

Medium-Sized Cities: The axis Vila Real / Régua / Lamego as a dilemma for action

Short Outline

Fostering the attractiveness of medium-sized towns can be a time lengthy process. Underdeveloped infrastructure and poor access to specialized networking hinder the desired interconnectivity among them. Evidence for this is provided in a case study of three towns in northern Portugal, Vila Real, Régua and Lamego.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss how medium-sized cities can network effectively in order to attract population and activities in a globalizing society where urban regions keep growing often within the pattern of urban sprawl and where national governments keep sector planning still dominant over comprehensive regional planning. The case study introduces three towns (Vila Real/Régua/Lamego) located a hundred km east of the Metropolitan Area of Oporto and along the main national interior road, a connecting north-south axis. This hilly area is not sustaining its population, despite a regional plan approved in 1991 that for the first time assumed the need to develop these three towns as a major anchor in the interior northern Portugal. More than ten years past, two of these towns keep losing population to the coastal strip while the remaining other (Vila Real) has started to attract population. With significant different economic basis, split by physical constraints and historical sub-regional divides what appeared to planners to be the ideal solution and was appraised by politicians is taking a long time to develop.

Infrastructure development has been lagging behind due to the high costs of building a motor way in a topographically constrained territory and in costly land as it is Port wine production area, part of it classified recently as World Heritage Area. This has probably been a major factor in hindering the interconnectivity of these three towns. In fact, what could be a 15 minutes safe trip is still taking almost one hour in ice-slippery winding roads. But other factors can be reported, namely initial lack of access to a national program with European Community funds targeting medium-sized towns for the two depressed towns. These factors among others will be put forward and discussed for further insight of the problems faced by medium-sized cities and especially their time lengthy process of reversing trends of losing population to urban regions.

Key-words

Medium-sized cities, Vila Real/Régua/Lamego, infrastructure

1 – INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses medium-sized towns focusing in a specific axis of medium-sized towns in the Portuguese urban system context. Departing from a macro-analysis based in two studies - an European and a Portuguese, a micro-analysis will be carried out for a specific group of three Portuguese towns that are part of the axis Vila Real/Régua/Lamego

In the next section, the Portuguese urban system is presented within a global European framework. This presentation is based on a study on the construction of a polycentric and balanced development model for the European territory. In section 3 follows the description of the axis Vila Real/Régua/Lamego according to the following topics as developed by a national report: demography, urban territory, accessibility, transports and communication, environment; construction and housing; integration and social exclusion; economic activities and employment, education, culture and sports, health, urban consumption; local authority dynamics; national and international networks. These analyses foster the understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the network of the urban centres under study and their different or similar rationales. This approach of global inventory also allows for the identification of the strategies of spatial development to be implemented in order to promote the potential of this axis for standing-out as anchor urban region.

The opportunities and limits faced by this specific axis of cities will be evaluated and presented in section 4. There follows a discussion on how medium-sized cities can network effectively and not just based on planners' hints followed by political agreement after the supposed ideal solution is put forward.

The last section presents some conclusions on the management of urban regions and how it can depart from a global inventory where experiences and new intervention possibilities are shared.

2 – THE PORTUGUESE URBAN SYSTEMS IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The development of European polycentrism is still a sensitive issue for some European countries. In fact, this sensitiveness underlies the existence of two divergent forces: reinforcement of polarization or dispersion of urban centres. Or, in other words, the dilemmas between competitiveness and concentration of resources versus balanced growth and distribution of resources.

Effectively, polycentrism seen as a favourable factor, relies on a number of key conditions, especially:

- competitiveness of the system, connectivity and cooperation between the urban systems.

Urban systems in several European countries were classified into five different categories: peripheral gateways, rising stars, promising systems, dilemma systems and most peripheral systems. The axis, in this classification, appears to be a dilemma system (see Figure 1).

