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On Track or Off The Rails

Intra-ministerial decision-making in transport infrastructure planning

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Summary

The call for a „transport transition“ has reached political and mainstream attention in Germany during the first decades of the 21st century. A shift from car-based individual transport to rail-based modes of transportation (operated by electricity) is seen as an important building block of a more sustainable transport system and as such also integrated in official sustainability strategies. Among other measures, this demands a new focus in transport infrastructure planning. Planning being a task primarily fulfilled by executive and administrative actors, ministerial bureaucracies assume a crucial role in this transition process. Their propensity (or not) to produce outputs that mirror a transition orientation sets the course for or against a modal shift. The preparation of the currently valid Federal Transport Infrastructure Plan (*Bundesverkehrswegeplan*, BVWP) allows a comparative view into decision-making processes on transport projects for different transport modes.

The BVWP is a national transport strategy outlining which transport infrastructure is supposed to be built throughout the next fifteen years. It has no legal character and is the first step within a wider planning framework. Projects newly included in this master plan are usually still in a very early pre-planning stage. Nevertheless, inclusion in the BVWP is an important first step to secure potential federal funding for road, railway and waterway projects.

Even though the BVWP is a national transport strategy, the first steps of its preparation are taken on the sub-national level, as the *Länder* prominently propose road projects and take part in proposing other infrastructure projects as well. This presents an opportunity to compare the processes in and outputs of sub-national ministerial bureaucracies when proposing infrastructure projects for different transport modes. Such an analysis provides insights into some determinants of transition-friendly decision-making and improves the understanding of how process characteristics shape ministerial outputs.

This study finds its theoretical framework in actor-centred institutionalism and draws together politics- as well as bureaucracy-centred perspectives in a delegation argument. I follow the argument that ministerial outputs are first and foremost shaped by ministers' programmatic positions. However, I challenge the view that the balance between ministerial and bureaucratic influence would be determined by the salience of the topic at hand in such a way that politicians would take care of their positions being duly executed when the respective topic is salient, and bureaucrats being more influential with non-salient topics. Instead, I argue that salient topics require more complex decision-

making processes, i. e. processes that involve a greater variety of actors – rather than simply pushing through political preferences – in order to ensure broadly accepted solutions that are in fact implementable. Outputs of complex processes, in turn, are harder to predict.

Building on document analysis and expert interviews with members of the sub-national ministerial bureaucracies, this thesis analyses how decision-making processes within bureaucracies shape policy outputs in transport infrastructure planning. Sub-national decision-making processes on which projects to propose for the BVWP 2030 serve as cases. These decision-making processes might either favour the car-dominated status-quo or a shift towards more rail-centred mobility, thereby hindering or furthering an overall move towards a systemic change in mobility and transport, referred to as transport transition – without this necessarily being the intention of the actors themselves.

The analysis involves two steps. In a first analytical step, a content analysis serves to structure the material and condense it into categories. I start with some theory-led concepts and then inductively develop sub-categories that capture the procedural steps pointed out in the material. In a second step, Qualitative Comparative Analysis will be employed to distinguish combinations of programmatic, procedural as well as capacity-related characteristics, that are sufficient for arriving at a less car-centred output.

The results address pathways towards a transition-oriented output as well as determinants for the set-up of complex intra-ministerial decision-making processes. They support the view that programmatic positions of ministers can indeed shape ministerial outcomes in the direction of a transport transition. Independently of programmatic positions, decision-making processes that are complex in the above-mentioned sense might also work positively to that end. However, none of these conditions is sufficient on its own. They both only work in conjunction with a transition-friendly behaviour of the respective sub-national ministries towards expectations on higher levels within the multi-level framework. At times, this means that *Länder* might deliberately act against federal expectations even where the implementation of their decision depends on the federal level. Administrative capacity in sub-national ministries and the salience of the topic for the respective minister shape how ministries design their decision-making processes. Where capacity allows it, complex processes are set up when the topic is perceived as salient. The relevance of capacity in this context points to the importance of a well-resourced bureaucracy for legitimacy-related purposes like setting up and carrying through public participation schemes.