

Cindynogenesis of the A69 failure, materialization of environmental risk in the Girou valley, radicalization and hybrid warfare

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The Castres-Toulouse freeway project, which was the result of a lobbying campaign initiated in the 90s, provoked strong opposition. A decision by the Toulouse administrative court annulled the prefectural authorizations and suspended construction. The institutions, whose perceptions were impacted by these influence operations, are faced with the problem of sunk costs and seem determined to relaunch the site, and a bill could make it possible to circumvent the administrative court's decision. At a time when the situation is marked by intense conflictuality, persisting in trying to restart the project could lead to an increase in divergences, which could be exploited by Russian information operations.

On February 27, 2025, the Administrative Court of Toulouse annulled¹ the orders of March 1 and 2, 2023 issued by the Prefects of Haute-Garonne and Tarn to ASF and ATOSCA to double the lanes of the A680 motorway and to build the A69 Verfeil-Castres freeway (Figure 1), thereby halting all construction work. This decision, which came as a surprise to many actors, sets a precedent that gives environmental organizations greater possibilities for action.

This case study is interesting in many ways for Relativized Cindynics, which enables a transversal approach to complex situations, where the issues of risk, conflict and development are intertwined, and focuses on immaterial dynamics in general, and influence or manipulation operations in particular. While an exhaustive cindynic analysis would require hundreds of pages, the MASCOR² approach allows us to pinpoint some crucial aspects of the risks and conflictualities generated by a freeway project conceived some forty years ago, and in particular: 1) the transformations that have led to the current situation, 2) at order one, the vulnerability factors of the situation, 3) at order two, the divergences and construction of perceptions, hence the etiology of conflictualities, 4) at order three, the impact of perception and power dynamics, and 5) the emerging threats that the strategic decision-making process should consider.

1 Transformation history

In the months leading up to the Administrative Court's decision, the situation was characterized by particularly intense conflictuality, leading to questions about the more or less silent transformations that may have led to this situation. Having historically been home to Latécoère and Aéropostale, Toulouse then logically welcomed Airbus, a major industrial success that considerably accelerated the development of its urban area. As a consequence of this development, for the last thirty years or so, artificialization is spreading ever further around Toulouse, and little by little the hillsides are being covered with residential areas, commercial and craft zones are multiplying, and the freeway network is expanding.

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¹ <https://toulouse.tribunal-administratif.fr/decisions-de-justice/dernieres-decisions/a69-le-projet-autoroutier-est-annule-faute-de-necessite-imperieuse-a-le-realiser>

² COHET, Pascal. *MASCOR, Strategic Analysis & Conduct of Operations - Transversal models for non-governmental actors*. Forthcoming.



Figure 1: A69, development hubs and main road network

Toulouse's road network is characterized by the Toulouse ring road, formed by the junction of the A62 and A61 to the east, and the A620 to the west, from where the A621 connects to Blagnac airport. In the east, **two major historic roads already link Castres to Toulouse**: the D112 connects Castres to Toulouse via Lavar, and further south, the N126 connects Castres to Toulouse via Puylaurens. The A68 links Albi to Toulouse, and the A680 runs along the Girou valley from the A68 at Gragnague to the Verfeil interchange with the D112. The A69 plans to extend the A680 through the Girou valley to Puylaurens, then on to Castres. The A69 would thus follow the historic N126 between Castres and Maurens-Scopont, the western part of the N126 having been downgraded to D826 between Maurens-Scopont and Toulouse, while at the same time the D42 up the Girou valley from Maurens-Scopont towards the Verfeil interchange has been integrated into the N126. Whereas the historic N126 offered a direct route between Castres and Toulouse, the modified N126 deviates northwards along the Girou, joining the A680 and then the A68, which descends southwards to reach the north of Toulouse.

1.1 Freeway projects and the A68

Strategically, in the context of European development in the early 90s, while there was a motorway link between south-east Great Britain and north-west Italy, there was no south-west/north-east motorway link via Toulouse to connect Lisbon or Madrid with Geneva or Munich. In 1992, the completion of the A68 to Albi was seen as the first section of a future Toulouse - Lyon - North-East Europe axis, and Philippe Bonnacerrère³, then First Vice-President of the Midi-Pyrénées Regional Council and General Councillor for the Tarn, called for the creation of a new freeway from the Toulouse section of the A68 to Castres and Mazamet⁴, proposing a 'Y' shaped A68 that would be "a sign of the unity of the Tarn region in a single development perspective".

In November 1991, the Direction Départementale de l'Équipement de la Haute-Garonne (Haute-Garonne Public Works Department)⁵ planned to open the A68 between Toulouse and Albi in 1993, followed by the Verfeil slip road in 1995, with the aim of improving service to the north-east of Toulouse, opening up the Tarn and Aveyron regions, and providing an inter-regional link with the Auvergne and Lyon regions. The DDE project called for the State to build the Gémil-Albi section of the A68, and Autoroutes du Sud de la France (ASF) to build the Toulouse-Gémil section, plus a branch from Castres to Verfeil - in other words, the future A69. As planned, the A68 will be opened to traffic in 1993.

³ <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/deputes/PA569>, <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/17/organes/commissions-permanentes/defense/composition>

⁴ La lettre de Midi-Pyrénées, n°7, October 1992.

⁵ Éléments de réflexion sur l'A68 et le développement du secteur Nord-Est. Direction Départementale de l'Équipement de la Haute-Garonne, Service Urbanisme Aménagement, November 1991.

