

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Berlin to Moscow by train in five hours

Renewed Russian interest in a modern rail link puts the option for a maglev system on the agenda.

When Russian President Boris Yeltsin proposed, at a May 13 meeting with German industrialists in Stuttgart, the construction of a high-speed rail link from Berlin to Moscow, he took his hosts by surprise. That the Russians would take the political initiative to revitalize discussions on grand infrastructure projects between the east and west of Eurasia had not been expected. The last time the Russians had talked about such projects was December 1992, when a joint statement on Russian-German cooperation was issued.

Yeltsin's proposal was endorsed on the spot by Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Transportation Minister Matthias Wissmann. Kohl said he wanted the European Union (EU) to fund such a project, and Wissmann said the issue would be placed on the agenda during the half-year German presidency of the EU which begins in July.

Unfortunately, neither side outlined a more detailed description of the project, which indicates that no such rail link has been planned out yet in the necessary engineering detail. Proposals for a high-speed railroad over the 2,000 kilometers between Berlin and Moscow have been made before, but on the political level.

For example, in the late spring of 1990, Russian Deputy Minister of Transportation Vitaly Budko met with Horst Gibtner, his counterpart in the East German transition government that was in power from March to October. Budko proposed construction of a modern rail line that would link Berlin with Moscow via Warsaw and Minsk, the capital of Belarus. He told Gibtner

that if the West funded the project, Russia would be willing to build its segment of the line from Moscow westward at the same time the Poles and Belarussians would build theirs, so that the project could be completed in less time.

In a discussion with this author shortly after the Yeltsin proposal in Stuttgart, Gibtner reported that Budko even made the "truly revolutionary step" of proposing—for the first time in 100 years of Russian infrastructure debates, since the Czarist-era cabinet minister Count Sergei Witte—that this line would be built with a European gauge, including on Russian territory. There would no longer be a need to convert trains coming from the West to the wider Russian gauge at Brest-Litovsk on the Belarussian-Polish border, and vice versa; trains could go through at speeds of 200 km per hour, covering the Berlin to Moscow distance in 10 hours with only minor interruptions at the borders of Germany, Poland, Belarussia, and Russia.

At that time, the European Community was not at all prepared to fund such "revolutionary" projects. It would have meant altering EU plans for the modernization and extension of the West European railway infrastructure grid, to define concrete projects into the East, after the fall of the Iron Curtain in late 1989. Not even in the spring of 1992, at the international Eurailspeed congress in Brussels, did development of railway infrastructure in the East (such as the Budko proposal) receive more than a vague, verbal statement of sympathy. Two years later, at the April 1994 All-European Transportation Conference in Crete,

the EU still would not do more than add some dotted lines pointing eastward on its project grid for "continental infrastructure development."

So far, eastern promises about rail projects haven't been more than statements of intent, either. There is still no construction work in Poland, which promised in 1990 to modernize its railway links with the West and the East so that trains can travel at 160 km per hour, nor has any concrete work been done on the Belarussian or Russian side.

But the Yeltsin proposal of May 13 has created a new political environment for discussion about transcontinental transportation projects, and once Kohl has placed it on the EU agenda, conditions will also change inside the western bureaucracy. Taking into account the average of two years of engineering studies and other administrative preparations that bigger infrastructure projects now require, it would still be possible to begin construction of the Berlin-Moscow line by no later than autumn 1996.

Modern magnetic levitation rail technology, already available with Germany's Transrapid experimental train, is, however, more appropriate for the envisioned Berlin-Moscow "project of the future" than conventional high-speed rail technology. Maglev trains, which run at twice the speed of the French TGV and German ICE, could make the Berlin-Moscow trip in five hours.

A draft proposal for a maglev line was first made in late 1989 by American economist Lyndon LaRouche in his proposal for a "Productive Triangle of Reconstruction, Paris-Berlin-Vienna." It still provides a solid basis for discussion of transcontinental grand infrastructure projects. It has been before all governments in Europe since 1989.