

# **Cross-border public transport in De Westhoek: what are the main problems?**

## **1. Introduction and Research Question**

The Westhoek region in Flanders and Northern-France is a special environment which has the border between France as Belgium at its core. This causes the two Westhoek regions to be rather peripheral regions in their countries and thus this creates a rather unique dynamic. But what is the impact of this particular situation on the available public transport in the area? It will soon become clear that there is a low supply of public transport in the region and a first important reason is the dominance of 'king car'. The car dominates almost everywhere in Belgium and beyond but in the Westhoek the power position of the car reaches its maximum realm. This can be explained by the fact that several disadvantages of the car are not present here in comparison with more urban areas. For example, there is almost no congestion here, and also almost all main roads are wide and in good shape. Therefore, most people in the Westhoek rely almost exclusively on their car. But then the question can be asked: If everyone uses the car, is there any demand for public transport? And is there therefore a shortage and a problem? There indeed is need for more and better public transport because although a large group indeed does rely on the car, there are several groups without access to the car and thus needing alternatives. There are for example youngsters who have no driver's license or elderly people who can no longer drive or dare to drive. So, the topic of public transport and the need to improve it is very important and relevant in the Westhoek region, especially when thinking about sustainability and the therefore questionable future and possible end of the realm of 'king car'.

Our main research question therefore is "How formal is the border between Flanders and France in the sense of public transport in the Westhoek?". While you can easily cross the border at many places with the car, this is not the case for public transport. For example, in the Westhoek there is only one cross-border bus line namely DK'BUS. All the other bus stops stop ten to hundred meters before the border creating a kind of no man's land. Besides, the two countries, France and Belgium, each have their own system of organizing public transport. Our focus will be on this last part: "What is the impact of these different systems in the border area, where the two systems (should) co-operate?".

## **2. Methodology**

To answer these research questions, the first thing that was done was a desktop research in which was looked at some online information and some academic literature. This was sort of the preparatory step to outline the context. Next to that, we participated in two information days about cross-border mobility in the Westhoek. The first one took place May 26, 2021 in the morning. The first infoday was a joint meeting of the action group 'Duurzame mobiliteit' and 'het Blauwe Park'. During this information day, among other things, the design for the

experimental bus line between Ypres and Armentières was discussed and the Mobility Plan of the Métropole Européenne de Lille. The second took place June 14, 2021 in the afternoon and was about cross-border mobility and the Transmobil project which is an Interreg project. In this infoday the Transmobil project was described, there was attention for the pilot project bus line from Poperinge to Hazebroek and the analysis on cross-border transport of the Transmobil project.

Also interviews were done with several actors. We contacted several stakeholders which are heavily involved in the public transport business, both on the French and Belgian side. De Lijn, NMBS, DK'BUS, Vervoerregio Westhoek, Hauts-de-France Mobilités and Eurometropool Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai were initially written to. Only Vervoerregio Westhoek and Eurometropool Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai replied and also directed us to other interesting stakeholders. Vervoersregio Westhoek is an agency where the different municipalities of the Westhoek work out their mobility plan together. Eurometropool Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai is an agency that tries to facilitate the cooperation between several powers and agencies on both sides of the border. Their core region is not really the Westhoek but due to their experience in cross-border consultation between Belgium and France, they seemed like a suitable actor to interview. This resulted in three interviews. One double interview with Christophe Boval, mobility expert of the province of West-Flanders, and Dieter Hoet, director of Dienstverlenende Vereniging (DVV) Westhoek. Also one normal interview was done with Stef Luyckx, mobility expert of West Vlaamse Intercommunale (WVI). Because of the fact that there were only 3 interviews, the choice was made to conduct long, semi-structured interviews. Half an hour of speaking time per person was estimated, and this seemed to be rather correct, although slightly underestimated.

### **3. Limitations**

Several limitations were encountered during the research. However, as long as they are included and reflected upon, they do not have to be a source of invalidation of this study. A first important limitation is the lack of an interview or interviews with an actor on the French side of the border. Despite the fact that several French parties were contacted, unfortunately, no answer was received from any of them. So it is important to note that there is some kind of information gap here. All the information that was gathered came from literature, online sources or interviews with Belgian actors. An interview on the French border probably would have made the story more complete but because of no response, this unfortunately was impossible.

