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Local Resistance to International High-Speed Rail Projects – Lessons for a European Silk Road:

A Comparison between Resistance to the Brenner Base Tunnel Project in Germany and Austria

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Excerpts from Introduction

Twenty years ago, Italy and Austria signed an agreement to build what was supposed to become the world's longest railway tunnel: the Brenner Base Tunnel (BBT) (BBT SE, 2024a). The BBT links Innsbruck in Austria and Fortezza in Italy and was initially planned with a 'Southern access line' connecting the tunnel to Verona (FS Group, n.d.). To this plan was added in 2012 a 'Northern access line' (ibid.), connecting Innsbruck to Munich (Davies, 2018). The BBT is at the heart of the Scandinavian- Mediterranean (SCAN-MED) Corridor, which is one of the EU's flagship railway projects and considered to be 'extremely important for European economy and mobility' (BBT SE, 2022). As the core of this Corridor, the BBT is a 'very high-priority project for the EU' (ibid.).

However, the BBT project has faced several delays in the planning and construction of the project, and the estimated completion date has been delayed from 2032 to 2040 (Fender, 2021b; Reich, 2024). The main reason for this delay is the Innsbruck-Munich access route, construction of which has not yet started (DB InfraGO AG, 2024). The majority of this route (47.5 km out of 54 km) is situated in Germany, and therefore falls under German responsibility (Railway Pro, 2021). In contrast, construction work has been ongoing on the Southern access line (FS Group, n.d.) and on the tunnel itself (BBT SE, 2024c). For the central part of the BBT, there is about 50 km left to excavate on the Austrian side of the tunnel and only final lining to complete on the Italian side. There is therefore quite a contrast

between the advanced state of the project in Italy and Austria and the relative lack of progress in Germany.

As pointed out by an expert from the magazine Railway Technology (Davies, 2018), ‘the biggest stumbling block’ to the realisation of the project has been resistance by German people in the affected regions. The question remains as to why this phenomenon has been particularly significant in Germany. To provide answers, this report examines local resistance in Germany and Austria, by focusing on the following research questions: How does local resistance to the BBT project compare in Austria and Germany? How can these differences be explained?

Previous research by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw) found that such an investment would also have significant environmental benefits. Its 2022 study on the environmental impact of a European Silk Road on a northern route, starting from Lyon and extending north-eastwards, found that such a passenger transport project could result in carbon emission avoidance of up to 10% of annual net EU27 emissions (Weber et al., 2022). A 2023 study found that the construction of the proposed European Silk Road along a comparable line could reduce CO2 emissions from freight transport by the annual equivalent of almost 24% of overall EU transport sector emissions (excluding air transport) (Arsenev et al., 2023).

Excerpts from Conclusion

As highlighted above, our research indicates that local resistance to the BBT project in Austria has not reached the same magnitude or impact as local resistance in Germany. One of the main reasons why local resistance in Germany had a bigger impact on BBT planning and construction than in Austria is the politicisation of the issue in Germany. As shown throughout our interviews, the perceived political advantage of opposing the project led politicians to mobilise the BBT project into a political issue. This politicisation resulted in greater pressure, achieving both project delays and route re-evaluation. In Austria, on the other hand, the issue never gained such political significance and so the impacts on the construction process were much more limited. This indicates how politicisation is a key reason behind the contrast in magnitude and impact of resistance between Germany and Austria

Source:

https://wiiw.ac.at/local-resistance-to-international-high-speed-rail-projects--lessons-for-a-european-silk-road-a-comparison-between-resistance-to-the-brenner-base-tunnel-project-in-germany-and-austria-dlp-7397.pdf