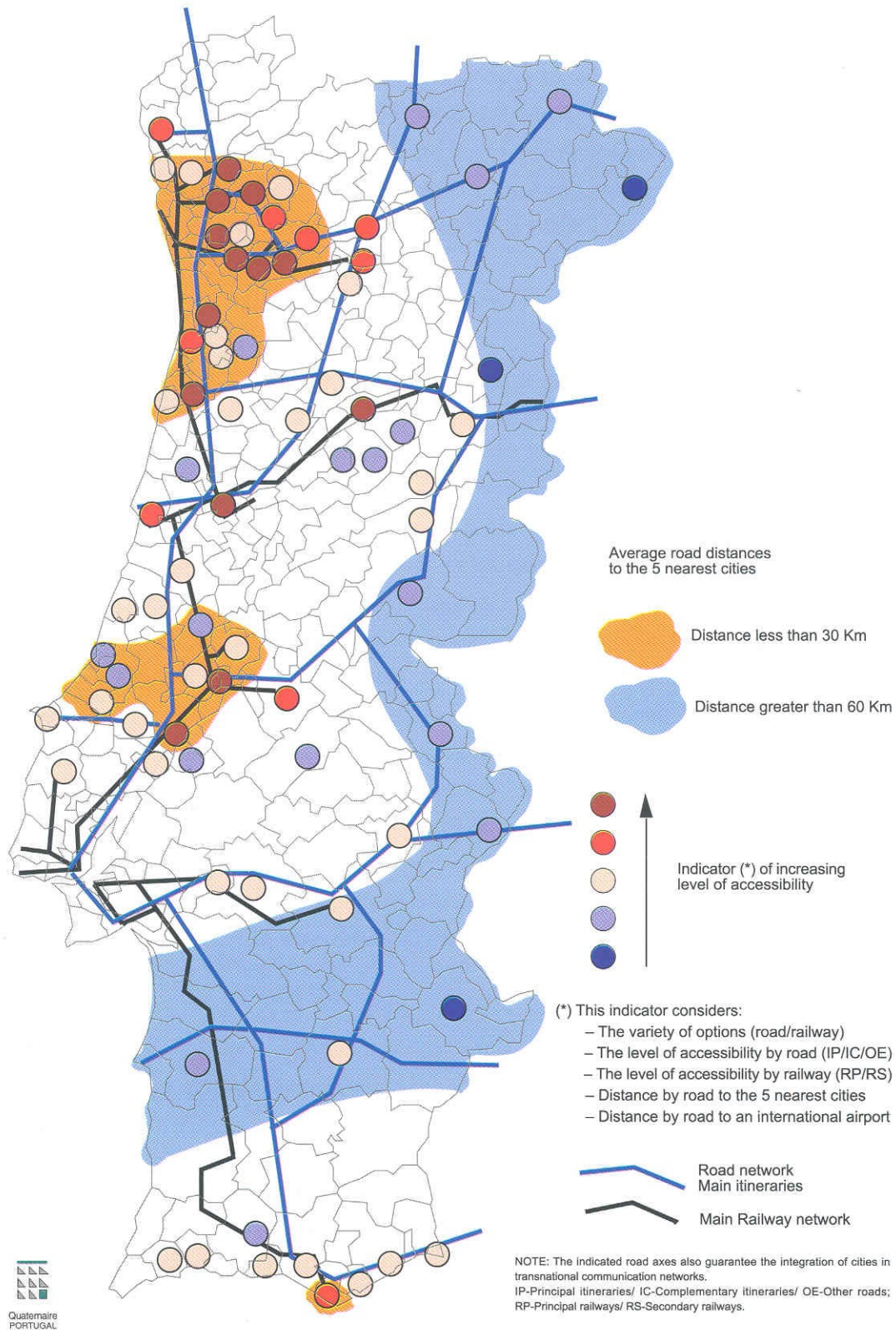


Figure 1 – Medium-sized urban centres in Portugal

The trend of urbanization in Portugal since the 16th century, that is after the Discoveries, has been the migration from the rural areas to Lisbon and, later on, since the 18th century, to the coastal strip. The proof that this trend still goes on, is the recent (2003) decision of three Municipalities located South and two Municipalities northeast of the former Metropolitan Area of Porto. They chose to be part of the Great Metropolitan Area of Porto according to a new model of territory organization (Laws 10 and 11/2003) which includes now 14 Municipalities (an increase of more than 50%).

This new model considers apart from the metropolitan areas, the urban and the inter-municipal communities. This favours the aggregation of Municipalities as large communities, an attempt to foster urban communities with critical mass. But this proactive intention seems to forget the only existence of real competitiveness among the Metropolitan Areas/Urban Regions of Lisbon and Porto. Although the present territorial model was made in a bottom up approach, that is the municipalities decided where to fit in, discussing among themselves where to belong and where to cut off the links to their former associate Municipalities, there were clear splits that emerged in the process.

Vila Real/Régua/Lamego joined with other neighbour Municipalities giving rise to a new urban community (DOURO). This decision was largely criticised and, as can be well imagined, politically fought by the three Municipalities which had some political-administrative power in the same region (Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro) or the major neighbour towns but all of them located 60 Km further away. They could perceive and consequently fear the threat of concentration of resources. For the first time, in 2003, the axis Vila Real/Régua/Lamego took political administrative shape. Previously, for about fifteen years, it had been essentially a planning concept.