A second limitation is the fact that no observations were done, however it was planned. The plan was to really participate in public transport and to try to use public transport to go grocery shopping in Belgium. From an ethnographic viewpoint, this participant observation would have been very useful, but the lack of time prevented this from happening. Ideally, this exercise would have been done in multiple areas around the Westhoek so that an image and comparison could be made about the state of affairs along the border.

An interesting and last limitation to mention is the use of a double-interview. A double interview was done with Dieter Hoet, the director of the DVV Westhoek, and Christophe Boval, mobility planner of the province of West-Flanders. So, these people sat at the same table at the same time. They did know each other rather well and seemed to get along fine, but perhaps there are other dynamics playing. It is possible that there may be some kind of conflict

between these two persons or between the agencies they represent. This may have caused one of the two parties to conceal or twist certain information in some questions so that the other party did not feel offended or found out about certain information. There was a very pleasant and friendly atmosphere and they even chatted on after the interview so it seems like this double interview did not pose any limitations in this specific case, but it remains something to keep in mind.

#### 4. Cross-border public transport in the Westhoek: Current state of affairs

This part will have a look at the current situation of the available cross border public transport between the French and Belgian Westhoek. It is important to note that the public transport lines, that are discussed below, are not the only ones around the border but that they are the best and most important ones to really 'cross' the border with. Thus, when a person travels from somewhere in the Belgian Westhoek towards the French part, or the other way round, he will most likely have to use one of the lines discussed below.

According to Grenstreibus (2020), there are two main entrance gates between the two Westhoek areas which are situated at the far east and far west of the region. Firstly, there is the line from De Panne towards Dunkirk. However, this line includes a necessary transfer in Leffrinkhoeke Fort des Dunes. VWI (2020) says that on top of that, there is also a lot of discussion concerning this line because of the fact that this line is mainly organized and financed by France but equally used by Belgian and French people. So, France wants Belgium to contribute more. This even has resulted in temporary closures of this line, but luckily, they came to a consensus and the line is crossing the border again (VWI, 2020). Figure 1 shows this bus line that crosses the border with the transfer in Leffrinkhoeke .



Figure 1: Cross-border bus connection from Duinkerke to De Panne with a transfer in Leffrinkhoeke (Source: Grenstreibus, 2020).

The second possibility is a line between Komen and Armentiers (Grenstreibus, 2020). But it should be noted that, strictly speaking, this line runs outside of the 'classic' alignment of the Westhoek region. However, to really cross the border, it is necessary to travel 1 kilometer by foot between the French-Komen station and the Belgian part of Komen (Grenstreibus, 2020). So, there is a 'gap' in this public transport line.

