

1. Crossed Perspectives



Traveling without ticket?

Between Jean-Louis Sagot-Duvaurox (Essayiste - dramaturge)
And Allan Alaküla (Directeur du bureau de Tallinn pour l'Union européenne)

25 April 2014

Despite being 3,000 kilometres apart, a French intellectual and a representative of the Tallinn European Union Office come together to discuss a question which both believe to be crucial for the future: the need for free public transport.

01. What are the implications of providing free public transport -both for passengers and public authorities? To what extent would it be preferable to have differentiated ticket pricing, so as to cater for the poorest in society?



Jean-Louis Sagot-Duvaouroux

The challenges are numerous. If you want to increase the usage of public transport – there isn't a more effective way of doing so than by providing free travel, not by a long way. If you are worried about uncivil behaviour, removing all the ticket inspections and the fraudulent use of public transport goes a long way to making people feel relaxed about being in each other's presence. If you are worried about air quality, a significant number of car journeys can be avoided, and if household spending is a concern, it's something that can be helped by the savings made on transport costs.

You are not sure that a market-based provision of transport is the end of the story. And a wholly convincing argument confirms your doubts about this. Is free travel preferable to 'social' pricing? I believe so. The progressive nature of taxation is there to establish a degree of social solidarity. But we need spaces where equality reigns – where the solicitor and the unemployed person are treated, recognised and respected equally; not according to what they have, but because of who they are: i.e. citizens, human beings.



A. A

Public transport (PT) is already heavily, usually well above 50%, subsidised in most EU cities and the regions. Most vulnerable groups already often enjoy free or almost free ride – under school age, pupils, students, retired, unemployed, big families etc. However, regardless of existing enormous subsidies the high ticket cost in PT remains major concern for Europeans according to Eurobarometer special survey (Dec, 2013). One way out from this vicious circle is free public transport. Increasing social cohesion is definitely strong side-effect of free PT, however it is almost impossible to express its value in euros. Previous image of PT being predominantly for youth, retired and female is already changing in Tallinn and appearance of working age males in the public transport indicates remarkable shift in the hearts and minds.



Allan Alaküla

Main reasons for providing free public transport (FPT) for Tallinn residents are social, economical and environmental. FPT provides mobility for all, thus increasing social cohesion. FPT stimulates consumption of local goods and services, thus supporting local economy and creating jobs. FPT in complex with other measures prioritising usage of public transport (improving the service quality,

expanding dedicated bus lanes, raising parking tariffs) brings modal shift – less car traffic, CO2, noise and air pollution and more space for light traffic and pedestrians in the city.



J. S

A city of more than 400,000 people, a European Union capital at that, has managed it. And there, as elsewhere, the 'free' effect has made itself felt. The explanations given by Allan Alaküla make it clear that moving away from a market-based world of public transport is actually a systemic change – and one that affects the urban, social and environmental balance.

All the constraints of the old system have disappeared. Effects that previously could only be achieved in a marginal way, courtesy of ruinously expensive communication campaigns, are now simply 'the way things are'.

02. How should free transport be financed? What justification is there for it to be publicly funded?



Jean-Louis Sagot-Duvaouroux

Each of us has a public life and a private life, and they are based on different rules. Free travel provides both the freedom and equality of access that are typical of the public space. Roads are largely free. Street lighting, public parks and schools are all free. Yet they all come at a price, as everyone is aware.

We cannot have a society without 'public places'. We cannot really claim a right to healthcare or to education without freeing the access to such benefits from the laws of the market. Whether I have money or whether I don't, I'm still entitled to be cared for and to be educated. That's what justifies the same notion of solidarity in funding terms, for example in the form of state funding.



A. A

Free internet access i.e. free movement of information also is widely recognised as public amenity. However it is evident that specially in the beginning not all social groups can use it equally. In fact justification is required for the PT subsidies which still do not satisfy too many needs of too many people.



Allan Alaküla

In Tallinn the cost of FPT is mostly covered from the increase of the number of taxpayers – official population has grown by 14 000 residents since the beginning of 2012. Annual total cost of FPT is in Tallinn 12 million euros and every 1 000 new residents bring to the city budget annually at least 1 million euros.

