



**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme  
Research Proposal**

**Mobilizing the Railway: Unraveling Insights from the Spanish High-Speed Rail Project for  
Canadian Infrastructure Dynamics**

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## **Abstract**

In February 2025, the Canadian government announced the establishment of “Alto”, a high-speed rail (HSR) connecting Toronto and Québec City. With this resurgence in public interest over rail development, it has become essential to outline, acknowledge, and reformulate the power of infrastructure in molding territoriality. This research aims to do so in distilling pertinent considerations for the upcoming rail project by looking unto the exemplar case of rail as a nation-building tool: the Spanish High-Speed Rail (HSR). Spain’s HSR is hailed as the world’s most significant transportation infrastructure project in revolutionizing a model for sustainable, efficient, and affordable travel. Outwardly, it has alleviated the perils of the “Spanish Problem”—the distinct regions and strong identity belongings that have impeded and resisted centralized Spanish institutionalization. This “success”, however, raises fundamental questions on infrastructure’s role in national identity imposition as a means of creating social cohesion as groups within Spain—specifically in the Basque Country and Catalonia—have organized in resistance to the project. This study attempts to understand this reaction, utilizing a socio-political lens of analysis outside the typically cited technical and economic justifications. Through qualitative fieldwork and an extensive literature review, I aim to uncover the evolving relationship between the Spanish state and citizens of the Basque Country as they rupture a supposedly stable social identity. In understanding the objections, motivations, and perceptions these groups hold, I aim to craft fundamental considerations for rail-infrastructure’s use as an ethical and effective governance tool. Importantly, I seek to bring this knowledge to the Canadian context, drawing an analogous link in outlining the lessons Canada can distill from citizen reaction and alteration of nation-building projects. All of this lies within the auspices of aligning the rail project with Indigenous reconciliation and inclusion efforts. As I argue, Canada has the chance to reconsider what constitutes “vital infrastructure” informed by the grievances of its inhabitants, and guided by parallel projects, to leverage rail as a mechanism for justice, reconciliation, and sustainability.

## **Introduction**

Investigating the role of the Spanish HSR ties within a broader interest of mine to understand the role infrastructure plays in crafting conditions conducive to peace, increased social cohesion and interconnection. To me, the infrastructural domain has always been a deeply politicized site of contestation and power projection. For example, in the Canadian context, “Wiindigo Infrastructure”, characterized in its inherent destructive and extractive nature, has become the normative model of operation. However, as it is to be explored, infrastructure’s malleability allows for its re-adaptation for more ethical and sustainable objectives. With public interest at an all-time high as Canada embarks on its own rail-expansion project, reframing the colonial legacy of the railway through more inclusive practices becomes an obligation—one that can only be fulfilled through intentional acknowledgment of communal grievances. The Spanish HSR presents a place where infrastructure is similarly instrumentalized as tool for hegemonic state-building, one that imposes a unified national identity at the expense of regional diversity. Here, citizens of the Basque Country choose to manifest their dissatisfaction through discourse, alternative projects, and advocacy. In this, deeper insight can be unraveled on the frictions and disillusionment born out of the discrepancy between state-goals and citizen expectation. Essentially, through this research project, I aim to investigate citizen contestation of the state’s

vision, with the intention of looking unto reshaping how infrastructure should be deployed. All of this accounts for a foundational belief of mine: that implicating individual experiences in governance process yields and a more robust, adequate, and just form of governance.

## **Research Objectives & Questions**

The objective of this work is to effectuate a more human-centered study to rail-infrastructure opposition. Rather than solely focusing on economic or technical dimensions, this research seeks to highlight the more nuanced, and often disregarded, local perspectives. I seek to understand the latent and overt dynamics that individuals ascribe to the tension between national rail infrastructure and communal expectations. As such, I aim to derive from answering the questions outlined a set of considerations and policy prescriptions that will be essential for sustainable and ethical infrastructural development.

Primary question: How has citizen response affected and shaped Spanish rail development as a social cohesion project? What lessons can Canada distill from citizen response to nation-building projects, and how does it align with indigenous reconciliation and inclusion efforts?