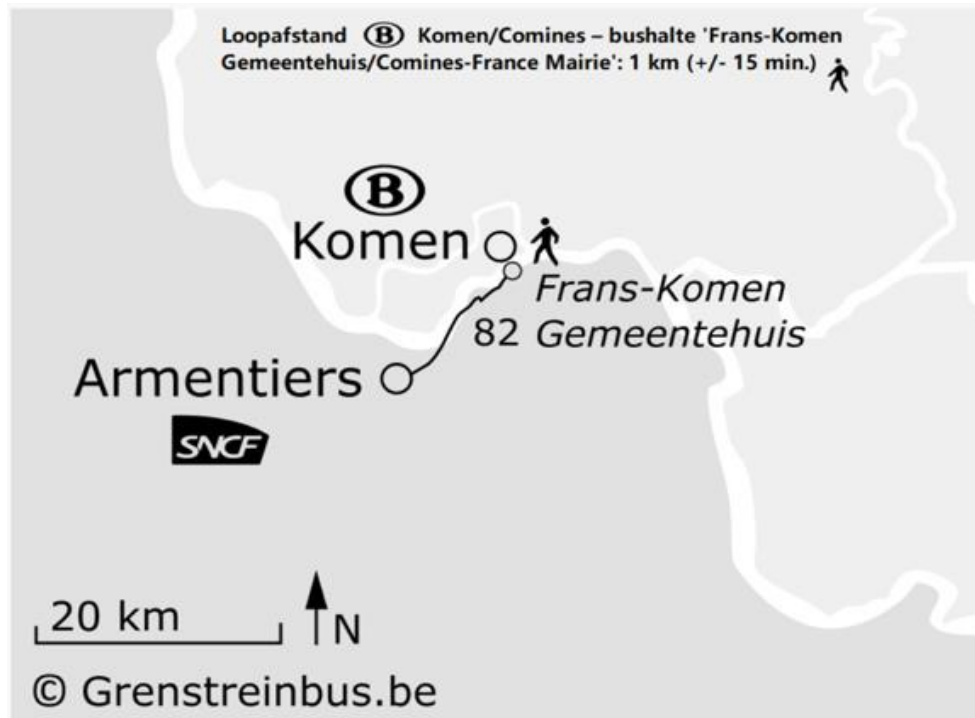


Figure 2: Bus line from Armentiers to Komen with 1 kilometer gap between the French-Komen station and the Belgian part of Komen which you have to walk (Source: Grenstreibus, 2020).

However, when somebody reaches the French Komen station, which is very close to the border, there are frequent busses that take you to Lille, a rather big city in Northern France (Grenstreibus, 2020). There was even a train from French-Komen to Lille up until 2019, which even ran further towards Belgian-Komen up until 1963, so the 1km 'gap' has not always been there (Grenstreibus, 2020). When someone reaches the city of Lille, numerous options arise to reach other parts throughout France. The biggest problem on this line is thus by far the 1 km walk and gap between French Komen and its Belgian counterpart.

Another interesting aspect that should be mentioned here is the old train line that ran from Kortrijk to Hazebrouck via Poperinge. But a part of this line was put out of use in the fifties causing Poperinge to become a terminal station and thus there were no cross-border trains anymore (Grenstreibus, 2020). The tracks were even removed in the seventies, so a re-activation of this train line has become impossible (Grenstreibus, 2020). This removal of at least three cross-border train lines should therefore be studied properly during the field trip.

## 5. Public transport in Flanders and France

In Belgium public transport is organized on a federal and regional level. This depends on the mode of transport. More specifically, train traffic is organized at federal level by the NMBS (Nationale Maatschappij der Belgische Spoorwegen), while bus and tram traffic is organized at regional level by De Lijn. Since 2019, Flanders has been divided into fifteen transport

regions, of which De Westhoek is one. This new transport layer aims to better coordinate mobility within the regions and at the Flemish level (Mobiel 21, 2021). For each transport region, a transport region council will be set up as the basic platform for consultation on mobility and to ensure that mobility is streamlined at the Flemish level (Mobiel 21, 2021). The transport regional council consists of various representatives such as the Department of Mobility and Public Works, De Lijn and the local authorities.

Interesting is that during the interviews it was mentioned that the transport regions were first divided differently. This means that Ypres, Poperinge and Roeselare belonged to one region and that Veurne and De Panne were classified with Ostend. The Westhoek did not want this because the only thing that matters then is how can people reach Ostend or Roeselare. The Westhoek is a really atypical region with its own features, namely being rural with villages across the whole region, open areas and no big cities. Because of these features they wanted to be a separated region so that the attention would go to these features and how to deal with them from a mobility perspective. These features make it harder to organize a well working public transport network which is visible in the current (cross-border) public transport network in this area.

The project of dividing Flanders in fifteen different transport regions started already in 2016 with four test areas in Belgium to try out new policies concerning public transport of which the Westhoek was one because of their special features (Digitaal Vlaanderen, 2021). So these changes have been made since 2016. The main goal of these changes is to push back the usage of personal vehicles, excluding environment friendly alternatives like bicycles. As mentioned before, this is very difficult in the Westhoek because the car is very attractive in this region. The new plan was approved in 2018 and aims to reduce car usage to 50% of personal transportation (Digitaal Vlaanderen, 2021). The finalization is expected to occur in 2022. Some key points for the Westhoek are that bus lines between the major cities need to be frequent and cover a wide surface area and they also need to assist the present train lines (Digitaal Vlaanderen, 2021). In the transport region of the Westhoek there is attention for cross-border cooperation. More specifically it is about the operation of cross-border lines to Dunkirk, Hazebroek and Armentières and the release of resources to enable the exploitation of these lines on its territory (Digitaal Vlaanderen, 2021).

