

## RELATION COMPARISON OF SELECTED RAILWAY TRANSPORT COMPANIES USING THE SERVQUAL METHOD

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*Summary: Railway transport and its reforms are currently a much-debated topic. The state began to realize the importance of rail transport and began to address operationally the issue of rail transport, which was underestimated in the past and began to decline as a result of the expansion of road transport. Creating a competitive environment is one of the basic aspects of the efficient functioning of rail transport. The main aim of the paper is to analyze three selected railway companies providing public passenger transport on the Košice - Prague route in both directions on the basis of a comparison using the method of measuring the quality of services according to customer satisfaction (SERVQUAL). For the analysis, I chose three railway companies, namely Regiojet, Plc, Leo Express, Plc. Železniční spoločnosť Slovensko, Plc. The result of the paper is to find out which of the examined companies is the most advantageous in terms of transport on the way Košice - Prague based on the quality of services provided.*

*Key words: railway transport, services, competitiveness, company, liberalization*

### INTRODUCTION

Rail transport is a part of European transport systems much earlier than other modes of transport, for example road or air transport in European countries. Its importance in the period of its greatest development was the way of transporting large quantities of goods and passengers over long distances. This development was subsequently reflected in the density of the European rail network, which interconnected the individual states, before the European integration began. At present, rail transport has great benefits in the transport policy of individual European countries, as it can solve the problems that transport in the EU is facing, for example in ensuring green transport - reducing environmental burdens, transport safety and traffic flow compared to other forms transportation (Kvizda, Pospíšil, Seidenglanz, Tomeš, 2007).

However, the benefits of using this area of transport are only possible if it can be managed in an efficient, cost-effective, affordable and attractive way for its users, as is the case in every area of business. This was not the case in the development of railway transport in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, because national carriers with a guarantee of subsidies from the state budget, in case of covering their possible resulting losses, were not motivated to operate effectively, economically and attractive to their users. These steps subsequently led to a

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continuous deepening of the losses from the economic results of these companies, where the state held the position of a saviour and subsequently the impossibility of their further development, which was reflected in the provided services. There was no room for new entrants to enter this market, there were no rules for possible entry, use of railway infrastructure, use of state railway ownership (depots, stabling tracks, etc.). These problems, together with the development of road transport, have led to a situation in which rail transport has declined and there is a need for its recovery and reforms in individual European countries in terms of EU railway liberalization policy (Kvizda 2013).

Railway transport and its reforms are currently a much debated topic. The state began to realize the importance of rail transport and began to address operationally the issue of rail transport, which was underestimated in the past and began to decline as a result of the expansion of road transport. Road transport means a significant burden on the environment and the air. Along with its massive development, the problem of a high load of insufficient road capacity has arisen. Rail transport is currently not able to compete with road transport. That is why the EU has decided to reform rail transport in order to support its position vis-à-vis other modes of transport (especially road transport) and to increase its transport performance again. At the same time, the reforms also aim to create a competitive environment within the sector (Tomeš 2014).

Creating a competitive environment is one of the basic aspects of the efficient functioning of rail transport. The importance of public transport (suburban or regional rail transport) will grow in the future as a result of increasing urbanization, where cities will have to respond to increasing traffic density and have to respond effectively and flexibly to this. The starting point will be an efficient, intensive and environmentally friendly suburban and regional rail transport that will help to solve this problem (Tomeš, Pospíšil 2006).

Regiojet, Plc. was the first private company to enter the Czech and Slovak passenger rail transport markets thanks to the approved liberalization packages of the EU (I, II, III, IV), which were approved in the past 20 years within the provided transport services and Leo Express, Plc. Regiojet, Plc. entered the selected analyzed Košice - Prague route, in 2011 and Leo Express in 2014. Railway Company Slovakia, Plc. has been operating regular connections between the Czech and Slovak Republics since its establishment in 2005. These connections have been partially modified and modified in various years according to passenger demand and performance of the total transport.