Naturally, the situation will take time to evolve and the former technical support offices (GAT) located in both towns of Vila Real and Lamego will be merged into one, assumedly located in Vila Real.

At the same time, Lamego has been chosen for locating the technical support office connected with the World Heritage classified area of Douro (GTL-ADV) which configures a distinctive move: from concentration in Vila Real to scattering of technical support critical mass?

In sum, contradictory technical moves derived from political decisions that probably show the difficulties in articulating the local systems.

Figueiredo (2004:12) associates this reassembling of Municipalities to a fist in the wall of centralization and sees it as a model of discontinuities without the associated learning leaps.

Arguing in defence of lost expectations as in other processes (strategic plans, development agencies), he may be wrong in the context of the great metropolitan areas as well as in the urban communities (ComUrb). For these, the challenge will be kept. For the nominated dilemma and the most peripheral systems, the discussion may indeed be a difficult challenge to overcome as they can have severe difficulties in becoming competitive centres.

For the most developed systems such as the two great metropolitan areas and the urban communities where Vila Real, Régua and Lamego belong, the challenge will now be, once their boundaries are settled, to assume functions delegated both by the central government and by the Municipalities, making this level effectively a decision-making one.

The axis (as can be seen in Figure 2) is considered to integrate three anchor cities, interconnecting the Metropolitan Area of Porto and territories of urban and structural void. It is also located in an internationalized territory, due to being Port wine production area.

