

SPEECH
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Members of the European Passenger Federation,
Colleagues, Friends, Members of the European Parliament and European commission,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour for me to have the opportunity to address this meeting of the European Passenger Federation. We all know that the Flemish BTTB stood at the cradle of this new-born passenger organisation and was one of the “founding fathers” (or founding mothers) of the EPF. This makes me feel proud and happy.

Without a shadow of a doubt, passenger rights in public transport will become one of the hottest topics for public debate and policy making during the years to come.

In the five minutes I have been allotted, I would like to present you a brief overview of what the Flemish Government and its external autonomous PT agency VVM De Lijn have already achieved in the field of improving passenger rights.

PT as an essential service of general (economic) interest

European legislation on the organisation of public transport activities has for a long time focussed almost exclusively on competition aspects, promoting competitive tendering as a miracle solution for improving quality standards, while largely neglecting the social cohesion dimensions of public transport, namely, its identity as one of the most essential services of general interest.

The recent Commission proposal for a regulation on public transport services COM(2005)319, launched on the 20th July 2005, is actually the subject of heated debates in the transport council under Austrian Presidency. For the first time in history, this regulation recognises explicitly that PT is a SERVICE OF GENERAL INTEREST with an economic dimension, the importance of which has to be determined by member states and competent authorities.

This overt recognition that it is unthinkable to deliver high quality PT on a purely commercial basis constitutes a big leap forward in the legislative framework on a European level.

Generally speaking, most passengers using public transport facilities are not in the least concerned with organisational aspects. Whether their bus/tram operator is publicly or privately owned, whether the PT contract has been awarded directly or after a competitive tendering procedure, most passengers could not care less.

The real priorities of PT users are of a totally different nature: availability of PT, even in sparsely populated, remote rural areas, accessibility for persons with reduced mobility, affordability for the less well-off, continuity of services, even late at night or early in the morning, minimal service during strikes, punctuality, reliability, safety and security ...

While the new commission proposal for a regulation confirms the status of PT as a SGI, at least in theory, it does absolutely nothing to translate this into concrete requirements.

In other liberalised sectors such as, telecommunications, electricity and gas, minimal Universal Service Obligations have been imposed to safeguard elementary consumer rights in sectors where competition has been unleashed.

Since COM(2005)319 undoubtedly intends to liberate the market potential of public transport and foster competition, one could legitimately wonder why no such “universal service obligations” have been defined for public transport.

It would at least have provided some guarantees for customers that even in PT markets, dominated by private, commercial operators, minimal passenger rights would be respected.

Anticipating future European legislation, Flanders has elaborated its hugely successful scheme of universal basic mobility, guaranteeing a minimum offer of public transport in even the most remote rural areas. By the end of this year, basic mobility will have been implemented in 90% of the 308 Flemish municipalities.

We think that this basic mobility scheme is quite unique in Europe. Its originality consists in the fact that each Flemish citizen living in a residential area, is empowered to enforce De Lijn to provide a minimum package of mobility services in regions that have been labelled “ basically mobile”.

In those “basic mobile” municipalities, citizens have the inalienable right to call a taxi and hand down the taxi bill to De Lijn, if the PT operator does not provide regular public transport solutions or, at the very least, some basic form of PT on demand.

Basic mobility as it is practised in Flanders is impossible to understand within a purely commercial, market-driven logic. Other non-commercial aspects such as the promotion of social cohesion, the fight against “mobility poverty”, bringing public transport to isolated populations in rural areas are largely predominant.

Although it should be said that basic mobility also enhances the attraction of regular PT, since it functions as a “feeder” to these regular lines.

Summarising, we hope that the passengers appreciate our efforts in the field of basic mobility.

What’s more, we hope that the Flemish experiment promoting basic mobility will become a source of inspiration for other organising authorities, PT companies, and, who knows, perhaps even for the European commission.

Increasing commercial speed : a major challenge

Lack of punctuality and low (average) commercial speed, are among the main sources of discontent and complaints from our customers. Insufficient punctuality is one of the reasons why professionally active people actually distrust PT, stigmatising PT as being highly “unreliable” and thus not a serious alternative to using their comfortable company car or their private car.

Recently, we have tackled this problem from various angles.

We pressed for adaptations of road infrastructure, and demanded more dedicated bus and tram lanes and influencing of traffic lights. During the last years, an inventory has identified a blacklist of congestion points in Flanders, where our PT vehicles accumulate substantial delays.