## **1. POSSIBILITIES OF ENTRY TO THE MARKET OF PERSONAL RAILWAY TRANSPORTATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAK REPUBLIC**

A rail carrier may operate a rail service subject to more conditions. The basic conditions include the following:

1. Obtaining a license to operate a rail service which entails some recognition of the applicant's ability to provide transport services. The conditions for the issue of licenses are regulated

by the Act on Rail Transport and the Act on Railways. E.g. they must have at their disposal the necessary fleet (locomotives, wagons), which are not necessarily owned but can be rented. In the Slovak Republic the license is issued by the Regulatory Office for Railway Transport and in the Czech Republic the license is granted by the Rail Authority (Protimonopolný úrad Slovenskej republiky 2011).

2. A further condition is the obtaining of a safety certificate attesting that the railway undertaking has implemented a safety management system and that it is able to meet the requirements of safety rules. This safety certificate is issued by the same authority as for the issue of licenses for a period of 5 years (Act no. 266/1994 Sb.).
3. If the carrier obtains a license and the safety certificate can subsequently conclude a contract on access to the transport route with ŽSR and in the Czech Republic with SZDČ. The Railway Infrastructure Administration provides access to the railway infrastructure for all carriers that meet the conditions laid down by the Railways Act. Access conditions comply with European standards and are the same for all carriers. The basic conditions for access to the railway infrastructure are: to be registered in the Commercial Register, to hold a valid license to operate railway transport, to hold a valid carrier certificate, to arrange liability insurance for rail transport damage, and to have allocated infrastructure capacity (SZDČ 2018). The same conditions apply to the allocation of railway infrastructure in Slovakia (ŽSR). Railway infrastructure capacity means the possibility to plan for a certain period of train paths on a certain section of the railway network. ŽSR allocates infrastructure capacity for the provision of transport services on request to applicants for the period of validity of the GVD (timetable) by means of a contract on the allocation of infrastructure capacity in the form of train routes (ŽSR 2018). In the process of allocating infrastructure capacity, problems often arise in terms of the interests of several carriers to operate their transport services within the same time span, mainly in terms of the attractiveness of the individual locations. Consequently, there are situations where a single line section is serviced by several carriers in a relatively short period of time. Subsequently, after fulfilling the above conditions, the potential carrier must demonstrate to the competent authority (ÚRŽD, DÚ) financial capacity, which means to prove that it is able to meet its current and future obligations arising from the provision of transport services (Protimonopolný úrad Slovenskej republiky 2011).
4. Last but not least, it is necessary to have available professional, medical and psychologically competent personnel, while the requirements for personnel are determined by legislation (Act No. 266/1994 Coll.). The employee as a train driver is obliged to undergo training and examination for obtaining a certificate of professional competence at least twice a year as part of regular retraining organized by the educational facility or the railway operator and to undergo periodic check every 3 years (Act no. 266/1994 Sb).

In the event that the carrier would bid for the operation of national transport in the public interest on the basis of an open competition, it must fulfil the same conditions, except that the application for the allocation of the infrastructure is submitted by the Ministry of Transport. The railway transport infrastructure manager then decides on the allocation of individual time positions and track sections. However, this fact is unconditionally linked to open tenders in the relevant year and according to findings from previous parts of the work, only one tender was held in Slovakia in 2010.

In my opinion, the main problem in the penetration of the carrier to the market of unsubsidized rail transport in the Czech and Slovak Republics is primarily price war (pricing policy) by other carriers and the state in terms of the entry of a carrier wishing to operate its services without subsidies. In Slovakia, this segment of rail transport is also distorted by the introduction of free travel, which further reduces the potential for profitability from rail transport operations.

From the point of view of the entry of new rail carriers on the basis of an effort to operate a railway line in the public interest, the main problem is, in my view, the lack of transparency, unfairness and conditions tailored to the national carrier.

