EUROPEAN BRIEFING

Cohesion, Polycentricity, Missing Links and Bottlenecks: Conflicting Spatial Storylines for Pan-European Transport Investments

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ABSTRACT  This article undertakes a discourse-centred investigation of the underlying rationales of European Union (EU) transport-sector investments. Its central contribution is the ‘Conflicting-Storylines Proposition’, stating that EU transport investments lack consistence and sustainability due to the existence of partially complementary, partially competing EU development objectives which are in turn expressed through four key storylines: ‘cohesion’, ‘polycentricity’, ‘missing links’ and, most recently, ‘bottlenecks’. EU decision-making remains deeply conflicted and contested. Transport sector investments have to satisfy different aims related to growth, competitiveness, cohesion and sustainability. The Trans-European Network priority projects violate cohesion and sustainable development goals by concentrating investments in already privileged areas.

1. Introduction

In its 1994 publication on the Trans-European Networks (TENs), the European Commission ingeniously concluded that “transport is many things to all people”. If not particularly eloquent, this statement still poignantly reminds us of the deeply conflictual nature of all transport-sector decision-making. Given that transport infrastructure investments tend to be both large scale and long term, the stakes for planning and policy-making in this sector are unusually high. Investments into different transport options are always also investments into different spatial development futures. To date, however, transport largely remains “an unusually fertile, though often overlooked, subject in the firmament of European studies” (Ross, 1998, p. vii).

This article undertakes a discourse-centred investigation of the underlying rationales of European Union (EU) transport-sector investments over the last decade. Focus is on identifying the specific discursive practices by means of which the European Commission advances its eco-modernist transport investment rationales. My central contribution in this article is
what I term the 'Conflicting-Storylines' proposition: I propose that EU decision-making for Pan-European transport investments lacks consistence and sustainability due to the existence of several, partially complementary, but also partially competing EU development objectives which are in turn expressed through several, partially conflicting storylines.

I first explain the theoretical approach of discourse analysis and the pertaining concept of storylines. I subsequently analyse what I identify as four main spatial storylines for EU infrastructure decision-making: cohesion, polycentricity, missing links, and bottlenecks. A concluding section summarizes the theoretical findings and their implications for decision-making.

2. A Discourse Analytical Approach to Planning and Policy-making

Fuelled by the publication of Maarten Hajer's (1995) well-argued and well-received book *The Politics of Environmental Discourse*, there has been a rapidly evolving literature on environmental discourses in planning and public policy. Its interdisciplinary influence is reflected in several recent articles in scientific journals relating to environmental studies, planning, geography, and even anthropology (see for example, Campbell, 1996; Nygren, 1998; Lumley, 1999; Fischer & Hajer, 1999; Ruzza, 2000; Harper, 2001). There now is even an emerging literature on sustainability discourses in the specific area of transport policy (see especially, Baeten, 2000; Sager, 1999; Richardson & Jensen, 2000; Langmyhr, 2000, 2001; Low & Gleeson, 2001; Vigar, 2000, 2001; Willson 2001). More generally, in the wake of Foucault and other post-positivist critics, scholars of all disciplines have found it necessary to focus much more closely on the various discourses that both researchers and practitioners employ. Struggles over transport-infrastructure decision-making clearly illustrate the use of different discourses and their consequences (see for example, Langmyhr, 2000; Sager, 1999; Flyvbjerg, 1998). Over the course of the last few years, Tim Richardson and Ole B. Jensen have published several articles applying a discourse theoretical approach to EU policy in the areas of transport and spatial development (Richardson, 1996; Richardson & Jensen, 2000; Jensen & Richardson, 2001). They employ Foucauldian discourse analysis and declare their intellectual affinity with Bent Flyvbjerg’s work on rationality (or rather: *Realrationalität*) and power in planning. The present article is in many ways complementary to their ongoing research.

Hajer (1995, p. 43) warns that “discourse analysis has come to mean many different things in as many different places”. He also correctly asserts that in everyday speech, discourse is often taken to be synonymous with discussion or a mode of talking. Like most social scientists working on related subjects, Hajer begins his discussion of discourse theoretical approaches with Foucault. Foucault focused on the way discourses are produced through institutionalized practices. From a social constructivist viewpoint such as Foucault’s, these practices are what mainly influence people’s actions and hence produce political preferences. Foucault’s discourse theoretical approach fundamentally challenges mainstream political theory since traditionally, political scientists do not focus on ‘institutionalized practices’ (or, as Foucault also termed them, ‘disciplines’) but on institutions, individual stakeholders, and expressed stakeholder preferences. In the end, we need both a combination of both, a thorough analysis of stakeholder power-relationships, and of the related discourses employed. Personal agency and deliberate agenda-setting by particular actors tend to disappear from view when structural discourses are over-emphasized.

The principal conceptual innovation of Hajer’s *Politics of Environmental Discourse* consists in its focus on what he calls ‘storylines’. Hajer arrives at this emphasis after a critical review of Foucault’s theory of discourse, which he finds wanting in one central aspect: “the role of the discoursing subject remains ambivalent” (p. 51). Well-aware that in the Foucauldian post-positivist worldview, “discourse is not to be seen as a medium through which individuals
can manipulate the world”, but that it “is itself part of reality, and constitutes the discoursing subject”, and that consequently, in this framework “interests cannot be taken as given a priori but are constituted through discourse”. Hajer ultimately finds that “there is still a conceptual gap between Foucault’s abstract work and the study of concrete political events”, which to him points to “a need to devise middle range concepts through which [the] interaction between discourses can be related to the role of individual strategic action in a non-reductionist way” (Hajer, 1995, pp. 51–52). His focus on discourse coalitions and storylines brings a certain amount of agency back into the picture. Rules and practices are only imbued with meaning as long as they are exercised by a particular person, and there is always choice involved in picking between different routines and in the precise way in which these are exercised. In other words, rather than simply note the existence of certain linguistic practices or conventions through rhetorical analysis, what should interest us when looking at political and bureaucratic decision-making, is the use, re-use, and transformation of particular images, phrases or storylines, and who benefits from them.

Originally an idea taken from Davies and Harré (1990), Hajer (1995, p. 56) re-defines a storyline as follows:

A storyline, as I interpret it, is a generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific physical or social phenomena. The key function of storylines is that they suggest a unity in the bewildering variety of separate discursive components parts of a problem.

Hajer also immediately adds the following key statement:

Political change may therefore well take place through the emergence of new storylines that re-order understandings. Finding the appropriate storyline becomes an important form of agency.

Interestingly, although somewhat reluctantly admitting the term ‘agency’ into his discourse vocabulary, Hajer seems ready at several points in his study to admit a necessary focus on what one might call the makers of a storyline. However, Hajer does not attach any importance to being the original creator of an idea or storyline. Rather, the key to discursive success in the world of communicative competition is the successful constitution of consensual meaning through adapting and re-defining a universally appealing storyline. Storylines cluster knowledge, position stakeholders and, ultimately, create coalitions. In identifying four major spatial storylines which have provided justifications for EU infrastructure assistance in the transport sector, I adapt Hajer’s concept of storylines to the particular case of transport infrastructure decisions in the EU.