This year, we complemented this approach by creating a dense network of presales-points, starting from the observation that on average, the sale of a ticket by a bus/tram driver on board of the vehicle takes some 15 seconds. I know that 15 seconds does not sound quite impressive, but if you multiply this modest time-span with the 30 million on board ticket sales we realised in 2004, you arrive at an astonishing total time-loss approaching 125 000 hours on an annual basis. Precious, expensive and ultimately unproductive lost time, which we try to economise by seducing our customers to purchase their tickets in supermarkets, press shops, post offices.. If we succeed in converting 70% of all ticket sales to our pre-sales network, our buses and trams will have gained 87 500 hours.. In order to increase the attraction of our pre-sales network, we increased the number of presales points from some 200 to 2500 presales points.

In order to guarantee the success of this ticketing revolution, we introduced a rather substantial price differentiation of 25% between tickets purchased on board of the vehicle and tickets bought in one of the 2500 pre-sales points.

Since this new ticketing policy has only been introduced 2 weeks ago, it is too early to evaluate objectively the impact of those measures. We remain confident, however, that streamlining ticketing operations and boosting commercial speed will ultimately result in more satisfied passengers.

Drivers as ambassadors of a customer-oriented policy.

Our drivers play a crucial role in upholding our image of a public transport company where passengers come first.

In our training programmes for drivers, we concentrate on technical topics such as “defensive driving techniques”. Defensive driving increases the ability to foresee potential traffic incidents so that drivers can anticipate and avoid potential problems. Defensive driving significantly enhances the comfort of our passengers on board of a bus or tram.

Drivers are also trained in communicative skills, enabling them to cope with all categories of passengers. Special attention goes to developing competences in assisting handicapped passengers and overcoming eventual accessibility problems.

Driving a public transport vehicle involves much more than merely mastering the technical and mechanical aspects of the vehicle: it requires a customer-oriented attitude, a listening ear, a helping hand, the ability to deliver useful information on timetables, frequencies, destinations tourist attractions nearby etc.

Last but not least, the driver should feel personally responsible for the well-being of his passengers. This is called "the duty of care".

In case things go wrong, drivers should even be able to improvise and propose practical solutions to their passengers.

Accessibility of public transport vehicles and facilities

Accessibility of PT vehicles and facilities is considered to be one of the most important aspects of our passenger-oriented approach.

VVM De Lijn closely cooperates with the "Accessibility Bureau" to make PT gradually more accessible to persons with reduced mobility. Priority areas have been identified in this field.

Since the beginning of this year, VVM De Lijn has become an active partner in the European "Urban Transport Benchmarking Project year 3", more specifically the subgroup "disabled persons in PT". January 2006, Hasselt hosted the first on-site visit of a European expert group, studying accessibility problems in concrete everyday situations. This expert group "disabled persons in PT" tries to propose practical and affordable solutions for these problems. Exchange of concrete experiences and practical knowledge among European accessibility experts will certainly become a valuable ingredient towards developing our own accessibility policy.

Flemish accessibility policy emphasises the importance of "inclusive" public transport. All efforts to make PT more accessible should not only benefit specific minority sub-groups, such as the handicapped population, but should also produce tangible advantages for other groups of passengers (parents with young children, people with heavy luggage,).

We do not shun our fair share of responsibility in making PT more accessible to the most disadvantaged groups within our society. We pledge to step up our efforts wherever action is most needed.

Honest and straightforward communication is also very important: we do not promise 100% accessibility of our entire PT network within 2 years. The sky is not the limit. But we'll make big efforts to minimise the obstacles.

Easy, open and straightforward communication with our customers

As in a happy marriage, good and open communication is the key to a lasting relationship between a public transport operator and its customers.

Significant investments have been directed towards optimising our external communication.

Real-time announcement of arrivals and departures is now gradually appearing in the streets of Flemish cities: Mechelen, Hasselt, Leuven, Antwerp (Roosevelt square), Ostend.already have those facilities.

Information on timetables, schedules, frequencies, destinations is easily accessible on the website of De Lijn www.delijn.be Our "route-planner" is a customer-friendly tool, integrating all transport modes, helping our passengers to plan their trip in a relaxed mood.

On top of our inter-active website, we should also highlight our Lijninfo, where specially trained call-center operators answer thousands of questions each day, questions on all possible aspects of public transport.

Careful analysis of incoming customer reactions provides us with valuable insights as to how our passengers perceive the quality of our services. Congratulations are always pleasant to receive, customer complaints are rigorously analysed , seeking to eliminate the source of discontent.