In France public transport is more decentralized to the level of the city. This means that each commune or in many cases group of communes, is in charge of setting up the parameters of the service and outline the modes of funding and functioning of the investments and exploitation of the network (Díaz & Charles, 2016). The parameters of the service refers to the frequency and hour amplitude for each line, the prices, the choice of operator, the target public and the contract. Although there is a national railway operator in France namely SNCF (Société nationale des chemins de fer français), the SNCF needs to negotiate and make up contracts with the French regions to operate the regional trains. Groups of communes are mostly brought together in intercommunals such as the 'Communauté de communes de Flandre intérieure'. In Belgium there are also intercommunals but there is an important difference between the ones in Belgium and the ones in France. The contact-person of VWI said during the interview that intercommunals in France have more competences than in Belgium. In Belgium an intercommunal is not an administrative level while this is the case in France.

In addition, public transport is financed differently in France than in Belgium. In France companies with eleven or more employees, within the scope of a mobility organizing authority where the mobility payment has been instituted, are subject to the mobility payment contribution and have to pay a tax named ‘versement mobilité’ to finance public transport (Urssaf, 2021). The tax is calculated on the basis of the remuneration of employees and the rate of the tax is set by the municipality or group of municipalities (Service Public, 2021). Outside Île de France, it is between 0% and 2.5% varying according to the size of the agglomeration. There is also another tax named ‘versement mobilité additionnel’ which can be instituted by certain mixed transport unions who bring together several mobility organizing authorities in order to coordinate their networks (Urssaf, 2021). This is the case in North-France. There is the union Hauts-de-France Mobilités. Figure 4 shows the communes where the ‘versement mobilité additionnel’ is levied. This tax is levied exclusively in municipalities located in urban areas of more than 50,000 inhabitants but outside the urban transport perimeters, areas in salmon pink in figure 4 (Source: Hauts-de-France Mobilités, 2021b). Within the urban transport perimeters, the ‘versement mobilité’ is charged by the competent transport organizing authorities.

