
La Via Augusta del segle XXI. El corredor mediterrani contra l'Espanya radial

(The Via Augusta of the twenty-first century.
The Mediterranean corridor versus radial Spain)

Josep Vicent Boira

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‘There is light at the end of the tunnel’. These optimistic, hopeful words could be used to define the current development of the Mediterranean corridor project. They are the words that the author, a professor of Geography at the Universitat de València and current Government of Spain’s commissioner for the development of the Mediterranean corridor, uses to conclude his book *La via Augusta del segle XXI – El corredor mediterrani contra l'Espanya radial*, published by Pòrtic and the winner of the 2021 Carles Rahola Essay Award.

Based on the title, the reader can guess that this book has a clear political claim: to explain, demonstrate and defend the Mediterranean corridor as ‘a formidable operation of territorially recomposing the power in Spain’ via the territorial articulation of its Mediterranean façade in a more polycentric way that is ‘directly’ connected to Europe, avoiding the radially of Madrid and the centralist politics that have characterised the traditional development of Spain’s public infrastructures. And it is precisely with Europe that Josep Vicent Boira begins this essay, explaining the importance and transcendence of this trans-European railway project that literally goes from A to Z, from Algeciras to Záhony, a Hungarian city located on the far east of the European Union, at the gateway to Ukraine. Through historical, geographic and literary anecdotes, the reader is transported to ‘geographies, maps and journeys towards the old empires of the East’, very far from here and thus more interesting and enriching. He weaves a story, or in Boira’s words, a *railway epic*, to convince the reader that the Mediterranean corridor is an extraordinary challenge, that it is out of the ordinary and able to play an important role in dealing with the current energy, climate and geopolitical crises. Suddenly, unfamiliar border stations like Záhony and its Ukrainian twin Chop become the metaphor of the frontier between East and West, between Latin and Cyrillic. The bridge over the Tisza River transports us towards the bridge over the Drina between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, designed by the Bosnian Nobel prize winner Ivo Andrić. At the same time, it reminds us of our imperial geographies, which

followed the path of today's Mediterranean corridor, beginning with Rome's Via Augusta, as well as the new imperial projects around us, like China's new Silk Route.

But why read a book about the Mediterranean corridor in 2021? The answer that Boira gives may surprise readers with a series of important railway anniversaries and celebrations that most will likely find curious. We shall highlight two of them: first, 2021 has been declared European Year of Rail by the European Union, and different initiatives have been held around Europe to promote trains as a sustainable, safe and smart means of transport. Secondly, the author reminds us that the Mediterranean corridor is a polysemic concept in the sense that the route, the distance, the origin and the destination, as well as its historical trajectory, depend on each person's and each territory's sensibility (and interests). Nonetheless, 2021 marked ten years since the existence of an official, defined treaty of the Mediterranean corridor by the European Commission as part of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), along with other new trans-European corridors which comprise a veritable continental underground network. After years of Spanish politics hemming and hawing, the Mediterranean corridor finally entered the 'first division' of state and European infrastructures. From the centralist vision that 'everything goes through Madrid' in 2011 we shifted, to the words of Sim Kallas, former European Commissioner for Transport: 'In Spain, not everything has to go through the centre'. Boira defines it as the *luminous decade*, in which the planning and execution of the corridor have taken a different impetus than in the past—that is, the *ominous decade*—when the efforts of civil society, academia and the business world translated into clear support for state and European institutions. These temporal definitions are based on a solid analysis of parliamentary acts, political statements, and news in the press, which fluidly and clearly reveal the details of an operation to politically sabotage the Mediterranean corridor perpetuated by exponents of Spanish politics on both sides, including José María Aznar and Josep Borrell.

This essay manages to explain in an understandable, relatively simple way the challenges, characteristics and main requirements of the corridors that the European Commission is demanding of states (including Spain) via regulations: the objectives, the composition of the European transport network, the timeframes and the technical interoperability criteria. They are important factors in order for the neophyte to understand how a train, an interoperable machine from Almeria, Murcia, Alicante or Tarragona, can reach the heart of Europe without any changes or hindrances. 'Certainly, this is how Europe is constructed... Countries joined by machines. Machines that join economies and allow for travel', claims the author. Therefore, it is easier to understand why the international gauge (also called the standard or UIC gauge) has to be deployed in Spain, as it is the veritable DNA of the Mediterranean corridor, so that the Iberian Peninsula will cease being a railway island (except the AVE high-speed train). In a central chapter in the essay, Boira looks back at the origin of this isolation in the second half of the nineteenth century, and he analyses the technical and political reasons that determine this separation even today, naming both the defenders of the Iberian gauge and the radial system and the promoters of the standard gauge and the Mediterranean corridor. It is surprising that this division does

not always reflect ideological or geographic divides and that unexpected ‘allies’ and ‘enemies’ can be found. Nonetheless, thanks to these local, regional, national and especially European advocates, there is currently a cross-cutting consensus on the Mediterranean corridor, politically, socially and economically.

In the last few chapters of the book, the author proposes a more subjective assessment of the last decade based on his experience in institutions, before as the regional secretary of the Generalitat Valenciana and now as the Government of Spain’s commissioner for the Mediterranean corridor. From his vantage point, he discusses two key factors in the present and future development of the corridor. One is the ‘uncertain’ C factor (for Catalonia), a territory that cannot be geographically detached from the Mediterranean corridor but that is politically uncertain given the yearnings for independence on the one hand, and the need for peer-to-peer collaboration with its closest territories, especially the Region of Valencia, on the other. The other is the ‘ambiguous’ A factor (for Algeciras), an important port in Andalusia that is also anchored in both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, with a historical preference for the central branch leading to Madrid and Zaragoza. Apart from these two, we could mention a third factor, perhaps the most important one, which is the ‘E’ factor (for Europe), defined by Boira himself as an *interference* in the Spanish system which has placed the Mediterranean corridor on the map of priority European infrastructures, defined its route and characteristics and has the economic funds and instruments of governance, led by the zealous European coordinator Iveta Radišiová and her team.

This essay concludes with the author’s personal reflection as a thinker and a geographer who has written and reflected extensively on the Mediterranean corridor. Based on his institutional experience, and considering the multiple crises we are facing (such as the climate emergency, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the crisis in energy and the supply of raw materials), Boira proposes a Mediterranean corridor project that is not exclusionary, rigid and highly exigent, as the AVE is. Conversely, he upholds the idea that public infrastructures in the twenty-first century should be ‘humbler and more resilient, less grandiose and tone-deaf, more adapted to fragilities, risks and uncertainty’, and value and integrate territories. Ultimately, the Mediterranean corridor stands as an *enabler* of new functionalities, new realities and new maps for connecting people and economies along a veritable Via Augusta of the twenty-first century.