3. Overarching EU Visions: Integration, Enlargement, Sustainability

EU decision-making is always torn between the twin forces of external enlargement and deepening internal integration. Additionally, the overarching goal of environmental sustainability objective competes with development objectives related to enlargement and integration. Manuel Castells (1998, p. 338) observed that “European integration is, at the same time, a reaction to the process of globalization and its most advanced expression”. As the EU Glossary on Institutions, Policies and Enlargement of the European Union notes:

Deepening refers to the integration dynamic present from the outset of the European venture. Through the customs union, the common market, and then the Euro zone, the European Communities have grown into what aspires to be an ‘ever
closer union’ among the peoples of Europe (Article 1 of the EU Treaty). Deepening is a process parallel to, and often viewed as a necessary step prior to, enlargement.

The Common Transport Policy (CTP) was regarded by the Community’s initiators as an essential pillar for the achievement of the internal market and the free flow of goods, services, labour and capital across national borders. Until the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, emphasis lay on non-spatial, regulatory issues concerning the harmonization and taxation of transport services. It was only after the Maastricht commitment to develop TENs that the spatial dimensions of European integration were directly addressed by the Community through infrastructure funding.

Eastern enlargement is essentially a three track process, consisting of: (1) the pre-accession strategy focusing on reform in the 10 candidate countries; (2) the preparation of Agenda 2000 and the opening of actual accession negotiations; (3) the publication of the Communication Strategy for Enlargement in May 2000. Further enlargement will certainly mean adjustments to the current EU structure of governance. The much lower infrastructure endowment of the candidate countries has led to the institution of the so-called pre-accession funds. Much of the focus in the transport sector is not only about expanding infrastructure, but also about harmonizing regulations and bringing existing networks up to EU standards. Overall, the rhetoric at both the Commission and the Parliament is aimed at expanding European markets and improving interconnections throughout Europe, albeit always with a view to privileged high-speed routes (see e.g. European Parliament, 1999).

It was only with the Treaty of Amsterdam that an explicit reference on sustainable development was written into the recitals of the EU Treaty. However, sustainability is not explicitly defined as a limiting factor on growth and productivity in the key documents that define the EU’s sustainability commitment. Both enlargement and integration are to be achieved in a ‘sustainable’ manner, but this mandate remains operationally weak. The sustainability mandate has also not helped much to bring about the much talked about modal shift towards more environmentally friendly systems of transport.

So far, the Commission has failed to meet its own recommendation to promote environmentally friendlier modes, and to favour rail over road. It is true, for example, that nine of the EU’s currently 14 TEN priority projects are high-speed rail projects and that over 60% (827 out of 1344 million Ecu) from the TEN special budget line went towards rail. But the vast majority of transport spending under the more sizeable Cohesion and EDRF Funds went towards roads, tipping the overall balance about two-thirds in favour of roads and highways. Also, the rail funds were all dedicated to high-speed projects with significant environmental impacts. From 1994–1999, over 70% of the 13.7 available EDRF Objective 1 funding went to roads. The imbalance was equally pronounced in the case of the Cohesion Fund. From 1993 to 1999, TEN-related priority transport investments to the four poorest member states (Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain) accounted for over 5 billion Ecu, of which 69% went to roads.

4. Four Spatial Storylines Justifying EU Transport Infrastructure Investments

4.1 Introduction: Funding for Trans-European Transport Networks

The idea of developing a coherent map of Trans-European Transport Infrastructure pre-dates the EU and was already actively discussed in several other international forums, especially within the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and within the OECD/European Conference of Ministers of Transport (ECMT). The concept of the so-called international E-routes developed in the 1980s was not connected to any idea of common funding schemes, however. By contrast, the TENs of the European Commission were always
intended to be partly financed by the EU. The idea of coordinating and financing a series of priority infrastructure links first emerged in the early 1990s. The development of the TENs was always closely linked to the creation of the European Single market. In their most ambitious form, the complete TENs master plans foresaw public and private investments in the amount of 220 billion Ecu until the year 2000 alone, of which the EU itself was prepared to supply about one tenth in grant funding. TEN infrastructure investments can be categorized into two main categories: network investments in underprivileged regions disbursed through the regular structural funds, and priority investments funded through the TEN budget line. Additionally, the European Investment Bank has provided loans for both types of investments.

Buunk (1999, p. 1) argues that the TENs are “the first spatial concept in European policies”. Given that the TENs predate and vastly outweigh (both in monetary and political terms) the EU’s first European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), the TENs can indeed be considered the EU’s first and primary de facto spatial development intervention. More importantly, however, the TENs were also the EU’s first large-scale infrastructure policy. Although the TENs are frequently dismissed as simply expressing member state preferences for national network connections that were yet to be completed, Piodi (1997, p. 24) presents an important alternative interpretation:

The 1990s saw the start of the European Union’s involvement in infrastructure policy … This innovation was far more radical than has generally been suggested by politicians, researchers or journalists. Historically, the role of public works in the Member States has far exceeded their specific function … [T]hey also function as a symbol of the tangible reality of power, which is of crucial importance even in the modern age. The fact that responsibility for this sector has been conferred on the Union means that the prospects for the political legitimization of the Union have been enhanced. … Its new responsibilities mean that it now plays a major role in the decision-making process at all levels of government in the Member States.

In short, the rise of the TENs also has much to do with the emergence of a consensus among member states that their competitiveness is intricately tied to that of the emerging EU, and that this Union needed to be vested with additional powers in order to ensure this ongoing competitiveness at a global scale. The following discussion of four key spatial storylines surrounding EU transport infrastructure policy in the 1990s shows how growth and competitiveness considerations continue to win over redistributive and environmental aims. The different storylines roughly correspond to different policy directorates within the Commission. While the Cohesion and Polycentricity storylines are closely aligned with policies that fall within the competency of DG Regio, the Missing Links and Bottlenecks storylines are more

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**Table 1. Overview of EU transport infrastructure investment storylines**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storyline</th>
<th>Policy arena</th>
<th>Responsible directorate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Cohesion’</td>
<td>Structural Funds</td>
<td>DG Regio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Polycentricity’</td>
<td>European Spatial Development Perspective</td>
<td>DG Regio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Missing links’</td>
<td>Trans-European Networks, especially priority projects</td>
<td>DG TREN</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Bottlenecks’</td>
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closely aligned with policies coming out of the DG TREN. Table 1 gives an overview of the storylines and the key related policy arenas.

4.2 Cohesion

Transport plays a key role in efforts to reduce regional and social disparities in the European Union and in the strengthening of its economic and social cohesion. (CEC, 1998, p. 1; Communication from the Commission: Cohesion and Transport)

Cohesion is perhaps the most important spatial storyline in EU policy-making. It represents policy-makers' recognition of the need to pro-actively counterbalance the negative effects of increased inter-European competitiveness brought about by the Single Market and globalization more generally. As a storyline devised to appease the losers of European integration and enlargement, it represents a formidable challenge that has had limited success.

Cohesion can be interpreted in various ways, most commonly referring to varying levels of (economic) stability and/or a process of convergence. Cohesion as a spatial concept was first written into the Single European Act (SEA) in 1985. It signified a commitment to promote the development of poorer regions in the EU in order to persuade the poorer member states to agree to the development of the single European market. The two measures which have received primacy in EU cohesion policies are gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and unemployment. Consequently, national and regional cohesion has frequently been defined in terms of the degree of parity in GDP per capita (also see DIW and EPRC, 2001, p. 9).

