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Research Report

Unraveling Insights from the Spanish High-Speed Rail Project for Canadian Infrastructure Dynamics

Image by Mario Sans Majuelo, taken in a town on the border of the Basque Country and Navarre

Jason Bouramia

Research Advisor:

Dr. Deborah Cowen

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Introduction

The development of the Québec-Toronto High-Speed Corridor comes at a time of great uncertainty, both in the global political agora, but particularly for the project of the Canadian state. It seems befitting that the infrastructure that molded the settler-state into one of territorial continuity be redressed in a more modern attire and unveiled to the world–especially as Canada's sovereign rule comes under threat. The project's historical infrastructural promises, however, come belatedly in-comparison to the rest of the world, as Canada remains the only G7 country without any high-speed rail (HSR) tracks.[1] With this, the Canadian state has sought, under the context of "turbocharging economic growth" the deployment of *Alto*, a high-speed rail infrastructure firmly labelled as a "nation-building project."[2] Infrastructure, here, serves a purpose beyond mobility, but one of territorial unity inciting a stark reminder that behind the almost-mythical benefits associated with rail exists a legacy of displacement, destruction, and injustice; a history particularly present in Canada as infrastructure's use remains a source of the state's primacy in its restructuring of the territory's spatial sphere.[3] As this article highlights, the modern railroad remains entangled in this process, where its perceived effectiveness in propagating flows of knowledge, labor, and capital through—relatively—invisible and uncontested means has constructed an assumed commonality of consensus around its expansion.[4] Moving forward, one posits: how can a more just form of rail be created? Inspired by the social movements of the Basque Country, I choose to investigate the Spanish-HSR to understand how popular resistance has re-envisioned the rail. To this end, I focus on the personalized experiences across *Euskal Herria*—spanning then length of its territories in northern Spain and south-west

[1] David Jones and Tasnim Fariha, *All Aboard: The Benefits of Faster, More Frequent Passenger Trains between Ontario and Québec and The Costs of Delay*, Commentary No. 676 (Toronto: C.D. Howe Institute, February 2025).
[2] Government of Canada, "Canada Is Getting High-Speed Rail," news release, February 19, 2025, Montréal, Quebec, Government of Canada, https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2025/02/19/canada-getting-high-speed.
[3] Deborah Cowen, "Following the Infrastructures of Empire: Notes on Cities, Settler Colonialism, and Method," *Urban Geography* 41, no. 4 (2020): 469–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2019.1677990; Winona LaDuke, *To Be a Water Protector: The Rise of the Wiindigoo Slayers* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2020).
[4] Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2013): 335, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522; "In the case of infrastructures, the poetic mode means that form is loosened from technical function. Infrastructures are the means by which a state proffers these representations to its citizens and asks them to take those representations as social facts."

France–to understand individuals' priorities in how infrastructure has come to serve their lived experiences

The Basque Case

Euskal Herria offers a uniquely important case-study that reflects a localized resistance movement of impressive magnitude that stood opposed to centralized infrastructure planning. This is particularly impressive when accounting for Spain's rapid deployment of high-speed train infrastructure, with it being hailed as a global success; in a matter of decades Spain's railroad has gone from an obsolete network, to being composed of almost 4000 KMs of high-speed tracks, the second longest in the world.[5] The high-speed train, or *tren de alta velocidad* (TAV) remains the emblem of the Spanish state's modernization efforts of the 20th century as it sought to bring itself forth, and equivalent, to the rest of the European continent; to this day, many consider Spain to represent the idyllic model of high-speed mobility. As others argue, however, mass investment into these infrastructures has held an overtly political goal of bringing scattered territories into the control of the state.[6] Drawing on a variety of means of resistance–both violent and non-violent–the dynamic processes of interaction between Basque actors and the nation-states they are bound within, present to offer a variety of reconsiderations on the role of transport mobility, beyond its technicality, but further in its underlying motivations.

To do this, I've conducted fieldwork throughout the region, interviewing various stakeholders with the intention of unraveling discourses surrounding the high-speed rail; citizen perception of the project; priorities and demands that have motivated mobilization efforts; elements of identitarian politics; and alternative visions for infrastructural development. In analyzing these factors, I look to propose considerations for the Canadian context, specifically to what pertains creating a high-speed rail project that can act as a *just* form of infrastructure, by answering:

[5] Ineco, *España Impulsa: Eficiencia del Sector Español en el Desarrollo de la Alta Velocidad Ferroviaria* (Madrid: Ineco, November 2023), https://www.ineco.com/ineco/sites/default/files/2023-11/Informe_tecnico_Espa%C3%B1a%20impulsa%20Alta%20Velocidad_2023.pdf.
[6] Ander Audikana, "Is Planning Still Political? The Politicization of High-Speed Rail in Spain (1986–2016)," *Political Geography* 84 (2021): 102269, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102269.

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 should it align with Indigenous reconciliation and inclusion efforts?

High-Speed Rail - Technically Advanced, but Socially Just?

The merits of HSR have been highly celebrated by scholars, mainly in what it serves in relieving traditional rail corridors, cutting down costs on transportation, and environmental benefits.[7] However, many have equally identified the elusive nature behind these promises and critiqued their capacity in materially actualizing them.[8] Particularly, discrepancies on visions of economic profitability and exaggerated environmental benefits have remained relevant in the public sphere of attention. In this, many social movements have risen up in rejection of this manufactured consensus, protesting the expansion of the state through the infrastructural domain. Interestingly, these movements' rejection of infrastructure often materialized functioning alternatives to normative social structures, inspiring a critical way of living detached from the state.[9] With infrastructure, resistance has often presented itself in a dialectical pattern manifested in its initial stages of production and development, with its implementation only serving as a reshaping and consolidation into perceived reality; rejection of its development occurs not only in its final phases, but its initial developments. In the same way geographical extraction reshapes landscapes, the reformulation of spatial visions accompanies a denial of the past and its existence.[10] However, the reality of this struggle against infrastructural intrusion lies deeply in

[7] V. Krishnan, E. Kastrouni, V. Pyrialakou, K. Gkritza, et al., "An Optimization Model of Energy and Transportation Systems: Assessing the High-Speed Rail Impacts in the United States," *Transportation Research Part C: Emerging Technologies* 54 (2015): 131–56, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trc.2015.03.007.; Chris Nash, "When to Invest in High Speed Rail," *Journal of Rail Transport Planning & Management* 5, no. 1 (2015): 12–22.
[8] Gorka Bueno, David Hoyos, and Iñigo Capellán-Pérez, "Evaluating the Environmental Performance of the High-Speed Rail Project in the Basque Country, Spain," *Research in Transportation Economics* 62 (2017): 44–56, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.retrec.2017.02.004.
[9] Emanuele Leonardi, "Foucault in the Susa Valley: The No TAV Movement and Struggles for Subjectification," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 24, no. 2 (2013): 27–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2013.789216.
[10] Jaume Franquesa, *Power Struggles: Dignity, Value, and the Renewable Energy Frontier in Spain* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

the heart of its developmental processes; one cannot necessarily fight the cemented structure but can fight the system that looks to propagate it.

The Analogousness of Canada and Spain

The belated nature of Canada's infrastructural undertaking offers an opportunity to look outwards and inform its development from contexts beyond its borders. In understanding the underlying reasons behind localized resistance to infrastructural expansion, the Canadian project can be reformed into a more comprehensive and just form. Identifying Spain, specifically the Basque anti-TAV movement, as an analogous study is based on three main conditions.

Firstly, the historical development of the railroad, as a tool for consolidation of territory, facilitation of flows, and military movements is one shared between Canada and Spain. This convergent history situates a pattern of infrastructural violence perpetuated by both these actors—with both risking its reproduction through high-speed rail. This is a point to be explored and developed throughout the subsequent literature review.

Secondly, Basque and Indigenous communities' share in a history of struggle against state violence, one that has targeted their land, territory and history through destructive practices intended for their assimilation. Both groups, here, have often converged in their propositions, grievances, and discourses surrounding heritage conservation—specifically in what pertains to the sanctity of land, and its preservation in-face of exploitation. Such positions, as is to be explored, have been particularly present in anti-infrastructural movements, with personification of state planning perceived as invasive and deeply rooted in entrenching exploitative practices.[11]

Thirdly, and intriguingly, Basque nationalism's form of propagation, has equally extended it comparative to another primary stakeholder in Alto's project, the province of Québec. The uniqueness of Québec in the Canadian state—one of regional identity assertion through the

[11] Carlos Alonso Cidad, Iñaki Barcena, and Izaro Gorostidi, "Repression and Criminalization of the Ecologist Movement in the Basque Country: The Case of the High Speed Train Project," Oñati Socio-Legal Series 4, no. 1 (2014): 13–34, https://opo.iisj.net/index.php/osls/article/view/242; Anne Spice, "Fighting Invasive Infrastructures: Indigenous Relations against Pipelines," *Environment and Society* 9 (2018): 40–56, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26879577.

rejection of centralized authority—situates it closely to that of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country. Comparably, in their struggle of regional-identity preservation, they've both utilized a "city-regional nation" framework to stake their claimed political, social, and cultural uniqueness. As Calzada outlines, the Basque Country, in the "Basque political era of post-violence," has begun to leverage the scale of its regionality to facilitate flows between its metropolitan centers, and center itself to Europe as a means of entrenching its political uniqueness.[12] This process of infrastructure building–both material and immaterial–finds itself uniquely parallel to the efforts the Québecois government undertook during the Quiet Revolution. As Desbien, highlights, Québec deployed the hydroelectric dam as a tool to showcase the technological proficiency of the Québecois people, but also to create an infrastructure that sustained them independent of Canada.[13] The explicit employment of infrastructure in creating a sense of autonomy renders the Québecois and Basque cases analogous in their nationalisms' perception of infrastructure as a tool of political control, or in some cases emancipation, from centralized state visions.