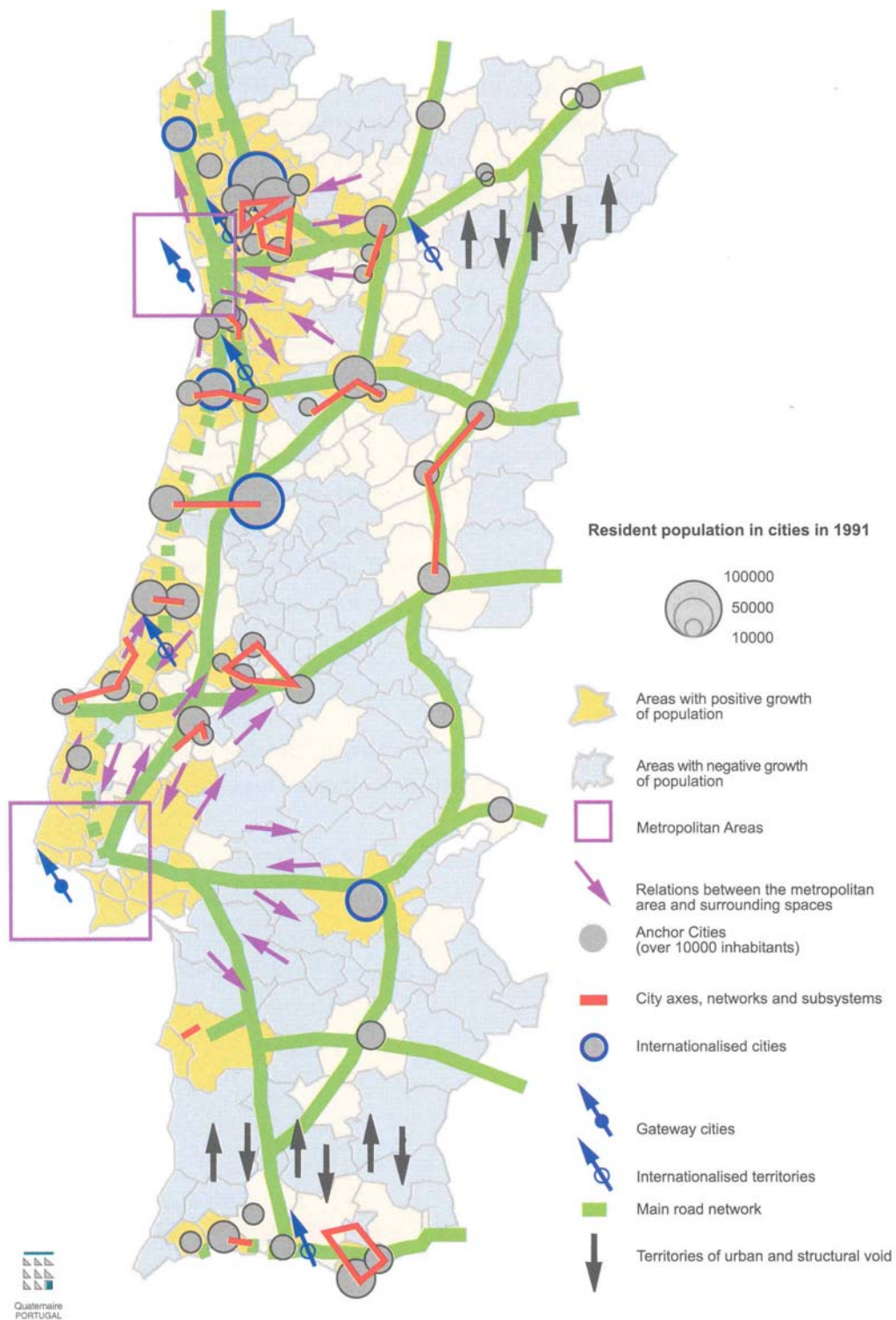


Figure 2 – Understanding the Portuguese Urban Systems

3 – THE AXIS VILA REAL/RÉGUA/LAMEGO.

An identification of similarities and distinctions between the three towns of the axis shows that in terms of economic sectors, there is over representation of the building industry in all three towns as well as of the tertiary sector in Vila Real and Régua (DGOTDU, 2002:61). Public sector employment is still dominant in Vila Real and agriculture in Régua whereas Lamego shows high values in both branches with agriculture more dominant over public sector. (DGOTDU, 2002:61-63)

Agriculture and tourism, the newly emerging sector, are the dominant economic activities. The construction sector also plays a relevant role. Douro Region is already at the 2nd level of importance in tourism accommodation in the Northern region, over passing traditional tourist destinations nearby the metropolitan area of Oporto (Lourenço, 2001).

All the three towns being in a transition area between the coast and the interior, display the situation of belonging to rural areas without job opportunities for young people, that is, it is still felt a very difficult integration of young people into the labour market.

Vila Real and Lamego show higher unemployment rates than the national average. It is still evident the image of low attractiveness and inability to maintain new activities in rural areas especially associated with the job market of Vila Real and Régua.

Peso da Régua and Lamego show low levels for purchasing power and also their population have significantly low consumption levels. Vila Real differs because it shows high values relative to purchasing power but similarly relatively lower levels of consumption, although classified in the 2nd level contrarily to the 5th level of the two other towns of the axis.

There are converging family and accommodation dynamics with greater difference for Vila Real during the eighties due to the expansion and up-grading of the educational equipment: from higher studies Institute to University. The other two towns of the axis show positive converging between family and accommodation dynamics (DGOTDU, 2002:25). The average percentage of one person families over 65 years old associated with an average percentage of retired among active population and all the Municipalities were considered to have a good coverage of facilities targeted at the elderly.

There is evidence for housing problems in Vila Real and Régua contrarily to Lamego where the housing stock has undergone massive maintenance operations especially in the historical core. Lamego even shows the best situation, in percentage, in terms of housing without facilities as the buildings are classified in the lowest national level while Régua shows the highest national level and Vila Real, the 2nd higher level. (DGOTDU, 2002:49).

Connectivity and accessibility levels are higher in Vila Real and Régua, in this town due to the national railway system while Lamego stays in the average (3rd national level) in terms of level of accessibility. Average road distances to the five nearest towns are greater than 30 Km but smaller than 60 Km, placing them in an average location and not in the most peripheral areas that extend over the interior border with Spain and also between the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon and the Algarve, the south bottom of the country. (DGOTDU, 2002:29). The daily commuting movements of the resident-active population and students between Régua-Lamego, are low in terms of total importance in the national context. (DGOTDU, 2002:71).

While Vila Real shows good equipment endowment (2nd national level), the other two towns are classified on the 4th level. (DGOTDU, 2002:97)

The schooling rates are low in kindergarten alone in Régua and Lamego, in middle education, while Vila Real shows a reasonable situation in schooling rates. Qualification levels at work and

among the resident active population are on the 2nd national level in Vila Real and Régua and on the average (3rd level in Lamego). (DGOTDU, 2002:66).

Vila Real is classified with a high cultural dynamics level (2nd level in the country) while Lamego and Régua (get 5th Level) meaning very weak dynamics.

Vila Real is a district seat but it shows a lower institutional dynamism than the coastal urban centres and slightly higher than Régua and Lamego.

On the whole, the axis is on average in terms of the 79 studied urban centres with Vila Real, the prime city, normally scoring a better result, achieving the 2nd level in almost all indicators.

It has a potential good location as it is within short distance to the Metropolitan Area of Oporto due to its closeness (100 Km) and major road/railway links (a little more than 1 hour distance) as well its closeness to internationalized territories (Port wine production area).