Supplementary questions include: Can social cohesion be created, and national identities solidified, through infrastructure? How have indigenous communities in Canada responded to infrastructural projects? How do the state and the individual engage with each other in shaping infrastructure? How do citizens re-envision state sanctioned infrastructure projects conceived with the intention of reconfiguring socio-political spaces?

## **Background**

My research is deeply influenced by seminal works on governance's failures, limitations and successes. This ties into my interest of exploring the contemporary and historical dimensions of rail-infrastructure as the most visible, effective, yet destructive nation-building tool. This greater lens on the topic, one that entangles infrastructure with governance, is informed by the concept of "state blindness" as articulated by James C. Scott. As Scott outlines in "Seeing Like a State", the state's historical development has often been flawed in its lack of insight on local knowledge systems—distinctly personified as blindness—emitting a narrow perception that perpetuates inadequate and harmful social engineering. This outlines an essential component that helps account and understand the underlying conflict between the state's perception of positive development that often creates unfavorable alteration to the human experience.

In relation to the Spanish context, the direction of my work distinctly draws on Diego Garcia-Mejuto's research. His work explores the competing regional and national visions for the HSR, contextualized within the tense relation between the Basque Country and the national Spanish government. Garcia-Mejuto's notion of the "spatial hegemonic vision" speaks extensively to the leveraging of spatial domains, especially relating to mobility and transport, as a means of instilling an imagined national community. As expanded upon in his work, infrastructure becomes a site of contestation for competing spatial visions. His qualitative work with government officials provides valuable insight on the state's conception of infrastructure, and the detailed manners upon which it has utilized it. The scope of his work thus presents an avenue into a more human-centered approach to the topic.

Ultimately, the value of this research stands in weighing the knowledge derived to Canada, by rectifying a comparative outlook on rail-infrastructure that envisions its transformation into a reconciliatory tool. This extension is not misplaced, as the uniqueness of the Canadian political experiment presents itself a closely correlated case-study on infrastructure as a nation-building tool. Winona LaDuke and Deborah Cowen's extensive critique and re-envisioning of infrastructure's destructive legacy in Turtle Island (North America) presents substantial context to analogize lessons from Spain. Specifically, LaDuke's book "To Be a Water Protector: Rise of the Wiindigo Slayers" outlines relevant material that explores the pervasive "Wiindigo Infrastructure" that is infused within the processes of Canada and the United States. Her work explicitly identifies the colonial legacy of rail, highlighting how ecological damage, displacement and unchecked extractionism has inflicted irreparable damage to the social fabric of Indigenous communities. However, it equally offers community-oriented solutions that are essential considerations for this research project. From this, broader, and even transnational, trends of alternative governance frameworks can be identified.

All-in-all, the literature outlined above has been heavily incorporated into the research plan and reshaped its trajectory and goal. By syncretizing the perspectives and discourses presented, I hope to create a unique, comprehensive, and creative lens upon which I become capable of effectively articulating the motivations behind citizen organizing to present a more prosperous form of infrastructure.

## **Methodology**

Initially, a literature review will be synthesized with the intention of exploring primary and secondary sources, as well as unraveling current scholarly debates on the multidimensional effects of Spanish HSR. Specifically, I seek to equip myself with more extensive knowledge on socio-spatial theories, and their extension unto the Spanish context. In assuring a more locally connected work, this process would equally include an examination of archival work on community-led responses—protests, community feedback sessions, and local government meeting minutes—to effectively incorporate historical material into the research.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews form the basis of my qualitative methodological approach, with the collected primary source material constituting the bulk of my research. Pertinent stakeholders have been identified that hold knowledge and impact in both the Spanish and Canadian context. For those related to my inquiry in the Basque country, questions will investigate personal perceptions of nationhood, views on the high-speed rail development, and judgments concerning local resistance to it. Conversely, to those related to the Canadian context, my investigation will focus on uncovering the historic nature of rail as a nation-making tool, contemporary plans of implementation, and expectations surrounding popular response to current rail-development plans.

