

A Derailed Country - reflections on the (de)investments in the Portuguese Rail Network



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By António Alves and Hugo Leandro

Two students of University of Minho, Eduardo Miranda and Pedro Quesado, in a highly praised academic cyber-journalism work, whose title inspires our article title, summarizes the Portuguese railway panorama in a gleaming sentence: “In some parts of Portugal, the train disappeared. In others, it slowed down. This is the picture of a railway always with plans, but never with planning” (Miranda and Quesado, 2017).

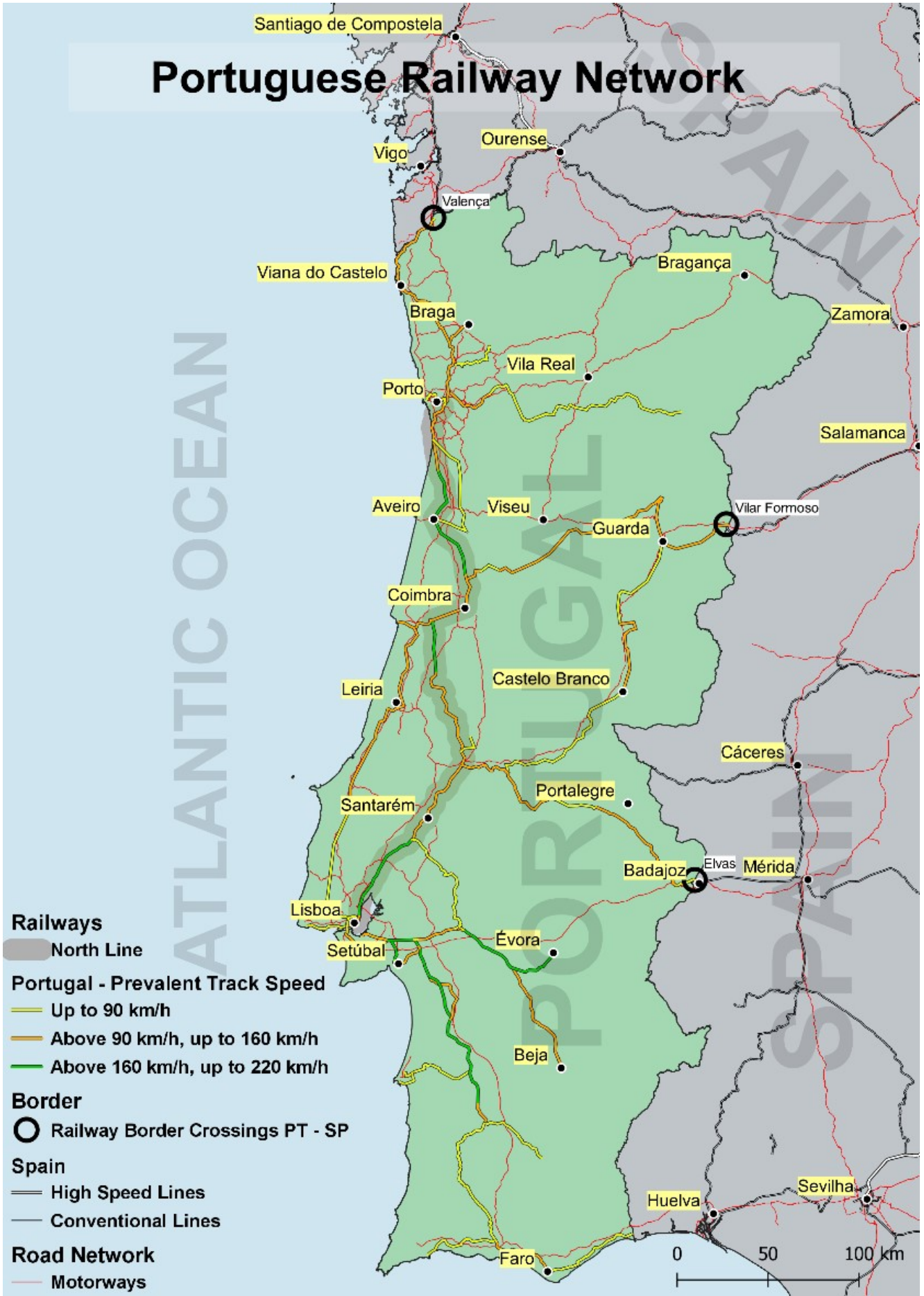
At the time we write these words, a National Railway Plan that thinks of the railways in Portugal as part of a holistic system that integrates other means of

transport and spatial planning options does not exist, if contemplated from the perspective of a railway strategy designed to act as a territorial, social, and economic cohesion policies cornerstone.

Being the spinal cord of the Portuguese railway network, the 330 km North Line links the two major Portuguese metropolitan areas, Lisbon and Porto, where half of the Portuguese population and more than half of the economic production are concentrated. In an operation that started in the mid-1990s, and was never truly completed, approximately 1,400m€ were spent and 80% of its extension modernised (Fernandes, 2017).

Figure 1 - Portuguese Railway Network.

