

RESISTANCE AGAINST METRO PROJECTS : SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEMANDS AGAINST NEW LANDSCAPES OF RENT EXTRACTION



The Grand Paris Express

is a new metro megaproject that is part of a wider urban regeneration plan for the Paris region aimed at "improving Paris' global competitiveness". It will include 4 new automated underground lines and extensions to existing lines, 68 new metro stations and 186 urban development zones presented as "industrial, financial and technological clusters". The project's implementation has been plagued by a litany of issues : constant delays and bitter disputes between state and regional authorities, shaky financial foundations and budget blowouts that call into question the mispending of public money (the project's costs have skyrocketed from €20.5 billion to €42 billion). The Grand Paris Express remains predominantly publicly funded, despite the involvement of private entities in infrastructure projects.

From its inception, the project has garnered widespread support across the political spectrum. Proponents argue that the Grand Paris Express (GPE) has the potential to symbolically unify the Paris region by delivering crucial infrastructure to the city's peripheral suburbs, areas that have long been underserved by public transportation. However, due to its neoliberal approach, the project may ironically exacerbate the issues of territorial inequality it aims to resolve.

Is this massive undertaking truly addressing the most pressing needs of the region's residents and local communities?

The Grand Paris Express threatens to become a catalyst for widespread gentrification and community displacement.

The project's financing model relies heavily on real estate development around the new metro stations, including massive construction of new office and residential buildings. Combined with the large-scale demolition of social housing under the National Urban Renewal Programme (ANRU), these processes will accelerate gentrification and displace long-term residents as wealthier newcomers move into the new residential areas. As property values soar and wealthy newcomers move in, long-time residents will find themselves pushed to the margins.

The project's environmental impacts have sparked most of the fierce debate and opposition.

The metro-line project is leaving a trail of ecological destruction in its wake, gobbling up precious agricultural land and decimating local ecosystems. This urban sprawl, disguised as progress, has inspired many grassroots mobilisations. One of the most notable resistance movements is the ZAD (Zone à Défendre) de Saclay in the southern suburbs of Paris, where locals have taken a stand against the relentless march of concrete and steel.

In essence, while the Grand Paris Express may promise a sleeker, more connected capital region, it does so at the cost of its soul – displacing communities, exacerbating inequalities, and scarring the environment.

The project serves as a stark reminder that urban development, when unchecked by social and ecological considerations, can inflict deep and lasting wounds on the very city it seeks to improve.

In conclusion, David Harvey's analysis of how cities are responding to wider economic changes seems quite illuminating. He suggests that the shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism (during the 1970s) marked a significant reorientation in urban policy.

Whereas the managerial approach focused on service provision and the welfare state within a Keynesian economic framework, the emergence of entrepreneurialism prioritises economic development and competitiveness. As a result, cities now find themselves in an ever more competitive landscape, fighting to attract investment. This transformation is not only reshaping urban landscapes, but also having a significant effect on the lives of inhabitants, highlighting the complex interplay between global economic forces and local governance.



Activists denounce the artificialisation of several thousand hectares of land.

Brussels - Metro 3

It represents an extension of the existing metro system. Crossing the city on a S-NE axis, the project is designed to use some existing premetro (tram) lines running through the center, including underground; then build a new station in the central area; and also extend the line with 7 new stops in the northeastern direction to connect Gare du Nord with Bordet station. The idea was first discussed in 2009, and in 2010 a study was commissioned by the Beliris (Belgian federal state & Brussels region).

Funding source: Federal contribution: 500 million euros between 2015-2024. Extra: EIB loan of 475 million euros approved in January 2024. The loan is set to be repaid over 25 years. The full north-south metro is expected to be completed by 2032.

Recently, the coalition Plateforme AVANTI! proposes instead a Premetro+ project.

It starts from the conclusion that skyrocketing financial costs, as well as social and environmental costs, heritage destruction risks, and together with the extended postponements until around 2030; all these entail the necessity of a new mobility solution.