These individuals and organizations have been grouped into two broad categories: "community-based groups" and "practitioners and academics". I will be reaching out to concerned individuals through email communication. Access to certain community organizations in Spain, specifically *AHT Gelditu!*, will be facilitated through an existing interlocutor with whom I maintain a personal connection. Contact with certain scholars will also be facilitated by my researcher advisor, Dr. Deborah Cowen.

## On Canada:

### Community-based groups

- Backbone Campaign on their “Solutionary Rail” policy

### Practitioners and Academics

- Winona LaDuke – Indigenous economist and activist.
- Dr. Theresa Enright – Associate Professor of Political Science whose work revolves around urban politics and governance at the University of Toronto.
- Dr. Katharine Rankin – Professor of Geography and Planning
- Dr. Matti Siemiatycki – Professor of Geography and Planning and Director of the Infrastructure Institute at the University of Toronto.

## On Spain:

### Community-based groups

- *AHT Gelditu! (AHT Stop!)* – Basque-based movement opposing the implementation of the HSR.
  - o Particularly, I seek to identify four active and implicated individuals from the organization to interview.
- *AHT Zundaketak* – a coalition of community groups that have recently organized in resistance to drillings conducted by the Spanish Ministry of Transportation and Sustainable Mobility.
- Igor San Jose Izagirre – Basque labor organizer part of *Eusko Langileen Alkartasuna (ELA)*, the Basque Workers’ Solidarity, the largest trade union in the Basque country.

### Practitioners and Academics

- Dr. Diego Garcia-Mejuto – Lecturer in Urban Planning at the Newcastle University.
- Dr. Claire Colomb – Professor of Land Economy at the University of Cambridge
- Dr. Maristol Esteban – Professor in Applied Economics at the University of the Basque Country
- Ander Audikana – Professor of Sociology at the Basque Police and Emergency Services Academy
- Dolores Juan de Miguel – Director of Transport Infrastructure in the current Basque government
- EH Bildu – a left-leaning political party that has directly and continuously opposed the development of the railway

In an assurance of authenticity—in language translation and community-contact—a primary interlocutor has been identified to aid in the research. Importantly, this individual is an undergraduate student with similar interests and academic background who has been raised in Vitoria-Gasteiz, the political capital of the Basque Country. I have maintained a long-term personal connection with them, having attended the United World College – USA together and collaborated on several academic and community-oriented projects. This pre-existing connection will allow me to engage in more ethically grounded research, as my interlocutor’s nuanced local

knowledge allows for a better-informed construction and approach to the research. Through this pivotal connection, I hope to occupy a semi-insider relation, whereby the orientation and trajectory of my work comes in constant consultation and reflection with a locally knowledgeable figure.

On another note, to ensure participant comfort, interviews will be conducted in Spanish if stakeholders identify a want to do so. Interview questions will be translated into Spanish with the aid of the interlocutor to assure alignment with communal norms. Additionally, the interview will be conducted with the aid of the interlocutor who will serve a principal role. The interlocutor will pose the questions, and translate the answers on-the-spot as to maintain note-keeping purpose and to allow for the development of follow-up questions. If consent is given, the interviews will be recorded, then transcribed and translated. A modified application of Brislin's method will be utilized to assure accuracy in translation. Sonix, an AI transcription and translation tool will act as the forward translation. The interlocutor will act as the back-translator, looking to identify any discrepancies between their interpretation and that of Sonix. If any major deviations are identified, a translator will be hired as a third non-implicated party.

The impact of this research stands on authentically identifying and transmitting the concerns, conditions, and propositions of local communities in their act of resistance against the state. As such, during my time in Spain, I aim to actively connect and build rapport with the communal organizations opposing the Spanish HSR. By establishing more robust and interpersonal relations, I look to reflect their motivations and responses in the most effective and authentic manner. Specifically, I identify the group *AHT Gelditu!* (AHT Stop!)—the primary community-lead platform opposing the nation-wide infrastructure project—as a pivotal stakeholder for this research. In my approach, I intend to attend, be present, and engage with its members—many of whom are students and labor activists—at social gatherings, community town halls, and other programming activities.

### **Training/ Certifications Needed**

No specific certification or training will be needed.