These measures may lead to a situation in which other carriers will not be interested in expanding their activities, resp. they will not want to enter the rail market, which could ultimately stop the opening of the rail market to competition and the associated positive effects for the Treasury and passengers themselves.

### **1.1 An Optimal model for securing the provision of railway passenger services of public interest**

Public passenger rail transport is operated under predetermined and announced transport and tariff conditions and is accessible to all interested parties. It is ordered by public entities and financed from public funds (ICEFA 2017). The optimal security of this public service from a legal point of view is realized primarily from the position of EU legal acts regulating and regulating obligations in this area. The European Union has adopted a number of Directives that Member States have not very willingly and conscientiously implemented, leading to the EP and Council issuing Regulation 1370/2007 on public passenger transport services by rail and road, which urged EU Member States to they have directly applied this Regulation to their national legal order.

This Regulation establishes a maximum duration of public service contracts to be concluded for a maximum period of 15 years, with a derogation for rail transport under which the competent authorities may decide to award public service contracts directly in so far as they concern rail transport, such contracts shall not exceed 10 years. The Regulation states that they have taken this exemption into account for rail transport, given the diversity of the territorial structure of the Member States, which is not further specified (Regulation 1370/2007).

According to the fourth railway package proposed by the EC, which is already in force, this possibility of awarding contracts to one carrier without competition, i.e. directly in 2023. This means that from 2023 they will have to conduct open tenders in Slovakia and the Czech Republic without the possibility of direct award to a national carrier. In 2023, therefore, we can see transparent, open and fair competition in rail transport. It will be an interesting opportunity for carriers to increase their competitiveness, ensure their sales and sustain their economic stability. This will have an advantage for the state mainly in securing public service and reducing the costs of subsidy support. Passengers will benefit from improved transport services and better prices for the future.

The optimal security of this public service from the economic and political point of view is ensured primarily from the position of the relevant Ministry of Transport, which orders the infrastructure manager for the relevant year from the infrastructure manager and assigns a new carrier contracts for the operation of individual lines in the public interest, i.e. without the possibility of tendering. On the contrary, there are currently dozens of competitions in the Czech Republic for the operation of various railway lines in the public interest. In Slovakia there is also a problem of free travel, which increased the interest in rail transport, but on the other hand led to a decrease in the revenues of the national carrier, because paying passengers prefer to switch to other forms of transport or use other carrier services. The state will also have to prepare in the future (from 2023) on the fact that this free travel will also have to be reimbursed to a private provider who, if it wins the tender, will operate the route.

In its strategy “Public Passenger Transport to 2030”, the Ministry of Transport and Construction of the SR states that it is necessary to make conceptual changes in the planning of transport services such as operational - tariff integration (interconnection of individual transport modes), setting minimum quality standards from provided services , frequency of railway service, etc. After the conceptual changes have been made, it will then be necessary to notify the public of new transport possibilities and to return the modern status to public transport, while marketing and active support of public transport (MDVSR 2017) plays a crucial but often underestimated role. Individual railway companies will also have to emphasize the continuous improvement (optimization) of in-house processes, which in turn will lead to more efficient management of the company. In terms of operational economic costs, it will be necessary to use the density of the railway transport network more efficiently in terms of frequency of use, but also of time positions, making the provision of this public service more attractive.

With the creation of standard conditions in this sector since 2023, the importance of competition in the market will grow, because it will be the competitive environment that will force businesses to become more efficient, to transfer savings, costs to transport prices - i.e. lower prices, which will to increase transport performance. It will also lead to more efficient rail service for the given corridor, as it is common knowledge that if a line (in the public interest) is openly competing, it leads to the provision of better services and lower prices for the traveling public.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA**

The main aim of the paper is to analyse three selected railway companies providing public passenger transport on the Košice - Prague route in both directions on the basis of a comparison using the method of measuring the quality of services according to customer satisfaction (SERVQUAL).