1.2 Gragnague - Verfeil slip road (A680)

By April 1990, the layout of the Verfeil slip road (A680) had already been decided, and on February 7, 1992, a concession was granted to ASF for its construction: starting from the A68 at Gragnague and joining the D112 at Verfeil, it is the first section of the freeway to Castres project promoted by Philippe Bonnacarrère. The decree of public utility was published a year later, on December 28, 1993. Construction of the A680, which opened in 1996, caused the first environmental damage to the Girou valley, which lost its rural character, and where the hectares of pear trees at Saint-Marcel have now disappeared. In terms of use or usefulness, many users living around the Verfeil interchange between the A680 and the D112 still don't use the A680 because of the toll imposed at the end of the A68 at Toulouse, and continue to use the D112 to go to Toulouse or take the metro at Gramont. In addition, the Gragnague interchange to the A68 does not allow users living in the Verfeil interchange area to use the A68 to Albi, so they may feel excluded, even though their territories are exploited by these motorway infrastructures.

1.3 Verfeil bypass and D20

As early as December 1995, the associations were aware of a bypass project⁶ at Verfeil (the future D20), intended to link the A680 to the Tarn section of the future A69. ASF then seems to have been sidelined from the A69 project, and the consulted study project also mentions the construction of a bypass along the Girou as part of the Grand Contournement Est de Toulouse project. In September 1999, a public utility inquiry was held, and one of the maps presented proposed that the Verfeil bypass should run along the Girou: this was the route that was eventually chosen. The segment of the original D20 between the D112 and the ZAD du verger will be renamed D212 (the northern part of the D20, between Verfeil and the A62, retaining the name D20), and the bypass, taking the name D20, will later be integrated into the A69 route. The bypass was declared to be in the public interest on June 18, 2000 and opened to traffic in 2003⁷, that is, seven years after the A680 was opened to traffic: these two 2x1 lane segments are destined to become 2x2 lanes when the A69 is completed.

1.4 Soual and Puylaurens bypasses

Towards Castres, the Soual bypass was opened in 2000, and the Puylaurens bypass was declared to be in the public interest in January 2001 and opened in 2008: the completion of these two bypasses, the Verfeil bypass in 2003, and the A680 in 1996 constitute in practice the basic sections of the A69 freeway that the Haute-Garonne DDE was planning in November 1991.

2 First Order : actors involved in the situation

At order one, an analysis of the actors involved in the materialization of environmental risk in eastern Toulouse, and in the Girou valley in particular, reveals vulnerability factors in a number of study dimensions and in their relationships. The main dimensions considered here are: values, models, information, rules, objectives and resources.

These actors range along a continuum from those promoting the completion of the A69, whose development models lead to artificialization and increased climate risk, to those opposing artificialization, fighting against environmental destruction and global warming.

Initially, the pro-A69 actors were mainly elected representatives from the Tarn region and economic operators from the Castres-Mazamet area, notably the Pierre Fabre dermo-cosmetics group, which has been campaigning for the creation of a freeway between Castres and Toulouse for decades, as well as concessionaires such as ASF and ATOSCA, whose financial interests are obvious. They are supported by regional and national elected representatives, as well as part of the executive.

6 CR Réunion APRES Vallée du Girou, December 29, 1995.

7 DREAL Midi-Pyrénées, Projet d'achèvement de la mise à 2 × 2 voies de la liaison Castres - Toulouse par mise en concession, Étude multimodale des déplacements, July 2009. <https://www.occitanie.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/etude-multimodale-des-deplacements.pdf>

The mobilization against the A69 brings together a number of associative, professional and trade union organizations, including La voie est libre, Extinction Rebellion, GNSA, Confédération Paysanne, France Nature Environnement, Agir pour l'environnement, Les Amis de la terre, Nature en Occitanie, Union protection nature environnement, Village action durable, Greenpeace, ATTAC, FSU, Solidaires and CGT. This mobilization is supported by local elected representatives and communes such as Teulat, as well as other political actors⁸, leading to the creation of a parliamentary inquiry commission. The scientific community and members of the IPCC have also set out their reasons for opposing the project.

Institutional actors such as the DDE, the DREAL Occitanie, the Environmental Authority, the prefectures and the judiciary have taken varying positions, as have the media, which may adopt a pro-A69⁹ editorial line or, on the contrary, carry out critical investigative work, such as that of Radio France's investigative unit.

2.1 Values and models

Opposition to the project is based in particular on values of respect for the environment, which do not seem to be a priority for the project's supporters. This axiological dimension is directly linked to that of models: the climate and environmental movements opposed to the A69 advocate development models that respect the environment and are compatible with the fight against global warming, whereas the actors waging the influence campaign aimed at obtaining the completion of the A69 advocate a neo-artificialist model that in practice takes up development models that date from the 80s or 90s and predate the Paris agreements, and that are based on road transport, and in particular road freight, which continues to be preferred to rail freight.

The French environmental authority has specifically criticized this neo-artificialist model, noting in its notice of October 2022¹⁰ that, given the challenges of climate change and the fight against artificialization, the A69 project, which dates back several decades, is now anachronistic.

2.2 Rules and controversy

The A69 project is affected by a succession of rules, decisions, rulings or opinions, sometimes critical of the project, such as the opinions of the Commissariat général à l'investissement and the Autorité environnementale, or frontally opposed, such as the ruling of the Toulouse administrative court in February 2025, including :

- Declarations of public utility for the A680 on December 28, 1993, for the Verfeil bypass on June 18, 2000, and for the Puylaurens bypass in January 2001,
- In 2006, the N126 between Toulouse and Scopont was downgraded to D826, and in 2009, the D42 became part of the N126,
- Decision of July 16, 2008¹¹ : abandonment of the Toulouse eastern bypass project,
- Notice of the French General Investment Commission (Commissariat général à l'investissement) of October 5, 2016¹²,
- Declaration of public utility¹³ for the A69 on July 18, 2018,
- Decree of April 20, 2022¹⁴ approving the concession agreement between the French State and ATOSCA,
- Notice of the Environmental Authority of October 6, 2022 on the A680 and A69,
- Prefectoral orders of March 1 and 2, 2023¹⁵ : environmental authorizations for the A69 and the doubling of the A680,

8 <https://reporterre.net/Comment-l-autoroute-Toulouse-Castres-divise-la-gauche>

9 example: la dépêche du dimanche -Haute-Garonne du March 30, 2025

10 https://www.igedd.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/221006_castres_toulouse_31_81_delibere_cle52cee7.pdf