So the origins of cohesion policy lie in the realization that the Community should pay some sort of integration subsidy to lower-income regions, making it a 'flagship of European regulated capitalism' (Hooghe, 1998, p. 457). Economic and social cohesion is now one of the fundamental objectives of the EU, at least in rhetoric. In Article 2 of the TEU, the Union sets itself the objective

\[
\text{to promote economic and social progress and a high level of employment and to achieve balanced and sustainable development, in particular through the creation of an area without internal frontiers, through the strengthening of economic and social cohesion and through the establishment of economic and monetary union. } \quad \text{[Emphasis added.]} 
\]

Cohesion is therefore seen as subservient to achieving progress and sustainability. In the Treaty on the European Community (TEC), the cohesion objective was then more explicitly defined as having a clear spatial dimension (Article 158 TEC, ex Article 130a):

\[
\text{In order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Community shall develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic and social cohesion. In particular, the Community shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions or islands, including rural areas.} 
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Note that the terms 'development' and 'backwardness' are not specifically defined, however. The Commission has since interpreted the concept as a triple axis encompassing the physical environment, the business environment and human/social capital. The main instruments for promoting cohesion within the EU territory have been the so-called structural funds. They are to address gaps within member states, between regions, and between social groups. The two funds most important with regard to transport infrastructure investments are the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund. Under the ERDF, the EU
provides funding for transport infrastructures in the EU's so-called least developed regions designated as Objective 1. Although its overall rationale does not include a specific mention of transport investments, in practice, the ERDF has nevertheless provided financial contributions to the relevant Trans-European Transport Network routes in that area. The Cohesion Fund, by contrast, was specifically designed to provide assistance in the areas of transport and environment in the poorest EU countries. Eligibility under the Cohesion Fund is determined according to national economic criteria based on GDP performance, so the future of Cohesion Fund assistance to Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain is now threatened by the prospects of Eastern enlargement. A complex deal was struck in Agenda 2000 by the member governments to ensure the continuation of both cohesion and enlargement funding from 2000 to 2006. Allen (2000, p. 264) provides a realist, inter-governmentalist interpretation for the deal:

This bargain was probably possible because the structural funds have rather less to do with real economic cohesion or the eradication of regional disparities than to do with a modest budgetary redistribution to facilitate the continued development and smooth running of the EU.

Although this borders on outright cynicism, Allen is certainly correct in that cohesion funding was never really based on economic development rationales but on political reasoning. Since deepening integration, i.e. a progressive implementation of the Single Market, provides an economic threat to the less competitive regions in the EU, political intuition demanded that subsidies and other economic incentives be provided for them in order to 'sweeten' the deal. Given this political nature of structural funding at the EU, member states never demanded precise estimations of the true costs for poorer regions of accepting the European Monetary Union (EMU) or further enlargement (cf. Allen, 2000, p. 263). The accession of several lower income countries into the EU in the 1980s simply made it politically necessary to institute a system of regional transfers. Resources for regional policies from the EU increased almost 10-fold from 3.7 billion Ecu in 1985 to 33 billion in 1999, amounting to 0.45% of the EU's total GDP (Martin, 1999, p. 11).

Of course, the official rationale for funding transport infrastructures in the context of cohesion was the idea that better infrastructure endowment would make lagging, often peripherally located, regions more competitive within the EU territory. So instead of pure politics, there ostensibly was a solid economic rationale behind cohesion policy. This economic justification, however, remains deeply contested. On an empirical level, recent studies clearly show that such a simplistic 'investment-for-cohesion' storyline misrepresents and oversimplifies the complex effects transport infrastructure investments have on regional economic development (see, especially, SACTRA, 1999). More generally, the (Keynesian) economic base of EU cohesion policy is increasingly being contradicted by alternative economic theories. Neo-classical theorists, for example, since they assume perfect competition, argue that policy interventions in favour of lagging regions are not necessary because (1) the process of integration itself will sufficiently accelerate convergence between regions, and (2) even regions with lower levels of productivity will still gain from trade based on comparative advantage. This argument is contradicted by new theories of economic geography stressing endogenous growth (see, especially, Krugman, 1991). These theories emphasize the importance of economies of scale, imperfect competition and the localized nature of spillover effects. Yet ironically, this new economic geography ends up challenging the validity of regional transfers in a much more troubling manner, because it implies that spatial redistribution will diminish competitiveness. The question then becomes whether cohesion, i.e. a more equalized distribution of economic activity across European space, is still a desirable goal if it might jeopardize European competitiveness in the long run.
This forces decision-makers to clarify their objectives. Philippe Martin's (1999, p. 12) recent EIB prize winning essay poignantly summarizes the key dilemma for economists:

If economies of scale and localized spillovers explain phenomena of increased regional inequalities, this necessarily implies that efficiency gains … accrue from the existence of economic agglomeration. The existence of these beneficial effects of agglomeration suggest rather that, in certain respects, Europe's economic geography is insufficiently agglomerated and specialized (for example in comparison with American geography). It is therefore illogical to claim that the diminution of regional inequalities supposedly facilitated by regional policies will generate efficiency gains at pan-European level. To oppose concentration and geographical specialization is also to renounce their beneficial effects.

According to this rationale, pursuing cohesion ultimately means foregoing the very benefits that urban and regional agglomerations provide. In other words, although hugely problematic from an equity perspective, the argument is that Europe as a whole may be better off (macro-)economically if it keeps concentrating infrastructure investments in the Blue Banana core of Europe, with certain peripheral exceptions. Martin is thus making an interesting efficiency argument that the EU, for political reasons, could never officially heed. 11

So, for the last 10 years arguments for the financing of TEN have been based on a dual strategy of increasing EU competitiveness and economic and social cohesion which is based on economic reasoning that is both internally contradictory and empirically dubious. Under the heading 'competitiveness and jobs', the Commission's 1998 report on the implementation of the TEN transport guidelines (CEC, 1998) summarized the TEN strategy as follows:

The rationale for the Community's Trans-European Network Policy is two-fold:

- Efficient jobs for transport is vital for EU competitiveness, and thus long-term growth and jobs. EU industry needs efficient transport systems both to keep costs down and to allow it to provide a good service;
- To enhance economic and social cohesion by ensuring that peripheral regions are well connected to EU networks. Work done for the Cohesion Fund points to a positive correlation between spending on TEN and private business investment suggesting a very favorable impact from new infrastructure investment, including a strong positive effect on employment in the long run.

Based "on very cautious assumptions by Commission services" the report estimates that the Transport TEN as a whole, consisting of an investment of 400 billion Ecu,12 could create "between 600,000 to 1,000,000 new permanent jobs, or 2.5. additional jobs per million Ecu invested in TEN instead of the average alternative investment". The report, prepared by the Transport Directorate, does not talk about where exactly this private investment was located in relation to the TEN investments, so even if these estimate were true, nothing can be implied as far as spatial cohesion is concerned.

