm for the event, which is key topic in territorial governance and in ensuring the sustainability of European activities in the frame of the Green Deal. He shortly presented the main objectives of ESPON which focuses strongly on the participation and exchanges between local and regional key stakeholders on wide sets of societal issues. He warmly invited current attendees to contact ESPON to present their needs in terms of territorial assessment. This was followed by Stefanie Van Den Bogaerde, Senior Policy Consultant at Tractebel. Van Den Bogaerde presented the STISE project and its overall methodology and main take-aways. The STISE project focuses on the Eurodelta that encompasses the Randstad, Belgian Regions, the Nord Pas de Calais, and the Ruhr and Rhineland. The Eurodelta is a very particular region in the EU as its corners can be reached within 3 hours travel. This particularity, in combination with its high population density and high economic activity, makes it an international hub of great importance at the European level. In order to explore the possible scenarios for a sustainable transport transition in that region, the STISE project focused on the four policy measures mentioned above. The first measure (implying the shift of aviation transport under 500 km to high speed train services (HST)), would have a major impact on the CO2 emissions, the noise reduction, give a boost to HST, and could also lead to a shift from car to train. The second measure (implying the installation of ZEZ in all major SURE cities) would have high environmental benefits but requires targeted accompanying measures in order to tackle the negative economic and social impact for specific population groups and economic actors. The third measure (regarding the potential of MaaS) indicates that the potential of MaaS is largely uncertain as it is highly dependent

public policies and the necessary investments in physical and digital infrastructure. The last measure (regarding the improvement of regional cross-border public train transport) concluded that there was sufficient demand to operate profitable rail services in several cross-border corridors in the SURE area. However, this shift requires cross-border connections that are well-integrated in national rail and bus services. In conclusion, the SURE-region can be an interesting and promising pilot area for implementation of ambitious policies and concepts given its location, the challenges and the motivation of many stakeholders.

**The second and third sessions** were moderated by Tom Goosse, researcher at the AMRP-UGent. The second session delved more specifically into the first policy measure of the STISE project and began with a presentation from Prof. Luuk Boelens. The study indicates that the difference in travel time for air and train travels between Eurodelta cities and other close and midrange cities (< 700 km) varies greatly. Depending on the departure and destination city, flight travels can be faster by up to 350 minutes (e.g. from Amsterdam to Billund) or, in other cases, train travels can be faster by up to 255 minutes (e.g. from Brussels to Birmingham). These variations are determined by the existing infrastructure, the available services and the partnerships between railway and flight operators. Overall, it was concluded that, with an enhanced HST service, the travel time could remain more or less the same in selected city pairs. Within these pairs an aviation ban for travels under 500 km would imply an increase in frequency of HST travel up to 4 times more than today. But it would also mean that several infrastructural bottlenecks should be cleared up, which would require an investment of up to 30 billion euros. This would also require a better collaboration between train and aviation operators to enhance the logistics of train-plane transfers and vice versa. The step-by-step policy road map of the STISE proposes to first reinstate the Open Skies agreement by the European Commission, to appoint an ambassador of the aviation-HST shift, to assign the respective national authorities for additional rules to decrease gradually short- and midrange aviation slots, to discuss with the Airport Operators how to implement this shift in a long-term strategy, to discuss with the national rail infrastructure providers how to implement and finance the first package of infrastructure amendments until 2030, and finally to start supporting studies to enhance and upgrade the HST network.

This presentation was followed by reflections of Léon Verhallen, Director of the Aviation development Brussels Airport. He supports the transition of flights under 500 km to HST services. However, while Brussels Airport was the first airport to have its own railway station, the HST link Amsterdam-Brussels-Paris ends 2km away from the airport. This is regarded as a historic error, due to the expected cost of installation, that excluded the Brussels Airport from HST links. This has led to a situation where the connectivity of the airport is lagging behind compared to other airports and consequently has a negative impact on the competitive position of the Brussels Airport. While the airport does not request new tracks, the position of Brussels Airport therefore demonstrates the importance of optimising the current tracks and rerouting them via Brussels Airport.

**The third session** started with a presentation of Pierre Van Den Leemput, project manager at Tractebel, presenting the targeted analysis regarding Zero Emission Zones (ZEZ) in all major cities in the SURE area. The main objective of the STISE project in that regard was to explore the potential of implementing harmonised criteria of ZEZs. One of the main challenges lies in the diversification of standards regarding ZEZ. The harmonisation would thus facilitate the elaboration of a common policy agenda and a realistic time horizon to align the ZEZs. The implementation of ZEZs would have a possible environmental impact with a significant reduction of air pollution in the major cities of the SURE-area and a major contribution to CO2 reduction (averaging 3% of the overall CO2 ambitions of the Green Deal by 2030 for only 1% of its soil). However, it is expected to have a limited impact on the modal shift and on the number of kilometres performed per vehicle. Its main impact would be to instigate a “motor shift” from fossil fuel cars to electric vehicles.