### **Research Location**

My research will be conducted in Spain in the Basque Autonomous Community, or what is more colloquially known as the Basque Country. I will mainly be in the city of Vitoria-Gasteiz, the political seat of the Basque government. If need be, I may travel around other locations across the Basque Country to interview stakeholders and engage with activities organized by community-groups across the region.

Fom June 16<sup>th</sup> to the 22<sup>nd</sup>, my first week of the planned research period, I will be attending a conference in Tbilisi, Georgia organized by United World College International. The conference is the Europe-SWANA Regional National Committee meeting, where I'll be representing the Lebanese National Committee.

## Research Ethics Board

My research requires REB approval. I've begun the process, which I hope I will be able to complete and finalize by mid-May. I will be reaching out to schedule these interviews within the week of receiving REB approval.

## Timeline

Preceding the research period, I plan to organize, synthesize, and identify the literature needed for my review.

### **Week 1: June 16<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup>**

I will be conducting remote interviews with the identified stakeholders on the Canadian perspective during my time in Georgia. Alongside this, I will begin writing the literature review.

### **Week 2: June 23<sup>rd</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup>**

The week will be dedicated to finalizing the literature review. The beginning of the week I'll be arriving to Vitoria-Gasteiz, where, with the help of my interlocutor, I'll start the process of forming relations with the identified concerned stakeholders. This will entail beginning to partake in community events and activities surrounding opposition to the HSR throughout my entire time in Spain.

### **Week 3: June 30<sup>th</sup> – July 6<sup>th</sup>**

I'll be conducting interviews with the practitioners and scholars identified as relevant for the Spanish context. This is done with the intention of gathering in-depth academic perspectives and diverse local knowledge to substantiate my understanding on the subject before conducting interviews with local community members.

### **Week 4: July 6<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup>**

This week, and the following, will be reserved exclusively to interviewing concerned stakeholders within the Basque Country. From community members that are part of *AHT Gelditu!*, to labor organizers, and Basque scholars. Here, I'll seek to leverage the relations I've begun to develop during my time of active participation in the community.

### **Week 5: July 14<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup>**

Interviews with Basque stakeholders will be finalized this week. The policy prescriptions for the final paper will begin to take form and be synthesized during this week. This week will also deal with finalizing any transcription and translation, as it will ideally be the last week where any interviewing takes place—unless deemed urgent.

## **Week 6: July 21<sup>st</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup>**

The last week is dedicated to finalizing the gathered material, and its synthesis into the final paper. Much of the week's work will focus on the policy prescriptions, as material gathered during the preceding weeks is analyzed to distill the essential considerations.

### **Resources & Support Needed**

I will be primarily relying on the online resources provided through the University of Toronto Library databases. I will also be consulting the Jon Bilbao Basque Library's collections hosted at the University of Nevada, Reno. Their collection constitutes one of the most comprehensive English-language repositories on the Basque Country. Furthermore, I aim to use the services of the Euskadi Archives that host collections and documents from various institutions across the Basque Country.

### **Potential Impact**

The policy production to come out of this work would hold distinct impact in reframing the discourse surrounding the purpose of the Québec-Toronto high-speed rail network. Particularly, this research's emphasis on a more socio-political local nuance that accounts for citizen and communal perspectives distinguishes itself from more technocratic or economic approaches. Positioning the individual as the primary focus aims to accentuate the impact nationwide infrastructural projects holds on micro-level spaces and everyday processes. Additionally, this research highlights a distinct interdisciplinary and international dimension, in its attempt to weigh this knowledge unto the Canadian context. In doing so, I aim to identify broader trends on rail-infrastructure's malleable utility and political instrumentalization. The analogization of the Canadian and Spanish case, allow for a more thorough inquiry on how citizens attempt to reframe state-imposed projects. In this, broader links of transnational solidarity can be initiated. The peculiarity, yet comparability, of the Basque experience offers indispensable insight on the dynamic relation between communities and infrastructure. As an effect, this work seeks to rupture apolitical conceptions of infrastructure, advocating for a deeper investigation into the role citizens can play in reformulating its purposes. The impact, thus, stands to be one that extends beyond altering policy, but in calling for greater popular inclusion, and mobilization, in state-led development projects.

### **Budget**

The accompanying budget proposal has been submitted.

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