Across town at the Regional Policy Directorate, the author(s) of the Commission's Communication on Cohesion and Transport had much more precise, less optimistic analysis to offer than their colleagues at the Transport Directorate, however. The conclusions offered in this Communication are unequivocal about the possibilities of reducing interregional disparities through transport infrastructure investments. Taking into account state-of-the-art research about 'pump effects'13 this report warns of using transport infrastructure investments in peripheral regions as a panacea for regional development:

It is clear that investment in transport alone will not lead to the reduction of development disparities. The success of improvements in transport depends on
complementary efforts to ensure that the disadvantaged regional economies are in a better position to seize the opportunities created. The evidence suggests that in such a context, carefully selected investments in transport infrastructure in Greece, Spain, Ireland, and Portugal have had positive long-run effects on private investment and economic development in the regions, although there may be wide variations in final impact. (Commission of the European Communities (CEC), 1998, p. 4)

The Communication also makes it clear that “the key concern here is often not the provision of new transport infrastructure, but the provision of transport services (particularly public transport)” (CEC, 1998, p. 5). Ironically considering its title, the 1998 Communication therefore more or less abandons the whole investment-for-cohesion rhetoric and instead reverts to arguments in favour of completing the TENs based on a rhetoric of ‘integration’ and ‘accessibility’:

The completion of TEN in transport clearly represents a necessary condition for spatial integration and raising accessibility. However, studies confirm that to ensure the maximum benefit from the TEN their development must be integrated into a broader strategy.\(^{14}\)

- the medium-sized cities in centrally located regions and located on the TEN nodes or corridors tend to obtain the major accessibility gains. Many cities on high-speed rail and motorways networks can expect a significant improvement in their physical accessibility;
- the main metropolitan areas are also major beneficiaries from TEN implementation but to a lesser extent than the medium-sized cities. This reflects the already well developed transport infrastructure in those regions.
- for peripheral and remote regions to gain the maximum benefit from the TEN, complementary investment in secondary networks will be required.

(CEC, 1998, p. 6, added emphasis)

Hidden in this paragraph is perhaps the frankest admission in official EU documents that TENs in and of themselves reinforce existing distributions and tend to be localized around key nodes. Although one should not overstate the importance of this Communication, its rhetoric is indicative.\(^{15}\) The Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion recently released by the Commission also explicitly states that infrastructure endowment is “a necessary, but not sufficient condition for the economic development and competitiveness of a region” (CEC, 2001a, p. 49).

‘Accessibility’ has since often been used as a substitute term for spatial cohesion in EU literature. Putting an emphasis on the territorial dimensions of cohesion is a convenient way for the Commission to side-step a decision for either more rural/peripheral or more urban/core investments, a touchy and contested subject within the administration. Rumford (2000, p. 183) makes a consistent argument that in the wake of neo-liberal policy-making in Europe, the primary conceptualization of the term cohesion even “has become detached from its redistributive origins and incorporated in a discourse of competitiveness and growth”.\(^{16}\) In sum, transport-related infrastructure investments calling for improved accessibility and for the ‘completion’ of the TENs even in remote regions are in conflict with neo-liberal macro-economic efficiency arguments which would instead call for a greater differentiation of European spaces based on specialized divisions of labour and regional competitiveness, and hence for a subsequent concentration of resources in already competitive places. In the wake of the latter line of argumentation, the emphasis of cohesion funding then typically shifts from a focus on peripheral, lagging regions within Cohesion countries (i.e. upgrading of rural roads and general modernization of infrastructure inside an already underprivileged member state)
towards a modernization of key, national-level infrastructures so that these Cohesion countries might be more competitive with regard to other EU member states. This problem of these different geographical scales of under-privilege, and the related internal inconsistency of the cohesion storyline, will become especially relevant in the case of funding for the Eastern candidate countries and the enlargement-related funding.

4.3 Polycentricity

The concept of polycentric development has to be pursued, to ensure regionally balanced development, because the EU is becoming fully integrated in the global economy. Pursuit of this concept will help to avoid further excessive economic and geographic concentration in the core area of the EU. (European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), 1999, p. 20)

The concept of polycentricity is intimately bound up with attempts to reconceptualize and ultimately reshape the spatial structure of urban hierarchies in Europe. The difficulty to disentangle rhetorical vision, analytical content and prescriptive policy elements connected to different concepts of polycentricity (particularly with regard to the ESDP) has already been variously discussed in the literature (e.g. Davoudi, 2001; Krätke, 2001; Copus, 2001; Albrechts, 2001; Kloostermann & Musterd, 2001; van Houtum & Legendijk, 2001; Bailey & Turok, 2001). Like cohesion, the polycentricity-storyline is based on the key insight that Europe needs a more equal distribution of globalization and integration gains than is presently the case. Richardson and Jensen (2000, p. 505) correctly note that “the construction of EU spatial discourse is conditioned by several mega trends: the globalized market, the emergence of the competitive city, and the culture of mobility” and that the resulting reframing of cities is guided by visions of “transcending spatial distances across Europe”. In the late 1980s, researchers at the French spatial planning agency DATAR presented an image of European space that has since become ingrained in the minds of many researchers and decision-makers. They conceived of European space as being dominated by an economic backbone reaching from London across the channel through the Benelux countries, northern France, Switzerland and southern Germany to northern Italy. This economic backbone (dorsale), also variously defined as the heart of Europe, became known as the Blue Banana. Blue Banana maps sometimes recognize other important agglomerations in Europe, but they all they very clearly divide European space into a core and several peripheries (finisterres). Ironically, the catchy Blue Banana image was used by the French spatial analysts precisely in order to point out the need to develop alternative, more polycentric structures. Nevertheless, the main effect was rather antithetical to the supposed aim of promoting polycentricity: cities outside the dorsale seemed suddenly doomed as losers simply because of their location. The Blue Banana became the main metaphor for an economically divided Europe. The image has proven very difficult to undo, in part because there is some empirical truth to it. Probably the most successful counter-image to the Blue Banana was developed by Kunzmann and Wegener (1991) at the University of Dortmund. They argued that instead of a banana, one should instead conceive of European space as of a ‘European Bunch of Grapes’. The image successfully evokes the notion of a polycentric Europe, yet the metaphor does not deny that urban hierarchies will persist. To keep with the metaphor: the individual grapes are part of a larger whole, but are not equally large, and some are juicier and tastier than others. Kunzmann (1998, p. 101) has since justified “the normative concept of the European Bunch of Grapes as a mental vision for spatial equity in Europe”.

At the level of European policy-making, the storyline of polycentricity finds its most concise, yet still contradictory, expression in a document that was published, but not officially adopted, by the European Commission in 1999. The document, the ESDP carries the
ambitious subtitle “Towards a Balanced and Sustainable Development of the Territory of the European Union”. Agreed at the Informal Council of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning in Potsdam in May 1999, it was the result of a multi-year, multi-country effort at setting out a future vision for the development of European space in light of current environmental, social and economic challenges. The overall ESDP process has been meticulously documented by Andreas Faludi and Bas Waterhout (2002) and need not be recounted here. What concerns us here are some of its key contents and rationales. The ESDP was developed following the adoption of the so-called Leipzig Principles by European ministers in 1994. The principles call for: (a) development of a balanced and polycentric urban system and a new urban–rural relationship; (b) securing parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge; (c) sustainable development, prudent management and protection of nature and cultural heritage (ESDP, 1999, p. 11). Interestingly, the ESDP does not fall into the trap of claiming that TENs will contribute to social and economic cohesion. The rhetoric is instead clearly oriented towards urban competitiveness. The ESDP recognizes that a large part of the EU transport investments are concentrated on high-speed railway lines connecting major conurbations and that cities close to high-speed stops will profit most from these investments. The ESDP’s additional justification that “high-speed lines may offer an incentive to shift increasing shares of traffic to the railways, thus helping to relieve road congestion and improve the environment” is both highly speculative and overly optimistic considering current trends. The ESDP does recognize, however, that “increases in traffic can no longer be managed by expansion of road infrastructure alone”. The ESDP insists that “spatial development policy and urban development measures have a role to play” (all quotes on p. 14). The presented perspective (its creators are adamant that the ESDP be not understood as a master plan!), however, remains problematic. Both centrality and urbanity, as well as their complementary concepts peripherality and rurality remain contested notions within the ESDP (Copus, 2001; Richardson, 2000).

