New mobility concepts for rural areas

Lessons learnt in the European cooperation project "Peripheral Access"

Interreg, Rural areas, Mobility, Public transport, Europe, Cooperation

European border regions, peri-urban and rural areas suffer from an undersupply of adequate local public transport. The consequences are manifold: high individual traffic, air pollution and reduced mobility for disadvantaged groups. Numerous initiatives, including transnational European cooperation projects, are developing and testing solutions for this at the local level. When applied consistently and expanded further, they can achieve great success on a small scale – if political support is available. The partners in the EU project Peripheral Access have approached this in different ways.

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How can rural and remote regions in Central Europe become better connected to public transport? Peripheral Access[1] has been working on this issue for the past three years under the leadership of the German Association for Housing, Urban and Spatial Development (Deutscher Verband für Wohnungswesen, Städtebau und Raumordnung e. V.). The project was supported by the Interreg B programme "Central Europe". Thematically, the project focus was on the support of intermodality and infrastructure in the participating regions, the use of intelligent communication technologies and innovative cooperation and marketing approaches.

As the project came to an end in May 2020, the nine partners from Slovenia, Italy, Austria, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Germany presented the results of their local pilot activities[2]. The measures range from the improvement of existing transport systems to the complete redevelopment of previously unserved areas. All "peripheral" categories are represented among the participating regions: border regions, suburban regions and rural areas.

In a detailed evaluation report[3] the partners assessed the project as a whole with regard to the thematic priorities and at the same time analysed the processes and results of the individual pilot projects. Based on this, they developed further political recommendations for action. With these two levels, the report should help disseminate the project results and thus make it easier for other regions and municipalities to implement similar measures.

Transfer point set up outside Graz in Austria

Among the innovations established by the regions during the project period is the establishment of a transfer point between different modes of transport ("multimodal node") in the area surrounding the Austrian city of Graz. The project partner Regional Management Metropolitan Area of Styria (Regionalmanagement Steirischer Zentralraum) transferred the "tim" system, which has already been successfully established in inner city locations and combines car sharing of e-vehicles with parking facilities, taxi stands and bike sharing, to the nearby municipality of Hart bei Graz. There, it was further developed as "Regiotim" and adapted to local requirements. In addition to a charging station and the purchase of an e-car, the regional management installed covered bicycle parking and storage facilities (see *figure 1*).

The area around a public bus stop in the centre of Hart bei Graz was converted into an attractive multimodal hub. The measures are intended to contribute to reducing the dependence of citizens on their own cars in the long term. The first "Regiotim" node also marks the beginning of an expansion of the system to the entire region. The pilot project provided valuable know-how regard-

Figure 1: "Regiotim" in Hart near Graz, Austria. Source: Verkehrplus

Figure 2: "Floorgraphic" as part of the marketing measures in the Vogtland region
Source: Verkehrsverbund Vogtland

ing equipment and technical implementation. The additional locations envisaged will be able to benefit directly from this knowledge.

Vogtland region wants to attract more passengers to the Elster Valley Railway Line

The authority for local public transport Vogtland (Verkehrsverbund Vogtland) had set itself the goal of better marketing the Elster Valley Railway Line, which is particularly attractive for tourists and runs from Thuringia via Saxony in Germany to the Czech town of Cheb, and to make better use of passenger capacities through leisure traffic. To this end, the project partner commissioned a trilingual tourist guidance system with various information options. The framework of the guidance system is the story of the giant "Voglar". Travellers will find his footprints in the form of floor stickers at selected platforms and other points along the route (*figure 2*). Interested parties scan the QR codes depicted on the footprints with a mobile device to learn more about local tourist attractions or to access timetables and other information. The offer is supplemented by an augmented reality app, which introduces visitors to the imaginary "World of the Giant Voglar".

The project partner first conducted surveys on user requirements and carried out test rides with focus groups. The results led to a mixture of static and digital solutions and helped to optimise the marketing approach. The transport authority hopes that this will lead to an increase in the number of journeys in the medium term. Since the guidance system is managed via a central website and additional footprint stickers with QR codes can be positioned cost-effectively and easily, it can be extended to the entire transport network if required. However, this is connected with high financial investments which cannot be covered by the surrounding communities – this would have to be enabled by follow-up projects or other support measures.

