

Steps Forward in Free Access to Urban Public Transport

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Thirty years of neoliberal domination, culminating in the economic crisis that began in 2008, have resulted in the introduction of charges for public service throughout Europe, particularly for education and health services. But this is not the case in all public services. In recent years there has been a renaissance of free public transport, particularly in Eastern Europe. While in Hasselt in Belgium or Colomiers in France – cities that were until recently symbols of the success of free public transport in Western Europe – tickets have been reintroduced as part of the neoliberal trend to charge for services, in the East candidates for local power compete with each other in many cities on the basis of free public transport. Currently, it is possible to travel free of charge in more than 100 cities around the world. And Poland and Estonia are at the forefront in this field.

When in 2012 the Free Trade Union “August 80” (WZZ “Sierpien 80”) started the campaign for free public transport in Poland, to fight against the increasingly frequent and high ticket price increases throughout the country, public transport was free in only two cities. Today there are 44 Polish cities that practice it, from the small town of Swieradow-Zdroj [1] – 5,000 inhabitants, but invaded by tourists and their cars in high season, whose free public transport is common with the Czech city Nove Mesto pod Smrkem [2] – to the canton of Lubin with a total population of 106,000. . [3]

Many other cities are considering establishing free public transport and it may be that next year the city of Czestochowa will be part of the lot – it is a larger city than Dunkirk in France and it would be the third largest European city with free public transport.

At first, mayors in many cities considered the idea of free public transport absurd and the media treated our initiatives as a curiosity, if they ever mentioned them. We cannot therefore fail to ask the question: why is Poland now ahead of the curve in this area? It is not easy to answer them, as free transport is introduced for many reasons.

In some cities, the decision is taken during the reconstruction of roads and bridges, as is currently the case in Konin, a city in west-central Poland with a population of 75,000. Often, once the work is finished, public transport remains free. Elsewhere, it is the citizens themselves who adopt a civic budget. The campaign led by “August 80” gave ideas to managers in many other cities. This was the case, for example, in Lubin, the largest Polish conurbation where this idea was implemented. Sometimes it is the budgetary reasons that decide: for example at Ząbki – a city of 35,000 inhabitants located near Warsaw – the right to free transport is limited to those who pay their taxes in the city. Free public transport is introduced both by more or less on the leftwing local government and by those on the far

right. Some local politicians promised it during the 2014 municipal campaign and those who were elected have generally fulfilled this promise. Finally, in Poland, as in the other countries of the former Eastern bloc, free public transport for some parts of the population has often been preserved, which simplifies the issue by simply extending it.

Perhaps we will witness the creation of regional networks of free public transport, similar to the one that operates in the canton of Lubin. In this part of the Lower Silesia region, free transport also exists in Polkowice, an industrial city of 22,000 inhabitants in the Lower Silesia region, and in some agglomerations of its canton, in Lubin and throughout its canton and in some agglomerations of the canton of Legnica, an industrial city (copper smelter) with 100,000 inhabitants in Lower Silesia, which between 1945 and 1993 was the headquarters of the Northern Group of the Soviet Army (occupying one third of the city). One can only wish for the creation of an inter-cantonal union of free public transport, an idea already under discussion. In the very near future, we could therefore see a large region with free transport.

Debates on free access

In Poland, the city of Żory in Upper Silesia is best known for its free public transport. [4] It was one of the first cities to make this decision, when our campaign for free public transport had grown. The issue was then discussed in almost all departments – in town halls, local media and on the streets.

“You see, they are still increasing ticket prices and it will turn out that their resources will decrease again, while they could lower prices or introduce free tickets,” said an old man in front of the newsstand in Katowice, before the introduction of free tickets at Żory, reacting to the price increase of KZK GOP, the local public transport operator, then in the Upper Silesian metropolitan area, now in the Silesian Metropolis-Zagłębie. [5]

In these discussions we could also hear: “But I don’t agree, because then homeless people will travel on buses”, often accompanied by “and they will stink”. Many people reacted in this way, from members of ultraliberal parties to civil servants in charge of public transport. This is an absurd argument, which has nothing to do with free public transport and only emphasises the need to solve the problem of homelessness, and therefore access to housing.

Today, in local government there are not many people left to propose increases in ticket prices. Instead, they are reduced and the demand for free transport for schoolchildren is present in each urban area. In recent years, Poland has become the world leader in providing free municipal public transport. In addition, in several dozen other cities, free travel has been partially introduced, for schoolchildren, the unemployed, motorists (e. g. in Zakopane), in city centres (e. g. in Kielce) or for everyone but only during weekends, on selected routes. It is also planned to introduce it this year only during the tourist season (in Szczyrk, Silesia). [6]

Rather, we hear that it is a good idea, but difficult to realize, because the city does not have the means... Yet, the truth is that all cities have the means. It is only a question of budgetary choice.