11 <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000019203432>

12 https://www.info.gouv.fr/upload/media/organization/0001/01/sites_default/files_contenu_piece-jointe_2021_04_avis_lact.pdf

13 <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000037226458>

14 <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000045632418>

15 <https://www.prefectures-regions.gouv.fr/occitanie/Actualites/Projet-de-liaison-autoroutiere-Castres-Toulouse-Delivrance-des-autorisations-environnementales>

- Law of July 20, 2023¹⁶ aimed at facilitating the implementation of objectives to combat the artificialization of land,
- February 6, 2024¹⁷ : creation of the Commission of Inquiry into the legal and financial structure of the A69 freeway project,
- Order of May 31, 2024¹⁸, granting the A69 the status of a national or European project of major general interest,
- Decision of the Toulouse Administrative Court on February 27, 2025, annulling the decrees of March 1 and 2, 2023,
- March 18 and April 1, 2025¹⁹, submission of two identical bills¹⁹ to overturn the administrative court's decision.

When it comes to the relationship between rules and behaviours/objectives, a number of blockages have been observed: the Pierre Fabre Group's promotion of the A69 seems to contradict its ethical charter, which advocates environmental protection. Violent actions are evidence of the conflictuality of the situation: construction machinery has been damaged²⁰, unidentified militias have set fire to ZADs and attacked their occupants, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur has criticized certain methods used by the forces of law and order. There have also been reports of breaches of regulations by the concession holder ATOSCA²¹. Lastly, the Toulouse administrative court ruled that the prefectural authorizations granted to concessionaires did not comply with the law.

Several investigations into compliance with the rules have given rise to controversy: Radio France's investigative unit uncovered²² the Pierre Fabre group's financial stake in ATOSCA. Alerted by journalists' questions on March 6, 2024, the group announced its participation in the concession contract in La Dépêche du Midi on March 14²³.

Moreover, when Jean Terlier, an active campaigner for the A69, was appointed Chairman of the parliamentary commission of inquiry into the legal and financial set-up of the A69 project, an investigation revealed that his wife was an employee of the Pierre Fabre group, prompting debate about a possible conflict of interest²⁴ since the group had admitted its involvement in the concession contract. The deontologist of the French National Assembly, however, considered that the risk of a conflict of interest had not been established²⁵.

Lastly, a group of investigative journalists noted direct links between directors of the ARDIAN fund, such as Emmanuel Miquel and François Touazi, and the financing of the Head of State's 2017 campaign²⁶ while Ascendi, which owns 15% of ATOSCA, is a subsidiary of this fund, which also owns 50% of ATOSCA Exploitation.

16 <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000047866733>

17 <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/16/organes/autres-commissions/commissions-enquete/ce-montage-juridique-financier-projet-a69>

18 <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000049676333>

19 <https://www.senat.fr/leg/pp124-452.html>, https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/17/textes/117b1205_proposition-loi

20 <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/occitanie/tarn/albi/nouveaux-incendies-sur-le-chantier-de-l-autoroute-l-a69-un-camion-et-une-pelleteuse-detruits-par-les-flammes-2974871.html>

21 <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2025/01/24/autoroute-a-69-mise-en-demeure-et-astreinte-pour-atosca-12465147.php>
<https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/occitanie/tarn/albi/autoroute-castres-toulouse-infractions-mises-en-demeure-les-opposants-a-l-a69-pointent-le-manque-de-sanction-sur-le-plan-administratif-de-l-etat-3088483.html>

22 <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/le-zoom-de-la-redaction/le-zoom-du-vendredi-19-avril-2024-9949441>
<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/secrets-d-info/secrets-d-info-du-samedi-20-avril-2024-2138441>

23 https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2024/06/07/autoroute-a69-l-ombre-du-groupe-pharmaceutique-pierre-fabre-sur-le-contrat-de-concession_6237859_3244.html

24 <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/occitanie/tarn/albi/autoroute-a69-pas-de-conflit-d-interets-pour-le-depute-du-tarn-jean-terlier-selon-un-nouvel-avis-du-deontologue-de-l-assemblee-nationale-2945109.html>

25 <https://reporterre.net/Conflit-d-interets-et-A69-le-president-de-la-commission-d-enquete-ne-sera-pas-inquiete>

26 <https://www.off-investigation.fr/autoroute-a69-un-renvoi-dascenseur-aux-financeurs-de-macron/>

2.3 Resources

The Pierre Fabre Group, with sales of over three billion euros in 2024, has historically had a strong regional and national influence, in stark contrast to the limited resources of local associations and rural communities impacted by the A69. With regard to the media, Pierre Fabre was notably a shareholder in La Dépêche du Midi²⁷ and Le Midi Libre, and owner of Valeurs Actuelles²⁸, and these means of communication could, if necessary, be mobilized for influence operations.

The question of resources was also behind the choice of a concession: the initial project to double the lanes of the N126, whose environmental impact would have been much more limited, required funding that would have taken the State years to mobilize. However, given that pro-A69 actors wanted the project to be completed quickly, and that only private financing could be mobilized quickly, the concession solution was preferred, and approved in April 2022²⁹.

2.4 Information and information deficits

With regard to information deficits, the environmental authority has denounced shortcomings in the traffic data provided to it. Similarly, the report of the commission of inquiry³⁰ prior to the issue of the prefectural authorizations, which incidentally refers to the critical or unfavorable opinions of the Environmental Authority or the Conseil national de la Protection de la Nature, remarks that the voluminous public inquiry file provided by the concessionaries is difficult to read, does not provide a synthetic vision or comprehensible maps, and does not enable the public and associations to find their way around in the time allotted for the public inquiry. In addition, the commission deplores the fact that it did not have time to propose improvements to the readability of the dossier, due to the urgency imposed by the Prefecture. These anomalies call into question the credibility of the public inquiry's conclusions.