On Spain

The choosing of the Spanish state as the subject of this research lies in its well-documented use of infrastructure as a means of historic and contemporary nation-building—sought out as a tool of economic and political integration. This history lies most potently in Francisco Franco's 36-year dictatorship, one that, beyond ideological leftovers, has maintained itself deeply visible in the post-transition state through its myriads of critical infrastructural projects. These infrastructures of memory, as Rubin explains, continue to infiltrate the daily consciousness of Spaniards, occupying not only public spaces of leisure, but also infrastructures critical for movement and nutrition–such as streets and grain silos.[14] Mega infrastructures, such as the infamous water dams of the era, remain quite literally embedded in the landscapes of the modern

[12] Igor Calzada, "Algorithmic Nations: Towards the Techno-Political (Basque) City-Region," *Territories: A Trans-Cultural Journal of Regional Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.5070/T21141508.
[13] Caroline Desbiens, *Power from the North: Territory, Identity, and the Culture of Hydroelectricity in Quebec* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013).
[14] Jeffrey S. Rubin, "How Francisco Franco Governs from beyond the Grave: An Infrastructural Approach to Memory Politics in Contemporary Spain," *American Ethnologist* 45, no. 2 (2018): 214–27, https://doi-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1111/amet.12633.

state in their reformulation of nature for the goals of modernization and economic development.[15] This establishes an important precedence where infrastructure occupies a peculiarly politicized position in Spain in its connection to destructive historical processes—which scholars argue have reproduced themselves in current political discourse. As Germà Bel demonstrates, the railroad maintains a unique centrality in Spain's nation-building efforts through infrastructure. Indeed, the rail was presented as a tool of wealth-distribution, one to be leveraged to equalize growth that the Industrial Revolution that had left the state unevenly developed.[16] However, underneath this proposition lay an attempt at political unification and centralization; the creation of Madrid as the focal point of the rail network cemented the capital—and thus the Spanish state—as a source of economic, and political power, diminishing the source of the rail as a mechanism for equitable wealth-redistribution. Nevertheless, discourse of the railroad's redistributive force remains present, and reinforced, in the post-dictatorship era, with increasing belief in its capacity to unleash a new era of Spanish mobility.

Figure 1: Spanish high-speed railway lines in operation as of January 2025. Source: Source: Wikimedia Commons, "Spain High Speed Rail," SVG map.

In this, the railroad's extensive historic use became one extending into the contemporary world, carrying with it the conflicting dynamics surrounding Spain's infrastructural development. As Audikana presents, Spain started to position itself as the forebearer of high-speed rail, parading it as an infrastructure of vast mobility, affordability, and sustainability. Though deploying modernization as the underlying premise, he argues, that the Spanish state sought to construct HSR primarily for state-building purposes; commencing a process of infrastructural

[15] Gema Lax-Martínez, "Reservoirs of Power: The Political Legacy of Dam Construction in Franco's Spain," *Explorations in Economic History* 94 (2024): 101628, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eeh.2024.101628; These standardized infrastructures became apparent during the field-work conducted for this paper, where many of the villages we had visited still utilized the design that had been standardized and implemented throughout Spain.
[16] Germà Bel, *Infrastructure and the Political Economy of Nation-Building in Spain, 1720–2010* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2012).

politicization that became increasingly reinforced with the years.[17] As he cites, the first HSR line developed, connecting Madrid-Sevilla in 1992, was one of unimaginable economic costs unjustified by the mobility demands of the trajectory.[18] As he outlines, this initiative aligned with the World Expo of 1992—an opportunity for Spain to present the successes of its transition to democratic rule.[19] Here, the HSR became an opportunity to tangibly showcase the ethos surrounding the modern Spanish state: an anti-thesis of the Francoist regime of isolationism, and a revindication for its forgotten history of global (imperial) relevance. Thus, the high-speed rail became a material artifact built to showcase Spain's newly constructed myth, with an emphasis on modernizing the state, and bringing forth its economic prosperity. This was not only essential, but pivotal to its success as Audikana posits,

But in the lack of these myths, what does a high-speed train serve?[20]

Even further, Diego García-Mejuto showcases Spain's HSR project had sought to cement it in equivalency with the rest of the European continent, physically connecting the state with the infrastructures of the expanding supra-national entity.[21] The post-dictatorship Spain, one of unprecedented economic growth with a forward-leading vision, aligned itself well with the European Union's vision to unify the continent. Europe itself saw it essential for these links to be formed, designating certain key-corridors as of critical importance to the entire region all to create a "Europe of Flows". These discourses of regional interconnection, as García-Mejuto identifies, took on a central role in entrenching the HSR as an essential project for national—and regional—development.[22] This "Europe of Flows" presented the train as a modernizing instrument, one that equitably balanced economic activity, where infrastructure provision led

[17] Ander Audikana, "Is Planning Still Political? The Politicization of High-Speed Rail in Spain (1986–2016)," *Political Geography* 84 (2021): art. 102269, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102269, 6–7.
[18] Paolo Beria, Raffaele Grimaldi, Daniel Albalate, and Germà Bel, "Delusions of Success: Costs and Demand of High-Speed Rail in Italy and Spain," *Transport Policy* 68 (2018): 63–79.
[19] Audikana, 6-7.
[20] Ander Audikana, *La politisation de la grande vitesse espagnole (1986–2011): Construction d'un mythe, production d'un consensus, émergence d'une controverse* (PhD diss., Université Paris-Est, 2012), 11. Translated from French by author: "Mais en l'absence de ces mythes, à quoi sert un train à GV ?"
[21] David García-Mejuto, "A Europe of Multiple Flows: Contested Discursive Integration in Trans-European Transport Infrastructure Policy-Making," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 24, no. 4 (2017): 425–41, https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776416663809.
[22] David García-Mejuto, *"A Europe of Multiple Flows,"* 433-434.

development, and ecological benefits constituted a noticeable externality of this growth.[23] As Natalie Buier posits, this discourse had become mutually symbiotic and central to the Spanish state's sardonic presentation of the HSR as a sustainable, eco-conscious, driver of economic growth.[24] This alignment, as Buier showcases in another work, was key in accessing essential European capital for the project. Drawing on David Harvey's 'spatial fix', she argues that this capital sought to reformulate the socio-economic landscape of Spanish territory as a means of entangling a new frontier into capitalist productionist processes aimed at profit-making; a phenomenon she labels as the HSR-finance complex.[25] In this, she declares the Spanish HSR a failure in its lack of ability to create any new profitable productive combinations.[26] As she portrays in another work, the HSR retains itself a case of dominance without hegemony, basing its popular success on a constructed image of collective consensus that ruptured with the rise of Basque opposition.[27] Bernacor and Llobet's more technical study contributes to this critique, highlighting how the social benefits of Spain's HSR network do not necessarily favor Spanish society, even in the most urgent corridors of which is Madrid-Barcelona.[28] The breaking down of the pre-eminent discourse of equitable economic development further questions the profitability of the network, strengthening positions on its existence for more political goals. Indeed, as evidenced through this, both Basque HSR lines do not even attain the ridership levels necessary to justify investment according to the European Union's guidelines.

On *Euskal Herria*

Throughout the interview process two high-speed train developments in the geopolitical imagination of *Euskal Herria* were identified as of primary interest.

[23] Maarten A. Hajer, "Transnational Networks as Transnational Policy Discourse: Some Observations on the Politics of Spatial Development in Europe," in *The Revival of Strategic Spatial Planning*, ed. Andreas Faludi and Willem Salet (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2000).
[24] Natalia Buier, "Spanish High-Speed Rail: Infrastructural Development and Dominance without Hegemony," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 33, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 56–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2022.2164403.
[25] Natalia Buier, "The Second Coming of Rail: The Spanish High-Speed Rail-Finance Complex," *Antipode* 52, no. 6 (2020): 1611-1613.
[26] Buier, 1615-1616.
[27] Natalia Buier, "Spanish High-Speed Rail: Infrastructural Development and Dominance without Hegemony," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 33, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 56–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2022.2164403.
[28] Ofelia Betancor and Gerard Llobet, "Financial and Social Profitability of HSR in Spain," in *Evaluating High-Speed Rail: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Daniel Albalate and Germà Bel (London: Routledge, 2017), 23-45.