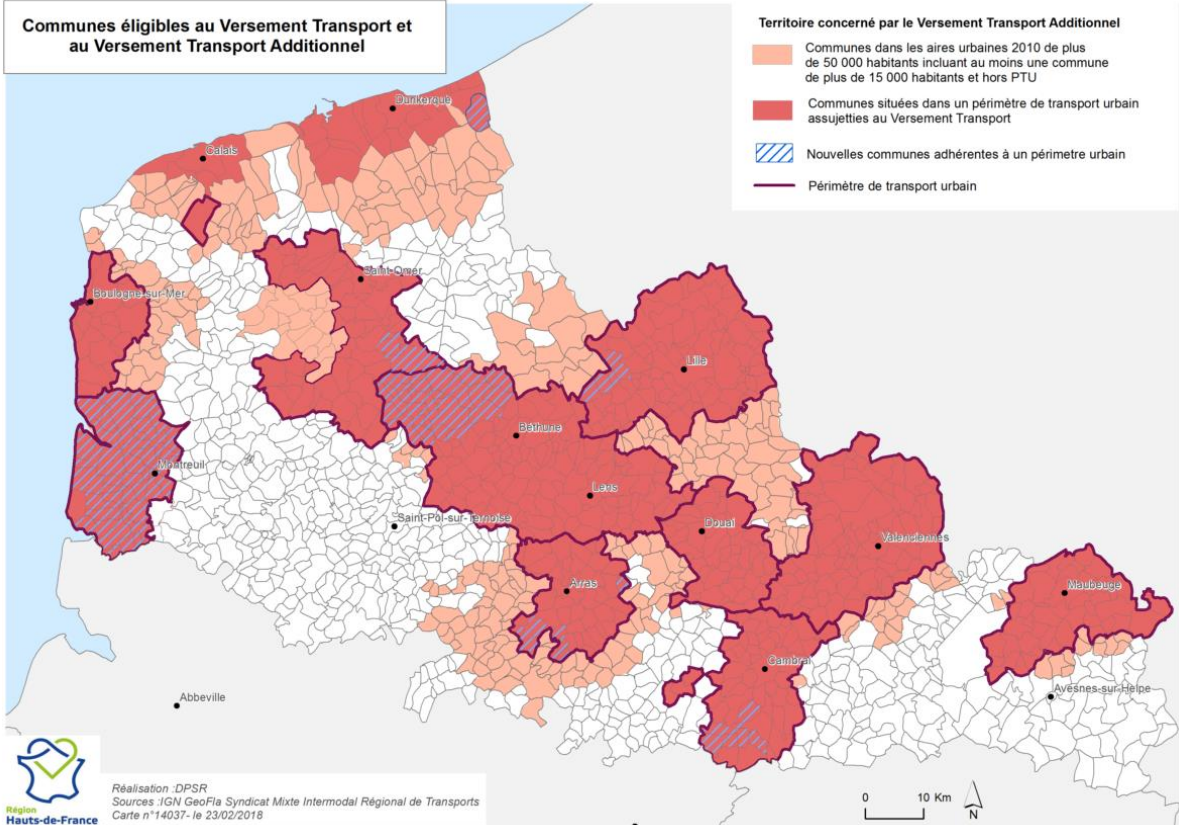


Figure 4: Communes suitable for ‘versement transport’ (red) and for ‘versement transport additionnel’ (salmon pink) (Source: Hauts-de-France Mobilités, 2021b).

This difference in running public transport between France and Belgium has important consequences for cross-border public transport in the Westhoek. In Belgium, villages and cities cannot decide on their own about public transport, while in France villages can (VRT NWS, 2020). This makes the French public transport a bit more flexible while in Belgium, a village with a public transport plan needs to enter into consultation with De Lijn and the

government. This also explains partly why the Belgian side of the border seems to be neglected a bit. The organizers of the public transport need to think about the whole of Belgium and thus borders tend to be a bit forgotten when the budget runs out. In contrast to this, the organizers of public transport in France can focus on their own villages and thus border villages can give their borders as much attention as they want. This difference in system emerged during the interviews as a problem that makes cross-border public transport more difficult. The Flemish side doesn't know who to contact or who is authorized on the other side of the border and it is the same the other way around. Public transport is organized differently on both sides of the borders, procedures are different, et cetera. This makes it more difficult and more work to organize cross-border public transport and easier to say not to organize cross-border public transport. The ignorance of what is on the other side of the border and stepping out of the comfort zone is an important aspect. During the excursion the mayor of De Panne said something about this, namely that there is cooperation between Belgium and France and there is the will to do this but there is no structural cooperation because of these differences in system and the complexity that goes with it. There is contact with France but the border continues to exist physically and has an influence on cross-border public transport cooperation.

## **6. Cross-border public transport constraints**

After looking at differences in policy between France and Belgium, it is good to look at cross-border public transport constraints because cross-border public transport is not self-evident. There are a lot of constraints and obstacles that can be linked to cross-border public transport. The top five obstacles that the European Commission lists in their report "Overcoming obstacles in border regions" are legal/administrative barriers, language barriers, difficult physical access, economic disparities and public authorities' interest in working together (European Commission, 2016). These obstacles are not for cross-border public transport but for border regions in general although for the transport sector the obstacle of different ticket fares and systems was mentioned in particular. For the difficult physical access one of the main concerns was lack of integrated public transport systems at the border. Public transport systems at each side of the border function separately from each other without recognizing what happens at the other side of the border (European Commission, 2016). Obstacles of an integrated public transport system are the complexity of rules, legislations and administrative procedures that hinder cooperation (European Commission, 2016). Cavallaro & Dianin (2020) confirm this by indicating that the lack of physical access is influenced by different factors, for example the weakness of cross-border public transport, the shortage of cross-border infrastructure and the presence of natural barriers along borders (Cavallaro & Dianin, 2020). They clarify that the weakness of cross-border public transport is linked to informative, connectivity and tariff-related issues.

The fifth obstacle was public authorities' interest in working together. In this regard the specific local context is very important for cross-border cooperation according to the European Commission (2016). More specifically, the degree of cooperation is determined by the political party and/or the will of individual politicians in the cross-border areas. Sometimes there can be an imbalance of interest on different sides of the border (European Commission, 2016). The lack of interest can be explained by societal, cultural, linguistic differences which make personal contact difficult (European Commission, 2016). In the survey the European Commission (2016) conducted for their research some respondents say that "they have the

impression that national authorities do not have border regions' concerns on their agenda, or that cross-border issues do not affect enough people for an interest to be taken at the national level" (European Commission, 2016, p.25). The cooperation between France and Belgium and the impact of the difference in system is explained in the previous section and it was clear that also in the Westhoek this is an important obstacle.