Stimulating the growth of the taxpayers numbers has been also one reason for providing substantial discounts for local residents in public transport also in Riga and Warsaw.

Eurobarometer from December 2013 indicates that lower price for public transport is seen by Europeans as the most important measure for improving urban mobility. In the countries where subsidy level of public transport exceeds 50% there is need to justify that public spending while many needs of the people are still not satisfied due to the ticket price. One way out from that vicious circle is shift to FPT.



J. S

As Allan Alaküla explains, free transport in Tallinn draws on the demographic dynamics of the Estonian capital – which provide the necessary resources for free transport. He also reminds us that the utopia of free transport has to be grounded in local practicalities. It's probably not possible to introduce it everywhere, immediately. At the same time, it should not be simply dismissed as something incongruous.

I like the way Allan turns the cost question around: paid-for transport involves costs and does not solve problems; free transport also has a cost, but meets people's needs!

03. What are the lessons to be learnt from the experiments to date in free public transport (Aubagne, Tallinn, Chengdu etc)? Are there any limits as to how far free transport can be scaled up – to major metropolitan, regional or national levels?



Jean-Louis Sagot-Duvaouroux

The first lesson is a very simple one: it's possible, and it works. The second one is that, contrary to today's overpowering dogma, we can indeed allow ourselves the freedom to invent a form of distribution of benefits that is not market-based – but is instead according to people's needs, and not the size of their bank account. The third lesson is that we know how to use this. Greed and personal interest are not the only effective ways of motivating people.

Is it possible everywhere? There can be technical questions to be resolved, at least in the short term. Would it be right to significantly increase the use of the Paris region's RER train network, when those trains are already packed? My suggestion is that transport should be free, right now, for everyone aged under 25. Let our children travel around, worry-free. They will, after all, be paying for our retirement.

Let's pay for their right to live in their own towns and cities. I also think that tension will ease as a result. Racism, which is so often a feature of ticket inspection, would be reduced. And every one of us would feel better!



A. A

Tallinn's case testifies that free public transport works well and it really makes good for social development, local economy and environment.

Recent 3-days trial of free public transport in Paris was the fine step in the right direction. I would just hope that the human rationale would prevail also in the world metropolises without the dust and smog emergency.



Allan Alaküla

Main lesson in Tallinn is, that has worked well since 01.01.2013 in every respect and it can sustain.

While maintaining and improving the service quality remain important the ticket price is still of the decisive importance. National passenger train company started operating brand new train fleet (since July 2012) with no implications to the passenger number, until it was made free inside Tallinn city limits for the residents – after becoming free in October 2013 passenger number tripled immediately.

Success in Tallinn prepares the possibility of expansion FPT to the region surrounding the city and for considering implementation of FPT nationwide.

Tallinn is so far the biggest city providing FPT to the residents. But it may well change. Recent emergency air situation in Paris was treated among other measures also with providing free public transport during 3 days.



J. S

In the numerous debates on the subject of free public transport, I'm frequently troubled by the persistence of hostile arguments that are "pulverised" by the facts. The experience of Tallinn shows that it is increasingly difficult to sustain these hostile arguments. It may be legitimate to prefer market-based access to free access, but it's totally false to pretend that improving the service provided is the key to increasing transport usage.

And thank you for the nod to the Paris regional authorities. Providing three days of free transport in Paris for environmental reasons – without the world actually coming to an end – is surely food for thought, is it not?



Jean-Louis Sagot-Duvauroux

Essayiste - dramaturge

Jean-Louis Sagot-Duvauroux, an essayist, has written widely on the subject of free transport, including "Pour la gratuité" (1995, second edition published in 2006 by Éditions de l'Éclat) and "Voyageurs sans ticket" with Magali Giovannangeli (2012, published by Au diable Vauvert). He is also a founder of Malian theatre company BlonBa, for which he has written a dozen plays.



Allan Alaküla

Directeur du bureau de Tallinn pour l'Union européenne

Allan Alaküla is Head of the Tallinn European Union Office in Brussels, chair of Tallinn Television's supervisory board and a member of the Tallinn Development and Training Centre's supervisory board. Apart from general communication roles, he is closely involved with the development and promotion of Tallinn's e-services and free public transport project.

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