In the end, the greatest challenge is related to the fact that the storyline of polycentricity entails very different visions at different levels of planning. As Simin Davoudi (2001, p. 2) concludes in her recent study on polycentricity in European spatial planning: “Despite its widespread currency, the concept is not supported by clear definition, robust theoretical framework and rigorous empirical analysis. Hence, polycentricity means different things to different people”. Davoudi herself distinguishes the use and adaptation of the concept at three different spatial scales: intra-urban, inter-urban, and interregional. Which, however, is the most legitimate Pan-European interpretation of polycentricity? This question still remains largely unresolved. Stefan Krätke (2001, p. 107) provides a basic definition of a polycentric system as a “system in which a whole series of ‘high-ranking’ location centres exist side by side with a large number of small and medium sized towns and cities”, and he finds that such a polycentric urban system is “especially relevant in the pan-European perspective”. The difficulty, however, as Krätke himself correctly asserts, is that “both polycentric and monocentric urban systems are to be found in the individual member states and in eastern central European countries [and that] the applicability of the notion …. to the whole EU needs further discussion” (p. 107). Several Scandinavian countries, for example, are outright sceptical of the concept (Bengs & Böhme, 1998).

Without resolving the issue of choosing between multiple definitions, Peter Hall (n.d.) nevertheless provides an excellent summary of the different possible interpretations of the concept at the European, interregional, intraregional and inter-urban levels:

The central word, *polycentric*, needs to be carefully defined: … At the global level, *polycentric* refers to the development of alternative global centres of power. … Within a specifically European context, therefore, one meaning of a *polycentric* policy is to
divert some activities away from ‘global’ cities like London (and perhaps Paris) to ‘sub-global’ centres. ... At a finer geographical scale, however, polycentricity can refer to the outward diffusion from either of these levels of city to smaller cities within their urban fields or spheres of influence. ... Specifically, the general principle should be to guide decentralised growth, wherever possible, on to a few selected development corridors along strong public transport links. ... In the more remote rural regions, ... the pursuit of polycentricity must have yet another dimension: to build up the potential of both ‘regional capitals’ in the 200,000–500,000 population range ..., and smaller ‘county towns’ in the 50,000–200,000 range. ... Again, but on a smaller scale, the growth of such centres could be accompanied by a limited degree of deconcentration to even smaller rural towns within easy reach. It is a complex strategy.20

In sum, the storyline of polycentricity continues to hold something in stock for everyone, which means that EU decision-makers wishing to justify high-speed rail connections between national capitals are as justified to do so in the name of polycentric urban development as are regional policy-makers arguing for improved road connections between secondary cities. The rhetoric of polycentricity is firmly set within an overall context of competitive European cities and regions which each pursue individual growth strategies.

4.4 Missing Links

TEN-T as a policy has been around for a long time, developed from the ‘missing links’ and the European Round Table, and all this kind of business, you know. (Brussels bureaucrat, quoted in Richardson, 2000)

The missing link storyline is predominately industry-created and represents a masterpiece in infrastructure investment lobbying. As preceding discussions have shown, EU transport infrastructure funding was obviously not backed up by unequivocal economic reasoning. So how could the TENs so quickly advance from a mere paper tiger to a multi-billion Euro investment programme? How is it that the EU was willing to commit billions of Euros in funds to a programme that did not guarantee economic returns? The explanation is that decisions were highly political. But it was also not simply a matter of income transfers, as was indicated by realist interpretations in the case of cohesion funding. The rapid adoption of the TENs concept in the early 1990s is primarily due to their timeliness and due to the ability of the concept to respond to urgent industry and high-level political needs. The pro-investment infrastructure and construction lobby and the EU joined forces on the idea of the TENs. In some ways, it may be even more accurate to say that most official EU transport infrastructure investment proposals, and the priority TEN projects in particular, originated as industry lobby proposals that were only later transformed into EU policy. There are several key reports prepared for the European Roundtable of Industrialists (ERT) which resemble future Commission proposals in startling ways.

In particular, ERT’s 1984 report called “Missing Links—Upgrading Europe’s Transborder Ground Transport Infrastructure: A Report for the Roundtable of European Industrialists”, outlined three specific proposals for a “Channel link between England and France”, a ‘Scandinavia plan for road and rail connections in Scandinavia, and a ‘trans-European network of high-speed trains’. This report urged the EU and private partners to spend billions of dollar of investments on these TEN precursor projects, which it claimed were economically highly justified projects. The glossy report (black and white copies are available at no charge from the Roundtable’s Paris or London offices) contains the following stunning note in an appendix:

The working group aimed to provide a concise and readable report. For this reason,
data sources and references are conspicuously absent from the text, charts and tables. The group's report is compiled from the following written [internally commissioned] submissions and reports: [List reports] The ‘pedigree’ of the facts and figures quoted in the ‘Missing Links’ report is finely detailed in the written submissions and reports listed above. Questions on the pedigree of facts and figures should be addressed to Michael Hinks-Edwards at the Roundtable Secretariat Paris Office (see address later).

In other words: the bold ERT proposal was based on data that is neither independently accessible nor verifiable. Upon request, the ERT is willing to answer questions on the pedigree, but not provide hard copies of the document itself.

The similarity of even this early proposal with the list of TEN priority projects adopted 10 years later at the Essen Summit in 1994 is striking. Not only did the 1994 EU list end up including the Channel tunnel and the Oeresund road-rail bridge as individual priority projects, but both were also integrated into a network of high-speed rail links that picked up most of the connections originally proposed by ERT 10 years earlier.

ERT soon created the myth that “not only are such projects desirable in terms of their economic and social impact, but they are affordable, environmentally acceptable and financeable without heavy extra commitments to public spending” (ERT, 1984, p. 1). Corporate watchdog organizations such as ASEED Europe acknowledge the immense success of the ERT in influencing future EU transport policy. As Doherty and Hoedeman (1994, p. 137) note:

Through its intensive lobbying of European transport ministers, and also the support of French Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, the ERT was astonishingly successful in introducing European power brokers to its vision of a future infrastructure. In 1985, Volvo's Pehr Gyllenhammer could report to ERT members that the Italian government, “on behalf of all the ministers of transportation within the community, is referring to the Missing Links as a master plan for European infrastructure”.

