Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

On the doorstep of a 'maglev century'

The vision of a European-wide grid of maglev trains is beginning to take shape.

When Transport Minister Matthias Wissmann leaves Bonn on Oct. 23 for a one-week trip to Malaysia and Thailand, proposals for the German maglev train, the Transrapid, to serve as the planned future high-speed rail lines there, are on his agenda. For example, the envisioned project of a high-speed rail connection between the Thai capital, Bangkok, and the southern industrial region of Rayong, has been portrayed by German and Thai transportation experts as "ideal" for maglev trains, which can run at speeds of 400-500 kilometers per hour.

Talks between Germany and Thailand are still at a relatively early stage, and the two nations are far from signing a contract for the project. But the fact that a German cabinet minister is officially proposing a maglev project, is something that is already extremely positive, if seen against the background of almost 30 years of painstaking and mostly fruitless debate in Germany about the usefulness of a maglev train system.

Only in the last two years has progress for this revolutionary transportation technology become visible, when the government finally gave the official go-ahead to build the long-discussed first maglev line between Hamburg and Berlin (the two biggest cities in Germany). Construction on the Hamburg-Berlin route is to begin in the spring of 1998 at the latest, and the 285-kilometer line is scheduled to be completed by the year 2005.

When the parliament passed the last elements of the legislation for the project in the spring of this year, the government also adopted a more aggressive approach in promoting maglev technology overseas. It began to advertise it in diplomatic meetings with other governments, including Chile, Brazil, China, and, most recently, the Netherlands.

The Dutch broadened the perspective of the maglev project beyond the envisioned Hamburg-Berlin route. In July, the Transport Ministry of the Netherlands signalled interest in a maglev connection from Amsterdam to Hamburg, based on the Transrapid technology. This would turn the Hamburg-Berlin line, which now stands as an isolated pilot project, into something that comes closer to an actual maglev grid, by cutting through almost the entire north of Western Europe.

A more detailed proposal and feasibility study will be presented in the Dutch parliament in November, and by the spring of 1997, it is expected that the parliament and government will decide on the project. An extension of that line from Amsterdam to Rotterdam, Europe's biggest seaport, is under discussion in the Netherlands.

Reports about this Dutch maglev perspective filled the pages of the German press during July and August. In early September, a new element was brought into the discussion, when the minister of economic affairs in the city-state of Hamburg, Erhard Rittershaus, called for a continental European maglev grid, which would connect some of the biggest cities of the continent, from the Atlantic coast all the way to Moscow. He proposed, in addition to the cities of Berlin, Hamburg, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam, which have been named in the discussion, that Copenhagen, Warsaw, Minsk, Moscow, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Munich, and Milan also be incorporated into a future, trans-European maglev grid.

The average travelling time on this grid sometime in the first decade of the next century would be reduced by almost 50%, as compared to Europe's present-day conventional high-speed trains: A maglev train ride from Berlin to Moscow would take five hours; from Berlin to Milan via Prague, three hours; from Copenhagen to Budapest, four and a half hours; and from Moscow to Amsterdam, seven and a half hours.

This proposed maglev grid, which closely resembles the proposal made by Lyndon LaRouche in late 1988 for a trans-continental maglev-based infrastructure grid, was outlined in a map in a special report published by the *Hamburger Abendblatt* daily, on Sept. 10. Since then, it has been referred to in a number of public statements and press articles also in Berlin, where experts are discussing where the best location is in that city, from which the Transrapid could be extended to other cities, sometime early in the next century.

The most feasible perspective which is being worked on now, by experts of the Berlin Senate and the German Ministry of Transportation, is for a special maglev tube in the planned new huge central train station at Lehrter Bahnhof, the traditional station in the heart of Berlin which was destroyed at the end of World War II and has never been rebuilt.

From there, cities on a route stretching toward southeastern Europe, including Dresden, Prague, Vienna, and Budapest, and, in eastern Europe, including Warsaw, Minsk, and Moscow, could be reached in, at most, one and a half hours from one city to another.