Figure 2: Basque Y and potential corridors to Navarre
Source: *Diario de Navarra,* La UE apuesta a iniciativa del PNV por unir el TAV con la 'Y vasca' por Ezkio*, April 15, 2023, Diario de Navarra, image accompanying article*

Firstly, the "Basque Y" (in purple), primarily located within the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country and tasked with connecting the three primary urban centers of Vitoria-Gasteiz, Bilbao, and Donostia / San Sebastián. Secondly, the Vitoria-Pamplona line (in green), which extended the anti-HSR struggle into the neighboring Chartered Community of Navarre–part of the historic Basque Country (to which I refer to as *Euskal Herria*, to differentiate from the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country). In this configuration, the four historic (Spanish) Basque cities become not only interconnected to each other, but also directly to the capital Madrid.

Literature Review

Hesitant of the promises of fast *and* sustainable mobility, as well as disconnected from the capital flows financing these projects, many have chosen to resist such infrastructure's expansion into their daily domain. Historically, such resistance movements have sought to not only oppose imposed visions but reinvision the way infrastructure interacts and intersects with people's lives. Emblematic of this struggle is Italy's Venaus movement, which mounted a successful opposition to the European Union's 'Mediterranean Corridor' connecting Lyon and Turin by HSR. Spain

itself is host to its own variation of the EU's hegemonizing infrastructural vision through the 'Atlantic Corridor.' The Basque region, as a central node of this plan, remains the only visible, and potent, movement to have actively organized in-opposition to the HSR in the Iberian Peninsula. Basque resistance to Spanish hegemonic projects is a continuously expanding list, as *Euskal Herria*'s geopolitical imagination still finds itself deeply rooted and legitimized in a collective consciousness. Citizens of the *Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco* (Autonomous Community of the Basque Country), alongside some parts of the *Comunidad Foral de Navarra* (Chartered Community of Navarra), have produced a variety of expressive forms of resistance to the Spanish state. Indeed, as Morandeira point out, the Basque Country is a particularly politically implicated region of Spain–one even deemed over politicized in the deeply ingrained, and publicly expressed, ideological polarization present.[29] Basque resistance, as such, has articulated itself in a myriad of mediums, with the most widely known being that of *Euskadi Ta Azkatasuna* (Basque Homeland and Freedom). ETA's violently led secession movement still echoes in Basque consciousness, having been active throughout Franco's last decades and into the new millennia. Its ideological undertones, those of Basque independence, highlight the stark cultural differences of the Basque people comparatively to the French and Spanish nation-states. ETA's independentist struggle, importantly, extended unto anti-infrastructural movements; with their most infamous intervention being the murder of Ignacio Uría, a Basque businessman whose construction company led projects against the HSR.[30] Indeed, their positions on anti-development and de-growth remain embedded within some contemporary anti-TAV movements—particularly in the Basque left-wing nationalist's perception of the train as reinforcing state-control over the territory.[31] The relationship between ETA and Basque environmentalist platforms manifested itself in the interchange of certain discourses, though differed in their execution of anti-TAV militancy. The divergence of these two movements, as Cidad et al. showcases, stemmed from a discrepancy in their practices of goal acquisition, where ETA sought violence as a means of emancipation while anti-TAV platforms prioritized more social mobilization efforts, emphasizing education, non-violent militancy and local knowledge

[29] Alejandro Ciordia Morandeira, *Less Divided after ETA? Green Networks in the Basque Country between 2007 and 2017* (PhD diss., University of Trento, 2020), 39, https://hdl.handle.net/11572/277816.
[30] Ander Audikana, "Is Planning Still Political? The Politicization of High-Speed Rail in Spain (1986–2016)," 10.
[31] Ander Audikana, 10.

empowerment.[32] As Audikana and Cidad et al. both emphasize, the Basque ecological movements were deeply ideologically motivated, espousing de-growth anti-capitalist positions that perceived the Spanish HSR as the penultimate culmination of capitalistic expansionism under the guise of development; yet not one that could be obstructed through violent means.[33] Indeed, resistance slowly began rejecting violent means of emancipation from these projects. These environmental platforms, at the helm of which stood the A*ssemblea contra el TAV* and *AHT Gelditu Elkarlana*, established alternative movements and coalitions that operated diametrical opposite to the Spanish state's approach. With this, they undertook information campaigns, public debate forums, the production and propagation of knowledge on the economic, environmental, and mobility impacts of the project, all with the intention of empowering stakeholders to become implicated in opposition to the project.

Evident to Cidad et al. and Audikana, however, is that though fractured, these anti-infrastructural and anti-TAV struggles have contributed to the grander arc of Basque exceptionalism in its variety of articulations; a Basque nationalism that located itself as part of a broader anti-capitalist movement, one perceiving the Spanish state's infrastructural expansion as one of capital mobility and regional identitarian denial.[34] Buier, in another work, further explores this phenomenon in identifying how anti-TAV movements positioned themselves as part of global anti-development struggles by emphasizing the necessity of a local lens in revindication to the larger scales of interest that globalization favored.[35] These ideological connections become clearer in their adoption of anti-capitalist, degrowth, and ecological rhetoric rooted in the conservation of the sanctity of the Basque region. To Buier, these groups partially succeeded with rupturing the consensus of approval the Spanish state had constructed, with their activities piercing through the hegemonic vision imposed by the central state.[36] As she and Cidad et al. showcase, the Spanish state repeatedly attempted to maintain this vision of collective consensus, to the extent of criminalizing anti-TAV activists alongside ETA militants.[37] Known activists of the anti-TAV movement were charged under the *Audiencia Nacional* (National High Court), an infrastructural

[32] Alonso Cidad, Barcena, and Gorostidi, "Repression and Criminalization of the Ecologist Movement," 23.
[33] Audikana, 10-11; Alonso Cidad, Barcena, and Gorostidi, 22-24.
[34] Audikana, 10-11; Alonso Cidad, Barcena, and Gorostidi, 18.
[35] Buier, "Spanish High-Speed Rail: Infrastructural Development and Dominance without Hegemony," 64-70.
[36] Buier, 67-70.
[37] Buier, 69; Alonso Cidad, Barcena, and Gorostidi, 28-29.

remnant of the Public Order Court—the Francoist regime's terrorist prosecution court. The utilization of anti-terrorist legal frameworks to criminalize the anti-TAV movement, placing it judicially equivalent to acts of terror, became an inflection point argued as a show of success in having threatened the state's assumed hegemonic consensus.

The TAV's expansionist agenda, however, is one that can only be maintained with local collaboration. In *Euskal Herria*, regional actors have sought to leverage infrastructure for the intents of self-determination, particularly in utilizing the supra-national geopolitical space of the European Union. To certain Basque stakeholders, the TAV became a project that signaled a move of modernization that catalyzed integration into Europe's political structure, a move that could further limit the Spanish's state capacity to intrude upon the region. In Diego Garcia-Mejuto's most recent works, he outlines how the European Union's classification of the 'Atlantic Corridor' as 'critical' unlocked for right-wing Basque nationalist and industrialists, a platform for an unlikely convergence of interest with the central Spanish state.[38] Specifically, he outlines the development of two *spatial hegemonic visions*, that of the Spanish state and of the Basque government. Drawing from Jessop's concept of hegemonic visions, he argues that the spatial reconstruction observed in Spain through the TAV functions with a two-fold purpose: as a capitalist fix to the Spanish overaccumulation crisis that serves to materially unite the territory, and a step forward for the Basque's project of the 'Basque City.'[39] This nationalist project draws upon the Basque Country's historic legacy as the mercantile class of the Peninsula—the TAV serves as a material means for increased capital and goods flow, holding the potential to reposition the region as a key-point for the hegemonic neoliberal structures of commerce, mobility, and development. Identifying the origins of this project in Bernando Atxaga's work, García-Mejuto traces its implementation and adoption by the Basque government—and its eerily parallel nature to the Spanish state's discourses of modernization. As he points out, the TAV represents to a certain population of the Basque Country an attempt to set itself apart from the Spanish state, through a more direct connection with flows of goods and capital.[40]

[38] David García-Mejuto, "Theorizing Nation-Building through High-Speed Rail Development: Hegemony and Space in the Basque Country, Spain," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 54, no. 3 (2022): 554–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X211061747.
[39] Ibid.
[40] García-Mejuto, 562-564; Audikana, 11.