Portuguese Railway Network



Source: Authors' own.

That modernization saw the introduction of active tilting trains in 1999, which achieved some substantial gains in service quality and journey time (roughly 30 minutes), was subsequently partly lost as a result of track degradation and overload of the unmodernised sections, as all types of traffic expanded along the line, with the Ovar to Vila Nova de Gaia section, in the vicinities of the Metropolitan Area of Porto, being the most critical. Consequently, the structural problem of the main trunk railway of the country, that is, the inability to efficiently deal with the growing demand and variety of traffic, remains.

A decade and a half later, in February 2016, the Portuguese government launched an investment plan, “Ferrovia 2020”, committing itself to the following objectives:

- Observance with international commitments with Spain and the EU, within the TEN-T Atlantic Corridor.
- Promoting the transport of goods and exports.
- Articulation between national ports and the major land borders with Spain.

Although around 2bn€ of investments are planned, only 304m€ were dedicated to the unmodernised sections of the North Line, namely the section of Ovar to Vila Nova de Gaia. Hence, this plan, still in place and already with considerable delays [(IP - Infraestruturas de Portugal, 2019)], will not solve the identified problem of the lack of capacity, or redundancy, of the North line which is the sole railway connection between Lisbon and Porto, and the only efficient means of interconnection between the rest of the network. Therefore, stakeholders of the rail system increasingly agree on the need for a new line, dedicated to long-distance high-speed passenger services, connecting the country’s two main cities.

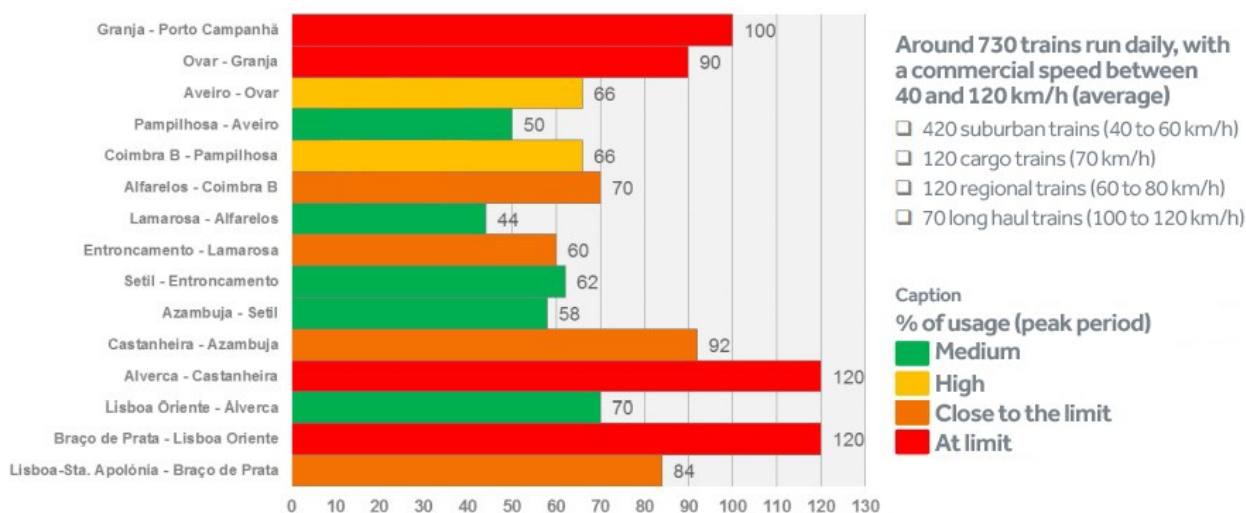
It should be noted that railway operation conditions are not merely determined by the number of tracks. This also includes the existence of level crossings, the signalling system, the track speeds and track layouts (which impact on train overtaking) (Leandro and Costa, 2015).

Figure 2 - North Line: Demand and capacity.

NORTH LINE Demand and capacity of the North Line



Occupation Levels
(nbr of trains per day/section)

