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Autor: [s.n.]
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Levitating train fails to get off the ground

Ambitious plans to link Switzerland's major cities with a high-speed underground railway, known as Swissmetro, appear to be dead. Some of its main supporters are pulling out of the project and its capital has shrunk dramatically. The kiss of death appears to have been a newspaper interview in which the Swiss transport minister, Moritz Leuenberger, said he no longer believed in the scheme.

The Employers Federation in French-speaking Switzerland is withdrawing from the project, allegedly because of the interview.

Pierre Weiss, the secretary general of Swissmetro and a member of the Employers Federation, said he would resign from the project at the end of December. Weiss said he did not believe Swissmetro would get an operating concession at any time in the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, the society's capital has shrunk from SFr6.7 million (\$4.6 million) to just SFr340,000, with shares worth less than SFr50 - down from SFr1,000. Swissmetro is holding an extraordinary general meeting on December 6.

"It won't become part of federal transport policy again," Michele Mossi, Swissmetro's managing director told swissinfo. "However it could develop into a programme of research and development."

Mossi said some of the key concepts of the project were still of interest to industrial partners.

"In the world of industry, there are people who are interested in the resistant cement of the gallery, the safety of the underground structure and the system of magnetic levitation in a vacuum."

Swissmetro is a magnetically-levitated high-speed system of transportation where trains would be able to achieve top speeds of 500kmh thanks to a partial vacuum in the tunnels.

Its planned route stretches from Geneva to St Gallen, via Lausanne, Bern and Zurich.

Asked about its prospects last week, Leuenberger said that, as minister of transport, he no longer believed in it.

"Even if I stayed in office for 15 years, Swissmetro would still not be sufficiently advanced to be included in transport planning," he told the newspaper, "24 Heures".

"When I see that it takes 12 years or more just to drill through the Gotthard [tunnel], I can't imagine the work that would be necessary to drill a tunnel the

whole length of Switzerland."

"And when I think of the safety issues which already pose difficulties in our tunnels, I can't see how one could resolve them for Swissmetro."

As recently as two years ago, a transport ministry report on public transport raised serious doubts about the viability of the project.

Even if the project still goes ahead, researchers say the futuristic mode of transport is unlikely to be operational before 2030 at the earliest.

source swissinfo.org

Divisions run deep among the Swiss

The Swiss are divided by more than just language, according to a new survey, which found a strong element of mutual dislike between the German - and French - language regions. Almost half of respondents thought regional differences could even lead to the break-up of Switzerland. The study by the GfS research institute found that while 73% of Swiss Germans liked their French-speaking neighbours, just 51% of Swiss French returned the compliment.

And 29% of French speakers said they would not regret it if the country were to break apart.

André Rothenbühler, who compiled the survey, said the very different attitudes were not surprising and could be attributed to the German-speakers' dominance of economic and political life.

The study found that younger people and the less well educated were generally not as well disposed towards their neighbours as older, better-educated Swiss. This raised fears that the well-documented cultural gulf between

the two language regions - usually referred to as the Röstigraben - could widen in years to come, Rothenbühler warned.

Some 63% of Swiss French were of the opinion that German-speaking Switzerland paid them too little, if any regard.

And while equal number of Swiss Germans and French thought Switzerland could break up as a result of the divisions, feelings on the subject were divided.

While 80% of Swiss Germans said they would regret the disintegration of Switzerland, the figure among French speakers was just 61%.

The study revealed a higher level of dissatisfaction with the status quo among French speakers than among German speakers, the researchers said, and showed that a significant minority of Swiss French felt alienated from the rest of the country.

source swissinfo.org



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