The effects of free access

It should also be taken into account that free public transport at Żory has proved to be less expensive than when it was paid for. Because it is an investment that pays off in the form of reduced road accidents, cleaner air, reduced noise, faster arrival of medical emergencies (due to the de-cluttering of streets), the abolition of ticket infrastructure costs, and also in the form of increased activity for older people, which is so important for disease prevention.

In almost all cities, since the introduction of free public transport, there has been an increase in the number of passengers and a reduction in car traffic. In Lubin, the number of passengers increased immediately by 50% and, one year later, by 100%! At Żory it has been multiplied by 3! Difficulties in finding parking spaces in the city centre have also disappeared in many of the cities concerned, whereas before it was impossible to park there. Everyone is pleased about this, from town halls that have decided to launch into it, to passengers and former motorists, to scientists. Kazimierz Kłosek, a professor at the Silesian Polytechnic School, one of the most favourable scientists for this project, concluded an interview: "I can't find any weak points there." [7] The stubbornness of the officials involved in organising public transport who are fighting against this idea – not only in Poland, but throughout Europe – is all the more surprising.

Mobility and access to parking spaces are not the only improvements due to free public transport. The most important effect, often forgotten in debates on this subject, is first and foremost the opening up of access to transport for the poorest – both young people and employees, and especially the elderly.

Nowhere in the world is public transport financed by ticket prices alone. It is always subsidized. In Poland almost everywhere more than half of this budget comes from taxes. In other words, travellers without tickets, treated like criminals, arrested and taken to police stations when they refuse to pay the fine immediately, have already paid for their trip... by paying their taxes. The poor, who travel without tickets, are simply treated as criminals because they are poor. This is because the law protects the interests of car manufacturers and motorists, not those of public transport passengers. By parking a car without immediately paying the price, you usually have two weeks to pay the fine, because you take into account that the driver may lack resources. But caught without a ticket on a bus, you have to pay the fine immediately, often more expensive than the one for parking and without the two-week deadline. Otherwise we're being sued by a bailiff.

In Lubin it was noted that the courts freed up when they no longer had to deal with passengers without tickets. "It is estimated that we have already saved around one million zlotys" because the courts are working, explains Lubin Mayor Robert Raczyński. [8] The total cost of public transport in Lubin is 14 million zlotys. Before free tickets covered only 5 million, so a saving of one million is a significant part of what the city's budget had to add to make public transport free.

Both in Lubin and at Żory, it has been noted that, since public transport became free, older people, who until then had remained at home, are moving around the city and can take care of what they were previously postponing, unable to pay for tickets. Many of them now take the bus to the city centre to do their shopping, whereas before they didn't. Traders, cinemas, bars and restaurants confirm this remark: their sales have increased... as have the taxes paid into the municipal coffers. In Lubin, the elderly have started to frequent allotments again, often bringing back new plants. What better way to spend a warm weekend than in the working-class garden, which can be accessed free of charge.

Free public transport in Estonia....

From 9 to 12 May 2018, an international conference on free public transport was held in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. Mayors, presidents and activists from all over the world shared their experiences and knowledge in the field of free public transport and the results of its introduction. As the initiators of this project in Poland, the activists of the free trade union "August 80" participated in this conference.

Together with Estonia, Poland is now an example in this field. And other Eastern European countries may soon follow in our footsteps. However, the paradox is that while more and more Polish mayors are deciding to introduce free public transport, many cantons and rural villages remain without access to public transport, cut off from the rest of the country. From this point of view, Poland is a country of extreme inequality: some already have free transport, while others have no access at all to public transport and if they do not have a car or driving licence, are condemned to stay at home.

It seems that Estonia will soon take another step forward. This country - the first where it has become possible to take the bus, tramway, trolley and train for free in the capital - wants to introduce free buses throughout its territory. If it does, it will become the first country in the world where public transport service from the rural village to the capital will be a right and not a commodity.

"The Minister of Economy and the Minister of Infrastructure have promised free public transport for all from 1 July 2018," Allan Alaküla from Tallinn when we interviewed him in Tallinn during the conference. Until then, only those who paid their taxes in Tallinn could travel to the city for free. Free public transport was introduced on 1 January 2013 and since then there has been an increase in the number of passengers and a reduction in car traffic. I must say that while I was there for the conference, I didn't see any traffic jams...

When hearing about free travel in Tallinn, many neoliberals argued that the means of transport in the Estonian capital were old and in poor condition. As if it depended on whether we have tickets or not! When public transport was charged for in Tallinn, its rolling stock was already old. This accusation was supposed to call into question the idea of free public transport... Today, however, the same people no longer say anything. Why? Why? Because the world capital of free public transport - the name claimed by Tallinn - has already changed almost all of its trams: 60 are new out of 85 on wheels and the others are in the process of being completely renovated. There are also new buses and trolleybuses (partly imported from Poland). The same applies to railway rolling stock, which has also been replaced - and in Tallinn the trains are also free of charge! It is in these trains that the increase in the number of passengers has been the most significant: their number has been multiplied by 8! Tallinn is also investing in the development of its public transport network. Tram lines are now going to previously unserved neighbourhoods and suburbs. It is therefore wrong to say that free transport means non-renewal, it is the opposite, according to the experiences of the cities that have carried it out...

