
Fare-free public transport: critical lessons from multiple sites

by Wojciech Kęblowski

Key messages

The transport debate in Brussels is locked in an unproductive exchange between growth-oriented “neoclassical” and de-politicised “sustainable” arguments.

Critical perspectives paying attention to socio-spatial inequalities underpinning mobility are side-lined and rarely enter political agendas.

A potentially “critical” policy of fare-free public transport (FFPT) exists in full form in nearly 100 diverse municipalities worldwide.

FFPT shows medium potential in terms of tackling car congestion or improving urban, and very high potential in terms of improving mobility of under-privileged group, across the urban territory.

The feasibility of FFPT is essentially a political, rather than a financial or a technical question.

Introduction

The contemporary debate about urban transport—embracing both academics and practitioners—is locked. It remains centered around a growth-oriented “neoclassical” orthodoxy on the one hand, and a largely de-politicised perspective on transport as contributor to “sustainable” development on the other. By contrast, “critical” academic voices that stress structural inequalities underpinning transport and mobility issues are rarely picked up in academia, and are even more seldom to be seen in official political agendas.

In this context, FFPT appears as a unique policy within the field in transport. It appears to be capable of directly addressing a variety of limits and ills of neoclassical and sustainable approaches to transport. Rather than focus on increasing the technical and economic efficiency of transport, and improving quality regardless of who uses it, FFPT seems to be rooted in a reflection about who uses, pays for and benefits from transport. At the same time, it is a policy that is discarded by the majority of transport engineers, economists and practitioners, who criticized it for allegedly financially destabilizing PT networks, generating “useless mobility”, devaluing public transport and failing to generate a modal shift from private vehicles to collective transport. On the other hand, a variety of urban scholars, public officials, and activists present strong empirical evidence of operational and economic savings related to fare abolition, but also discuss FFPT as an “alternative” choice that has an explicitly political, social and urban dimension, and has the capacity to confront transport “rationality” that berates fare abolition as a nonsensical instrument.

Methods, approaches and results

The research employed quantitative methods. Through extensive literature review (800+ articles studied) detailed empirical material was collected in Brussels to detect existing approaches to urban transport in the academic literature. To analyze how this literature reverberates in the transport debate in Brussels, 19 semi-structured interviews with high-rank officials representing and actively defining key stakes and strategies within the policy field were conducted. The interviewees included mobility authorities at the municipal, regional, and federal level, public transport (PT) operators, members of the civil society, and local academics. Furthermore, I reviewed academic and grey literature produced by the interviewees’ institutions. Similar methods were then applied to prepare empirical research about FFPT. Following an analysis of its global landscape, FFPT was analysed in three different sites:

- 1 Tallinn (Estonia), where fares were abolished in January 2013 for residents only, the self-proclaimed “Capital of Free Public Transport”, the main node in the growing international FFPT network, and the largest city with full FFPT.

- 2 Aubagne (France), where FFPT was introduced in May 2009 for all users located in the suburbs of Marseille, and the centre of the French FFPT network.
- 3 Chengdu (China), a booming metropolis (over 10m inhabitants), the largest city to have ever experimented with partial fare abolition (before morning peak, and on 116 short-distance bus services).

The analysis of FFPT in each city was based on qualitative and mixed methods. Approximately 80 semi-structured interviews have been conducted altogether in three FFPT sites with public officials on the municipal, regional and national level, transport experts, academics and workers, representatives of civic society. Next, to detect official records of FFPT implementation, the minutes of meetings of political bodies that discussed fare abolition were analysed, and mobility-related and budgetary plans were studied, as well as academic literature, and local media outlets.

What emerges from this work is a strong theoretical evidence of the neoclassical-sustainable hegemony that visibly permeates the debate about transport in general, and FFPT in particular. With regard to empirical evidence about FFPT, its programmes have been detected in nearly 100 municipalities. Most of these cases are located in rather small localities: the majority them are second- or third-tier towns and cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants. Even so, the case of Tallinn provides an important exception to this rule. On the one hand, FFPT appears to follow certain regional patterns, as socio-political and sustainable arguments in favour of fare abolition are particularly present in Europe and Brazil, while being less visible in the US. On the other hand, FFPT seems to be loosely related to their political orientation and does not appear to have a specific political “colour.”