The largest issue concerning the lack of public transport that was mentioned in the interviews is by far the budget provided by the central government. With a limited budget, the number of buses throughout Flanders has a maximum quota. The statistics of deciding which area gets a bus line is all decided by supply and demand. There are no numbers of cross-border demand so it is neglected. Inland are the largest cities in Flanders like Brussels, Antwerp etc. which have the highest number of possible users for the trains and buses and as a result are better developed in this regard. In the Westhoek the largest cities cannot compare to most cities in Flanders. There's also a large surface area with only tiny villages and scattered farms that make up most of the Westhoek. This makes up for a very low demand. Besides, if a bus line is added another bus line should be abolished and here there is a favor for inland traffic instead of cross-border lines. Added to this is the fact that the car is king. Because of the largely scattered population, traffic is almost never an issue. And since there's such a small amount of public transport, people will mostly use their car to get around. Most households have around 2 to 3 cars, one per adult person. But this automatically leaves out under age people, elderly and disabled inhabitants incapable to drive and some also just want a more sustainable alternative to cars.

Cross-border transport adds other difficulties to the matter with its unique difference that it has a physical, national border to be crossed. Issues quickly become political. An example of the interviews is that until the 1950s there used to be train lines crossing the border. Reinstating these lines is something the Flemish government does not want to do because it could cause competition with the French ports like Dunkerque with the Belgian ports like Zeebrugge or Antwerp. There is even a fear of criminality from both sides. A connection between Koksijde and Dunkerque is halted for fear of possible dangerous individuals coming to each side of the border. There was already a bus stop removed from the DKBUS in De Panne because of sound complaints.

Besides, differences in ticket systems and language barriers are mentioned in the interviews but these are easier to solve than the budget barriers and the difference in governance. The core issue in this case is the difficulties of organization and communication between the two different governances. With public transport on the French side being more privatized and controlled by local authorities compared to Flanders where this is governed by the federal government. The federal government is not very inclined to govern public transport across the border since this brings in more difficulties and competition than profit or solutions in their opinion.

## **7. Cross-border public transportation in the European Union**

It is interesting to look at the bigger picture namely cross-border public transportation in Europe. In the past, the European Commission has set up various programs to support cross-border cooperation, mainly through funding programs. A first type is European Cross-Border cooperation, also known as Interreg A, supports cooperation between at least two different Member States of the European Union who are lying next to each other (European



Commission, 2021a). The projects have many concrete outcomes: removing barriers to better health care, security, education, transport, energy, training and job creation (European Commission, 2021a). At this moment, there is one Interreg program operational in the Westhoek that works about mobility, namely Transmobil. The Transmobil project is about strengthening mobility services in cross-border rural areas where there are no alternatives for the car (Interreg France Wallonie Vlaanderen, 2021). The target audience is the population that does not own a car and citizens who are open to a more sustainable way of life and want to be less dependent on the car (Interreg France Wallonie Vlaanderen, 2021).

An important limitation of European projects that emerged in the interview is that such a European project can only be used for one-time investments. A suitable example is that this money can be used for providing bicycle racks at stations to make the stations more accessible by bike but not for setting up bus lines because these require a continuous investment. These instruments are good for research and smaller projects that do not continue for years like operating a bus line and one of the interviewees said that if Europe would invest in this, for example in the exploitation of cross-border bus lines, there will be a whole different result of cross-border public transport lines. It is understandable that Europe is not doing this because it costs a lot of money.

Another program from the European Union is Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) policy. The TEN-T project is about the implementation and development of a Europe-wide transport network, including public transport whereby the goal is to close gaps, remove bottlenecks and technical barriers and to strengthen social, economic and territorial cohesion in the EU (European Commission, 2021c). Figure 5 shows that there is no TEN-T project around cross-border transport in the Westhoek, there are only projects on the French side of the border.