Call a Smartbus for a ride through the Trieste region

The aim of the pilot project in the Italian region Friuli-Venezia Giulia was to improve the accessibility of the sparsely populated karst plateau north of the city of Trieste on the border with Slovenia. The local transport company Trieste Trasporti developed an innovative on-demand service: with the support of Venice International University VIU, they tested the "Smartbus" for several months as a supplement to regular bus services (*figure 3*). Two vehicles on two routes operated daily between 9:00 and 21:00 as booked by passengers. The service administration ran on an IT platform installed specifically for the pilot. One bus served a route with 68 stops, the other even covered 199 stops. Newspaper articles, funny YouTube videos and other activities were used to present the service to the public.

The experiences in the Veneto region highlight the importance of a proactive, coordinating role of the public sector. It also became clear that, despite existing synergies, the current legal framework for cross-border public transport between Italy and Slovenia remains subject to many restrictions. The catchment areas of central towns in border regions usually extend to several countries. Therefore, there is still a lot of potential to create suitable mobility offers for visitors and commuters alike and thus also for reducing emissions from individual transport.

Diverse package of measures in the South Moravian border region

The main objective of the Czech pilot activities was to improve public transport in peripheral areas in a sustainable way – for daily commuters and for tourists. The project partner Kordis JKM, coordinator of the integrated transport system of the South Moravian region, therefore focused on the introduction of new bus services with bicycle transport ("Cyclobus", see *figure 4*) as well as cross-border transport services for tourists. Extensive public relations work with information stands, flyers, special train rides and many other activities supported the pilot projects.

The measures are already having an effect: new seasonal bus connections from the centre of the Brno region to the Podyjí/Thaya Valley National Park as well as other year-round cross-border bus services have been set up and were very well received. Moreover, the long-standing efforts for South Moravian tickets to be recognised on trains between Znojmo in the Czech Republic and Retz in Austria have finally been successful. Regularly and extensively involving the population was crucial for these results, as the locals know most about the actual transport needs in the region.

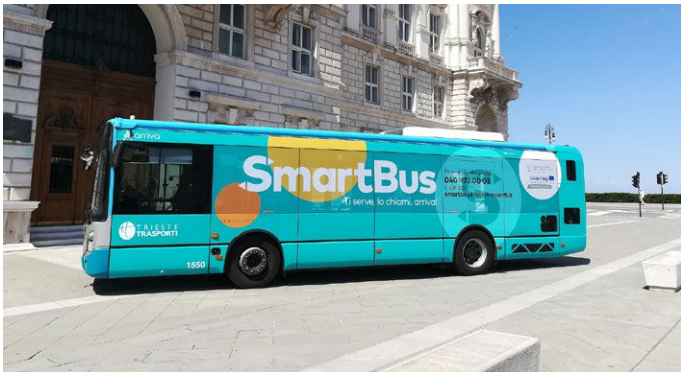

Figure 3: The "Smartbus" as an innovative on-demand service in Trieste, Italy
Source: Trieste Trasporti

Figure 4: The "Cyclobus" takes cyclists to their destination in the South Moravian border region (CZ/AT)
Source: Kordis JMK

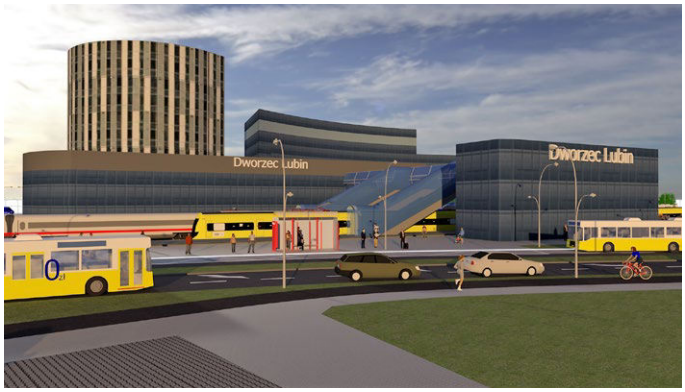

Figure 5: Rendering of the planned transport interchange in Lubin, Poland
Source: Powiat Lubiński