Plateforme AVANTI! presents solutions such as new routes, new uses of the preexisting tunnel and of trams. Applying these solutions is deemed feasible until 2030. In exchange, the Metro 3 line was announced in 2009, aimed to be finalized by 2020, and at the current rate, the estimation is 2035-2040.

The costs of Metro 3 have risen 5 times, reaching a provisional estimate of 4.7 billion euros. A half-implementation of the project would be a way for the government to save face. On this, Plateforme AVANTI! argues that even a half-implemented Metro 3 line - that is finalizing the new metro station and adapting the network for a shorter line and not constructing the tunnel for the new 7 stations - would still be too costly and the Premetro+ solution would be cheaper, more feasible, and better adapted to actually increase mobility, even with lost opportunity costs of the Metro 3 project.

Metro line 11 in Madrid

When the project started? The works were initially scheduled for 2020 and began in 2023, with a large number of trees having to be felled in order to set up the worksite. The project to extend Madrid's metro line 11 is to be built in sections and the first one comprises 7 km of underground corridors and 5 underground stations, three of them new and two renovated. At the initial study stage, the project only called for the felling of 67 trees, but these plans would have had an impact on public roads, which the Community of Madrid and its Department of Transport wanted to avoid. A modification was then proposed and approved, involving the felling of 1,027 trees (according to neighbourhood associations) and the disappearance, at least in part, of seven green spaces along the route.

Where does the money come from? The project is being financed by European funds linked to the European Investment Bank. Under EIB rules, projects financed within the EU must be guided by the Climate Bank's Roadmap, which itself was drawn up on the basis of the Paris Agreements and its Sustainable Development Goals. The EIB has lent 372 million euros out of a total project cost estimated approximately at 744 million euros in 2022. In total, the EIB agreed to loan 554 million euros to the Community of Madrid for this project.

Why are the people complaining? Protests were organised against the disappearance of the trees, that in many cases were tens of years old, and legal action was taken by residents of the affected neighbourhoods. The protests were put down by the police, who made a number of arrests. The lack of communication from the public authorities was also highlighted by opponents, who took the Community of Madrid to court and petitioned the European Parliament's Committee on Petitions. The project's lack of consideration for its environmental impact and the non-participatory nature of the procedures are the main criticisms levelled at it. Various neighbourhoods and environmental organisations are campaigning against the cutting

Lisbon metro line

There are essentially three different projects for expanding the Lisbon metro:

1. The creation of a circular line involving the construction of two new stations, which will connect parts of two existing metro lines and serve as the central element of the metro network.
2. The extension of one of the current metro lines (the red line) by approximately four kilometers, with the construction of four new stations.
3. The construction of a new line (the violet line) in the municipalities of Odivelas and Loures, located on the outskirts of Lisbon.

Construction on the circular line began in April 2022, with EU funding of 83 million euros. The remaining funds come from the Environmental Fund (Ministry of the Environment), with the total investment exceeding 210 million euros.

Work on the expansion of the red line began only this year and will be funded by the Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR), with an estimated total cost of 405 million euros. The total investment in the Violet Line will amount to 527.3 million euros, with 390 million euros coming from the PRR as a loan, and 137.3 million euros from the State Budget.

Projects funded by the PRR must be completed by December 2026 to avoid the loss of funds, although it is already anticipated that meeting this deadline will be impossible.

Proponents of the metro network expansion argue that it will reduce car traffic and improve the overall performance of the network. The circular line, in particular, is expected to enhance connectivity between some suburban areas and the city center, as well as other peripheral zones.

However, not all residents are pleased.

Residents of a neighborhood in Loures initiated a petition to prevent the metro from passing through their neighborhood. They expressed concerns about the reduction in parking spaces and roadways that the metro's route would cause. Additionally, they were worried about a potential increase in affluence to the neighborhood due to the demand the metro line would bring, as well as the close proximity of the metro to residential buildings and a school, which raised issues related to safety, noise pollution, and vibrations. The project would also result in the destruction of the neighborhood's iconic palm trees, along with several green spaces that are already scarce. The residents gathered more than 790 signatures, which led to the elimination of two stations from the initial plan, including the one that would have passed through their neighborhood.