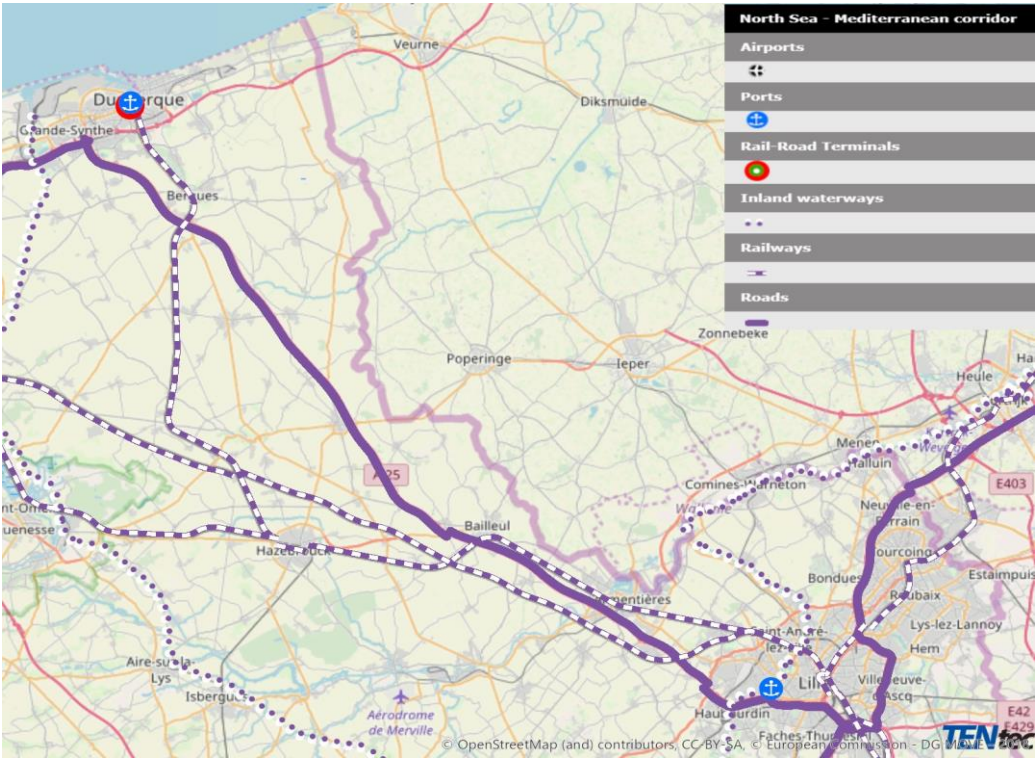


Figure 5: TEN-T North Sea - Mediterranean corridor (Source: European Commission, 2021b).

## **8. Pilot project: two new buslines**

As was mentioned before there is only one cross-border public transport line namely, DKBUS and this is not even a binational line because it is only exploited by the French side. Besides there are also cross-border train lines but these are located outside the Westhoek. This is going to change. In the near future there will be a pilot project about cross-border public transport. This pilot project which includes two cross-border bus lines in the Westhoek were discussed in the information days. The first line goes from Ypres to Armentières and the second line goes from Poperinge to Hazebrouck. This project means that the Flemish government will finance the exploitation of these lines for one year. During the information days it was mentioned that the transport region already made a budget free to continue the operation of these lines for if it is a success but only for their side of the border. So the French side should contribute and co-finance for their part of the line but no concrete agreements have yet been made with the French side.

A difficulty that was mentioned during all the interviews was communication. Communication is really important because if people do not know the line is there, they can not and will not use it. Besides, a bus line needs time to meet its full potential and the pilot project will only be operational for one year. It is important to note that there is demand for these lines from both sides of the border. This was discussed during the interviews as well as during the information days. In addition, there is also the discussion of the chicken and the egg. If it is not there it will not be missed. Supply can also create demand but as mentioned before there is demand from both sides of the border. There are important groups of people that can not use the car like elderly, disabled people or people who are too young to drive. Besides, the challenge is mainly to create an appropriate offer as an alternative to the car. This project shows that more attention is being paid to cross-border public transport.

## **9. Conclusion**

From a public transport point of view it can be said that the border is really present in the Westhoek. There are different reasons why there are not many cross-border public transport lines. The most important barrier is budget constraints in the two countries which result in a focus on inland public transport because this is seen as more valuable. But also the differences in the organization of the system in France and Belgium is an important reason. Next to that, there are also economical and logistical problems. New train tracks for example could create a negative impact on inland economics due to creating better accessibility for certain sectors abroad, such as in this case the port of Dunkirk. Also the abroad market and its potential are unknown to inland public transportation companies which, together with differences in language, tariffs and ticket systems, make it easy for these companies to put no effort into it because it is relatively a lot of work and out of their comfort zone. There are almost no cross-border public transport lines but this might change in the future. A pilot project is set up to put on two cross-border public transport lines in the Westhoek. These have a lot of potential and could become key in the future of cross-border public transport within De Westhoek.

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