In sum, although there is potential for competitiveness, there is still a long way to go. Vila Real has still to capitalise more as prime city but the other two towns demand equal partnerships. As such, explicit partnership contracts between the towns are still very scarce and dealing with basic infrastructure namely litter collection.

4 – THE DILEMMAS OF NETWORKING AND TERRITORIAL COHESION

In this medium-sized towns there is less formal structuring into technical bodies than in Metropolitan Areas' Municipalities but this does not seem to be an incentive to more frequency of formal or informal arrangements in them.

Formal arrangements are essentially sector-based. That is, a specific Ministry will sign a contract or intention for action with a single Municipality of the axis and not with the entity axis.

As a matter of fact, the axis is starting to become a full concept, more than a planner's concept nowadays, as the local politicians, local population and even private companies (especially in the tourism sector) use this denomination.

Informal arrangements in the axis Vila Real / Régua / Lamego do not seem to play such an important role as in most Municipalities of the Metropolitan Areas where the networking of both political and technical agents is more dynamic. Thus, there seems to be a shortage of informal contacts and, consequently, of informal arrangements that give density and content to the decisions being undertaken.

There is also inner competitiveness among them for the location of public administration services, especially these last. Individual actors and pro-active policies are not so pre-eminent as it would be desirable especially if working for the reality axis.

As such, in terms of territorial organization there are complementarities to be further enhanced, namely connectivity rail-road-river with Régua as the anchor city. It is important to notice that there are threshold and small size effects due to the importance of the agricultural lands in between the three towns and also topographical factors. This is an important physical constraint hindering the expansion of urban growth areas.

Standards of living, social and human capitals are higher in Vila Real but contrarily to most Metropolitan Areas where an historical capital has been developing faster for a long time, the development of Vila Real is quite recent, in the last twenty-five years. Thus, the other two towns do not respect its slightly higher position as prime city and driving force of the axis.

There are clear identities, with specific specializations derived from the location of infrastructures (rail road and harbour in Régua) and equipments (University in Vila Real) but there is a wider situation on the axis of underdeveloped infrastructure and poor access to specialized networking.

Likewise, the situation is somewhat the traditional pattern of the bottlenecks in the implementation policies, already portrayed in the seventies (Pressman and Wildawsky: how great expectations in Washington are dashed out in Oklahoma). Nevertheless, the amount of analyses and studies produced together and most important, discussed together by politicians and technical representatives of all three towns is fostering dialogue and creating informal networks of practitioners. This may lead to an effective basis of shared information that will prevent situations like the exclusion of two of the towns in the first instance of a financial program targeting medium-sized towns. When they appealed as many others and as it is typical (see examples for the Netherlands in Faludi, 1997), by the time they were admitted, in the second phase of the program, things did not turn out very well and no project was approved in Régua nor in Lamego. As asked (Figueiredo, 2004:13) are the Municipalities going to see their expectations dashed away, having given the process excessive time and resources considering the scarce benefits they will get, as it happened with strategic town plans and the creation of development agencies? The question remains to be answered.

5 – CONCLUSIONS

The importance of the traditional political-administrative systems cannot be easily overridden by proactive policies. There are levels of decisions and competencies that are kept within the traditional established systems, no matter the proactiveness of the planning policies. Netherlands shows this at full evidence. The knoopunt strategy was undermined by requests of other Municipalities to belong to the list of urban centres appointed as growth centres (Faludi, 1997). Furthermore and even in a country such as the Netherlands where Municipalities can effectively be merged by Parliament decisions, the merging did not occur as well. Aiming at the systems of networked cities or rather service networks run by cities is a question to be asked. And the second question is that if this latter situation is enough. That is what is happening as the contacts between urban centres expand, independently of politicians, planners, etc but also including the sectoral approaches. In fact and rather as a disillusioning conclusion Vila Real/Régua/Lamego seem to be islands along an axe of competition and not yet a system of networked cities. The question about placing the focus in establishing of bilateral links between the key strategic sectors or rather concentrating and specializing? The answer seems to be that while the axis as an entity should concentrate and specialize, within the axis, the different urban centres can assume different roles. The doubts about territorial cohesion based on strategic efficiency criteria or the gradual hegemonic governance of territories or decisions taken at higher territorial and political level can also be put forward. The first situation seems to be the general panorama on democratic Europe, a bottom-up approach where decisions are being taken step by step. That is also the case in Portugal and more specifically in Vila Real/Régua/Lamego axis. Nevertheless, for a certain level of decision-making the last stand as a top-down approach is also necessary. Even the regional level can be for some major network decisions not the appropriate level as they have to be taken at national level.

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