

## Dis/connectivity in the South Caucasus: imaginaries, the effects of power, ambivalences

Smolnik, Franziska

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SWP Research Paper

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*Franziska Smolnik*

# Dis/Connectivity in the South Caucasus

Imaginaries, the Effects of Power, Ambivalences



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
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- Connectivity, especially in the transport sector, has become a ubiquitous issue in the South Caucasus in recent years.
- Transport connectivity also plays a central role in the European Union's policy towards the region. As part of its Global Gateway Initiative, the EU has made a commitment that is both value-based and geostrategic.
- To do justice to this commitment, the EU should consider the different dimensions of transport connectivity and their implications on several levels and in an integrated manner. In particular, the EU should take into account the link between connectivity and questions of political power.
- The EU could provide support in establishing genuinely inclusive and transparent multi-stakeholder processes and independent project monitoring. This could point the way towards a more holistic approach to connectivity. The EU should also critically examine its commitment to connectivity for possible conflicts of objectives.
- The policy debate in Berlin and Brussels would benefit from a more intensive exchange with critical logistics, infrastructure and connectivity studies. Their findings could contribute to a more nuanced view of transport connectivity and its complexities and ambivalences.

**SWP Research Paper**

*Franziska Smolnik*

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German Institute  
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Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4  
10719 Berlin  
Germany  
Phone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-200  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

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*Dr Franziska Smolnik is Deputy Head of the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division.*

### **Dis/Connectivity in the South Caucasus. Imaginaries, the Effects of Power, Ambivalences**

Connectivity has become a buzzword in international relations in recent years, including in the South Caucasus. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as a plethora of regional, extra-regional and international actors, have formulated strategies, plans and ideas to improve national or regional connectivity. Hardly any recent policy or strategy paper on the region seems to be without such a reference. While the term connectivity is often used in a seemingly self-explanatory way, it is understood and spelled out quite differently by the numerous actors.

With regard to the South Caucasus, the dimension of transport connectivity and the development of corresponding infrastructures play an important role. They are the focus of this study. For reasons of manageability, other dimensions of connectivity, such as digital connectivity, are not dealt with here. The same applies to energy relations, which are often discussed together with transport connections in the EU context. Migration and personal mobility are analytically separated from transport connectivity here – as they are in EU documents – and are only mentioned in passing.

The debate on transport connectivity in the South Caucasus has been fuelled not least by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which Beijing has been promoting under different names since 2013. The EU has also presented plans to expand connectivity, for example within the framework of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy or the Global Gateway Initiative, which was launched at the end of 2021 and builds on the former. Specifically with regard to the South Caucasus, connectivity is a focus of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP), including the extension of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) into the EaP area. For some years now, Azerbaijan and Georgia in particular have been trying to distinguish themselves as transport hubs in the region, to enshrine the idea that their geographical location functions as an interface between Europe and Asia, and thus to profit from it.

The discussion on South Caucasus transport connectivity has had to be updated in the context of the



changing regional configuration resulting from the war over Nagorno-Karabakh. While the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war and its aftermath first and foremost have had consequences for connectivity to and within the region, Russia's 2022 attack on the whole of Ukraine affects transport links and supply chains globally, with implications also for the South Caucasus. The war against Ukraine, the Western sanctions against Russia in response, and the massive geopolitical distortions provoked by the Russian attack between Russia on the one hand and the EU, USA and NATO on the other, mean that questions about connectivity and disconnectivity are also being raised anew in and about the South Caucasus.

These geopolitical developments provide the context for this study, which brings together an overview of South Caucasus transport connectivity and a focus on a specific example of connectivity infrastructure, namely the North-South Corridor in Georgia (also known by its historical name, Georgian Military Road). Looking beyond discourses of hope and fear, in which the topic of connectivity and disconnectivity is often rather one-dimensionally embedded, opens up space for complexity and ambivalence. Connectivity projects are not apolitical or primarily technical interventions, nor is disconnectivity simply a by-product or residue. Rather, both connectivity and disconnectivity are closely intertwined with political power and power relations.

As part of Global Gateway, the EU has adopted a connectivity policy that is more geostrategic and at the same time value-based. The German government has expressed its support for the initiative and, in the context of the war against Ukraine, has explicitly advocated that Global Gateway should also be orientated towards Eastern Europe. As far as the implementation of Global Gateway is concerned, the question for the EU is how a geostrategic orientation and a values-based approach can work together – not only in theory, but also in practice. To make this concrete, the EU would have to look holistically at the manifold implications of connectivity and connectivity projects as well as their embedding in power relations from the local to the (extra-)regional level – and also critically reflect on its own actions. A first step for the EU could be to advocate for genuinely inclusive and transparent multi-stakeholder processes in connectivity and in specific EU-funded connectivity projects. Transport connectivity plays an important role in the official foreign policy rhetoric of all three countries. In Georgia the example of the North-South Corridor

suggests, however, that the issue has so far found little resonance in debates across society. Promoting an inclusive exchange on the added value – but also the risks – of connectivity and connectivity projects could help to ensure that the different views are heard and then better taken into account in the design and implementation of relevant EU engagements. At the same time, such an exchange, together with a more decisive use of findings from critical infrastructure and logistics research, could also make German and EU policy debates even more sensitive to the ambivalences and complexities of transport connectivity, in terms of its geopolitical, regional and local implications.