While the influence campaign waged by the Pierre Fabre Group for decades, from the regional level up to the highest levels of government, is now widely established and documented, astroturfing practices that go beyond simple lobbying have been brought to light by Radio France, which reveals that Pierre Fabre asked a famous weather presenter³¹ to create and finance an association to promote the A69. The presenter acknowledges the deceptive nature of this initiative, pointing out that “*Nobody knew Pierre Fabre was behind it. I was his underground spokesman*”³². The association mobilized its members to take part in the public debate meetings³³ held from the end of 2009, and distributed truncated maps in which the two main roads linking Castres to Toulouse (D112, and N126/D826) were masked³⁴, thus presenting the A69 route as the only direct route. These misleading practices cast doubt on the validity of the public debate's conclusions.

2.5 Objectives

Finally, the dimension of objectives, which derive in particular from values and models, shows major dissonances between pro-A69 and opponents. As the pro-A69 objective is one of transformation, the consequences of which are not acceptable to climate and environmental movements, the situation is fundamentally conflictual, and illustrates perfectly the intertwining of risk (in this case, environmental risk), conflictuality and development. The absence of the consensus needed to reduce vulnerability calls for an analysis of conflictuality and its origins.

27 <https://reporterre.net/Elus-industriels-Dans-le-Tarn-les-barons-de-l-A69>

28 <https://www.lesechos.fr/2015/04/lhebdo-valeurs-actuelles-change-de-propretaire-244304>

29 <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000045632418>

30 <https://www.prefectures-regions.gouv.fr/occitanie/content/download/103008/653750/file/lact%20-%20rapport%20d%C3%A9finitif%20du%2009-02-2023.pdf>

31 described as a climate skeptic : <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-ecologie-et-politique-sciences-cultures-societes-2012-2-page-47>

32 <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/secrets-d-info/secrets-d-info-du-samedi-20-avril-2024-2138441>

33 <https://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2010/01/09/751519-castres-autoroute-les-expertises-refusees.html>

34 <https://www.calameo.com/read/006296452a28dc8c7e059>

3 Second Order : ductabilities and the alteration of public and institutional perceptions

Second-order analysis takes into account the relativity of actors' points of view, their divergence on desired transformations, and their disparity of perception of the real situation, which are factors of conflictuality. In practice, these perceptions of reality can be impacted by influence operations, the effectiveness of which depends on the actors' ductability, i.e. their inability to prevent a third-party actor from altering their perception of reality in order to modify their objectives.

Ex post, it appears that the construction of public and institutional perceptions has been altered by a persistent influence campaign initiated some thirty years ago and based on a discourse asserting that the absence of a freeway between Castres and Toulouse is responsible for Castres' enclavement, and therefore for its economic difficulties and high unemployment rate. It has to be admitted that, in the absence of appropriate fact-checking, this discourse has been able to exploit institutional ductability and impact institutional decisions and public opinion, whereas it is not compatible with the facts or direct observation *in situ*, for several reasons :

3.1 The feeling of enclavement versus real unemployment rates

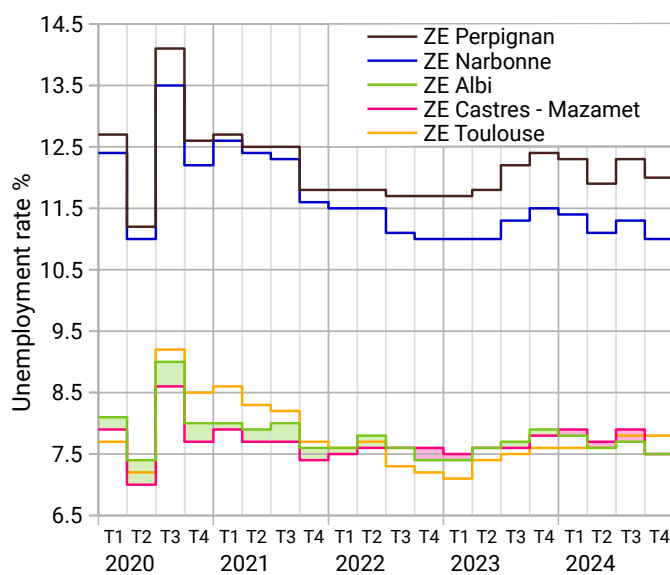


Figure 2: Unemployment rates in Castres, Albi, Toulouse, Narbonne and Perpignan employment zones

The pro-A69 discourse regularly uses unemployment figures to demonstrate the need for a freeway, as in the case of Jean-Marc Balaran³⁵, President of the Tarn Mayors' Association, for whom the Castres-Mazamet area suffers from enclavement, with the unemployment rate in Mazamet 50% higher than the national average. Or Michel Bossi³⁶, President of the Tarn CCI, who claims that the Castres-Mazamet unemployment rate is one of the highest in Occitanie.

This argument clashes head-on with INSEE³⁷, figures, which show that for the past five years, the unemployment rate in the Castres employment zone has been comparable to, and three-quarters of the time lower than or equal to, that of the Albi employment zone, which is served by the A68 motorway, and well below those of the Narbonne and Perpignan employment zones, which are also served by freeways.

In this instance, these INSEE figures confirm the position of scientists and members of the IPCC, who in an article³⁸ published in October 2023 reiterated that “*the argument of opening up the region does not hold water: research clearly shows that the link between motorway infrastructure and development is not automatic*”, while Clément Beaune, the French Minister for Transport, confirmed at the end of September³⁹ that the A69 project would be maintained, arguing that the political decision should prevail. The problem was that this political decision was based on a perception distorted by misleading discourse.

35 <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/l-invite-de-8h20/l-invite-de-8h20-du-week-end-du-dimanche-22-octobre-2023-7107908>

36 <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2024/12/01/autoroute-a69-la-sideration-du-monde-economique-selon-le-president-de-la-cci-du-tarn-12357504.php>

37 <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1893230>

38 Opinion column by a collective of over 1,500 scientists “*For us scientists, the A69 freeway is one of those projects that must be abandoned*”, Le Nouvel Obs, October 4, 2023.

