

Beyond Best Practices Policy Brief

Closing the transportation gap in Hungary

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Hungary's government has several strategies that mention greenhouse gas emissions reductions measures of one kind or another, lacks a concrete roadmap and a mechanism for tracking and measuring results. Often, the practical measures set by the government are counterproductive.

Within Romania, municipalities often have stronger strategic policy documents. Budapest and some other municipalities have Strategic Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs) to guide emissions reductions in the transport sector however with the exception of the development of cycling infrastructure and the careful reallocation of transport space - municipalities are reluctant to take the substantive steps to reduce GHG emissions.

Transportation in Hungary

How did we get to this point when the government is proposing to cut transport funding in the 2024 budget amid runaway inflation?^{1,2}

There were three 'discoveries' that motivated Hungarian transport policy in the 1990s that led it astray and still define transport policy today. All three can be traced back to the common myth that car manufacturers have successfully planted in people's minds all over the world: "Owing a car is freedom!". We now know that it is possible to have a transport infrastructure, an advanced public transport service, land use, taxation and charging systems, and a municipal policy that allows people to feel free without a car. But thirty years ago, many of the solutions of the 21st century were not mainstream knowledge, except for the fact that for many people, it is the bicycle rather than the car that can give them the freedom to move around.

The Hungarian government's first 'discovery' was that significant amounts of public subsidy for public transport can be withdrawn almost imperceptibly, without the change causing an immediate significant deterioration in quality.

The second 'discovery' was that if people shifted from public to private transport, quality of public services could be reduced and the money saved can be reallocated elsewhere. In Hungary this is manifested in the construction of motorways, where the potential for corruption is greater than in public transport.

The third 'discovery' was that more attention can be garnered through spectacular major infrastructure investments, rather than through more necessary but less impressive traffic balancing, planned preventive maintenance and organic, intelligent development of transport infrastructure.

This is how, in a few years, we have come to the point where rail passenger transport has been deliberately dismantled by the state, and many regional services have been abolished without reasonable cause. In addition, because of the inadequate maintenance of the road network, in some settlements where there is no rail passenger transport, the road is inaccessible by public transport because the road to the settlement is in such a poor state that buses cannot run,³ and there are hardly any other public road services in Hungary. Due to misguided policy the rail network is plagued by a plethora of permanent or forgotten temporary speed limit signs,

¹ Hungary, "2022. Évi XXV. Törvény Magyarország 2023. Évi Központi Költségvetéséről" (National Assembly of Hungary, 2022), <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a2200025.tv>.

² Hungary, "On the 2024 Central Budget of Hungary" (Hungary: National Assembly of Hungary, 2023), <https://www.parlament.hu/irom42/04181/04181.pdf>.

³ Attila Szabó, "Gazdaság: Leállnak a Buszok a Rossz Utak Miatt. Két Településre Nem Lehet Eljutni," NOL, 2011, http://nol.hu/gazdasag/leallnak_a_buszok_a_rossz_utak_miatt_ket_telepulesre_nem_lehet_eljutni-1113571.

sometimes even on Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) lines that were upgraded with EU funding a few years ago.⁴

The post-1990 boom in private car ownership has been compounded by a misguided urban policy, and the two have combined to create a huge population explosion in the settlements around Budapest and the agglomerations of the larger rural towns. The resulting commuting, mainly by car, continues to contribute significantly to the steady increase in transport carbon dioxide emissions.

Hungary modal split 2000 (left) and 2021 (right)

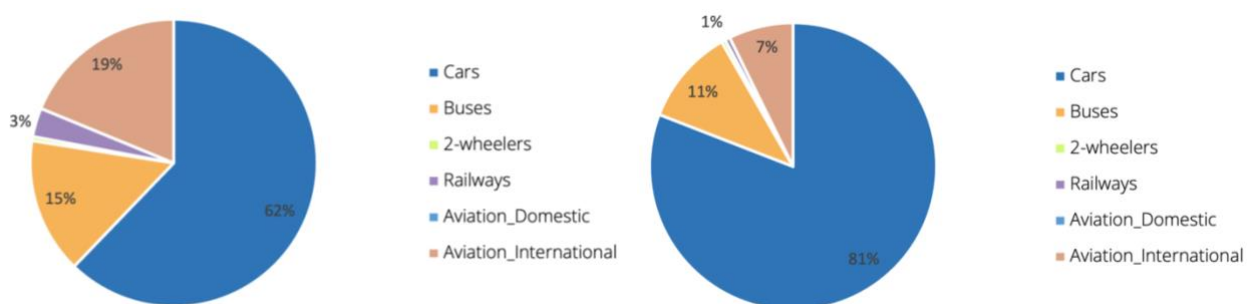


Figure 1 Hungarian modal split in 2000 and 2021⁵

Is there a way out?

Most importantly, we believe that the social cost of road transport should be paid by all participants through a suitable toll system. This is a prerequisite if, together with the other measures, any meaningful change is to be achieved.⁶ It is also necessary to prioritise public transport and raise service standards, including on regional and long-distance lines, in addition to suburban railways. A measure that can be implemented quickly is the abolition of all public bus services that run parallel to and compete with rail. But even more important is the development of a timetable-based, vehicle-independent public transport service with a uniform fare system, as witnessed by several initiatives in recent years that have been scrapped.

Transport should be integrated into the various strategies and programmes in a coordinated way based on uniform principles. This requires a national passenger transport strategy, which should set out a vision for the future, and give the indicators that characterise that vision (modal split, indicators of the quality of public service, age

⁴ Hungary Today, "EU Supports National Transport Infrastructure with €5.4 Billion," Hungary Today (blog), June 30, 2022, <https://hungarytoday.hu/eu-hungary-transport-infrastructure-support-five-initiatives/>.

⁵ Full analysis can be found in: Climate Analytics, "Transport Emission Disaggregation Tool (TEDiT)," TEDiT, 2023, <https://tools.climateanalytics.org/tedit/>.

⁶ Márton Vargha, András Lukács, and Andrzej Ancyger, "Transport Decarbonisation in Hungary: Beyond Best Practices National Technical Report" (Berlin: Clean Air Action Group, Climate Analytics, 2023).

composition of the car fleet, fuel composition, specific CO₂ emissions, etc.) and the target values of these indicators not only at the last year of the strategy but annually. All other strategies, investment ideas and project lists should be derived from that, showing what is expected from the proposed measures in terms of indicators, and ensuring that all investments are made to the best available technical standard. In other words, an action plan for the implementation of the passenger transport strategy should be drawn up from all the related strategies and development ideas. There is also a need for annual reports to show how indicators are developing and to evaluate interventions. If necessary, points of intervention should be identified where backlogs can be corrected.

This could be a good starting point and a basis for the establishment of a decarbonised, energy-efficient, passenger- and environment-friendly, congestion-free passenger transport system in Hungary by the mid-21st century at the latest.

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