



## Canada's Infrastructural Plan

The Canadian state recently introduced *Alto*, a high-speed rail (HSR) labelled as a “nation-building project;” a strategic infrastructural policy for the only G7 country without a HSR network.



Figure 1: Alto's projected trajectory

Canadian rail's legacy of displacement, and injustice, overshadows the potential economic and ecological benefits of HSR. The belated development of HSR offers an opportunity to (re)conceptualize rail as a reconciliatory tool that centers Indigenous & local perspectives.

## Research Questions

*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?*

## Methodology

Conducted 5-week long field-work across the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country & the Chartered Community of Navarre interviewing a range of stakeholders: social movements, community leaders, and politicians. Conducted discourse analysis of interview material to identify themes, discourses, and narratives surrounding the various claims regarding the Spanish high-speed rail, with a particular emphasis on identifying policy alternatives.

## Basque Resistance to HSR

Resistance in the Basque Country and Navarre developed a technically viable alternative to Spain's state-led HSR; remarkable given Spain's system is hailed worldwide as a model of sustainable mobility.



Figure 2: HSR projected trajectory in Basque Country and Navarre

This study examines these groups' underlying objections and perceptions regarding HSR, with a particular focus on the alternative visions they articulate as to outline a set of recommendations for a more *just* Canadian high-speed rail project.

## Results

Anti-HSR stakeholders rejected high-speed rail infrastructure as an effective mobility tool; employing technical knowledge, and informed by their lived experiences, they deployed the following discourses disproving HSR's promises of economic growth, just mobility, and ecological benefit.

- 1 High-sunk cost, with burden of cost imposed on local population—particularly harmful as HSR does not meet the region's mobility, and economic, needs. Espoused a strong Anti-capitalist perception of HSR as an exploitative tool.
- 2 Urban bias integrated within train's structure in its prioritization of urban connection over rural inclusion. Sentiment of subsidization since the train uses, yet, disservices rural territory—this was perceived as a form of wealth-transfer.
- 3 Environmental benefits are over-emphasized, with massive ecological destruction from territorial reconfiguration undertaken to accommodate HSR. Furthers unsustainable practices in its disregard of mobility needs, increasing car reliance.

## Tren Publico y Social

Anti-TAV stakeholders across *Euskal Herria* proposed the *Tren Social y Público*, a community-centered alternative to HSR formulating a *spatial counter-hegemonic vision*. Informed by community perspectives, their vision prioritizes cargo transport, rural-urban connectivity, & upgrading conventional rail to ensure it is socially just, economically viable, and environmentally friendly.

## Recommendations

- 1 **Effective & Consequential Participation**
  - Alto must meaningfully engage impacted communities beyond performative inclusion, and center their practices in materially shaping the HSR's outcome.
  - Inspired by Basque approach, a participatory framework must be implemented, travelling along the rail line and holding community-led gathering to open dialogue and accurately incorporate grassroots perspectives
- 2 **Accessible & Affordable Mobility**
  - Small and mid-sized communities lack adequate public transportation systems—an inequality Alto reinforces in focusing on inter-provincial urban transport.
  - Complimentary conventional rail must be deployed as a solution, with intention of creating a network that addresses these populations' mobility needs.
  - Indigenous access must be central, aligning with MMIWG Calls for Justice on rural and remote mobility.
- 3 **In the Hands of the Public**
  - Canada's rail history shows harm from private monopolies and underfunded public services; one reproduced in VIA Rail's sidelining with Cadence consortium's development and operation of Alto.
  - Framing privatization as “efficient” ignores colonial and monopolistic legacies in Canadian rail; limiting accountability and risking increased grievances.
  - Alto must remain a public service—financially solvent, but not profit-driven.

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