<https://www.nouvelobs.com/ecologie/20231004.OBS79024/pour-nous-scientifiques-l-autoroute-a69-est-un-de-ces-projets-auxquels-il-faut-renoncer.html>

39 <https://www.ouest-france.fr/economie/transports/autoroute/plusieurs-projets-dautoroutes-vont-etre-arretes-annonce-clement-beaune-57e049b6-5c35-11ee-b3bf-85356afed175>

3.2 The feeling of enclavement versus real traffic



Figure 3: Traffic on the Verfeil bypass on February 28, 2025

While traffic on the immediate outskirts of Castres may be dense, and may require some adaptation, direct observation of the D20, which provides access to the A680 and then the A68 from Castres, shows that this two-lane section, which must be used for end-to-end journeys between Castres and Toulouse via the A69, and which is to be widened to two dual lanes in order to be integrated into the A69, is *virtually deserted*: daytime traffic generally varies between 2 and 7 vehicles per minute, i.e. around 4,500 vehicles per day, of which perhaps less than 2,000 would make an end-to-end journey between Castres and Toulouse - an estimate to be refined by an independent study, and to be compared with the 80,000⁴⁰ to 105 000⁴¹ vehicles per day on the A621 section serving Blagnac airport.

Direct observation thus leads us to question the validity of the 2025 traffic forecast models indicated in the consultation file⁴² circulated in January 2011 by the Midi-Pyrénées Prefecture, which, based on earlier studies, seemed to predict 10,000 vehicles per day on the D20 in 2025, i.e. double the traffic currently observable. This observation also raises the question of the impact of overestimated traffic forecasts on the project's economic model.

The obvious under-utilization of this two-lane segment is

incompatible with the sense of isolation invoked to justify the need for an end-to-end freeway or two-lane dual carriageway, and calls into question the relevance of the motorway project and, *a fortiori*, the invocation of a major interest allowing derogation from the Environmental Code.

What's more, unlike Albi, Narbonne or Perpignan, Castres is one of the few cities in Occitanie to have its own airport. Castres-Mazamet Airport, one of a dozen French airports benefiting from public funding, offers daily flights to Orly. In terms of traffic, this route is far from congested, with the Cour des Comptes (French National Audit Office) indicating a load factor⁴³ of 65% for the Castres - Orly route, and 62% for the Orly - Castres route in 2023.

3.3 Route and time savings: Eurocentre, Blagnac and the Rangueil hospital pretext

One argument regularly put forward is that the A69 would save time for Castrais residents travelling to Toulouse, and in particular for ambulances going to Rangueil. Models seem to have predicted that journey times would drop from 70 to 78 minutes without the A69, to 53 minutes with it. However, in 2022, a report by the French Environmental Authority⁴⁴ reveals that precise measurements made using real Google data show that travel time between Castres and Toulouse, without the A69, varies in practice between 50 and 54 minutes.

40 DREAL d'Occitanie, Les trafics routiers sur le réseau national en Occitanie, Résultats 2023
https://www.occitanie.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/carte_flux_occitanie_2023_vf.pdf

41 Direction des routes du Sud Ouest (DIRSO), Réseau national non concédé, trafic 2019, https://www.dir.sud-ouest.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/trafic_2019.pdf

42 <https://www.occitanie.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/dossier-de-concertation-tc-bd.pdf>

43 <https://www.ccomptes.fr/sites/default/files/2023-10/20230615-reponses-maillage-aeroportuaire-francais.pdf>

44 Environmental Authority, Deliberate notices no. 2022-62 and 2022-73 adopted at the meeting of October 6, 2022

https://www.igedd.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/221006_castres_toulouse_31_81_delibere_cle52cee7.pdf

Furthermore, the question of journey time savings is directly linked to the chosen route, which in practice lengthens the distance to the historic N126 (i.e. the N126 between Castres and Scopont, then the former N126 downgraded to D826 between Scopont and Toulouse) by making a detour to the north to join the A680, then heading south again to join Toulouse via the A68.



Figure 4: A problematic map broadcast by Arte

This route has been misleadingly described, notably in an Arte⁴⁵ documentary featuring a map (Figure 4) apparently supplied by the Occitanie region prefecture, which masks the detour imposed by the A69 route by placing Toulouse in the place of the Gragnague half-diffuser on the A68, thus presenting the A69 route between Castres and Toulouse as direct. Beyond this misinformation, whose intentional or accidental nature remains to be assessed, more generally, many maps circulated in the media, or by Pierre Fabre's astroturfing⁴⁶, show only the A69 route, or do not show the historic N126⁴⁷, which does not allow the public to perceive the detour imposed by the A69, whereas it is hardly compatible with the argument of seeking to save time.

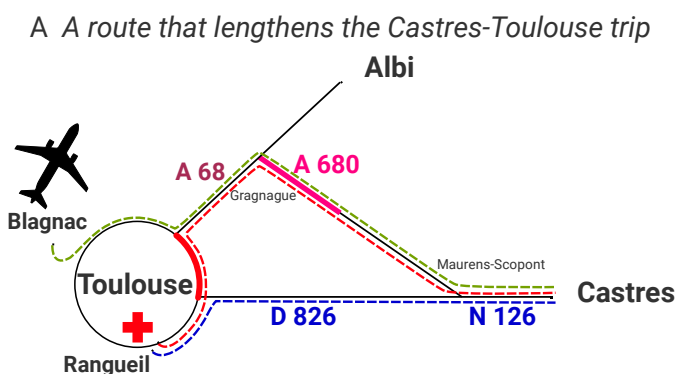


Figure 5: The problematic A 69 route

With regard to medical emergencies and access to Rangueil, invoked by the pro-A69 actors, in practice, compared to access via the historic N126, the A69 imposes a detour to the north, then a waiting time due to congestion at the A68 toll barrier, before returning south via the East ring road, which is frequently congested. On the other hand, the route is more convenient for users wishing to take the plane at Blagnac, since compared with the historic access via the D826, access via the A68, further north of the ring road, avoids congestion on the eastern ring road.