Other researchers have made the same point. Tim Richardson (1997, p. 337) also provides a strong case that decisions were influenced by the privileged access that industry decision-makers had to key Commission working groups:

Proposals for the Trans-European Road Network … were developed by the Motorway Working Group (MGW) of the Commission's Transport Infrastructure Committee [which included] a number of private sector interests including the European Round Table (ERT), the Association des Constructeurs Europeens d'Automobile, and the International Road Transport Union. The Committee was overwhelmingly dominated by transport and infrastructure interests, with a notable absence of environmental interests. […] It appears that the debate within this key decision-making arena was largely political. The institutional power of the infrastructure lobby demonstrated here was strengthened by ready access to top-ranking EC and member-state politicians.

Dick Richardson (1997, p. 55) chimes in almost verbatim. In reminding us that the consequences of the Trans-European Road Networks (TERNs) are in direct contradiction to the EU's own environmental policy, he also takes the critique one step further, once again contrasting EU rhetoric versus reality:

In reality, at the European level as well as at the global level, environmental policy is made and implemented in terms of the vested interests in government and
industry who wish to consolidate their power and follow the path of economic growth. For example, the TERN plan was based on proposals made by the Motorways Working Group [...] The fact that the consequences of TERN, in terms of the production of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, can be considered to be in direct contravention of the EU's commitments in the Framework Convention on Climate Change at Rio did not even enter the equation.

ERT lobbying for the missing links was heavily stepped up before the passing of the Maastricht Treaty, with three more ERT publications further underlining previous calls for TENs. Lobbying proved successful. Already 2 years after the ERT proposal, the European Conference of Ministers of Transport published its sketch-like map of Europe showing a list of 'missing links' in European road and rail infrastructure. Around the time of the Maastricht Treaty, the OECD (1992, p. 93) also chimed in with efficiency arguments for completing key infrastructure links, linking the 'missing links' rhetoric with the follow-up storyline of 'bottlenecks' but interestingly also warning that it is also possible to create too much infrastructure:

A bottleneck or a missing link result in less efficiency for the whole network. One small link investment can therefore have a dramatic effect on logistics efficiency, while another one creates overcapacity.

Despite the serious objections to the TEN on both environmental and social, and even on economic grounds, several important arguments worked in favour of the TENs from the point of view of the Commission. Besides the strong pressures from the industry in the form of the ERT, there was internal pressure in the form of what Turro (1999, p. 102) calls the 'bicycle theory'. According to this theory, the EU is constantly forced to "keep pedaling to avoid falling off", i.e. it has to push and explore new areas of cooperation and increase political and economic cooperation in order to keep the union alive. And in the particular context of the early 1990s, embarking on 'Missing Infrastructure Links' and 'Trans-European Networks' served several strategic objectives for the Commission: first, it provided a new 'safe' field of cooperation at a time where it was too early to seriously push common defence and foreign policy or monetary unification. Second and more important, Trans-European infrastructures could be used to justify an important increase in the Community budget and a reduction of the excessive share of the overall budget that was spent on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Since the implementation of the projects would remain a national responsibility, no substantial expansion of the EU bureaucracy was needed. Turro (1999, p. 103) also points out that:

under these conditions, the transfer of investment from the national to the Community budget could be of interest to Finance Ministers needing to improve the appearance of their public debt and national deficit figures to comply with the EMU conditions. [...] The TENs concept had the rare virtue of combining national and common interests and to be timely and mostly non-controversial. [...] This explains its quick progress in relation to the normal pace of European policy-building.

Once the 'Missing Links' storyline was in full force, its promoters did not have to even bother pretending to work towards a more equitable, more sustainable Europe. In a report commissioned for the European Parliament, Piodi (1997, pp. 24–25) notes that the Christopherson Report in fact argues that "improved access to the central poles of activity of the Union will help boost competitiveness of the regions concerned and the undertakings located there" which he correctly unveils as meaning that the TENs, from their outset, were going to fundamentally contradict EU cohesion development goals:

[T]he Christophersen report frankly admits the existence of a circumstance which
has in some circles been seen as a breach of Article 129b of the Treaty, namely the priority given to infrastructure creation in the Union’s central regions rather than in the peripheral and island regions.

The same dynamic continued when the EU started to address the issue of enlarging the TENs eastward. Very quickly, the rhetoric switched from a talk about network extensions to that of corridor expansion. Long before the Transport Infrastructure Needs Assessment (TINA) for the candidate countries was finished in 1999, the EU and the Candidate countries had already agreed on a set of Pan-European Corridors who were to receive priority assistance. So once again, the priority focus was on privileged ‘missing links’ representing major trade routes between the various capital cities, and not on an integrated, sustainable development of the networks as a whole. The EU attempted to sell the corridors as a forerunner for a larger network, but the reality remains that these links will skew the network and further reshape European space to improve accessibility mostly between key links, and not equally across space. In sum, the ‘Missing links’ storyline is the one that most honestly reveals the key rationale behind EU transport infrastructure investments, namely to improve conditions for business and trade between the most powerful, most competitive urban agglomerations in Europe.

4.5 Bottlenecks

Unless infrastructure is interconnected and free of bottlenecks, to allow the physical movement of goods and persons, the internal market and the territorial cohesion of the Union will not be fully realized. (CEC, 2001b, p. 50)

The bottleneck storyline is not a new one in EU transport policy, but it has recently reappeared with vigour in the Commission’s new White Paper on the Common Transport Policy (CEC, 2001b). In the section on infrastructure policy, the almost exclusive focus on the issue of bottlenecks in this document is stunning. In some ways, it is a variation of the ‘Missing Links’ storyline. And again, the industry is ahead of the Commission in terms of setting the stage for the ensuing rhetoric. In the mid- to late-1990s, the so-called European Centre for Infrastructural Studies (ECIS) in Rotterdam published two major studies on the ‘State of European Infrastructure’ (ECIS, 1996) and on “Bottlenecks in the European Transport Networks” (ECIS, 1999).

The Bottlenecks-storyline aims at creating a strong sense of urgency. Its major implication is that there are congested infrastructures that need to be ‘unblocked’. In its most simple form, it is an unqualified cry for infrastructure expansion. The idea is that the free flow of goods, and by extension, the competitiveness of the entire European economy, is hindered by the limited capacity of Europe’s roads, rail lines, waterways and air routes. In complete disregard for the EU’s Sustainable Development Strategy, which was published the same year, the new Transport White Paper is content in simply focusing on curing the symptoms (i.e. bottlenecks) rather than address transport problems from a more comprehensive, growth-managing perspective. It simply states that the “transport boom is outstripping economic growth” and that this is ‘posing a major problem’. The White Paper’s understanding of the environmentally sustainable policy developed at the Gothenburg European Council is also limited: it supposedly only ‘underlined’ the need “to tackle rising levels of congestion and encourage the use of environmentally friendly modes” (p. 50). As for the latter, this appears to be defined as anything apart from highway funding including multimodal projects, high-speed rail, sea terminals and airports. Already the introductory paragraphs of the section, the writers of the White Paper (i.e. DG TREN) entirely abandon even the slightest nod towards state-of-the-art transport policy—which would advise better management rather than building after demand.
The White Paper suggests concentrating a major share of future TEN resources on 'unblocking the major routes', i.e. the existing 14 Essen TEN priority projects as well as a select number of new 'special' projects. There is simply no more talk of equal distribution of benefits from infrastructures in this paper. The proposed two-stage revision speaks for itself:

The first stage in 2001 ... should concentrate on eliminating bottlenecks on the routes already identified as priorities for absorbing the traffic flows generated by enlargement, particularly in frontier regions, and improving access to outlying areas. ... [For] the second state in 2004 [t]he idea is to concentrate on a primary network made up of the most important infrastructure for international traffic and cohesion on the European continent.

