

Audit of supervision of ordering regional passenger transport

Federal Office of Transport

Key facts

The Confederation and the cantons jointly order regional passenger transportation. Regional passenger transport is not financially self-sustaining and the two purchasers each pay one billion Swiss francs per year for transport companies' uncovered planned costs throughout Switzerland.

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) examined the control mechanisms in regional passenger transportation, the demarcations between regional and local transport and aspects of economic efficiency. The audit was conducted at the Federal Office of Transport (FOT) and in the cantons of Bern, Basel-Landschaft, Graubünden and Solothurn.

The results varied. While there is potential for improvement in the cooperation between the two purchasers and the checks, the demarcation between regional and local transport is well implemented. The economic efficiency of the overall regional passenger transport system is tending to develop positively, although essential instruments for controlling the development of costs are hardly used or not used at all.

Purchasers must trust the reliability of the transport companies' cost accounting

With today's instruments, an audit of the annual accounts by an external auditor and a subsidy audit by the FOT, it cannot be confirmed that the actual costs of the transport companies are correct.

The correctness of the corresponding regional passenger transportation accounts by division of activity should be confirmed by the transport companies. The FOT, as co-purchaser and supervisory authority, is required to work together with the cantons and the transport companies to find practicable and risk-oriented solutions.

Disentanglement of the current ordering procedure should be examined

Today, the FOT and the cantons place orders for both regional passenger transport bus and railway lines together. The current regional passenger transport reform project aims to exploit potential for optimisation. One solution is the partial disentanglement of orders for trains and buses. This would mean that in future bus services would be ordered solely by the cantons.

Against the background of the new system of fiscal equalization and the division of tasks between the Confederation and the cantons (NFE), this approach appears logical and worth examining. In addition to partial disentanglement and the current regime, a variant whereby railway orders would be made solely by the Confederation should also be considered as a solution.

Roles and tasks between the two purchasers must be clarified

Regional passenger transport ordering is currently a joint task of the Confederation (represented by the FOT) and the cantons. Federal law stipulates that the cantons are responsible for planning offers, reviewing tenders and negotiations with the transport companies and for reviewing the quality of services. Neither the FOT nor the cantons involved in the audit have detailed these joint tasks in more detail.

Depending on the canton, the ordering procedure is implemented with different structures and specifications. While half of the offices included in the audit are process-oriented, the others lack such structures. The FOT has defined generic process specifications and checks for its tasks. The cooperation described by both purchasers cannot be traced due to a lack of documentation (e.g. checks and results). In order to ensure uniform implementation of the ordering procedure, the FOT must work with the cantons to develop minimum framework conditions and ensure that these are implemented. This is the only way to systematically prevent duplication and/or gaps in cooperation. The clarification of roles must take place independently of any disentanglement at the time of ordering.

Opportunities to improve profitability are only being used with reluctance

Together with the transport companies, both purchasers are striving to continuously improve the economic efficiency of regional passenger transport. With various measures (e.g. marketing, cooperation between transport companies, subsidies for season tickets) they are trying to make public transport more attractive. In the complex regional passenger transport system, it is almost impossible to assess the impact of individual measures, some of which are local. However, the fundamentally positive development of the cost recovery ratio in recent years across the entire regional passenger transport system shows that the cumulative efforts are successful.

Calls for tenders offer the opportunity to create competition between the transport companies in the bus sector. Concrete developments (e.g. increases in efficiency) for individual lines and transport companies can be defined with target agreements. Both instruments are attested by the purchasers to be potentially effective in improving economic efficiency. However, the instruments are still rarely used today.

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