45 Magazine 28 minutes, *Chantier de l'A69 : la France a-t-elle encore besoin d'autoroutes ?* Arte, October, 12 2023.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoQdQqQef9Y>

46 Association Les routes de l'avenir, remote-controlled by Pierre Fabre: <https://www.calameo.com/read/006296452a28dc8c7e059>

47 Journal de 20 h, *Autoroute A69 : la bataille des arbres*, TF1, September 1, 2023

<https://www.tf1info.fr/player/5d63a5e8-a2b2-4e99-8468-9196e27a8d12/>

3.4 Route origins, objectives and beneficiaries

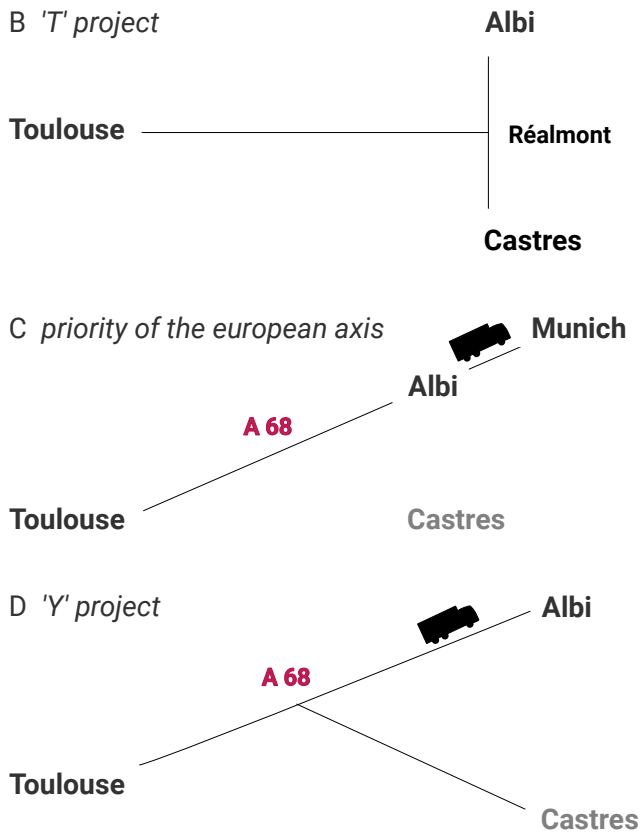


Figure 6: From T-project to Y-project

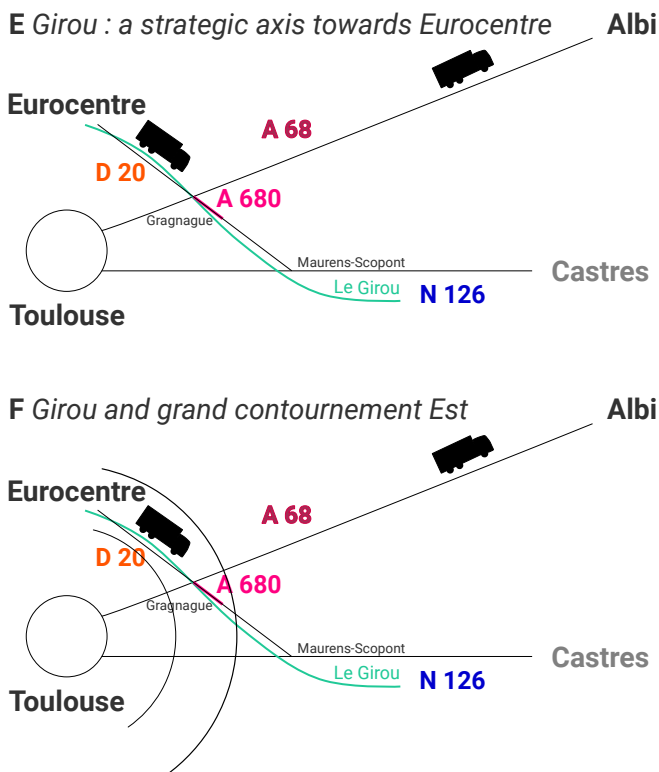


Figure 7: The Girou valley as a strategic axis

The etiology of the route explains why it passes through Gragnague, and why it was never designed to save time for Castres drivers on their way to Toulouse. Before the A68 project, in 1975, there was a plan for an expressway from Toulouse to Réalmont, halfway between Albi and Castres, which would split into an expressway to Albi and another to Castres⁴⁸.

By 1990, however, European traffic (mainly freight traffic, since it's unlikely that anyone would use their car to drive from Toulouse to Munich) was prevailing, and it was decided to build a freeway through Albi to encourage traffic between Toulouse, Lyon and Eastern Europe, which may have led to disenchantment in Castres.

In 1990, the route of the Verfeil slip road, joining the A68 at Gragnague, was decided, and in 1991 the DDE of Haute-Garonne envisaged that ASF would build a Verfeil-Castres freeway, corresponding to the current A69, which led to the Y-shaped project, where a junction close to Toulouse on the A68 would take traffic to Castres.

While the A68 route gives priority to freight traffic to Lyon and Munich, the choice of connecting the A680 to the A68 at Gragnague stems from the strategic choices⁴⁹ described by the DDE de Haute-Garonne in 1991, based on three development hubs: Toulouse, Albi and the Eurocentre freight hub to the north of Toulouse, as well as on the strategic axis of the Girou valley, which links Gragnague to Eurocentre via the northern section of the D20. This link to Eurocentre could have been materialized by the Grand Contournement Est de Toulouse project, but this was abandoned on July 16, 2008⁵⁰. The A69 was not designed to save time for Castres drivers on their way to Toulouse, but to facilitate the movement of trucks from Castres companies needing to reach Eurocentre, which explains why the A69 route takes such a long detour to reach Toulouse, forcing ambulances from Castres to endure congestion at the A68 toll barrier and on the eastern ring road before they can reach Rangueil.