On Canada

Alto's high-speed network, being in its preliminary development phase, has yet to embody a determined trajectory along the corridor. Set-in-stone, however, is the connection of seven cities, a number that CEO of Alto, Martin Imbleau, has insisted will remain unchanged.[41] Toronto, Peterborough, Ottawa, Montréal, Laval, Trois-Rivières, and Québec City will be the main arteries connected by over 1000 kilometers of newly built electrified tracks, billed at an estimated completion price of 80-100 billion Canadian dollars. With trains running at 300 km/h, on completely passenger dedicated tracks, this will mark a substantial shift in Canadian rail mobility from the current VIA Rail service: one capped at 160 km/hr, and dependent on the infrastructure of Canadian National Railway—Canada's largest, previously public, now private railway company. This massive endeavour, importantly, is to be constructed and operated by the Candence private consortium, with VIA Rail retaining ownership and oversight of operations.[42] Though lacking a defined trajectory, Alto has identified over 40 "potentially

Figure 3: Seven cities that Alto plans to connect; no specific route has been decided. Source: Shaping Canada's Future with a High-Speed Rail Network*, Alto Explanatory Document, 8, https://www.altotrain.ca/sites/default/files/2025-05/alto-explanatory-document.pdf.*

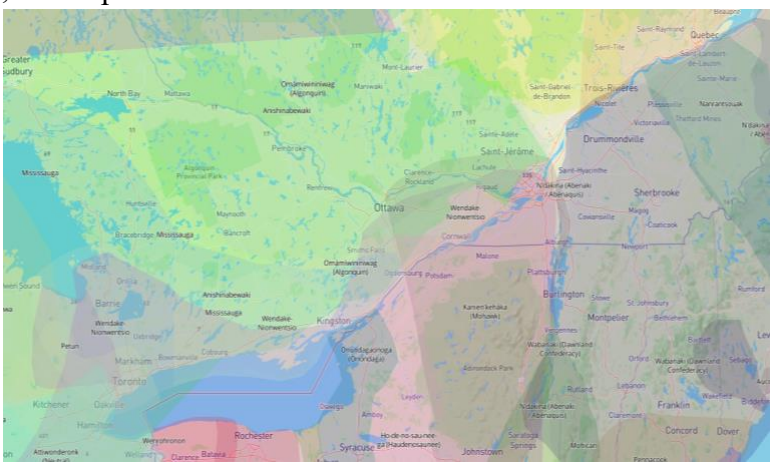

Figure 4: Indigenous territories that the train breaches through. Source: Native Land Digital. Native-Land.ca: Interactive Map of Indigenous Territories, Languages, and Treaties. Accessed July 15, 2025. https://native-land.ca

[41] Luke Henry, "Canada's High-Speed Rail Line Won't Stop between Peterborough and Ottawa, Official Says," *The Intelligencer*, February 21, 2025, https://www.intelligencer.ca/news/canadas-high-speed-rail-line-wont-stop-between-peterborough-and-ottawa-official-says

[42] T*oronto–Québec City High-Speed Rail: First Major Milestone Reached*, press release, Montréal, March 21, 2025, issued by Alto / Cadence consortium, Alto Transportation, https://www.altotrain.ca/en/news/toronto-quebec-city-high-speed-rail-first-major-milestone-reached.

impacted indigenous communities, organizations and entities," to consult as part of its Indigenous participatory framework. Its promise to Indigenous communities, currently, lies in relation to the Government of Canada's "legal duty to consult, and *where appropriate* to accommodate Indigenous peoples, when it contemplates measures that might adversely impact [Indigenous Constitutional] rights."[43] Materially, Alto promises to dedicate 5% of its budget for Indigenous participation in procurement and employment opportunities.

Literature Review

Charles Tilly is often cited for speaking upon the interrelation of war and state-making; the ingrained nature of violence that underpins the creation, continuation, and centralization of the state as the leading force of coercion.[44] Monopolizing violence required radical infrastructural expansion: one intended for the military transport of goods, capital, and labor, but that could also double for social provision–albeit with the continued pretense of hegemonic control. As he states,

> *"For the most part, [states] relied heavily on capital and capitalists as they reorganized coercion."*[45]

Perhaps nothing speaks to this as much as the Canadian state, with points of contention unraveled when diving into the infrastructural legacy that underpinned its creation. As Deborah Cowen explores, the infrastructure of the Canadian Pacific Railway–the first transcontinental railroad–was developed in-tandem with the British Empire's territorial and financial expansion, the interest of settler Canadian elites, and the colonial-making of Canada.[46] As she argues, drawing on historiographic and archival material, the formation of Canada revolved around infrastructural goals poised as a means of maximizing capital gain and military conquest–all built on the labor, and exploitation, of Indigenous and racialized peoples.[47] Eased settler-mobility, connection to the grand flows of established metropoles, and increased mobility to rural territory

[43] Via HFR – Via TGF Inc., *Summary of the Request for Proposals of the High Frequency Rail* (Ottawa, May 24, 2023), 2.
[44] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992*, rev. pbk. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).
[45] Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, 69.
[46] Deborah Cowen, "Following the Infrastructures of Empire: Notes on Cities, Settler Colonialism, and Method," *Urban Geography* 41, no. 4 (2020): 469–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2019.1677990.
[47] James William Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Indigenous Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013).

of great natural wealth were all foundational considerations for the development and evolution of the railroad. Thus, the very purpose of the rail became one complimenting a network of exploitation. As Winona LaDuke presents, infrastructure has long been tied to destructive practices that seek to extract and feed the economic machine–the very one Tilly showcase is pivotal in entrenching state power. LaDuke provides an in-depth perspective on this, personifying the Canadian state's economy–and infrastructural domains that maintain it–as the 'Wiindigo economy.' As she argues, the economic structuring of Canada is inherently incompatible with the underlying premises of Indigenous practices of living.[48] Indeed, conceptualizing the economy as a beast specifically derived from Anishinaabe stories of a greedy monster who yearns for human flesh serves to showcase the deep grievance that the train's legacy has left upon the land and its people. In this, infrastructure's capacity is showcased and highlighted beyond the conventional lens; a road is not simply a passage for commuting to one's job but a pathway, and a vein, for dispossession, exploitation and productive-capitalist purposes.

Importantly, these aspects of Canadian infrastructure continue to present themselves in modern discourses surrounding the HSR. As Katz-Rosene showcases in exploring Canadian narratives surrounding high-speed rail, some historical underpinnings of the railroad continue to reproduce themselves.[49] Through a discourse analysis of stakeholder interviews, he identifies three core narratives, with seven discourse coalitions surrounding HSR development. Particularly noticeable among them is the EcoTrain narrative, espousing the train as a modernizing force that would simultaneously reconfigure economic processes for greater growth, while equally acting as an appropriate ecological form of movement in its replacement of plane and car trips—a narrative parallelly found in the Spanish state's modernization discourse. Veccia's chapter in Hickman et al. further corroborates these perspectives surrounding the HSR in Canada, identifying three discourses closely related to that of Katz-Rosene.[50] Importantly, his investigation underlines the conflicting political, and ideological, positions held by these

[48] Winona LaDuke, *To Be a Water Protector: The Rise of the Wiindigoo Slayers* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2020).
[49] Ryan Katz-Rosene, "To Build or Not to Build? Competing Narratives of High-Speed Rail Development in Canada," *Mobilities* 12, no. 5 (2016): 758–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2016.1175757.
[50] Giacomo Vecia, "Where Are the Rails? An Investigation into the Climate, Future Prospects and Barriers to High-Speed Rail Development in Canada," in *Discourse Analysis in Transport and Urban Development*, ed. Robin Hickman and Christine Hannigan (United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2023), https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802207200.00020.

discourses. Bernard, in the most recent discursive analysis uncovers a deeper divergence, outlining how the socio-political legacies of the rail continue to exude pressure on its contemporary material vision.[51] Similarly to the Spanish contexts, she showcases how competing visions on economic return, ecological sustainability, and identity still prevail in limiting its development. This is particularly important in accounting for the trans-provincial nature of the project, its passage through Indigenous sovereign territory, and the economic growth promised with its construction.

Upon the time of writing this article (Summer of 2025), newly voted Prime Minister Mark Carney has embarked on an extensive campaign that has emphasized an expansion of Canadian extractive, and military, capacity–in an effort to combat the ever-uncertain hegemonic decline of the United States.[52] This has been accompanied with the facilitation of immense infrastructural projects deemed of 'critical' nature—of which ports, pipelines, and railways have been identified.[53] Through this, entities may request a fast-tracking of regulatory procedure, a process that risks further desecrating Indigenous rights, and suspending environmental obligations.[54] In these announcements, officials have deployed discourses of modernization, calling for Canada's grand return; and disentanglement from the U.S. web of neoliberal production through the creation of its own 'Made in Canada' prosperity. This discourse continuously reiterates itself in the Canadian political sphere, with Tim Hodgson, Federal Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, calling upon the state to intervene and substantiate investments into infrastructure similarly to "wartime efforts".[55]

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[51] Isabelle Bernard, *From Talk to Action: A Stakeholder Discourse Analysis of Canadian High-Speed Rail in the Québec City–Windsor Corridor* (Master's thesis, McGill University, May 2025), accessed July 17, 2025, https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/papers/4m90f1984?locale=en.

[52] Liberal Party of Canada, "Mark Carney's Liberals Announce Plan to Diversify Canadian Trade by Improving Canada's Trade-Enabling Infrastructure," news release, March 28, 2025, Liberal Party of Canada, https://liberal.ca/mark-carneys-liberals-announce-plan-to-diversify-canadian-trade-by-improving-canadas-trade-enabling-infrastructure/

[53] *Prime Minister Carney Launches New Major Projects Office to Fast-Track Nation-Building Projects*, press release, Ottawa, August 29, 2025, Prime Minister of Canada, https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2025/08/29/prime-minister-carney-launches-new-major-projects-office-fast-track-nation-building-projects.

[54] Government of Canada, "Prime Minister Carney Meets with Premiers and Shares His Plan to Build One Strong Canadian Economy," news release, March 21, 2025, Ottawa, Ontario, Government of Canada, https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2025/03/21/prime-minister-carney-meets-premiers-and-shares-his-plan-build

[55] Mike Le Couteur, "Minister Calls for Wartime Effort to Build Infrastructure," *CTV News*, published June 25, 2025, updated June 26, 2025, https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/article/minister-calls-for-wartime-effort-to-build-infrastructure/.