The red line extension will involve the demolition of 20 buildings, affecting 32 families, some of whom live in social housing owned by the Lisbon City Council.

The expropriation process began in 2023 but has been fraught with difficulties, and not all buildings have been vacated yet. Property owners have complained about the low compensation amounts, which they argue will not enable them to find viable housing or commercial alternatives. The compensation offered was almost half of the expected value according to the parameters set by the Expropriation Code.

For tenants, the situation is even more severe.

as they are not entitled to financial compensation. All residents have voiced concerns about the lack of dialogue during the process, with at least six families in precarious situations who have not been provided with alternative housing solutions by the Lisbon City Council, the landlord, or the Lisbon Metro.

Another example of opposition to the metro expansion plan is the «Save Jardim da Parada» movement.

Jardim da Parada is an iconic space in the Campo de Ourique neighborhood and the only green area in the vicinity. This group of residents demanded that the metro station be located outside the neighborhood. They launched a petition that garnered around 1,500 signatures.

Another group of residents from the same neighborhood sees the arrival of the metro as an opportunity to expand the garden and improve public spaces in the area. They propose transforming the garden into an urban superblock (similar to those in Barcelona), eliminating traffic around it and extending it to the façades of nearby buildings. To achieve this, they suggest moving the metro station just a few meters. This group also launched a petition, gathering nearly 1,000 signatures.

The project was modified in response to some of these demands: the metro station will be moved 6 or 7 meters, and the construction site within the garden will be reduced, which will result in fewer trees being destroyed.

[It is important to note that the Campo de Ourique neighborhood, particularly the area around Jardim da Parada, is a high-income area, with mostly Portuguese residents who have owned property and lived in the neighborhood for many years. They managed to get a lot of attention in the media, unlike other residents also protesting the metro, namely the ones that are seeing their house demolished]

In general, most residents have complained about the lack of dialogue throughout the process.

They believe that the public consultation and information sessions were superficial, as the major decisions had already been made.

The 1st metro line in Cluj-Napoca

Romania: Against chaos and public funding waste

Context: Cluj-Napoca, the second largest city in Romania, is deemed the winner of the post global financial crisis austerity measures in the national urban system.

Between 2014-2024, the university-city turned into a hotbed of speculative real estate development. It became an international site for huge music and film festivals, which led to rapid touristification. The development of the IT industry contributed to the speculative real estate practices. Starting around the GFC, neighboring villages turned into dormitories, with new unregulated and crammed residential projects. Simultaneously, public housing production reached the lowest level in recent history and housing prices - rents and acquisition - skyrocketed, turning it into the most expensive city in Romania.

Plans and reasoning: In 2019, both the metro and metropolitan train projects were proposed as solutions to solve transport congestion. The metro project is seen as a crown jewel awarded for the economic performance - and an indicator of its continuous growth. Moreover, it represents the indicator of a regional capital in direct competition with Bucharest. The EU backed Recovery and Resilience Plan turned into an opportunity to attract EU funding. However, the cheaper metropolitan train project was practically relegated as secondary to the metro project.

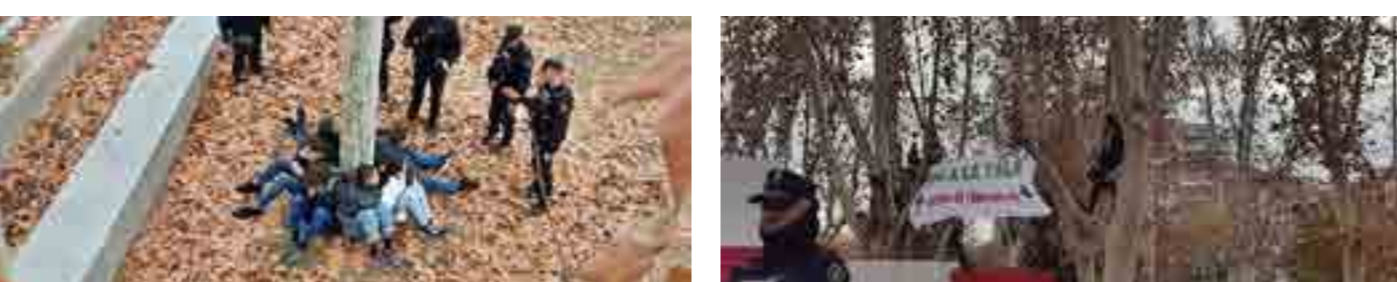
The construction of the metro project line is estimated at 2.1 billion Euro, while the metropolitan train is estimated at 300 million Euros (new trains and stations on existing railways). In the 2019 plans, the metropolitan train was presented as Stage 1 and the Metro line as Stage 2. In late 2019, a consortium of firms won the bid to provide the pre-feasibility and feasibility studies.