48 DREAL, Liaison autoroutière entre Castres et Toulouse – Dossier de concertation , October 2007 Version 5

49 Éléments de réflexion sur l'A68 et le développement du secteur Nord-Est. Direction Départementale de l'Équipement de la Haute-Garonne, Service Urbanisme Aménagement, November 1991.

50 <https://archives.debatpublic.fr/projet-grand-contournement-autoroutier-toulouse>

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000019203432>

3.5 The Feeling of enclavement vs. frustration with speed limits

Ultimately, the unemployment rate in the Castres-Mazamet employment zone is comparable to that in the Toulouse employment zone, and cannot be invoked as a consequence of enclavement. Similarly, a feeling of enclavement could be credible if there were a shortage of lanes between Castres and Toulouse, and these lanes were congested. However, there are already two major historic roads between Castres and Toulouse: to the north, the D112, which connects with the north of Toulouse at Gramont and the Balma-Gramont metro station, via Lavaur, and to the south, the historic N126, which connects with the south of Toulouse at Lasbordes, via Puylaurens. In addition, the D20-A680 diagonal, which connects this southern link to the A68 along the A69 route, is virtually deserted.

These observations lead us to understand the feeling of enclavement invoked not as a lack of lanes or congestion of existing lanes, but as a feeling of frustration in relation to speed: what is desired is not to be able to reach Toulouse from Castres, but to be able to do so at 130 km/h instead of 90 km/h. And this is clearly what is expressed by the argument that the A69 would save travel time. This analysis suggests the need to change the speed culture in the Tarn, which would be in line with the objectives of reducing speeds required to combat global warming.

4 Third Order : power estimates and dynamics

In conflict situations, the actors involved have a strategic vision of the transformations desired by the other actors, and each evaluates the power of the other actors, i.e. their ability to impose these transformations. The actors each have an overall vision of the transformations desired by the various actors, and the estimates of power are subjective and relative to each actor, which can lead to underestimates, particularly at institutional level. Moreover, changes in perceptions of power are a fundamental mechanism in the dynamics of mobilization. Power analysis helps us to understand why the motorway project in eastern Toulouse initially saw a number of achievements, such as the A680 and the Verfeil bypass, and then suffered a setback that surprised the executive.

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, the rural communities affected by motorway projects and local associations lacked the necessary power to counter the influence of a group with billions of euros in sales⁵¹ or to influence a decision-making process that was ultimately settled in Paris. This explains the construction of the A680 and the Verfeil bypass as the first sections of the future A69. A major change occurred in the mid-2000s: with the democratization of the Internet, associative movements were better able to develop, increase their membership and communicate with the public and institutions, thus to influence institutional decision-making. At the time, it was only logical that the executive, who had only just discovered the Internet, should initially underestimate the power of associations beginning to carry out counter-lobbying at a level hitherto reserved for major economic operators. Today, however, climate and environmental movements exploit the Internet and social networks on a daily basis, and underestimating their power would be more difficult to understand.

From 2021 onwards, the mobilization against the A69 entered a virtuous circle of credibility and power: the collective La Voie est Libre⁵² was joined by Extinction Rebellion⁵³, then by the GNSA⁵⁴ and the Confédération Paysanne⁵⁵. The diversity of actions carried out (rallies, marches, 'squirrels' occupying trees, hunger strikes, ZADs, etc.) resulted in extensive media coverage⁵⁶, reinforcing the credibility of the movement, which was then joined by more and more players, such as Greenpeace, ATTAC, the FSU, Solidaires and the CGT. This power-building dynamic takes on an international dimension with the participation of Greta Thunberg and, in February 2024, the mission of Michel Forst, United Nations Special Rapporteur

51 3.1 billion euros in 2024 : <https://www.pierre-fabre.com/fr/notre-groupe/nos-chiffres-cles>

52 <https://www.lvel.fr/>

53 <https://extinctionrebellion.fr/>

54 <https://gnsafrance.org/>

55 <https://www.confederationpaysanne.fr/actu.php?id=14476>

56 <https://reporterre.net/A69>, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/recherche/#!/r/requete=A69&onglet=actualites>, <https://recherche.lefigaro.fr/recherche/A69/>, <https://www.francebleu.fr/theme/autoroute-a69>, https://www.lemonde.fr/recherche/?search_keywords=A69, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/recherche?term=A69>

teur on Environmental Defenders, as part of an investigation into the repression of environmental activists in Europe⁵⁷. The mobilization also took legal action, notably by bringing the case before the Toulouse administrative court, which ultimately invalidated the construction permits.

The executive has failed to anticipate or assess the power dynamics of the mobilization against the A69 and is not giving up on the project, and the concessionaire has started work either without anticipating that the Toulouse administrative court would halt it, or, according to some opinions⁵⁸, by anticipating it but trying to bring the work forward as quickly as possible in order to present the courts with a *fait accompli*. As a result, the executive is now faced with the problem of sunk costs, since the concessionaire has probably spent three hundred million Euros, which he will no doubt expect to be reimbursed⁵⁹, given that he was granted prefectural authorization.

5 A strategic decision faced with future threats

While the administrative court's decision has suspended construction work, divergences have in practice increased as a result of reactions from the executive and pro-A69 lobbying. This will have consequences both for the economic operators concerned, and on a politico-social level, as well as on a strategic scale, in a context of increasing hybrid warfare operations by the Russian Federation, whose informational component relies as much on disinformation as on exploiting the internal divergences of the actors it targets.