Conclusions

Fare abolition is a feasible transport policy. However, its feasibility is essentially a political, rather than a financial or a technical question. Material from three sites listed above shows that FFPT policy is not financially harmful to local PT authorities and operators. Rather, in each of the cases studied, the implementation of FFPT has actually helped to generate new revenue that largely covers the reduced or eliminated income from fares. FFPT shows medium potential in terms of tackling car congestion or improving urban circulation, and very high potential in terms of improving mobility of under-privileged group, across the urban territory. However, the process of executing FFPT relies on coalitions forged between various actors and stakes, embracing different positions, interests and territories. The partnerships that underpin FFPT appear to be essentially top-down, bringing together established local actors that belong to local elite coalitions, and involving hardly any bottom-up actors. Despite its political character, FFPT does not seem to have a strong potential to empower its users by expanding the locus of urban decision-making away from politics

of urban regimes towards politics of the inhabitants. Although it improves the working conditions of drivers, it can nonetheless be incorporated into strategies oriented towards disempowering public transport workers. Furthermore, FFPT has an inherently spatial dimension: its impact plays out across various scales, and enters into the dynamics of inter-territorial competition—a key aspect for its potential implementation in Brussels.

Policy recommendations

1. Fare-free public transport open a debate

The key recommendation coming from this research regards structuring a debate about FFPT, and assessing its viability and desirability for Brussels. The research clearly demonstrates that this debate is not effective when structured solely around transport-related questions. Alongside inquiring into whether fare abolition is financially feasible, the analysis of FFPT should begin by analyzing how and by whom is the idea of switching to fare-free would be implemented, whose interests it helps to articulate, and whose interests it allows to challenge.

Rather than conceptualize FFPT as policy having the capacity to attract car drivers to PT, the discussion about whether to abolish fares in a given locality should also focus on its spatial embedding and anticipated territorial impact, within and beyond particular administrative boundaries. The discussion about FFPT should therefore not only consider the potential of FFPT to contribute to the improvement (or detriment) of quality of collective transport, but also reflect on how fare abolition is to affect the agency of passengers, and the conditions of PT workers. The apparently straightforward question about the cost of fare abolition does not only mean taking into account—on the one hand—higher costs related to lost income from tickets, increased demand and more personnel, and—on the other hand—lower expenses related to the maintenance of ticket systems and controls. Instead, the cost-benefit analysis of FFPT should be regarded as a highly spatial and political issue, involving a debate about what authorities—regional, but perhaps also federal and municipal—should contribute to FFPT—and making a statement in an ongoing conflict between different ways of moving around and living in the city, exercised by different inhabitants, across social classes.

2. Move beyond the dichotomy of “good” and “bad” policies

Approaching FFPT in a critical way means formulating high expectations towards this policy. It is not about scrutinizing it against its performance in terms of mobility, but also analyzing in terms of how it enters local power relations, how it interacts with public transport passengers and workers, and how it contributes to long-term, utopian transformation of urban society and space. However, the fact that a particular FFPT programme does not have the capacity to fulfil all these expectations does not mean—in opposition to many arguments raised by transport practitioners

and academics—that it is not a feasible policy, and one that can be applied by many cities, beyond the three localities studied in the dissertation.

To the contrary: the above-presented material should be read as an examination of how an existing practice can be implemented, and how it could be improved. Its goal is not to determine whether FFPT is a “good” or “bad” policy, or to identify a its “ideal” features to be compiled into a policy template maximising its potential. Whether and how FFPT “works” (or not) to a great extent depends on the particular urban contexts in which it is applied, and by whom it is developed and used.

3. Test FFPT

While obvious and understandable doubts and question will surround the idea of implementing FFPT in Brussels, there seem to be no convincing reasons not to test this policy in the Brussels-Capital Region. For beyond concerns related to its financial feasibility or environmental sustainability, fare abolition appears as a policy that addresses one of central contemporary problems in Brussels—its deepening social and spatial inequality, not only in relation to accessibility to public transport vis-à-vis other transport modes. The elaboration of its exact financing mechanism (which could involve regional and municipal authorities, or implementation of company tax) and its socio-spatial form (provision for tax-paying residents only vs. for all users) should be elaborated following the recommendations made in points 1. and 2. above.

List of publications

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