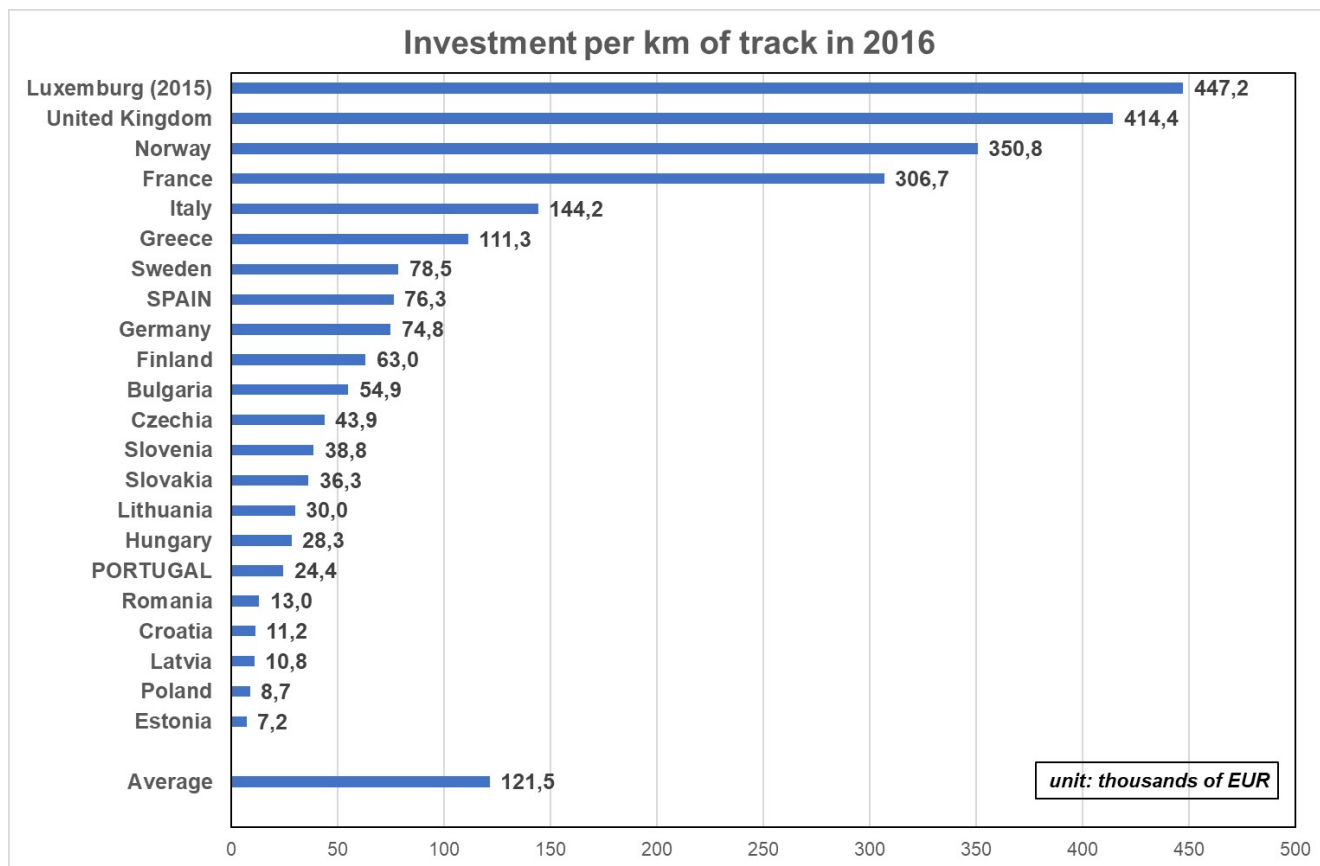


Source: Fernandes (2017).

The low level of investment in the Portuguese railways becomes indisputable when we compare its volume per kilometre of track. Portugal invests on average three times less than its neighbouring Spain and about five times less than the average of the European countries for which data is available. The comparison with Spain is imperative as this is the only land border of Portugal, having to be traversed for access to the rest of Europe. If the integration of our railways with the European network is an important objective, that objective will only materialize with the integration of ours with the Spanish network.

On the last few decades, the Portuguese motorway network grew exponentially, while the railway network lost dimension. The two Metropolitan areas of the country hold today an exceptional position in the European context, with a density of motorways exceeding 140km of roads per thousand km², equivalent to a possible over-dimensioning of the network by 35-42% compared to other European metropolises. The recent expansion (2000-2016) of the motorway network shows that this situation is, not only the result of the necessary modernization policies, but also an automatic response to economic development. It is mainly due to the inefficient regulation of urban expansion and the total acceptance, until very recently, of the automobile as the dominant response to mobility needs (Padeiro, 2018).

Figure 3 – Investment per km of track in 2016.



Source: Data extracted from Pordata and Eurostat combined by the authors.

Recently, within the framework of the National Investment Plan 2030, a reversal in this panorama was announced. A total of 4,040m€ have been allocated for the railway, of which 1,500m€ are reserved exclusively for strengthening the capacity and increasing speeds in the Northern Line; by building new partial variants with the aim of connecting the cities of Lisbon and Porto, which are about 300 km apart, in just 2 hours (Governo de Portugal, 2019). This investment is fully public that will be in part co-financed with a combination of structural European Union investment funds and other European Funds that can cover up to 80% of the investment, in case, as in the example of Spain, the Cohesion Fund and the Connecting Europe Facility Fund are simultaneously applied.

Uncertainty, however, remains:

- Will these investments consider the relevance of the railways for regional development?
- Will the less developed regions, or the medium sized urban areas, gain with these projected railway investments?

If these doubts are carefully considered, it will be an opportunity to get the country back on tracks again.

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About the authors



António Alves holds a Master in Marketing and Strategic Management by University of Minho, Portugal, and has worked in the railway sector for 30 years. ORCID



Hugo Leandro is a Geographer holding a Master in European Policies by the University of Lisbon, Portugal, and has worked on the railway sector for over 20 years.