SERVQUAL is a method of measuring the quality of services according to customer satisfaction, first published by American authors Valarie Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman and Leonard Berry. The method is based on the gap model (GAP analysis) between customer expectations and subsequent service experience.

For the analysis, I chose three railway companies, namely Regiojet, Plc. Leo Express, Plc. Railway Company Slovakia, Plc. The result of the paper is to find out which of the examined companies is the most advantageous in terms of transport on the route Košice - Prague based on the quality of services provided. First, I pointed out the importance of rail transport in the EU context, the possibilities of entering the rail passenger market in the Czech and Slovak Republics, and the problems of awarding contracts in the public interest, based on a content analysis. Furthermore, in the third chapter I briefly characterized the selected companies based on the performance of their activities and then used the above-mentioned SERVQUAL method, which I used to compare railway companies and tried to find out which of them is the most advantageous in terms of transport on the route Košice - Prague. I made the calculations based on the price of a two-way travel document on the Košice - Prague route off-peak (Friday, Sunday) for each company and on my subjective evaluation when using the transport services of these companies. Finally, I evaluated the results.

## **3. INTRODUCTION OF PERSONAL RAILWAY COMPANIES ON THE KOŠICE – PRAGUE LINE**

For comparison using the SERVQUAL method, I chose these passenger railway companies that provide their transport services in the territory of the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic on the investigated route Košice - Prague.

### **3.1 Company Regiojet, Plc.**

This company was established in 2009 as a subsidiary of STUDENT AGENCY. The holding of Regiojet, Plc. are also affiliated companies of Regiojet, Plc. (Slovakia) based in Bratislava, Obchodná 48, 811 06, Slovakia and Student agency limited partnership registered office nám. Svobody 86/17, Brno-City, 602 00 Brno. These companies perform specific tasks in the provision of services to passengers, both in domestic and international transport in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the form of bus, rail and taxi services, as well as providing language and work stays. The corporate philosophy of Regiojet, Plc. is “To provide customers with the best service at great prices” (Regiojet 2019).



The company was founded in 1996, when the owner Radim Jančura founded STUDENT AGENCY and hired the first employees. Following the successful entry into the market for passenger bus and later rail transport, the company started to expand to other lines / markets within the scope of the provision of these services, such as access to the domestic Bratislava - Košice, Prague - Ostrava, Bratislava - Komárno and international Prague - Košice, Prague - Bratislava, etc. In the coming years, RegioJet plans to enter other routes and is ready to apply for tenders for the operation of national public-service lines (i.e. state-subsidized lines) in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Student agency 2018).



Figure 1 – Regiojet logo and train set

Source: Regiojet 2019

### 3.2 Company Leo Express, Plc.

Leo Express began operating as a private carrier operating at its own commercial risk without any operating subsidies at the end of 2012. As of December 2019, it will also provide regional transport as a public service obligation in the Pardubice Region and cooperate to provide regional transport in the Zlín Region. In the long term, it is interested in the operation of other regional and long-distance lines in the public service obligation ordered by the Ministry of Transport of the Czech Republic and individual regions. The common goal of the carrier and the customer is to increase the number of passengers on a long-term basis. Quality vehicles and customer service are the keys to success. Both are appreciated by passengers in 7 European countries, on railways in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland and in cooperation in Germany (Leo Express, Plc. 2019).



