

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Eastern perspectives for maglev rail

The Russians and Germans plan to build a maglev rail system from Moscow to Sheremetyevo airport.

On Oct. 12, 1988, in a speech at the Bristol Kempinski Hotel in Berlin, U.S. statesman Lyndon LaRouche outlined a perspective for East-West cooperation in the joint development of a "Eurasian land-bridge" of infrastructure and industry. The ideas that LaRouche presented, a year before the Berlin Wall fell, sounded like "castles in the sky" to many, but some took detailed notes.

So, when today, politicians and experts in Berlin repeatedly come forth with proposals for grand infrastructure development projects between the West and the East, one must also recall this debate has a background that can be traced back to that spark at the Bristol Kempinski Hotel in 1988.

During the last week of January, Berlin was at the center of several important events that were in the spirit that LaRouche addressed:

First, the transport ministers of Germany, Poland, Belarus, and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding in Berlin on Jan. 23, on the accelerated completion of the Berlin-to-Moscow transport corridor, which is planned, by the year 2010 at the latest, to make train travel possible at speeds of 160-250 kilometers per hour. The agreement was a point of departure for Herwig Haase, the Berlin city-state's minister of public transportation, who proposed that maglev trains, such as the German Transrapid, be used on that route:

"In view of the fact that the city of Moscow has concrete plans to build an urban maglev train line, and in view of the certainty that the Transrapid will run between Hamburg and Berlin, and

in view of discussions between Moscow and St. Petersburg as well, the modern maglev train system should be used instead of the traditional rail-track technology," Haase said on Jan. 24. "A project that would link the capitals Berlin, Warsaw, Minsk, and Moscow through this modern transportation system should also be seriously discussed. Travel time between the two end points of this new route—Hamburg and Moscow—could then be reduced from 33 hours currently, down to five."

Haase has mandated a study to define a route into Berlin for the Transrapid coming from Hamburg, as well as for potential maglev routes from Berlin to the East.

What Haase referred to as Moscow's "concrete plans" for an urban maglev project had already been discussed during talks that Berlin's Mayor Eberhard Diepgen conducted with senior Russian officials and transportation experts in Moscow in October 1994. The visit took place in the context of the sister-city partnership between the two capitals. The corresponding visit of a Russian delegation to Berlin on Jan. 24, 1995 resulted in a cooperation agreement that was signed that same day by both municipal administrations and industrial firms in the railway technology sectors.

The Moscow project envisions the construction of a 30 km maglev link between the planned new business center near the Kremlin and the international airport at Sheremetyevo. After completion of the line, passengers will be able to travel between the Kremlin and the airport in 20 minutes, as compared to an average 90 minutes today.

The project, which is scheduled to begin next year, will be a joint venture, with the construction (about 70% of the total work) done by Russian firms, while Germany will contribute the train system and modern electronic components, such as signal systems.

Vladimir Inosemtsev of the Moscow University of Transport Technologies who led the Russian delegation, said that the Bonn cabinet approval last autumn for the Hamburg-to-Berlin maglev project convinced them that this technology would be ideal for their project.

Both Inosemtsev and Haase hinted that after the maglev track in Moscow is completed by the year 2002, the Russians plan to build another 120 km rail line between Moscow and the industrial center of Selenograd, plus to the Domodedovo national airport.

The first line is expected to cost DM 1.2 billion (\$750 million), and the second DM 600 million. The weak flank in this agreement is that the investments will be organized by a private banking group that will be set up in Moscow. This requires a strong state hand in the project on the Russian side, to make sure that the free-market impulses that have caused so much ruin in the Russian economy, don't delay the project.

The Germans have offered to help the Russians secure some European Union funding for the projects, which, because this involves state guarantees on the western side, would make investments considerably safer.

On Jan. 29, Haase proposed taking the maglev technology beyond Moscow to Asia: "I am already seeing the Transrapid going from Berlin to Beijing, even to Tokyo." Since by 2010, Berlin will have become the biggest hub for high-speed transport on the continent, it is appropriate to think about maglev lines to Asia today, he said.