This urgency has inadvertently constructed an assumed consensus for these infrastructural developments, with any resistance to this claim immediately addressed. As Guenther showcases, the Canadian state has criminalized any obstruction of the railway in an eerily recognizable pattern.[56] In Canada, protests, demonstrations, and obstructions of infrastructural expansions, have been violently targeted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), leveraging the protection of what they label as "critical infrastructure". This classification, as Guenther argues, is deeply tied to the economic functions of the railroad, which serves as a bureaucratized word that legitimizes state violence against Indigenous protests. In this, the Canadian state reinvokes the colonial legal frameworks that bypass Indigenous communities' jurisdiction, reproducing through infrastructure another intrusion into Indigenous affairs. Indeed, Bosworth and Chua showcase why the state responds to these threats in such seriousness, citing how Indigenous activists often invoke a sense of counter sovereignty in their militancy.[57] Their occupation of "critical infrastructure" does not only stark violent responses due to its economic externalities, but rather due to showcasing fissures in the assumed consensus hegemonic projects depend on. These alternative visions then, manifested through militant and activist actions, showcase the fragility of the hegemon, seeking to destabilize its material manifestation.

Theoretical Framework

To attempt to uncover how local groups formulate their ideological positions and material satisfaction–or unsatisfaction–with rail infrastructure, I invoke the use of Diego Garcia-Mejuto's conception of spatial hegemonic visions. This concept refers to an understanding of territorial reconfiguration–particularly related to the rail–that encompasses an economic function with deep ties to state-building processes. As García-Mejuto theorizes, there currently exists two spatial hegemonic visions, that of the Spanish state's attempt at spatial intrusion into peripheral regions; and the Basque Country's focus on the development of a modern and industrial city-regional

[56] Lisa Guenther, "Property, Dispossession, and State Violence: The Criminalization of Indigenous Resistance in Canada," *Philosophy Today* 67, no. 1 (2023): 81–98, https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday202321469.
[57] Kai Bosworth and Charmaine Chua, "The Countersovereignty of Critical Infrastructure Security: Settler-State Anxiety versus the Pipeline Blockade," *Antipode* 55, no. 5 (2023): 1345–67, https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12794.

economy.[58] Though articulated to be hegemonic by García-Mejuto, I argue that the presence of active movements in-opposition to the TAV, and its associated spatial hegemonic visions, maintains the existence of another vision-making process. Observed from a Gramscian lens this process can be defined as a 'war of position,' in the anti-TAV's struggle to extend its alternative unto the mainstream. Informed by Boggs' Gramscian perspective, opposition to the hegemonic process is, consequently, counter-hegemonic.[59] As such, I propose the extension of García-Mejuto's terms to encompass the counter-hegemonic vision-making process undertaken by these movements under the framework of *spatial counter-hegemonic visions*.

As I argue, the theoretical relevance of García-Mejuto's work is twofold. Primarily, it emphasizes the spatial reconstruction of power enacted by rail-infrastructure, highlighting it as a hegemonic force for capitalist economic restructuring that employs pivotal identitarian dimensions. Importantly, this will allow for a more in-depth understanding over the identitarian, and ideological currents associated with positions on these infrastructures. Secondly, García-Mejuto's conceptualization of a spatial hegemonic project outlines nation-building as a geographic process concerned with structuring a specific configuration of "territory (defined by boundaries), place (defined by proximity), scale (defined by hierarchy) and network (defined by interconnectivity)."[60] This is where Ben Jessop's work plays a particularly central role in García-Mejuto's concept, underlying how the state will pierce, maintain, and reconfigure these multi-dimensional fronts to imbed its hegemonic vision.[61] This is particularly relevant in understanding the geopolitical imagination of *Euskal Herria* beyond its territorial constraints, but rather as a specific configuration of territories, places, scales, and networks.[62] This non uni-dimensional view is important in outlining the vision non-state groups have of the railroad as one that goes beyond molding geographic territory, but extending into other facets of societal organization.

[58] David García-Mejuto, *"A Europe of Multiple Flows;"* David García-Mejuto, "Theorizing Nation-Building through High-Speed Rail Development: Hegemony and Space in the Basque Country, Spain," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 54, no. 3 (2022): 554–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X211061747.
[59] Carl Boggs, *The Two Revolutions: Antonio Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism* (Boston: South End Press, 1984). Gramsci never explicitly labels opposition to the hegemonic order as counter-hegemonic.
[60] Mejuto Theorizing
[61] Ibid.
[62] Jessop, Bob, Neil Brenner, and Martin Jones. "Theorizing Sociospatial Relations." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26, no. 3 (2008): 389–401.

Tren Social y Publico

The analysis[63] uncovered the presence of a significant narrative, one of strict rejection of the high-speed rail broadly; and of its development and expansion into *Euskal Herria* specifically. Though several political enunciations exist within anti-TAV narrative, this vision maintains itself the most apparent one, having extensively developed a well-articulated alternative to the HSR. Included within this narrative is an amalgamation of actors; ranging from the institutionalized political party of *Euskal Herria Bildu* (EH Bildu) to the more informal grassroots collectives scattered throughout *Euskal Herria*.

1. Delusions of Economic Success

Perhaps held most firmly in this narrative is the emphasis on the gaps, deficiencies, and misconstrued economic benefits to come from high-speed rail. As many interviewees point out, the HSR is a project that (1) has garnered increasingly high-economic costs; (2) requires immense subsidization to operate; and (3) lacks the capacity to transport cargo. Indeed, the deeply hilly and diverse geographic configuration of the Basque Country, has naturally led to immensely high sunk costs in the development of the project.

> *Delays can be seen, for example, in the arrival of the high-speed railway in the Basque Country, which are also largely due to the orography of this country, where every kilometer of work has to be done over a viaduct or through a tunnel. This makes the work very expensive and depends on the economic times.* (Interview 10, Basque Vice-Minister of Infrastructures and Sustainable Mobility)

The difficulty of territorial reconfiguration–or destruction as it seen by this narrative–has come with exorbitant costs; with interviewees citing concerns over Basque citizens becoming the primary risk-holders in bearing the costs of subsidizing the train's construction. This concern, equally, extends beyond construction, unto the source of operation of the service. Looking unto the larger Spanish context, interviewees cited the immense financial capital required to operate HSR. This uncertainty conforms with Buier's outlining of the HSR as having "strengthened the

[63] For discussion on the methodology employed refer to Appendix I.

illnesses of the Spanish economy," particularly in its failure of meeting the ridership expectations to justify development and operation.[64] This, as interviewees state, may also plague *Euskal Herria*, in its neglect of the actual mobility needs of the population it targets.

> *The review of European policies on the railway system […] seeing what has been the social or economic profitability of the lines that have already been built, that not even the Madrid-Barcelona line, which is the one that can move the largest population, is profitable.* (Interview 1)

Indeed, this is correlated with the perception of the plan lacking alignment with commerce needs of the region. A few interviewees question the profitability–and economic viability–of the HSR in its lack of goods transportation. This is an important node to consider, particularly as it casts increased doubt in the state's intent for operating the HSR, with its deceptive failure to fulfill certain key promises regarding the project.[65] Indeed, to interviewees, cargo transport was a pivotal part of the project, and perhaps one of its few redeeming qualities. In its lack of implementation, many now question the underlying motivation for HSR development.

> *[Transporting goods] must also be a fundamental debate in favor of railroads, eliminating as much as possible the transport of goods by road. Any government could have done that.* (Interview 9)

> *In the end everything surrounding [HST], it's a deception, because here the Basque Government promised that it was going to carry freight and in Europe we were told that no high-speed train is going to carry freight.* (Interview 5)

Importantly, in what pertains to economics, most interviewees expressively outlined an anti-capitalist and anti-developmental stance. Opposition, thus, presented itself to not only the economics of the HSR, but to the economic system that birthed it as a form of infrastructure. Most cited the unnecessary need for the HSR, personifying its creation as one of capitalist intrusion that aimed to capitalize and extract value from both individuals and their territory.

[64] Buier, 2025, 1615.
[65] Though HSR does not typically transport cargo, part of both projects–the Basque Y and Vitoria-Pamplona connection–entailed a cargo component.

> *What we want is a global alternative. In other words, we do not believe that the anti-HST fight is only about a transport model, but that the HST reflects a little bit that the current system, the capitalist and criminal destructive system, is somehow antisocial.* (Interview 8)

2. Urban Bias

Alongside economic externalities, interviewees expressed sentiments of the HSR embodying immense urban bias. As articulated, the HSR seeks to primarily serve the connection of urban centers, disregarding the needs, interests, and concerns of rural communities. This was seen to be an effort to motivate rural relocation to urban cores—threatening to add to Spain's already highly-destructive de-population problem. The train is seen as a vehicle of economic and cultural concentration between metropolitan cores, reinforcing rural areas as peripheries whose only value comes from the vast landscape it has to offer for the HSR to pierce through.