Figure 2 – Leo Express logo and train set

Source: Leo Express, Plc. 2019

### 3.3 Železniční společnost Slovensko, Plc.

Železničná spoločnosť Slovensko, Plc. (ZSSK) is the largest passenger rail carrier in Slovakia, operating an average of 1,518 trains a day, including 226 long-distance trains and 1,292 regional and suburban services. It stops at 713 stations and stops and operates on 2,909 kilometres of lines in all regions of Slovakia. The priority part of ZSSK's assets consists of rail vehicles (locomotives, wagons, and multiple units), locomotive depots and repair shops. The 100% shareholder of ZSSK is the Slovak Republic, exercising shareholder rights through the Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic. ZSSK was established by a resolution of the Government of the Czech Republic in January 2005 and is one of the three successor companies of the single railway in Slovakia. Together with ZSSK were created: Railways of the Slovak Republic (ŽSR), which are the operator of the railway infrastructure manager in Slovakia. The railway company Cargo Slovakia, as (ZSSK Cargo) provides freight rail transport oriented to the needs and requirements of the state and customers. The vast majority of ZSSK trains operate within the scope of the state order, which is a subsidized service under the Public Transport Services Agreement. In addition to the state order, the company operates ZSSK IC trains on the Bratislava - Košice line, which operate as a commercial product (without a state subsidy) (Železničná spoločnosť Slovensko Plc. 2019).





Figure 3 – Železničná spoločnosť Slovensko logo and train set

Source: ZSSK, Plc. 2019

#### 4. COMPARISON OF COMPANIES WITH THE SERVQUAL METHOD

When applying this method, we initially choose three companies with the same focus. We determine the characteristics that each of the companies should have. These properties will be appreciated by weights selected from a certain scale (e.g. 1-10). Individual services will be appreciated by points that we select from a certain scale (e.g. 1-5). We multiply the weights of the individual properties by the points we rated each service and add the products. We get the ranking of businesses (Škodová-Parmová, 1998, p. 56). The higher the sum, the better the service. If the real quality rating is higher than what we expect, it means the business is of good quality. Each visitor / customer's opinion on the importance of each service differs, so we can tailor this method to more accurately capture the reality (Vašítková, 2008, p. 199).

Table 1 - Quality evaluation of services provided by selected railway companies

PROPERTIES	RELEVANC E/WEIGHT	REGIOJET, Plc.	LEO EXPRESS, Plc.	ZSSK, Plc.
Compliance with the train timetable	10	5	4	1
Quality of cabin crew	9	4	5	3
Quality of points of sale	7	5	5	3
Transport of immobile passengers	4	1	5	3
Cleanliness of trains	6	3	4	3
Possibility of transporting pets	2	4	2	5
Quality of provided services in the area of refreshments	9	5	3	2
Operated vehicles	9	4	5	3
Purchase of travel documents through the Internet	8	5	4	2
Equipment of night vehicles	7	5	2	4
Safety in night vehicles	8	4	5	4
<b>Overall service valuation</b>		<b>334</b>	<b>321</b>	<b>219</b>

Table 2 - Tariff prices (adult) for a two-way travel ticket on the Košice - Prague route in the night lines

ADULT PRICE BY INDIVIDUAL TRAVEL CLASSES OUTSIDE THE TOP (FRIDAY, SUNDAY)	REGIOJET, Plc.	LEO EXPRESS, Plc.	ZSSK, Plc.
STANDARD	958 Kč	578 Kč	1 489 Kč
RELAX	1 198 Kč		
BUSINESS	1 398 Kč	1 418 Kč	
LEHÁTKO	1 580 Kč		1 948 Kč
LŮŽKO	2 180 Kč		2 407 Kč
PREMIUM - possibility to extend the whole seat to the sleeping position		3 478 Kč	

Source: Regiojet website, Leo Express, ZSSK

#### 4.1 Applying the formula

$$\frac{\frac{Qa - Qb}{Qb}}{\frac{Pa - Pb}{Pb}}$$

*P* = calculation for standard

Comparison of Regiojet, Plc. - Leo Express, Plc.

$$\frac{334 - 321}{958 - 578} = \frac{0,04049844}{0,65743945} = 0,061$$

Leo Express is more profitable as it produces a more valuable service at a better price.

Comparison of ZSSK, Plc. - Leo Express, Plc.

$$\frac{0,31775701}{1,57612457} = 0,201$$

Leo Express is more profitable as it produces a more valuable service at a better price.

Comparison by Regiojet, Plc. - ZSSK, Plc.

$$\frac{0,52511416}{0,35661518} = 1,472$$

Regiojet is more convenient as it produces a more valuable service at a more favourable price.