Following this, Laurent Willaert, representing the Belgian and Luxembourg Federation of Automobile and Motorcycle (Febiac), shared his reflection. According to Febiac, the harmonisation of ZEZs is essential as too many standards exist in Europe, which ultimately undermines the citizens' trust. The main objective should be to shift the existing fleet and decarbonise it rapidly. However, based on a Febiac analysis, such a shift would be the most challenging for private cars (contrary to company cars), which could make ZEZ measures highly divisive, discriminatory, and anti-social. Another challenging aspect implies an infrastructural shift for non-fossil fuel vehicles, that needs to be dealt with credible policies in order to achieve credible objectives.

The STISE project's four policy measures alongside the previous two sessions were then discussed between Christophe Vanoerbeek (General Director of Brussels Mobility), Filip Boelaert (Secretary General of the Flemish Department for Mobility and Public Works), Koen Millis (General Director the Belgian Civil Aviation Authority), and Jan Steinkohl (DG MOVE) in a roundtable format.

From the perspective of Brussels Mobility as an urban public institute, the ZEZs and MaaS are the most important measures that first and foremost require a very clear regulatory framework for implementation. The role of Brussels Mobility in that endeavour could be to encourage competitiveness and to facilitate other stakeholders in reaching certain objectives. Brussels Mobility has made progress by developing a database to instigate exchanges between key stakeholders. Moreover, a Low Emission Zone (LEZ) has been established in Brussels since 2018, a diesel ban will be put in place by 2025, and a ZEZ is planned for 2035. In the meantime, a bonus is offered for citizens who get rid of their car. The main issue according to Brussels Mobility is indeed the harmonisation of standards between cities in order to enhance a level playing field. In support, a densification of the frequency of HST between cities might also be a very interesting endeavour but requires high infrastructural investments.

According to Filip Boelaert, the ZEZ is mandatory after seeing its impacts and underlined the importance of harmonising the standards. The aviation shift and promotion of HST are also worth the investment. On the other hand, as Luuk Boelens pointed out, the establishment of ZEZ will require the replacement of the existing car fleet by electric vehicles and consequently highlighted the insufficient resources for the construction of car batteries to achieve this. To answer this challenge, the enhancement of public transport services (Filip Boelaert), the promotion of shared vehicles (Christophe Vanoerbeek), and the focus on innovation (Laurent Willaert) were presented as complementary solutions.

Koen Millis argued afterwards that even if the ban of plane travels under 500 km only represented 3.8% of CO2 emissions, this step was inevitable for the future of sustainable transportation. In that context, connections between different types of transport are very important and a new perspective of combined railway and aviation services should be adopted rather than the existing "train vs plane" perspective. In order to achieve this, Filip Boelaert put forward the importance of implementing integrated services by, for instance, facilitating luggage connections between the different modes of transportation.

Jan Steinkohl, as representative of the European Commission DG MOVE, reminded the participants that the greening of transport was essential against climate change but also requires the independence of the EU on resources. In that sense, the Green Deal remains the main strategy of the EU.

In the **conclusive exchanges**, Luuk Boelens asked each keynote reflector to present one main take-away for how to move forward. Jan Steinkohl expressed the potential financial support of DG MOVE for regional projects that would deliver proof of best practices and would follow the rules set by the European Commission. Filip Boelaert argued that not only the public authorities, but also the other reflectors, as regional actors, are responsible for implementation next to potential funds from the European Commission. Therefore, a next step would be to present the findings delivered by the STISE project to the politicians. An important point of attention brought forward by Luuk Boelens and confirmed by Jan Steinkohl, was the need for societal support in such changes in order to have the essential democratic legitimacy. Koen Millis underlined, once again, the necessity of integrated practices and thus, invited the present stakeholders to join forces.

## Conclusion

The PLW on the STISE project gathered interesting views and reflections from key stakeholders. On a downside, other key stakeholders, such as some environmental institutes or railway companies, could not be present at the event, which was ultimately detrimental to producing integral take-aways for the event. This was expressed in the post-event evaluation by one of the attendees. Nevertheless, another attendee deemed the level of participation to be successful taken into account previous experiences.

The main conclusions of the event were:

1. The ZEZ and MaaS analysis have indicated that these two topics can be seen as two sides of the same coin (due to the issue of resources for the new non-fossil fuel vehicles) and should thus be combined in policy recommendations. Regarding these two topics, it was commonly agreed that the first subsequent step was **to harmonise the ZEZ standards amongst the major SURE cities, together with the MaaS incentives.**
2. In that regard, the implementation of ZEZ could create incentives for electric vehicles. However, studies have pointed to the risk for **unequal distribution of electric vehicles between private and company cars**, the latter having a competitive advantage in applying the shift from fuel to electric cars. Moreover, **the lack of resources** to replace the entire car fleet was also put forward, which also might instigate social inequality. Without given concrete examples, innovation was brought forward to potentially and partly offer solutions to this issue.
3. Therefore, the importance of developing the public transport services, train connections and shared electric vehicles services was further underlined.
4. Finally, the cross-border rail services were hardly discussed in the meeting because of their minor impact on the overall ambitions. However, they could of course be of major importance for the respective regions.



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#### **ESPON 2022**

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