In the entire paper, there is no precise definition of what exactly constitutes a 'bottleneck'. A section entitled 'foreseeable bottlenecks', the White Paper includes missing border links, single track rail lines, lack of bridges, and limitations on certain waterways. Other sections speak of urban ring roads. In the end, the clear tenor is to accommodate rather than manage growth.

It would be naïve to pretend that bottlenecks can always be addressed though means other than infrastructure expansion. What is problematic however, is that the Commission should be focusing so vicariously on so-called international bottlenecks in relation to the TENs, since the actual projects hiding behind this designation are often the very same large scale industry-lobbied 'missing links' that did not get built (yet) during the 1990s. Here, at a recent conference on the release of the White Paper, the Secretary General of the ECMT, Jack Short (2001, p. 2) warned the Commission not to overstate the case for EU mega projects:

Since a bottleneck is where there are severe problems it is logical that investment should show high economic rates of return. But it should be understood that bottlenecks in international traffic might sometimes benefit more from particular national investments rather than high profile and very expensive international projects. For roads, it might be a bypass round Budapest for example or a particular seed investment in terminals for combined transport.22

More importantly, Short reminded his Brussels audience that 'bottlenecks are not all physical' and that “there is a tendency to overdimension projects once they are on the maps. Motorways or high speed trains are not needed everywhere” (p. 3). This comment is particularly insightful in light of current Pan-European infrastructure plans for the Central European candidate countries, where ambitions for infrastructure expansion are at a particularly drastic mismatch with actual funding and planning capabilities, and indeed, as Short correctly notes, also with actual needs.

Finally, the dramatic resurgence of the bottlenecks storyline also points to the persistent interdependence of Pan-European and urban interests with regard to infrastructure expansion. Apart from bottlenecks at natural barriers and national borders, congestion is primarily related to urban densities. This is a circumstance that opens the way for both cooperation and conflict.

5. Conclusions: The Challenge of Prioritizing Investments

The presented discourse-centred analysis has relied on an adaptation of Maarten Hajer’s concept of ‘storylines’ to tease out persistent contradictions in underlying EU transport-sector investment rationales. By extension, my analysis was therefore more rooted in a Foucauldian than in a Habermasian tradition (also see notes 3 and 4). Contrary to what a more optimistic, Habermas-inspired communicative rationality perspective might conclude, I find that the difficulties in devising a sustainable, consensual European transport policy lay less in pro-
cedural deficiencies related to the way in which underlying rationales are communicated by various stakeholders, but rather in the fact that many of the expressed rationales remain internally contradictory and incompatible. The difficulties in agreeing on a Common Transport Policy arise from the difficulties in defining its prime beneficiaries. From a public welfare perspective, the key consideration is the optimal use of public funds to the greatest possible benefit of all populations in the affected regions. Investments other than new construction, especially road upgrading and maintenance, often promise greater economic returns (World Bank, 1996). Also, in order to attract the kind of highly educated labour force that the new telecommunications and computer industries require, place-factors such as cultural institutions may be more important than additional access roads. However, regional interests may collide with national interests. Local residents may consider an upgrading of the local road or rail system much more important and preferable than the construction of an additional long-distance freeway routed through their region, especially if the latter cuts through valuable nature reserves. Yet, national priority projects are typically not based on the specific needs of the regions, but rather on a more general national master plan. Large-scale links often receive priority primarily not because they can be justified either through careful cost-benefit analysis or production function calculations but simply for political reasons. This is even more true at the Pan-European level.

The demand for new infrastructure or added capacity is typically highest in regions with higher population densities, i.e. in core regions. As long as cost-benefit analyses continue to calculate the bulk of their benefits from user time savings, investments in more urbanized, higher density core regions will still show greater benefits than in lower density regions. In other words, if investments were to simply follow existing demand, then peripheral regions, which are typically more rural in character, would be unlikely to receive priority investments. This obvious dilemma demonstrates that transport policy has to be developed in consistency with spatial and regional policies. Despite efficiency arguments favouring investments in agglomerations in the core, the EU is likely to continue to be committed to developing rural and peripheral regions, and will therefore continue to finance rural transport infrastructures. It should be clear, however, that this is first and foremost a political commitment, and not an efficiency decision. Also, the problem is that these infrastructures will be primarily roads. With population and economic activity necessarily being more dispersed in peripheral regions, higher per capita investments are needed there. And with non-central regions gaining political influence in Brussels, the EU is unlikely to discourage rural development for efficiency reasons in the near future.

The fact that the key objective of EU cohesion and spatial development policies, namely to achieve a more balanced distribution of infrastructure across space, is contradictory to what experts at the EU’s own house bank and main lending institution, the European Investment Bank, consider state-of-the-art economic rationality, is a deeply troubling thought. Meanwhile, the European Investment Bank itself has been the main funding institution for those very TEN networks that supposedly will be developed “for the benefit of all citizens of the European Union”, 23

On a more general level, the contrasting storylines explain the recurring dilemma of all decision-making surrounding large-scale infrastructure: by definition, all ‘backbone networks’, be they located along the Blue Banana or along any of the 10 chosen Helsinki Pan-European corridors, privilege connections between large cities and bypass agglomerations of lesser importance. And the bypass effect is certainly much greater in the case of high-speed rail than for roads. This means losers are scattered along the way, and, according to the British Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment (SACTRA) experts, even possibly also at one of the two ends. This becomes particularly important when we consider the EU’s ambitions to extend the TENs into Central and Eastern Europe.
EU decision-making thus remains deeply conflicted and contested. EU transport sector investments continue to have to satisfy different aims related to growth, competitiveness, cohesion and sustainability. Environmental concerns often take a back seat to mainstream economic development interests, and the politically most influential core regions continue to be able to attract a significant amount of infrastructure funding at the expense of less economically advanced peripheral areas. The TEN priority projects fundamentally violate cohesion goals and sustainable development by concentrating investments in already privileged areas. And despite a rhetorical favouring of rail, the majority of investments still went towards road projects. In the cases of the chosen TEN priority projects, which were determined at the 1995 Essen Council meeting of the EU, most of the high-profile road and rail projects were, in fact, long-standing pet industry projects that had been heavily promoted by the industrial lobby for some time.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the diminished faith in transport investments as triggers of economic growth in lagging regions must be seen in the larger context of the recent re-evaluation of the possibilities of regional policy as a whole. In Europe, empirical evidence in the 1990s has been used to support both supporters and dissenters of the view that regional policies can help poorer regions catch up with wealthier ones. Many commentators argue that the economic forces leading to an increasing divergence between regions are simply too strong for regional policies to counteract them. According to this view, infrastructure investments in poorer regions appear as pure income transfers that are unlikely to seriously narrow the productivity gap between poorer and richer regions. In fact, improved transport connections may even accelerate out-migration in poor regions and thus widen rather than narrow the gap. Alternatively, one might argue that these types of transfers negatively affect overall growth. As Philippe Maystadt (2000, p. 4), the president of the EIB, recently noted: “Indeed, [regional spending] may lead to lower overall prosperity if it drains resources from those wealthy and innovative regions that are the main engines of economic growth. If this is the case, we face a trade-off between equality and growth”. An increasing number of scholars concerned about the increasing environmental burden that our transport systems impose upon us would throw in ecology for good measure, arguing that it is really a three-way trade off. So in the end, we are once again faced with the fact that the goal of sustainable development, regional or otherwise, is always struggling to balance at least three often incompatible dimensions: growth, equity and the environment.

