

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Trains are gaining speed, at last

Discussion in Europe on modern railway grid is meeting resistance, though, from Bonn's "Mr. Trucking."

A press conference March 28 of the Bonn minister of research and technology, Heinz Riesenhuber, on projects and funding priorities broke the routine. At a point in the briefing when nobody expected anything spectacular, Riesenhuber declared that "magnetically levitated trains should play a big role in future East-West European transportation."

He explained that the West German experimental train, Transrapid, could help to bring millions of future passengers quickly from one end of Europe to the other. The political changes in Central and Eastern Europe over recent months require a rethinking of plans for the future of transportation in Europe, and among other projects in discussion, one may also consider Transrapid routes on, or crossing the territory of today's East Germany, Riesenhuber said.

A spokesman at the ministry leaked later in a discussion with *EIR* that there is "certain forethought about a future route leading, let's say, from Cologne over Dortmund, Bielefeld and Hanover to Berlin, or, one may also begin the project in Berlin extending into the West and on the other side, to Warsaw in the East or even beyond." The spokesmen emphasized that the Transrapid shall not be a substitute, but a complement to the electrically driven, high-speed trains now being built or planned.

The East German side has begun to move too. The outgoing transition regime of Prime Minister Hans Modrow gave the official go-ahead, in mid-March, for the Hanover-Berlin high-speed rail project. The start of

work on the project, which is the centerpiece of transport infrastructure linking Eastern and Western Europe, was set for spring 1992, and it shall be completed by 1996-97. This schedule can be moved up by the new government, naturally.

Also in mid-March, the East German railways signed an agreement with the Polish railways to increase the schedule of mutual cross-border rail transports. The East German will secure, in the new summer train schedule, six more trains per day on the main route Frankfurt (Oder)-Poznan-Warsaw, which is equivalent to some 9,000 tons of commercial train-load (30 to 35 cars) or 5,000 passengers (800 each on a train with 10 coaches) daily. Further, agreement was reached between the two state railways that the long-overdue project of electrifying the route from Berlin to Frankfurt (Oder) begins this year.

In Bonn, things are not moving. When in late March, senior representatives of the West and the East German state railways (Bundesbahn and Reichsbahn) resolved to set up a joint project commission, they met the veto of Friedrich Zimmermann, the Bonn transportation minister. He told the Bundesbahn to "step back and leave initiatives to the politicians, first."

Zimmermann is not taking initiatives on the railway issue, but is favoring road-transport by trucks. He has also been blocking the Transrapid project of his ministerial colleague Riesenhuber. And despite a few public remarks, not even Chancellor Kohl has made the railway grid a leading issue of cabinet debates on future

transportation between East and West. This indecision in Bonn has come under heavier attack.

The presidium of the West German railway workers union met in Munich March 27, and passed a resolution calling on Bonn to secure the East German rail grid which carries 75% of all commercial freight. The government was urged not to repeat the earlier mistake in West Germany's transport sector of shifting substantial freight to trucking. The railway workers also advised that East Germany become an integrated segment in the planned trans-European high-speed rail grid.

Zimmermann, "Mr. Trucking in Bonn," should take a cue from his Austrian colleague Rudolf Streicher, who proposed in Vienna April 2 that there be "a high-speed train that can make the entire distance from Vienna to Berlin in only three hours." He said that restoring existing routes alone won't suffice to secure transport of persons and commercial goods; new tracks for high-speed trains to link Berlin with Vienna, Prague, and Budapest must be built.

Streicher also announced that Austria will hike its investment budget for the next fiscal year from 4.5 to 5.2 billion deutschemarks, emphasizing bettering basic rail infrastructure into Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Eighty percent of all Austrian commercial exports to these two countries is carried by rail.

Within the next five years, the Austrian program will reduce average travel time from Vienna to Prague and Budapest from 5.5 and 2.5 hours respectively, to 3 and 2 hours. Basic investments into a modern rail route from the Austro-Hungarian border to Budapest will be around DM1.6 billion, said Streicher. He should get on the phone with his reluctant colleague in Bonn right away.