Figure 6: "Road Safety Day" in the city of Balassagyarmat, Hungary
Source: KTI Közlekedéstudományi Intézet Nonprofit Korlátolt Felelősségű Társaság

Big plans for the Polish region of Lubin

In the Polish municipality of Lubin, the largest transport hub in the district is to be built in the near future, linking local, national and international means of transport. Implementation will cost around 95 million euros and will take several years. Within the framework of Peripheral Access, the Powiat Lubiński (district administration of Lubin) developed the first concept for this transport hub and carried out marketing measures and a multi-channel participation process alongside each other. Design guidelines for the construction of a necessary tunnel were developed, which form the basis for the subsequent financing of railway infrastructure (*figure 5*).

After completing this phase, a very stable economic and political situation and good cooperation on many levels are necessary for the ongoing progress of the project. With its broad-based citizen participation, the administration saw great interest and acceptance for the project in the region. It therefore hopes that the plans once adopted will also be continued by future political successors and the institutions and companies involved.

Implementation of regional action plans in Slovenia and Hungary

Some partners from Slovenia and Hungary, who did not carry out their own pilot projects, implemented other measures instead. These were identified, among other ideas, in a status quo analysis and an action plan during the first phase of the cooperation project.

For example, the regional development agency of the Ljubljana region (RRA LUR Regionalna razvojna agencija Ljubljanske urbane regije) selected the most suitable option after evaluating possible on-demand services: In areas without public transport, a taxi or bus is offered to take passengers to the nearest railway station. In cooperation with Ljubljana passenger transport and the municipality of the suburban municipality of Škofljica, this offer was tested with e-cars.

The city of Balassagyarmat, Hungary, has set itself the long-term goals of offering a better passenger transport service and creating a network of cycle paths. As an accompanying measure, the project partner KTI Institute of Transport Sciences (KTI Közlekedéstudományi Intézet Nonprofit Korlátolt Felelősségű Társaság) organised a "Road Safety Day" as part of Peripheral Access. During this event, local residents, especially school children, were informed about ongoing cycling projects and were able to increase their knowledge of road traffic regulations with the future cycling infrastructure in mind (*figure 6*).

Major challenges remain for peripheral areas

Peripheral Access has shown that pilot projects can produce innovative ideas and that urban solutions can be transferred to the surrounding area – if they are carefully adapted to the respective environment. All partner regions have achieved improvements in rural public transport. However, the pilot examples also clearly highlight the deficits that still exist: Many peripheral areas in Europe are still not adequately connected to public transport. This is not only a technical challenge: rather, strong political and financial support, for example for new cross-border public transport systems, is needed, especially at EU level. Otherwise, regions and countries will continue to give priority to internal transport connections within their own countries, thus further encouraging the departure of young qualified people from border regions. Peripheral Access shows: Innovative mobility solutions have also only partially found their way into suburban and rural areas. However, local stakeholders need to show more initiative and courage to trial and provide such complementary systems.

Political commitment and additional financial resources required

Good solutions for attractive mobility offers in rural areas are not available for free. This requires more than just pilot projects: It requires a clear commitment to local public transport. Sufficient financial resources must be made available for this at national and EU level. Against the background of the current discussion on air quality, public transport is increasingly being seen again as the most effective and environmentally friendly means of transporting large numbers of people compared to private cars. But the focus of strategies and investments is often too much on urban agglomerations. More needs to be done at all levels of government to ensure that such successful pilot projects can be widely disseminated and that appropriate rural strategies are put in place that provide long-term guidance and facilitate cooperation. ■

1 Further information is available on the project homepage: www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/Peripheral-Access.html

2 The partner organisations as well as the project results are presented in a series of "factsheets" and are available at the following link: www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/Press-and-Communication-Kit-Fact-Sheets.zip

3 The evaluation report is available at the following link: www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/Peripheral-Access-Evaluation-report-w-cover.pdf

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