Popular reactions: A disbelief that such a mammoth project will be implemented, particularly in the given conditions: a strict timeline - until 2026 several stations should be finalized to avoid losing EU funding; and the previous experience with larger projects being postponed for various reasons.

Secondly, a fear of chaos determined by massive excavations in central areas; probable postponements, at least because of geological and archeological factors; uncertainty related to its finalization - all weaken popular support.

Professionals and part of the public interested in mobility policies insist on implementing the metropolitan train project and the introduction of tram lines.

Conclusion: In Cluj-Napoca, the metro project is a political instrument used to distract attention from the consolidated model of speculative and exclusionary urbanism, an instrument legitimized with EU money.



down of trees along the construction site for the extension of metro line 11 in Madrid. According to them, the consequences for pollution, air quality and public health are terrible. 80,000 trees have been cut down in Madrid over the last 4 years, which is a significant figure for the city as a whole. Parcs Comillas and Arganzuela are specifically affected by the loss of trees due to metro construction work. What the organisations find particularly striking is that the extension of metro line 11 is being presented as an exemplary sustainable development project, even though it involves cutting down a considerable number of trees and air quality has clearly fallen around the construction site.

The metro station planned to be on Exarcheia square

When the project started? Works began on 2 August 2022. Special police forces surrounded the Exarcheia square in Athens to protect the Attiko Metro SA workers who were placing corrugated metal sheets around the perimeter of the site. A demonstration took place on the same day. The permits required to start works on the site had not been granted on time, and there were many shortcomings: no signs, no environmental impact studies, and the perimeter was much higher than required by law. The residents, who had only heard about the project at a very late stage, formed an assembly a few months earlier in order to block the project on the grounds that there had been no public consultation, a general lack of communication on the part of the authorities and a general discontent concerning the destruction of the only public square in the neighbourhood.

What are the impacts?

Exarcheia metro station is one of 15 metro stops currently under construction along Athens' new line 4. The station has come in for fierce criticism from residents, who see it as a move towards gentrification and touristification of their neighbourhood. Above all, they deplore the disappearance of the only public square for a metro station, even though the Omonoia stop is only a few steps away. The construction site has already had a huge impact in terms of loss of public space, tree felling, noise pollution and air pollution. Also, since the start of the works, special police forces have been keeping a 24-hour watch on the site. According to journalist Sotiri Botsari, there are 300 police officers keeping a 24-hour watch on the site in turn! Abuses in terms of both violence and arrests have become commonplace and have been denounced several times by the «No metro in Exarcheia Square» assembly and Amnesty International. The trees that used to line the square have all been cut down. There were 72 of them, most of them over 50 years old.

What are the arguments in favor? The municipality of Athens is defending the construction of the metro project in Exarcheia square. This was the case when Kostas Bakoyannis was mayor of Athens (from the right-wing conservative New Democracy party), but the current mayor (from the socialist PASOK party), Haris Doukas, is also defending it. The arguments in favour include better integration of the district with the public transport network (without specifying for whom), and accessibility to the National Archaeological Museum, which is just a few steps away. No serious consideration has been given to an alternative location for the station. It would appear that the choice was political rather than practical. Concerning the cut of the trees, the company has committed to replant the existing trees but it seems clear that this will not happen as the trees were subsequently cut before being inappropriately moved from the square.

Where does the money come from?