Tallinn, the first capital in the world to offer free public transport, has been promoting this idea for several years. Not only are the results very satisfactory, but the city has also made itself known - an unexpected tourist promotion effect. It is really a remarkable city, because not only is it the first capital to introduce such a solution, but it will also be the first country to introduce free buses throughout its territory. The Estonians have taken an important decision, they have taken a giant step forward in making public transport free of charge.

...and in Dunkirk, Tübingen, Avesta

In the north of France, the Dunkirk conurbation, which has more than 200,000 inhabitants, will have free public transport from 1 September this year. It will therefore be the largest city in France implementing this solution. For the moment, transport is free on weekends. It was a test for this type of public transport. The results indicate that the idea was excellent and that it should be generalized to everyone throughout the week, as traffic has decreased and the number of passengers has increased. Dunkirk has the same experience as Polish cities in activating older people. Now they attend cinemas, parks and restaurants instead of staying in front of the television. The results of free access throughout the week can only be even better, but we have to wait another year to confirm this.

Tübingen is a city of 90,000 inhabitants in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, which is starting to introduce free public transport, first on Saturdays. The authorities have prepared themselves very professionally for this, carrying out a study to find out how many additional buses will be needed, how many more passengers will be needed and how many more will need to be added by investing in its development. It will be the largest German city introducing free public service.

Avesta, a small Swedish industrial town (23,500 inhabitants), 150 km northwest of Stockholm, introduced free public transport in 2012. The city was depopulated before the introduction of free public transport, but since then it has had 2,000 more inhabitants, which is a significant increase. As in the cases mentioned above, the number of bus passengers has increased... multiplied by 5. Similarly, car traffic has decreased and the number of pedestrians has also increased. But the most interesting thing is that paid transport cost the city 23.6 million Swedish crowns. If free access had been introduced only for children and schoolchildren, the cost would have been \$31.8 million. But the decision to make it free has been made and today it costs... only 23.7 million crowns!

Projects in Bucharest, Vilnius, Sophia, Bratislava and... Paris!

The small town of Lugoj (38,000 inhabitants) was the first city in Romania to introduce free public transport in 2013. Since then, initiatives spreading this idea have multiplied and the number of cities where public transport is even partially free has increased. The 2016 municipal elections in Bucharest – the capital of Romania with a population of 2.5 million – were won by Gabriela Firea, whose main slogan was free public transport.

In Vilnius (Lithuania, 550,000 inhabitants) this will be the main electoral argument of one of the mayoral candidates, who is likely to win. In Slovakia's capital, Bratislava (450,000 inhabitants), free public transport was at the centre of the election campaign. And in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia (1.3 million inhabitants), activists are continuing to spread the idea.

The biggest surprise at this conference came from Paris. The municipality commissioned an in-depth analysis with a view to the possible introduction of free public transport in 2020. [9] If Paris, one of Europe's largest cities, decided to offer free public transport, it would also be the first city to have a free metro... if Bucharest does not get ahead of it.

Free public transport is on the rise all over the world, not only in Europe. In China too, in Chengdu (14 million inhabitants), public transport is free of charge during peak hours. In Brazil, you can travel free of charge to 12 cities, the largest of which, Maricá, covers 362 km² and has 153,000 inhabitants. It is also a country where protests against the increase in

ticket prices have mobilized hundreds of thousands of demonstrators and where the demand for free public transport is very strong.

Like health and education services, public transport service must be a right and not a commodity – a good idea that is spreading!

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Lukasz Lugowski, activist of the Free Trade Union “August 80”, is one of the initiators and coordinator of the campaign for free public transport in Poland.

Notes

1. Swieradow-Zdroj is a spa town in Lower Silesia, on the border of the Czech Republic. Public transport has been free of charge since 16 June 2016.
2. Nove Mesto pod Smrkem, 4,000 inhabitants, in Bohemia.
3. The canton of Lubin – city of copper mines and their transformation – also includes the cities of Scinawa and Rudna and has 106,000 inhabitants over an area of 712 km².
4. Żory (62,000 inhabitants) in Upper Silesia, was an essentially mining town until the restructuring of the mines in 2003.
5. The Metropolis of Haute-Silésie-Zagłębie (Górnośląsko-Zagłębiowska Metropolia), whose centre is the city of Katowice, was created in July 2017. It has a population of 2.3 million.
6. Zakopane (27,000 inhabitants) is a tourist city located below the Tatras mountains, it is the winter sports capital of Poland. Kielce is a city of almost 200,000 inhabitants in central-eastern Poland. Szczyrk (5,500 inhabitants) is a tourist town and ski resort in the Beskids, in southern Poland.
7. Municipal elections will take place in spring 2020 in France.

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