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Travelling by coach: basics and perspectives

(Carreiseverkehr: Grundlagen und Perspektiven)

Summary

Objective of the study

Coach travel is generally considered to be a very efficient form of transport. The significance of this position within transport planning, in particular in realising the intermodal transport supply, is not well characterised. Important framework conditions, such as building and maintaining infrastructures, or awarding licences and concessions, are set by the government.

The present study will extend existing bases by showing the characteristics and system properties of the transport mode coach. Coach travel's current difficulties in terms of interaction with other relevant actors (cities, Confederation/Cantons, tourism industry etc.), especially the desired establishment of intermodal transport supply, will be presented, and the implications for future action described. Finally, concrete measures in terms of infrastructure, new services, and concession and licence practices, will be presented.

Characteristics of the transport mode coach

The coach shares with other modes of transport such advantages as low infrastructure costs (no tracks of its own) and flexibility in choice of route and course of the journey; one disadvantage is its dependence on other road traffic and on the performance of the road network.

The main area of coach operation is transporting travel groups in leisure and holiday traffic. This segment is primarily covered by occasional services, which can be divided into charter (transport of predetermined groups) and tour operation (e.g. package holidays). In addition, the coach is also used in regular service, although the vehicle's characteristics mean that long-distance journeys dominate here. Customers emphasise the good value for money, the sociability of the group, flexibility and comfort. However, coaches also have certain image problems, sometimes originating from ignorance and sometimes from bad experiences of coach trips. Nevertheless, there is objective evidence of very good results in terms of environmental pollution and safety compared with other forms of transport. Since coaches often only run if a certain minimum capacity is guaranteed, both environmental burden (emission of pollutants, CO₂ potentials) and energy consumption are relatively low in relation to person-kilometres travelled. In terms of safety, great efforts have been made to improve the vehicles (active and passive safety) and in the training and monitoring of drivers.

For passenger transfer infrastructure, the requirements of occasional and regular services differ to a certain extent. For regular services the picking up and setting down of passengers is limited to clearly defined stops, while occasional services have a greater diversity of destinations.

Operation and significance of the coach in Switzerland

By far the greatest use of the coach in Switzerland is in occasional service. The range on offer here is very great (club outings, transport to events, theme trips, beach holidays, ski tourism etc.) Young and old people predominate among the passengers, with the middle-aged less well represented. In the scheduled services, which are almost exclusively transfrontier, coaches depart from Swiss cities to destinations in Eastern and Southern Europe. Foreign workers from these regions form the main customer segment here.

Industry structure and problem situation

The structure of the Swiss coach tour industry is extremely heterogeneous, with a large proportion of the companies owning under three vehicles. Market management generally takes place on a very small scale. The industry is fighting internal problems such as overcapacity and high price competition. Although growth is still predicted in leisure activities, the coach tour industry is competing in this area with other forms of transport (private vehicles, trains, aeroplanes). In addition, developments at a higher level, such as the conclusion of the Land Transport Agreement with the EU, will lead towards

deregulation in transfrontier traffic, thus putting the industry under further pressure. In terms of domestic regular services, the industry's hands are largely tied since the Confederation does not wish to issue concessions that would compete with the railways. A further problem is an inadequate infrastructure in terms of location and equipment (bus stops, coach terminals). Like other collective modes of transport the transport mode coach is dependent on good connections with other modes. Here there is a general need for improvement, particularly in cities.

Need for action and recommendations

From the analysis of the coach as a mode of transport and observation of its operation in Switzerland, the following positive characteristics can be highlighted: the coach is a form of collective transport that can be operated flexibly, is comparatively environmentally efficient and safe, and makes a significant contribution to tourism in Switzerland. It can also contribute to a functioning intermodal transport system. Against this are the problems and shortcomings mentioned above, both within the industry and in relation to other actors. The following needs for action can be drawn from this.

The coach tour industry will have to strengthen its marketing and sales efforts. This would result in an improvement of image for the whole industry, while at the company level there would be better communication of the products on offer, with increased use of additional distribution channels. This may require a thorough examination of the industry's structure. The heterogeneous structure of the industry and the low profitability of the individual companies both hamper efficient marketing and sales, and must be overcome through increased cooperation within the industry and strengthening the structures of industry associations. In the future, occasional services will form by far the greatest proportion of what is offered by Swiss coach companies. Here, new leisure and holiday trends should be watched particularly closely.

It is recommended that the cities, communes and tourist resorts affected by coach travel take it into account as an independent factor in transport planning. This includes both planning and management of areas for passenger transfer, and the management of access routes. In evaluating the sites for passenger transfer areas, the aim should be to establish good connections with public regional and long-distance transport. Making use of and optimising existing approaches would be realistic. To finance the building and operation of such coach terminals or normal stops, charges for their use should be considered; larger establishments are best placed in the hands of an independent operator.

In granting concessions or licenses for public transport the Confederation and Cantons should examine how they award regular service concessions, to see how the coach as collective transport can be used to cover mobility needs. Certain specific applications, particularly in leisure traffic, are conceivable. An increased recognition of the coach as a generally useful form of collective transport also requires a thorough examination of tax and duty practice in comparison with the competing forms of transport.