> *It represents a land-use planning model that prioritizes large cities over something that is very urgent, which is to reverse the depopulation that has taken place in rural areas, because it is unsustainable to maintain large cities.* (Interview 9)

> *And so today, we are against high-speed rail because it does not serve our small and medium-sized towns well.* (Interview 3)

There is also a perception that these infrastructures, though denying and actively decreasing coverage of rural areas, is being subsidized by local populations themselves—whether directly through taxes, or through forceful seizure of land. Individuals have identified a dissatisfaction in their facilitation of a project that has neglected their own mobility needs, while cannibalizing on their territory and wealth to do so. The HSR, thus, becomes a project that does not only drain–both labor and land–but does so facilitated by local capital.

> *It is also an elitist project, which moves people with money, because in the end people who are more normal, when will they use it? […] Until now they had exorbitant prices in high speed. Now they have managed to go down, but all tickets are subsidized. We pay for the work, we pay for the maintenance and we pay with public money part of the ticket.* (Interview 5)

[HSR] represents first of all killing the train as a concept of public and social transport, because in the end the [HSR] will be for the elites. Now tickets are being subsidized, but this is like Ryanair and company trips. In other words, it cannot cost a 15 € ticket, for example, to go to London from Bilbao. This is not normal. Someone here is paying for this type of high-speed train. (Interview 9)

It is a train built with everyone's money. […] In other words, it is like passing everybody's money to private pockets. (Interview 8)

3. Environmental Protection

Environmentalism, land protection, and ecological concerns were highly noted across interviewees, citing the territorial destruction that has occurred in preparation for HSR; with many expressing deep connection to the land and the practices surrounding it. This was done through the personification of *Euskal Herria* and the characterization of the TAV's passage as a as a 'wound' or 'scar'.

In the end it is one more scar on the territory due to a terrible social, economic and environmental impact on the area. (Interview 5)

Of course, what they are insisting a lot is that it is a green train, it is an ecological train... But that falls under its own weight, because in all the analyses they make, none of them contemplate all the years of destruction they are causing, all the tons of greenhouse gases they are creating, not only in construction but also in mines, in quarries, in transportation. (Interview 8)

Interviewees also highlighted how decreased funding in conventional rail—in prioritization of HSR—increased personal car use. Here, many question whether, even in operation, the HSR will convince enough individuals to pivot towards public mobility to justify claims of sustainability.

Another thing we have to do is to take cars off the road, to get people to travel by public transport, either by train or by bus. The high-speed train is not going to respond to that either. That is why we say that the HST does not meet the strategic objectives that we must have in terms of mobility at this time, which is to reduce travel, to remove or reconfigure to consume less energy and emit less CO2. (Interview 1)

Alternative Visions

Perhaps the most foundational element identified within this narrative is the articulation, and propagation, of an alternative vision for mobility: a rail project that remedies expressed concerns. Almost every interviewed stakeholder had created, and presented to us, an alternative for the conventional rail over the HSR. The train, to them, was still a pivotal tool for mobility, and one that could, and should, be leveraged.

> *We believe that the railroad has to be the backbone of the transportation of people and goods in the territory.* (Interview 9)

Though created in places across *Euskal Herria*, at different periods of time, these alternatives coincidently employed the same name: *Tren Social* (Social Train) or *Tren Publico y Social* (Social and Public Train). Despite being created by different groups, these projects similarly envision the rail's role, emphasizing the same goals: creating an economically viable transport system, forming a locally informed mobility network, and assuring environmental viability.

Primarily, in assuring the train's economic viability, they call for the creation of a cargo transport corridor across *Euskal Herria*. In revindication to the Spanish state's project, these groups centered goods-movement, envisioning an increasingly interconnected Basque economy. This was equally sought with the intention of interlinking rural economies, by facilitating labor, goods, and capital mobility within these communities, and with urban cores. Indeed, this seeks to equalize the urban core with rural territories–servicing large cities with similar mobility access points to that of the rural—to discourage urban relocation. In deciding to directly engage rural communities, the train would serve as a connecting infrastructure, one empowering more equitable relation as opposed to the complete disregard inherent in the HSR. Popular—grassroots—inclusion was vital in this, as many of the interviewees highlighted the need to implicate increased public-participation in the process of infrastructural development.

> *There are other models, and we must always work on them, and we are committed to bottom-up participation.* (Interview 9)

This was coupled with an emphasis on the importance of upgrading conventional rail services. Indeed, as argued, this would minimize the environmental damage required to construct the infrastructure, while minimizing the seizure of any territory—conserving both the sanctity of the land, and the economic and cultural practices entangled to it.

> *It is to defend a model of public rail transport as broad as possible for the transport of people and goods and that respects the territories with direct interrelation with the affected communities.* (Interview 9)

The Spatial Counter-Hegemonic Vision

Drawing from this narrative's discourses, I argue that the *Tren Social*'s alternative vision formulates itself as a primary manifestation of a spatial counter-hegemonic vision. As explored, the alternative rail positions itself diametrically opposite to Spain's HSR: if the TAV is a tool of progress, the conventional *Tren Social* is one of degrowth; if the TAV is the mobility tool of the urban elite, the *Tren Social* is that of marginalized rural communities. Indeed, anti-TAV stakeholders denounce the assumed consensus surrounding rail, responding to its claims of benefits through deeply technical means—a lens, clearly, more entrenched within impacted communities. Their formulation into a spatial counter-hegemonic vision becomes even clearer when accounting for Jessop's territories, places, scales, and networks framework, as one identifies a shared vision in how these groups look to restructure these nodes through the *Tren Social*. To these groups, this project must be one composed for the territory, integrating both rural and urban centers equitably; identified in this point is a rejection of the underlying capitalist premise fueling the HSR, and a need to return to a scalarity of the project that revolves around *Euskal Herria* rather than national or regional integration. Fundamentally, this alternative project emphasizes the deployment of a network that integrates actors of economic, cultural, and political production equitably. The rebirth of the conventional rail as the medium to achieve these positions points to an infrastructural reconfiguration informed by local priorities; particularly in conventional rail's perception as a more socially, economically, and environmentally just mobility option. Thus, the HSR is not only rejected, but systematically replaced by an already established, and reclaimed, infrastructural domain.

Clearly, these counter-hegemonic visions share in their ideological undertone: defined by an ambition to create an anti-capitalist, publicly driven, and anti-developmental mobility model. While the hegemonic project looks to the (re)configuration of territory for new productive combinations of profit-seeking, the counter-hegemon doubles down on the need for a conventional mode of mobility—one that rejects discourses of modernization and economic growth that have exploited the material, and immaterial, capital of *Euskal Herria*. It is in this, that the component of *social* and *public*, finds itself reiterated and reinforced.

> *What we defend is that a public and quality railway system is necessary and for that we have to stop all the high-speed train projects that exist in the State and revert them.* (Interview 9)

Currently, the most potent *Tren Social* initiative is one undertaken by *Euskal Herria Bildu*—a leftist Basque nationalist party. Their initiative, focused on the Basque-Navarrese corridor between Vitoria-Gasteiz and Pamplona, has gained broad coalition support from local constituencies. The plan emphasizes modernizing conventional rail services to connect 24 communities along the route. EH Bildu's implication in this project is one of pivotal relevance, particularly as an institutionalized stakeholder that has gained legitimacy from local collectives. For example, Fundacion Sustrai, an interviewed organization, who had developed their own *Tren Social y Publico* initiative, have backed and supported EH Bildu's project—though themselves expressing deeply anti-establishment perspectives.[66]

This phenomenon, as I argue, marks a noticeable paradigm shift in the anti-TAV movement. EH Bildu, now, has started to extend legitimacy to the alternative visions of anti-TAV collectives through the hegemonic structure, while benefitting from these social movements' entrenched relations with rural communities. Indeed, such a dynamic is particular to EH Bildu, with the peculiar nature of its entry into *Euskal Herria*'s political sphere. Before 2012, the party struggled to maintain itself a contender for the Basque political left, as many hampered its attempt to enter broader political institutions due to its linkage to ETA. Nevertheless, in the past decade, it has

[66] *Compromiso en contra del TAV y por el Tren Social de varias fuerzas políticas navarras*, press note, Fundación Sustrai Erakuntza, May 23, 2019, https://fundacionsustrai.org/compromiso-en-contra-del-tav-y-por-el-tren-social-de-varias-fuerzas-politicas-navarras.

grown to engulf a large portion of the Basque nationalist left, unifying an *abertzale* coalition.[67] Thus, this Basque nationalist ideological undertone embedded the party in most anti-institutional struggles, a reflection of its voter base's *abertzale* attitude. It is no surprise, then, that the party slowly etched itself into the anti-TAV struggle, espousing its guiding ideological tenets through integrating a Baque nationalist and anti-Spanish state sentiment in its anti-TAV discourse.