First, I compared Regiojet with Leo Express and found that Leo Express provides a more valuable service at more favourable prices on the Košice - Prague route in a standard travel standard compared to Regiojet. Then I compared Regiojet and ZSSK in the same way and found that Regiojet was more profitable on this route and on the tariff under investigation. Finally, I compared ZSSK and Leo Express and found that Leo Express is more advantageous in terms of providing more valuable services at better prices compared to ZSSK. In the first place, Leo Express finished in the standard tariff between Košice and Prague, which achieved almost identical results in terms of quality as Regiojet, as, which gained 13 points in terms of quality evaluation, but in terms of price indicator, Leo offers Express in tariff standard the cheapest travel tickets on this route. On the other hand, the worst results are shown by ZSSK, which lags far behind the overall survey of services offered. However, the value of the quality of the services offered does not correspond to an exaggerated price, which is almost double that of private carriers. For this reason, this company represents the worst option for using the transport between Košice and Prague and back in the standard tariff.

$$\frac{\frac{Qa - Qb}{Qb}}{\frac{Pa - Pb}{Pb}}$$

*P - Calculations for sleeping tariff in night connections*

Comparison by Leo Express, Plc. - Regiojet, Plc.

$$\frac{0,03892216}{0,59541284} = 0,065$$

Regiojet is more convenient as it produces a more valuable service at a more favourable price.

Comparison by Regiojet, Plc. - ZSSK, Plc.

$$\frac{0,52511416}{0,09430827} = 5,568$$

Regiojet is more convenient as it produces a more valuable service at a more favourable price.

Comparison of ZSSK, Plc. - Leo Express, Plc.

$$\frac{0,31775701}{0,3079356} = 1,031$$

ZSSK is more profitable as it produces a more valuable service at a more favourable price.

If we compare these companies in the travel tariff bed, which is valid for night connections on the route Košice - Prague. In the first place, Regiojet, as, which offers services of very good quality, would end up. On the other hand, in the case of night connections, Leo Express ended up worst, which offers high-quality services in comparison with ZSSK, but it has a very high price that would definitely discourage potential customers. Another disadvantage is that the company does not have a fleet that specializes in night transport, yet operates these connections and offers 6 seats in the Premium Economy class, where the customer can fold the seat to sleep for the price of 3,478 Czech crown. The second option seems to us to use the services of the Railway Company Slovakia, which, however, is far from the quality of services provided by Regiojet, as, but has a fleet specialized in night transport.

If we should summarize the results of the analytical examination, in the case of transport in tariff standard on the Košice - Prague route, the best option in terms of quality of services and price is Leo Express, followed by Regiojet and ZSSK. In the case of night connections on this route, it is Regiojet, Plc. followed by ZSSK and Leo Express.

## CONCLUSION

The main objective of the paper was to analyse three selected railway companies providing public passenger transport on the Košice - Prague route in both directions on the basis of a comparison using the method of measuring the quality of services according to customer satisfaction (SERVQUAL). I chose railway transport companies, which I use very often when traveling to work, study or place of residence. Thanks to the aforementioned method, I found out the quality of the services provided, based on the price of the ticket in the standard and bed tariffs and my subjective evaluation of the services and facilities provided when traveling on individual rail connections. I was not surprised by the results because I expected the victory of Regiojet, Plc. especially on night flights. In the case of Leo Express, the result is largely in line with the comfort (absence of sleeping beds) and the exaggerated prices on this route. However, the victory of Leo Express in the case of the standard tariff on daily flights surprised me. In terms of daily and night connections on the Košice - Prague route, the best option is to use the services of private carriers, which in terms of quality of services and prices considerably exceed the national carrier Železničná spoločnosť Slovensko. This shows how important EU liberalization measures in this area have been in opening up the rail passenger market to improve the quality of services provided to passengers and to enable the choice of transport services offered.

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