A significant part of the financing of line 4 comes from the NSRF (National Strategic Reference Framework) transport program, i.e. money coming from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) of the European Union. The European Investment Bank has granted a €730 million loan to Attiko Metro SA, the company responsible for building line 4 of the Athens metro. This 30-year loan is not only the largest loan for a transport project in the country, but also the largest loan granted by the EIB to Greece. The first tranche of the loan was granted in 2019. The total cost of the project was initially estimated at €1.5 billion, but is likely to be revised upwards. The estimated cost of building the Exarcheia stop is currently €2 million.

Why are the people against it?

On 22 January 2024, 2 people, signed by 90

other residents, submitted a petition to the European Parliament's Petitions Committee to contest the project to build line 4 of the Athenian metro, and specifically the planned station on Exarcheia square. The petitioners consider that the metro station project lacks the necessary authorisations, in particular the environmental impact study of the works, which is legally required. They denounce violations of both the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and certain European directives concerning access to information and the environmental effects of the project. They also denounce the lack of public consultation, the disappearance of the only public square in the neighbourhood, and the destruction of the 72 trees that used to grace the square, in a very dense, concrete neighbourhood. Finally, they denounce the excessive police presence and the use of violence against those protesting the project on their part, a violence that Amnesty International has also denounced. The construction work, which is expected to last around 8 years, is causing a nuisance for the local residents and businesses. It is also considered dangerous because the Exarcheia square used to be a meeting place for residents in the event of an earthquake, and despite the work, no space has been created to replace it.



Police officers rest on the 5 meter high fence separating Exarcheia square from the neighbourhood. © Stefania Mizara

Conclusions

Context: the post-GFC public financial support at national, federal, and/or EU levels to reorganize territorial value extraction, including the urban spaces, emerges as a form of **usterity urbanism**.

Political assemblages: metro projects are examples of political assemblages designed to provide **new landscapes of rent extraction**, while eschewing the use of democratic popular instruments of intervention. Social and environmental costs are rendered as elements subjected to a required creative destruction.

Political actors and political temporalities: national/federal/EU are directly involved often without clear political mandate. Exogenous factors have a deeper influence on the spatial reorganization of capital, as opposed to the myth of urban competitiveness. As large-scale infrastructure projects, they cover multiple electoral (and economic) cycles.

Political processes: decision making procedures roll over these projects in time, procedures which support **new political machinations aimed at incurring public debt**. Decision-makers feel that abandoning projects half-way incurs political losses.

Power of walls of money: a metro project is a large-scale deployment of political consensus between public and private actors over resource allocation. Different funding sources come with different political legitimacy and accountability. **The European Investment Bank plays a key role in several cases.**

Socio-economic and environmental impact

Drawing from the various metro expansion projects across European cities, a complex picture emerges regarding gentrification, social impact, and ecological consequences. While aimed at improving urban mobility these large-scale infrastructure developments often catalyze significant socio-economic changes in the affected areas.

Gentrification is one of the most concerning phenomena, particularly evident in Paris, Lisbon or Athens, where rising property values lead to the displacement of long-term residents, especially those from low-income backgrounds. The social fabric of neighborhoods is threatened from the physical disruption caused by construction, the loss of public spaces (as in Athens' Exarcheia Square) and the erasure of the local character of places. **Police violence and repression** were used to counter the protests in many cases (Madrid, Paris and Athens).

In ecological terms, these projects come at a high cost. The extensive cutting down of trees in Madrid, the destruction of green spaces in Brussels and the consumption of agricultural land for the Grand Paris Express highlight the tension between the current model of urban development and environmental protection. **Moreover, the sustainability goals that the projects claim to pursue are contradicted by their massive carbon footprints, especially during the construction phase.**

In other cases, such as Cluj-Napoca, metro projects serve as political instruments, diverting attention from the ongoing model of speculative and exclusionary urbanism.

These impacts are often exacerbated by a **lack of public consultation and transparency**, leading to the marginalization of affected neighborhoods and communities. While metro expansions promise to improve mobility and reduce social inequalities, the cases examined show that without a change in the economic and urban planning model, necessary infrastructure projects come at the cost of increasing inequalities and environmental degradation, rather than fostering sustainable urban development.