> *If you analyze historically the anti-TAV struggle in the Basque Country, the beginning has nothing to do with the 'abertzale' idea, when the Assembly [contra el TAV] arises from people who live in urban environments also, but in more gaztetxe environments, free radios, anti-military movements, etc. Then, obviously, when the movement becomes broader, the nationalist left takes on a predominant role. And well, we can say that yes, they took it on their political agenda as an important story.* (Interview 8)

EH Bildu's institutionalized nature, composing part–though opposing–of the hegemonic bloc, has allowed it to employ a counter-hegemonic narrative for its own political ambitions. By effectively leveraging the experiences of grassroots collectives EH Bildu completed the unprecedented in the infrastructural battlefield: synthesized a unified spatial counter-hegemonic as a new common-sense to replace that of the hegemon. In reference to Laclau and Moufe's 'articulatory principle,' EH Bildu's *Tren Social* platform employs strategies that effectively, and successfully, integrates the immaterial predisposition of the people whose support they seek into a physically tangible project; one whose success could cement, and validate, this alternative common-sense they've constructed.[68] As cited, their platform directly draws on the technical knowledge developed by various anti-TAV collectives—and related organizations—in *Euskal Herria*: a modernized conventional railway that services rural communities, prioritizes accessible transportation, and transports goods. These are the exact rail demands deployed by platforms interviewed across *Euskal Herria*, from France, and Navarre, to the plains and valleys of Araba and Gipuzkoa. Their failure to manifest their respective common-sense alternative to the hegemonic vision can be explained by Srnicek and Williams. As they argue, the failure of folk-politics–an accurate designation of anti-HSR militants–can be explained by these groups' lack of

[67] *Abertzale* refers to those subscribing to Basque nationalist ideas.
[68] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1985)

ability to constitute a powerful unifying counter-hegemonic force.[69] Such failures occur due to an inability to constitute larger-vision goals and operate for their attainment through more institutionalized channels—an approach fundamentally rejected by these movements' anti-hierarchical organizing.[70] Srnicek and Williams outline it clearly, stating that folk politics fail in employing "a strategic vision that sees temporary and small-scale changes as the horizon of success."[71] García-Mejuto and Audikana posit this shortfall in their works; fieldwork interviewees further corroborated this when discussing the rise and decline of the anti-TAV struggle stating that,

> *When [AHT-Gelditu] was created it was very powerful, there were many groups, as I said, political parties, trade unions, environmental groups, etc., but now, let's say at a geographical level, it has practically remained in Navarre, and the small collective this of itself in Lezo. (Interview 8)*

Ever since the dissolution of the *Assamblea Contra el TAV*, collectives organizing against the TAV appear to have eroded in their operational capacity—a powerlessness reinforced by sentiments of defeat in the construction of large portions of the Basque Y, and the shift of the anti-TAV struggle towards Navarre. Though possible that the construction of a spatial counter-hegemonic vision was likely in the midst of creation preceding the 2010s, it is unlikely that enough of a unifying force could've been consolidated to create a sufficiently relevant and powerful vision inspired by folk-politics. This is, in a way, partly reinforces García-Mejuto and Audikana's perspectives, sharing in Srnicek and William's observation of the folk-politics' failure in consolidating itself beyond a politics of immediacy. However, as I see it, it is not in the folk-political element that this failure of the movement exists–as the anti-TAV movement held large success in its social mobilization that galvanized a deeply informed local sentiment of infrastructural resistance. It was, however, the state's repressive tactics against these movements that played a divisive role in their demobilization and forced to re-pivot their strategy of contestation.

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[69] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work* (London: Verso, 2015), 131; Matthew Wilson, "Wars of Position: Folk-Politics, Counterhegemony and the Cooperative Movement," *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 24, no. 2 (2024): 91

[70] Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 46.

[71] Srnicek and Williams, 131.

EH Bildu, however, has succeeded in creating and constituting itself as an "ecology of organizations".[72] Itself being a coalition of broadly nationalist leftist Basque groups, it's been able to leverage that experience in the creation of the *Tren Social* platform. This has made it a pivotal actor in ensuring the continuity, and extension of the movement unto the politics of the mainstream, institutionalizing–for the first time–a folk-politics directed infrastructural plan in the region. To achieve this, EH Bildu has collaborated–and occasionally engulfed–the movements of anti-TAV collectives across *Euskal Herria*. In a way, EH Bildu has hegemonized them into a spatial counter-hegemonic vision–one that looks to leverage rail to represent a Basque homeland that specifically stands antecedent to the two spatial hegemonic visions of the current Basque administration and Spanish state. The greatest evidence of this presents itself not only in the material manifestation–seen through the technical components of the alternative—but more so in the discursive nodes deployed as tools of direct contestation to the current power structures. However, whether this hegemonizing capacity—and institutionalization of the anti-TAV struggle—maintains an effective material transmission of popular demand remains to be seen.

Recommendations

Inspired by the alternative visions of anti-TAV movements in *Euskal Herria*, this paper looks to highlight considerations for the upcoming developmental process of *Alto*. While outlining the importance of this comparative case-study, specifically as a means of learning from the Spanish experiment's failures and success, it is important to establish identified limitations. Firstly, this study's short timeframe only allowed for a preliminary inquiry into the current context of *Euskal Herria*. Importantly, it has showcased an immense shift surrounding HSR in the region, indicating the need for further fieldwork on the topic. Secondly, it is essential that no pre-determined position is imposed, and extended, unto communities impacted by Alto's development from this research's findings. Though some stances, priories and discourses may converge, it remains that those impacted conserve the right to stake their own claims concerning HSR. Rather, this article emphasizes that at the forefront of any successful infrastructural policy is centering, in decision-making positions, impacted communities—namely Indigenous.

[72] Srnicek and Williams, 169.

With that said, this paper outlines three considerations that are foundational in assuring the development of a socially and economically *just* railway. Though rather broad in-scope, they outline either an emphasis or reconsideration for current Canadian policies surrounding HSR, drawing on the success of Spanish policy, but primarily on the grievances and alternative visions outlined by interviewed stakeholders. Many of these recommendations are derived from the *Tren Social*, highlighting an underlying premise that must be established for Alto:

> *To actually plan mobility that is not linked to private profit, but to public needs for travel, which must be increasingly less, both for goods and people. And in any case, favoring commuter and medium-distance transport.* (Interview 9)

1. Effective, and consequential, communal participation

At the root of these recommendations, lies an importance in integrating impacted communities into the decision-making process of Alto. This process, however, should be one of consequential impact, materially accounting for the concerns and recommendations of communities.

As has been explored, Canada's infrastructural legacy maintains historical injustices and inequalities that persist to this day. As it stands, the Alto team has understood the reconciliatory potential this project holds, though it is one that they must swiftly and actively build upon.[73] Indeed, the platform's promises to Indigenous communities remain vague, and still deeply entangled in the normative policies underlying Canadian state efforts of inclusion–which have tended to embody more performative outcomes. Alto's procedural outline has emphasized an attempt to integrate various Indigenous communities' knowledge into their developmental process—however, it remains one of limited purview in its emphasis on economic dimensions. As is emphasized, Alto must engage and leverage community-knowledge on a deeper and more consequential level, reimagining Indigenous' implication in the production of the train's current vision, and its future manifestation(s). It is important that this produced vision, however, is one that aligns with Indigenous practices of living—to diverge from linkage with the 'Wiindigo economy'. The project must not seek legitimacy in the fulfilment of diversity quotas but must

[73] Allan Clarke, "Alto: A Transportation Project Rooted in Reconciliation," *LinkedIn*, June 21, 2025, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/alto-transportation-project-rooted-reconciliation-altotrain-qydxe/.

evolve in creating a more sustainable train through reconciliatory practices. While the success of this premise depends on every community's own articulated concern, it generally translates into accounting for the varied social, economic, and mobility needs of Indigenous populations.

Inspired by a strategy employed by the Basque government in the early phases of the Basque Y, the Alto team should look to travel along the communities on the proposed rail-line, engaging community-led gatherings addressing expectations and concerns regarding the HSR project. This practice accounts not only for a more personalized connection with Indigenous peoples—and for impacted individuals more broadly—but for materially understanding the circumstances at the root of their discourses. This is particularly important when accounting for the legacy of rail resistance that exists along this corridor, with Indigenous nations such as the Mohawks disrupting the train's piercing of their sovereign territory to contest the settler state's exploitative practices.[74] While perhaps unorthodox, this methodology of community-engagement is one that more seriously reflects the prioritization of Indigenous perspectives, in attempting to understand daily-lived experiences and accounting for how the HSR could ameliorate that.

2. Mobility beyond, or within, the provincial

Expansive, and affordable, means of public transportation in Canada remain minimal and scarce. With transport networks within metropolitan areas already strained and underdeveloped, interprovincial—and intra-provincial—transportation face even larger gaps in accessibility. Alto's development, however, will serve foundational in ameliorating inter-provincial transportation. Nevertheless, it also embodies a component of intra-provincial connection, with aims to link major urban centers within Québec and Ontario—embodying an opportunity to invigorate and strengthen intra-provincial transport. This intra-provincial aspect is particularly crucial, as most domestic journeys made within provinces, an important measure to account for if aiming to create a truly cohesive and effective mobility network.[75]

[74] Audra Mitchell, *Revenant Ecologies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 121-122.
[75] Destination Canada, *Canada Tourism Fact Sheet 2019* (November 2020), 1, https://archives.destinationcanada.com/sites/default/files/archive/1241-2019%20Tourism%20Fact%20Sheet/coretourismfacts_Nov20_EN.pdf

To do this, Alto's infrastructural development must incorporate the creation of a slow, more regionally centered, means of transportation between disconnected small and medium-sized cities. Similarly to the Basque case, Alto's technical format limits the places it services, creating an uneven landscape of benefit as certain communities facilitate the train's operation in their relinquishing of their land though receiving none of its mobility benefits. It becomes imperative, then, to call for a more sustainable and affordable transportation models, to undertake an initiative that operates in-conjunction with Alto: a reliable conventional train-line that connects under-serviced communities to each other, and to the HSR network. Maximizing reach, and consequently benefit, to communities along the train-line can only be achieved in creating an infrastructure that accommodates the mobility demands of those disregarded.

