

The Nine Euro Ticket

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Getting more people on to public transport has been a challenge that the world faced long before COVID-19 caused train, bus, and light rail use to collapse.

Data from the Eurostat shows that across the EU 83.2% of all inland journeys in 2019—the last full year before the pandemic—were by car.

The figure rose as high as 90.6% in Lithuania, 89.3% in Portugal, and 89.1% in Norway. In the United Kingdom, it was 87.4%. That figure might come as a surprise to those who live in London, with its extensive and popular multimodal public transport network. But it will raise few eyebrows anywhere else in the country.

Even nations that are internationally seen as being leaders in public transport emerged as highly car dependent. In both France and Germany, 83.3% of inland trips were by car, slightly higher the EU average. The best-performing countries were clustered in eastern Europe, led by Hungary (where “only” 72.9% of trips were by car) and Slovakia (73.8%). While many eastern European countries do indeed have well-developed public transport networks, they also have lower incomes and, therefore, fewer cars. Even there, then, relatively high rates of public transport use might reflect sheer necessity rather than social, economic, or environmental choice.

In any case, the world's emergence from pandemic lockdowns forced governments across the world to think creatively about how to get their populations using public transport again—and whether some of those solutions could be the basis for long-term gains, rather than just achieving the post-COVID “bounce back.” More recently, the global crisis caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has provided further incentive for governments to use public transport subsidies as a way of cutting energy use and easing increasingly painful living costs.

Perhaps the most innovative—and certainly the boldest—scheme was announced in spring 2022 by Germany's Olaf Scholz as part of a EUR 30 billion package of relief measures. The German chancellor revealed that between



June and August, unlimited multimodal travel would be available on regional and local public transport networks for just EUR 9 a month. This was a huge subsidy; existing “travelcard”-style subscriptions to transport networks cost an average of EUR 80 a month, meaning that people who had one were effectively getting nearly 90% off their travel bill, or more than EUR 200 over the summer. The federal government had to provide Germany’s 16 regional states with EUR 2.5 billion to compensate for lost ticket income.

The short-term aims were to ease the cost-of-living crisis and curb inflation, as transport costs make up a significant portion of the “basket of goods” used to calculate the headline inflation figure. But the longer-term aims were social and environmental. The hope was that an immediate boost in public transport numbers would translate into a permanent shift in behaviour, as people realised that they didn’t need their cars as much as they might have thought.

It was also seen as an invaluable nationwide experiment—a chance to test assumptions about how and why people travelled as they did. Specifically, they were asking to what extent cost was the major constraint in getting people out of their cars and on to public transport?

In one sense, the scheme was a measurable success. More than 52 million tickets were sold in a country with a population of 83 million. The VDV—Germany’s association of public transport operators—estimated that public transport replaced around 10% of car trips during the lifetime of the 9-euro scheme, meaning 1.8 million fewer tons of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Closer scrutiny, however, suggests a more mixed picture. Even the VDV’s own figures suggest that 90% of car trips were not replaced by public transport under the initiative. Of course, a 10% reduction is far from trivial—10% of a very large number is still a large number—but one might argue that if a 90% subsidy for public transport reduces car use by just 10%, it isn’t delivering maximum value.

In any case, other statistics present a more mixed picture. A study in Munich, carried out from June to mid-July, showed that while 35% of participants used public transport more, only 3% used their cars less. Christian Böttger, a rail expert at the Berlin University of Applied Sciences (HTW), told Der Spiegel that “only a slight shift from the road to public transport of, at best, 2% to 3% can be seen.”

At the same time, rail and bus use surged, with the VDV concluding that around a quarter of journeys made via public transport during the first two months of the scheme would not have been used were it not for the 9-euro price tag.

This finding points to an uncomfortable conclusion: to some extent, the scheme created extra journeys, rather than changing the way that people travelled. The theory is that many people continued to use the car in much the same way as before and used the offer to “tag on” extra trips—day trips and holidays—that they would not otherwise have taken. It is why research by the think-tank Agora Verkehrswende suggested the scheme had increased emissions overall.

In any case, the scheme also flagged up constraints in Germany’s public transport networks.

People in the U.K. might be surprised to learn that they are not the only country with gripes about their rail infrastructure. For many years, Germans have complained about underinvestment in their local and regional railways, with late and crowded trains common even before the 9-euro offer. The surge in demand over the summer compounded this issue, with passengers taking to social media to share their woes.

Research also highlighted the fact that public transport provision tends to be better in larger cities rather than smaller ones, as well as in urban areas rather than rural ones. Expensive flat-rate public transport subsidies, therefore, do not benefit everyone equally. A study by the University of Kassel found a higher proportion of

people bought the 9-euro ticket in bigger cities, while 37% of respondents to VDV surveys said that they did not use the ticket because a lack of transport connections meant that it was not useful for them.

The main drawback of the scheme, of course, is that it was eye-wateringly expensive and not sustainable in the longer term. The German government announced a replacement scheme in September that will work in a similar way, but with a price tag of between EUR 49 to EUR 69 per month. It is more economically viable, but likely to have less of a transformative effect.

There are some clear lessons to be learned from the great German experiment. One is that people like simple systems and flat-rate fees. As Deutsche Welle pointed out, the public transport ticketing system in Germany is so complex that there is even a song about it. (Rail users in the U.K., who also have to navigate a baffling system of fees and discounts, will understand this pain.) Simple, flat-rate systems are effective, popular, and much easier to publicise.

Second, there is a significant latent demand for more public transport, and cost is a major constraining factor. We can argue about to what extent rail and buses replaced cars during the 9-euro scheme, and to what extent they just added extra journeys. The fact remains, though, that people wanted to make those extra journeys. Making public transport cheaper gave people significantly more freedom to go to places they wanted to go.

For me, the 9-euro scheme shows that reducing the cost of public transport must go hand-in-hand with improving its quality, capacity, and reach if it is to achieve sustainable, long-term modal shift at the scale that we require. For decades, we have allowed the car to become central to our lives, as well as the way that we have planned and built our communities. Unpicking that will take time and money—there is no quick (or cheap) fix.