As a "learning organisation", we try to learn from what went wrong so that we can clean up our act in the future.

Participation of consumer organisations representing passengers, will become reality with the creation of MORA, the strategic advisory body in the mobility area. MORA will allow passengers to let their voice be heard on policy-making level.

Commuting plan (Pendelplan)

Recently, the Flemish mobility minister published her "Pendelplan", a project promoting PT for professional commuters. Up till now, relatively few commuters use PT to get from their homes to their offices. The "Pendelplan" aims to extend the modal share of public transport in the segment of professional commuter travel, increasing that share to 20% of all commuter trips.

With this "commuter project", an "unserved audience" is now moving in the foreground.

Convincing this difficult and rather assertive target –group of commuting professionals, that PT can be a solution for their professional mobility problems, will be a major challenge for the near future. The first concrete projects co-financed by the "commuter fund" have recently been launched in Ghent (Skaldenpark-Dampoort) and Herentals.

PASSION- INTERREG III + project "Indicators for determining Passenger Satisfaction"

And last but not least, I should tell you something about "Passion"

We are of course, in the first place "passionate" about you, our customers, you who give us a vote of confidence each time you board one of our vehicles.

But PASSION is also an acronym for PASSenger SatisfactIOn, a European project doing research into the underlying parameters determining passenger satisfaction, or dissatisfaction.

We embarked on this project 2 years ago starting with a small consortium of European partners among which Dublin Bus, Connex, RET, MIVB, and consumer organisations such as BTTB and ROVER.

This PASSION-project is now reaching its final stages and we plan to organise a press conference, presenting the results of PASSION somewhere near the end of April.

The objective of PASSION was to elaborate a benchmarking matrix, based on empirical evidence. Such a benchmarking matrix could guide us through the labyrinth of internal and external factors, which make our passengers feel happy or unhappy. If this PASSION-model proves to be successful in day-to-day practice, it could easily be adopted and applied by other PT companies outside the actual consortium. European public transport would then have an excellent benchmarking tool at its disposal. So far for "Passion".

Ladies and gentlemen, I could continue this shortlist of measures De Lijn has taken to improve PT quality standards and to satisfy our most critical customers.

I have limited myself to just some random examples of our customer-oriented policy.

It is now up to you, passengers, to judge us by our deeds, not by our words.

And what then about the "Charter on Passenger rights", I hear some whispers in the dark?

The possible creation of a voluntary "Charter on Passenger Rights" could be the next step in developing our relationship with our passengers.

During the past months, UITP, the International Association for PT, has debated this topic in an expert group, in which our European affairs officer, Paul Arents, played a very active role.

The final draft text containing UITP recommendations on a "Charter of Passenger rights" has been discussed and amended during the last meeting of the UITP European committee held in February 2006.

We hope to be able to present a final version of this "recommendation for a voluntary charter on passenger rights" within a few weeks.

From the side of the European commission, a consultation on passenger rights in international bus and coach travel has been launched during the summer of 2005. The results of this open consultation have now been carefully analysed by the Commission, which seems to have led them to the conclusion that complementary legislation is still needed?

We from De Lijn contributed to this consultation and asked the COM to restrain their legislative zeal to international commercial bus and coach services without public service obligations.

Since the European commission seems to play with the idea of proposing new legislation on passenger rights in the field of public transport, we would like to recommend them to take into account the very specific nature of local and regional public transport.

The rules imposed on air traffic services, ferries and international rail services, cannot simply be transposed or merely copy-pasted to local public transport. Such a copy-paste exercise would be an unwelcome quantum leap, certainly not satisfying the passenger's needs.

More importantly, the commission should consult with all stakeholders involved, including representative passenger organisations, organising authorities and PT operators. We, from our side, are prepared to join forces with representative consumer organisations and the European commission to create a stable legislative framework, guaranteeing real added value for all our passengers.

Summarising, we think that a "Charter on Passenger Rights" can never constitute an end in itself.

It should rather be the icing on the cake, the red cherry on the pudding, finalising a gradual, painstaking process of putting the passengers in the spotlights of public transport policy.

A lot has already been achieved but still more remains to be done.

Thanks for listening so attentively to me. I wish you a very successful EPF -conference here in this beautiful city of Maastricht, situated in the cross-border EUREGIO. One of the historic Treaties of the European Union was signed in this city in 1992. Today, in this symbolic place, let us reunite passenger organisations, public transport operators, and organising authorities, committing ourselves to the common goal of striving towards high quality PT, PT which caters and cares for the needs of its customers.

Thank you and have a very nice day.

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