This proposition also remains of large relevance to Indigenous communities, where Alto's inclusion policy needs to undertake a more material manifestation. In its utilization of Indigenous territory for the deployment of its activities, Alto must assure the righteous, and relevant, distribution of its potential wealth. In acknowledgement of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' (MMIWG) Calls for Justice 4.8—specifically calling for improving mobility in rural and remote Indigenous area–Alto's strategy should encompass addressing the mobility demands of Indigenous communities.[76] Indeed, Alto must look to create an inclusive and affordable transportation scheme, subsiding HSR travel, but more importantly, other forms of mobility that address the systematic inequalities that limit Indigenous access.

3. In the Hands of the Public

In alignment with the *Tren Social y Publico*, the final recommendation outlines the urgency of maintaining public-ownership, and operation, of the HSR.

Canada has often struggled with the supremacy of private-monopolized interests, both politically and economically, causing diminished economic growth and impacting consumer livelihoods. Concurrently, the country has been critiqued for its large public sector, one many argue has

[76] *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, vol. 1b (Ottawa: National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019), 182.

limited its wealth-creation, and created largely inefficient public industries. Passenger railway, owned and operated by the VIA Rail Crown corporation, has lived at the fault-lines of these two situations: allowed limited infrastructure access by private cargo rail companies, and drastically under-funded by the state to create its own. In attempting to remedy this, Alto has sought private operation and development under the Cadence consortium—with VIA Rail retaining ownership. Though attempting to address VIA Rail's decreasing budgets, many question the truly public nature of the project in its mobilization of private capital. Indeed, it seems Alto has fallen under the common misconception of the private sector as a more effective and efficient force. With VIA Rail's limited material implication in-practice, Cadence consortium retains limited accountability towards public institutions, risking increased marginalization in the train's development. As Matthew Boswell, Canada's Commissioner of Competition, points out, it is essential for consumer well-being to break historically entrenched monopolistic industries. Boswell himself highlights the colonial dynamics that have favored these corporations and entrenched them into the contemporary economic model. In the deeply privatized Canadian railway world Alto must retain public-relevancy, creating a model that while financially-solvent, must not become a profit-driver. This is particularly important if the train seeks to reconciliate, rather than further agitate grievances, particularly as infrastructural opposition in Canada has generally targeted private-interests—many, sardonically, safeguarded by public institutions. As Unifor—Canada's largest private sector union—argues, Alto risks turning a public-service into a publicly-subsidized private venture, a Canadian-long tradition that leaves much to be desired.[77]

[77] *RailLine – Volume 12, Issue 7: "Bargaining and the Future of VIA Rail"*, Unifor, March 3, 2025.

Conclusion

Conclusively, *Euskal Herria*'s legacy of resistance against high-speed rail reveals important considerations in what pertain to infrastructural development's intricate influence on citizen-state relations. As Canada now embarks on its own high-speed rail journey, it becomes essential to consider the underlying motivations of this project, especially with an ever-reproducing legacy of injustice. *Euskal Herria*, then, presents us with an opportune case-study, where localized, grassroots resistance sought to reclaim infrastructure through implicating local visions into a functioning alternative. This alternative, a staked claim for a new common-sense, formulates itself into a spatial counter-hegemonic vision; one where the rail functions as a tool of equitable, and reasonable, economic growth, affordable interconnectivity, and environmental protection that stitches together a popularly defined Basque Country. Drawing from anti-TAV stakeholder's counter-hegemonic vision-making, the Canadian state must acknowledge the politicized nature surrounding infrastructure to actively leverage Alto as project of just and equitable public mobility. Failure to do so risks further deepening the fissures of the hegemon's fragile dominance, one that's been consistently questioned through the infrastructural domain. With high-speed rail infrastructure continuing to be spearheaded as a tool of sustainable development and growth, it becomes pivotal to deconstruct the narrative surrounding its sudden deployment into Canada—beyond a desire for ecological mobility exists a latent need to expand frontiers of production. With this, Alto risks becoming another pathway of exploitation, one that requires collectively-informed reconceptualization.

Appendix I

Methodology

1. Data Collection

To investigate these questions, I undertook a 5-week long field-work project in the Basque Country, conducting a total of 10 interviews with various stakeholders. However, in alignment with the research purposes, there was a focus on contacting and interviewing social movements and community collectives that organized around opposing the TAV. Ultimately, the interviewee list grew to encompass politicians, social militants, environmentalists, community collectives, academics and even legal-support foundations. This wide variety of actors, encompassing an important balance of both formalized and informalized implication in the topic allowed for a varied spectrum of inputs into perceptions of the high-speed rail. The interlocutors and I also found it useful to divide our groups in the following manner, attempting to gather from as far across the Basque political sphere as possible.

1. Non-Basque Nationalists
    . Composed of two parliamentarians within political parties that work and fit into Spain's larger political system
2. Basque Nationalists
    . Anti-Establishment parties with an overt Basque nationalist component, with a relatively smaller involvement in the larger Spanish political arena
3. Social Movements and Grassroots Collectives
    . Informal groups and organizations that rallied against the high-speed rail project, or other forms of infrastructure

As I am not a fluent Spanish speaker, the interviews were undertaken with the help of two interlocutors from the Basque Country–both of whom had grown up in the region and moved to Madrid for their university education. Importantly, both grew up in the same city; are undertaking studies in social sciences; speak *Euskera* (Basque) and *Castellano* (Spanish); and hold different political and ideological beliefs. This allowed not only for the work to be guided with local perspectives but also for these positions to be challenged. This created a dynamic

where interview questions were proposed by myself, altered appropriately by one of the interlocutors, and then often challenged ideologically by the other. This knowledge-creation process equally extended into the post-interview reflection, where we would collectively discuss findings revealed by interviewees to gather a set of fundamental take-aways.

Most interviews were conducted in a semi-structured capacity, though varied in-accordance with the interviewee. Interviews with politicians (interviews 1, 2, 4, 10) took on a more structured capacity in accordance with a set of pre-determined questions; on a few occasions, the interlocutors or I would interject and ask a follow-up question to deepen engagement or hone-in on a certain concept. Interviews with more informal actors (interviews 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9) took on a deeply more liberal structure, with some guiding questions that would often lead into lengthy answers from them. Accordingly, we would engage with their response–as it generally maintained itself relevant to the topic–and only asked guiding questions if deemed necessary to facilitate the flow of the conversation.

Discourse Analysis

To classify the positions of our interviewees, Maarten A. Hajer's discourse analysis framework was used. Discourse, as he defines, is a "specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities."[78] Hajer's conception is particularly valuable in identifying underlying discourses in their variety of practices–encompassing a myriad of actions ranging from protests, and policy production to the proliferation of system-wide alternatives. Thus, spatial hegemonic visions–or spatial counter-hegemonic visions–are constituted, manifested, and communicated through the enactment of specific discourses. In this, the high-speed train occupies a duality, one of material presence, but equally one of immaterial abstract meaning–which in many ways dictates its eventual physical manifestation. Hajer's definition will thus be foundational in dissecting how claims made by participants contribute to the formation of a spatial (counter-)hegemonic vision. This is

[78] Maarten A. Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 44, https://doi.org/10.1093/019829333X.001.0001

particularly important in interviews where participants invoked terminology and perspectives that branched out of the HSR into other domains; many discussed other infrastructural developments, grievances with the central or regional state, or even deeply local politics. Thus, it became essential to incorporate the underlying political propositions that came through this discursive material, investigating not only their affinity or opposition to the HSR but the ideological foundation rooted in their claims. Nvivo 15 was used for the qualitative data analysis, with a thematic deductive procedure focusing on identifying the economic, social, and environmental concerns/propositions made by interviewees.

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2. *Partido Popular* Parliamentarian. July 9, 2025.
3. *Collectif des Associations de Défense de l'Environnement du Pays-Basque et du sud des Landes* (Collective of Associations of Environmental Defense of the Basque Country and southern Landes). July 13, 2025.
4. *Partido Socialista de Euskadi-Euskadiko Ezkerra* (Socialist Party of the Basque Country) Parliamentarian. July 15, 2025.
5. Anti-megaproject collective in Araba (Anonymous). July 16, 2025.
6. Anonymous. July 17, 2025.
7. Anonymous. July 20, 2025.
8. AHT Gelditu! Elkarlana July 20, 2025.
9. Fundación Sustrai. July 21, 2025.
10. Basque Vice-Minister of Infrastructures and Sustainable Mobility (2024-Present). July 22, 2025.

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