5.1 The increase in divergences and its consequences

Failing to abandon this project would increase the already intense conflictuality of a situation marked by violence⁶⁰, notably that of militias⁶¹ who have attempted to set fire⁶² to ZADs. Two identical bills⁶³ presented to the Assemblée⁶⁴ by Jean Terlier and Philippe Bonnacarrère, and to the Sénat⁶⁵ by Philippe Folliot, Marie-Lise Housseau and other senators, include a single article aimed at validating prefectural decrees authorizing work on the A69 despite the decision of the administrative court. If successful, this initiative, which was quickly criticized⁶⁶, would have the effect of convincing all climate and environmental movements of the pointlessness of recourse to the law, and of inciting violent modes of action. What's more, using parliament to overturn a court decision would exacerbate the divergences between citizens and elected representatives, and thus encourage abstentionism.

By persisting in its defense of the project, and threatening to relocate its activities⁶⁷ following the decision of the adminis-

57 <https://unric.org/fr/repression-des-militants-ecologistes-une-menace-pour-la-democratie/>

58 https://www.liberation.fr/environnement/biodiversite/arret-du-chantier-de-la69-la-strategie-du-fait-accompli-se-retourne-contre-letat-20250227_EXSBNUYEC5GHPPKCP LFYBN5KDE/

59 <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/a69-la-justice-examine-une-potentielle-suspension-du-chantier-20241125>

60 <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/occitanie/tarn/albi/incendie-sur-la-zad-de-l-a-69-l-enquete-elargie-a-des-faits-de-violence-en-reunion-apres-l-agression-subie-par-des-opposants-3018968.html>

61 <https://www.marianne.net/societe/police-et-justice/intimidations-cocktails-molotov-revelations-sur-les-attaques-de-milices-contre-les-opposants-a-l-a69>

62 <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/faits-divers-justice/deux-tentatives-d-incendie-chez-une-maman-qui-refuse-de-quitter-sa-maison-situee-sur-le-trace-de-la-future-a69-3210621>

63 <https://www.ouest-france.fr/economie/transport/autoroute/autoroute-a69-des-senateurs-et-deputes-vont-proposer-une-loi-pour-reautoriser-le-chantier-89fb700e-ffec-11ef-889b-49069a321526>

64 https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/17/textes/117b1205_proposition-loi

65 <https://www.senat.fr/leg/pp124-452.html>

66 <https://www.nouvelobs.com/ecologie/20250319.OBS101637/a69-lettre-ouverte-a-ces-elus-qui-se-croient-au-dessus-des-lois.html>

67 <https://reporterre.net/Pour-sauver-l-A69-le-chantage-a-l-emploi-du-groupe-Pierre-Fabre>

<https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/occitanie/tarn/albi/autoroute-a69-le-groupe-pierre-fabre-menace-de-delocaliser-ses-activites-si-le-chantier-est-annule-les-opposants-denoncent-un-chantage-a-l-emploi-3068845.html>

<https://www.marianne.net/societe/ecologie/si-le-projet-est-abandonne-a69-le-bon-vieux-coup-de-pression-des-laboratoires-pierre-fabre>

<https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/economie-social/les-opposants-a-l-a69-se-disent-atterres-par-les-menaces-des-laboratoires-pierre-fabre-de-quitter-le-sud-du-tarn-5939053>

trative tribunal, the Pierre Fabre Group has set in motion a logic of escalation leading to a hardening of actions, and inciting campaigns targeting the Group's dermo-cosmetic brands⁶⁸, such as Ducray, Klorane, Glytone or Darrow in Brazil. The extension of these campaigns on an international scale⁶⁹ is facilitated by the dynamic of power perception in favor of movements opposing the A69, attracting ever greater support. For example, Greta Thunberg, accompanied by an international delegation, took part in actions in Saïx⁷⁰ or that the United Nations Special Rapporteur visited the site⁷¹. Other factors favoring internationalization: technically, international mobilization is now significantly facilitated by advances in machine translation, and the trade war initiated by the Trump administration is weakening economic operators, who are becoming more vulnerable to information operations.

5.2 Russian exploitation of intra-societal divergences within a complex strategic framework

By focusing on the 300 million euros possibly already spent by ATOSCA and refusing to take its losses without considering the strategic framework in which the A69 crisis is embedded, the executive would be placing the State in the face of threats of a whole different magnitude. Today's strategic framework is particularly complex, since in addition to the risk of climate change and conflicts linked to climate refugees, we now face the immediate threat of Russian neo-imperialism, which now relies unashamedly on hybrid warfare operations aimed in particular at weakening or destabilizing Western countries.

A major component of this hybrid warfare, Russian information operations will exacerbate intra-societal divergences, exploiting in particular the divergences between pro-A69 and climato-denialists on the one hand, and anti-A69 and climate and environmental organizations on the other. As for the Head of State, he could be directly targeted by the exploitation of a suspicion of links⁷² between shareholders in the A69 concession holder and political funding.

A first mistake was to persist in neglecting Russian information operations in Africa⁷³, which led to the end of the French military presence on the continent. Today, a second mistake would be to believe that economic operators, such as fuel distributors or cable operators, will not be targeted there. And a third mistake would be to assume that these Russian operations will not exploit French divergences in general, and the A69 crisis and the rise of climate denialism in particular, to divide French society, undermine its rearmament efforts and thereby weaken Europe.

Pascal Cohet
V1d April 21, 2025

68 <https://www.pierre-fabre.com/fr/nos-marques/prendre-soin-des-cheveux>
<https://www.pierre-fabre.com/fr/nos-marques/prendre-soin-de-la-peau>

69 <https://www.pierre-fabre.com/fr/rapport-annuel-2024/presence-monde>

70 <https://www.france24.com/fr/info-en-continu/20240210-greta-thunberg-attendue-sur-la-cabanade-du-tarn-le-rassemblement-interdit-des-anti-a69>

71 <https://unric.org/fr/ecureuils-mobilises-contre-la69-conclusions-du-rapporteur-special-de-lonu/>

72 <https://www.off-investigation.fr/autoroute-a69-un-renvoi-dascenseur-aux-financeurs-de-macron/>

73 <https://www.ifrei.org/article128-Russian-Foreign-Policy-and-Hybrid-Warfare>