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Notes

1. Note that there is an explicit focus on infrastructure investments, thus excluding discourses that are more focused on regulatory or managerial aspects of European transport policy. It would be quite possible, for example, to do detailed discourse-theoretical analyses of eco-modernist storylines such as ‘Intelligent Transport’, ‘Interoperability’ or ‘Fair Payment for Infrastructure Use’ or ‘Safety’. These are beyond the scope of my project, but certainly present worthwhile areas for further research.

2. Although the authors of these scattered recent articles have not yet entered into a full-fledged debate with each other, this is highly desirable for the future. The journal European Planning Studies has been
especially prominent in advancing the debate by publishing four key articles on the topic over the
course of the year 2000 alone (see Baeten, 2000; Sager, 1999; Richardson & Jensen, 2000;
Langmyhr, 2000). When analysing automobility, rather than sustainability, Beckmann (2001) even
posits the emergence of a new ‘sociology of transport and mobility’.

3. In particular, Hajer refers to Foucault’s later works, especially L’ordre du Discours (1971) (translated as
Discourse on Language), Discipline and Punish (1975), in volume one of History of Sexuality (1976) as well as
discussions in Burchell et al. (1991).

4. At this point, it seems appropriate to emphasize a fundamental difference between at least two
different camps of ‘discursively-minded’ researchers in the field of planning and policy analysis. First
of all, there are researchers who, like myself, employ discourse-centred strategies to better understand
the rationality of urban, regional, transport planning and/or environmental policy. In this case,
discourse analysis is mostly seen as a means to an end. Closer attention to language is seen as a
helpful device for revealing underlying rationales for decision-making and power relationships (see
especially Hajer, 1995; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Richardson, 1996; Baeten, 2000). This means learning from
Foucault, but it does not necessarily mean questioning rationality as such. More importantly, it does
not mean reneging on an overall political economy perspective predominantly concerned with issues
of equity, redistribution and social justice. Secondly, there are researchers for whom the question of
how discursive interaction is organized is itself the key question that determines what is ‘good’ versus
‘bad’ planning or policy-making. For such (Habermasian) adherents to the communicative rationality
approach, the focus on discourse and rhetoric is itself the centerpiece of a new approach to planning
and policy-making, and even to the social sciences more generally (for the realm of transport
planning, see, especially, Langmyhr, 2000; Sager, 1999; Willson, 2001). Here, discourse theory is no
longer a means to an end. Rather, ‘better’ discourse becomes itself a normative goal, i.e. greater
communicative rationality is to provide the solution to environmental and social equity struggles. I,
however, ultimately tend to stress Foucauldian discourses and Flyvbjerghian power-rationalities over
Habermasian ambitions for ideal speech situations.

5. This Glossary is available online under http://europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/cig/g4000i.htm (last
accessed on 3 July 2002).

6. Objective 1 funding is designated for the least developed regions of the EU, i.e. regions where GDP
per capita is below 75% of the EU average.

7. The term ‘structural funds’ was adopted in the late 1980s as a ‘shorthand term’ (Allen, 2000) for the
European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Guidance
Section of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF). Since their
respective addition in 1992 and 1993, respectively, it also includes the Cohesion Fund and the
Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG).

8. Article 160 TEC states that “the European Regional Development Fund is intended to help to
redress the main regional imbalances in the Community through participation in the development
and structural adjustment of regions whose development is lagging behind and in the conversion of
decaying industrials regions”.

9. Article 161 TEC specifies that “a Cohesion Fund set up by the Council … shall provide a financial
contribution to projects in the fields of environment and trans-European networks in the area of
transport infrastructure”.

10. Note that the assumption of a straight correlation between transport investment and economic
development is also contradictory to the ambitions of the EU’s new Sustainable Development
Strategy, which explicitly aims at decoupling transport growth from GDP growth.

11. It should be noted, however, that current rethinking of regional policy as a whole does not necessarily
challenge the sense of using road and rail investments as tools for economic development, since
neither market-led economic integration nor diversification can be achieved without first physically
linking the infrastructures of countries or regions. What it does, challenge, however, is previous
simplistic assertions (also made both by the Commission, see later) that improved road and rail
connection automatically reduce regional disparities.

12. The Ecu was the (unminted, virtual) direct predecessor of the Euro, i.e. 1 Ecu is equal to 1 €.

13. A pump effect is the (counter-productive) removal of resources from structurally weaker and
peripheral regions due to improved accessibility. As for state-of-the-art research, the Communication
specifically refers to the “Study of the socio-economic impact of projects financed by the Cohesion Fund” done by the London School of Economics (LSE) for the European Commission in 1997.


15. Communications mainly serve the purpose of clarifying Commission thinking on a particular issue at a particular time, but there is no direct political commitment resulting from them, and its conclusions are not necessarily shared by all members of the Commission.

16. Also note that there is a rapidly growing literature that uses the term cohesion in the sense of inclusiveness, stressing issues such as social capital and governance. For a good overview of this literature with regard to cities, see Fainstein (2001).

17. In the related article, Richardson and Jensen identify mobility and polycentric development as central themes in the European Spatial Development Perspective. Note, however, that what they identify as a ‘mobility discourse’ is less directly related to infrastructure investments but more attributable to a general ‘culture of mobility’ that aims at ‘transcending spatial distances’.

18. This desire to indicate such core-periphery connections, and to indicate a hierarchy of linkages, is clearly visible in some of the less publicized Banana representations.


The Concept of polycentricity has at least three meanings in the context of European spatial planning and regional geography. At the scale of Europe as a whole (inter-regional), the possibility of developing multiple dynamic growth zones across Europe, to challenge the tendencies for a strong core region to which other part of the territory are peripheral. … At the scale of the territory (intra-regional), the situation where there are multiple urban centers, often interconnected, rather than a single dominant centre … At the scale of the urban agglomeration (intra-urban). This refers to the multiplicity of nodal points within large urban areas, which challenge traditional notions of cities focused around their city centers.

20. Excerpted from Peter Hall (n.d.), Christaller for a Global Age: Redrawing the Urban Hierarchy, Section ‘Towards a spatially integrated approach’, available under http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/rb/rb59.html

21. In fact, ERT (1984, p. 1) claimed, some of the link projects:

   could be financed in very large measure by the private sector. If governments were prepared to set the right investment climate in terms of fiscal incentives and operating licences, the money could be raised. … Although Europe has become culturally programmed to see large transport infrastructure projects as the preserve of government, there is no reason why this should be so.

22. Note that in the specific case of Budapest, EU and European Investment Bank involvement in the financing of the ring road has in fact been a crucial and contested issue. See Peters (2001).

23. Much important grant funding for TEN networks particularly in the four lower income EU member countries has come from the EU Cohesion Fund. However, a much larger part of the TENs was financed through favourable loans from the European Investment Bank, as well as through public–private partnerships and national government funds.

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