# Introduction: Connectivity, Power, Political Space

The importance of the South Caucasus or its three constituent countries for Eurasian transport connectivity is underpinned both in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia themselves and by extra-regional actors with reference to historical links.<sup>1</sup>

## The Silk Road: (alleged) common denominator of South Caucasus connectivity

The current expansion of South Caucasus transport connectivity is above all rhetorically linked to the historical Silk Road. This defines the expansion as a revival, a reactivation of some sort of original purpose for the region – or even for individual countries – as trade hub(s); the expansion is thus in a sense naturalised. The reference to *the* historical Silk Road can be misleading, however, because there has never been a Silk Road. Rather, a network of routes for the historical exchange of goods (by no means limited to silk) in the Eurasian region can be subsumed under this cipher. In this bundle of routes, the South Caucasus was probably more of a side show – among other things because the contemporary “rediscovery” of the Silk Road as a quasi-continuous trade route connecting East (China) and West (Europe) is not historically documented, and the exchange of goods probably focused more on the areas of today’s Central Asia and Iran.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The study is based on the analysis of existing secondary literature, relevant primary sources and quantitative data. In particular, the chapters “Case Study: Dis/connectivity along the Georgian Military Road” and “The EU as a Connectivity Actor in the South Caucasus” are also based on qualitative interviews with relevant stakeholders. My special thanks go to Giorgi Tadumadze, Paul Bochtler, Corinna Templin and Arthur Buliz for their valuable support in the preparation of this study.

<sup>2</sup> Khodadad Rezakhani, “The Road That Never Was: The Silk Road and Trans-Eurasian Exchange”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3 (2010): 420–33.

## The term Silk Road as a normatively charged narrative has gained considerable popularity.

Contrary to what cartographic images suggest, a clear attribution of routes to the Silk Road remains contradictory and must remain so, since *the* Silk Road is an invention of modernity. Nevertheless, the term has gained considerable popularity as a romanticising, normatively charged and unifying narrative.<sup>3</sup> This is true not least because of China’s BRI, including in and with reference to the South Caucasus. The modern nation state, however, differs significantly from earlier forms of rule, where border areas in particular were usually rather fluid.<sup>4</sup> This, too, complicates making direct comparisons between historical and contemporary connectivity, let alone establishing linear links between them. On the one hand, technological developments have over time mitigated, if not entirely levelled, the topographical challenges in the South Caucasus that the expansion of transport

<sup>3</sup> Tim Winter, “The Geocultural Heritage of the Silk Roads”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 7 (2021): 700–19 (701); see also Toby C. Wilkinson, *Tying the Threads of Eurasia. Trans-regional Routes and Material Flows in Transcaucasia, Eastern Anatolia and Western Central Asia, c. 3000-1500 BC* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2014); Rezakhani, “The Road That Never Was: The Silk Road and Trans-Eurasian Exchange” (see note 2). The term Silk Road can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German geologist Ferdinand von Richthofen, who used the term to describe trade routes between the Chinese Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) and the area of present-day Central Asia.

<sup>4</sup> Wilkinson, *Tying the Threads of Eurasia* (see note 3), 73, 89f.; Alexander C. Diener, “Parsing Mobilities in Central Eurasia: Border Management and New Silk Roads”, *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 56, no. 4 (2015): 376–404; Monica L. Smith, “Networks, Territories, and the Cartography of Ancient States”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 4 (2005): 832–49.

routes used to face. On the other hand, in more recent times the availability of transit routes has been limited primarily by political considerations and nation-state border demarcations. The contemporary South Caucasus, with its unresolved territorial conflicts, political fault lines and tensions and their effects on transport routes, provides numerous examples of this.<sup>5</sup>

## Connectivity and the imagining of political space

Specifically making use of the Silk Road topos, its discursive “co-optation”,<sup>6</sup> conceals to a certain extent that the reasons for the historical (further) development of transport and traffic networks in the South Caucasus did not lie solely in the regional and supra-regional exchange of goods. Military and power-political purposes and considerations also played a role in the construction and expansion such as in developing territories using military support, securing territorial expansion and projecting (imperial) power.<sup>7</sup> The Georgian Military Road, for example, which connects Russia and Georgia over the ridge of the Greater Caucasus, functioned as a link between Tsarist Russia and its Georgian vassal. Moreover, the route, which is currently being expanded as part of Georgia’s connectivity policy<sup>8</sup> served the Tsarist pacification of adjacent mountain regions, but at the same time made such a pacification necessary to secure the route.<sup>9</sup>

5 Laurence Broers, “The South Caucasus: Fracture without End?” in *Russia Abroad. Driving Regional Fracture in Post-Communist Eurasia and Beyond*, ed. Anna Ohanyan (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 81–102.

6 Wilkinson, *Tying the Threads of Eurasia* (see note 3), 93.

7 Military considerations and trade (interests) often complemented each other and were accordingly intertwined. The historical connection between the military, power politics, and transport networks is certainly not limited to this region. Commercial logistics, for example, developed out of a military context. Brett Neilson, “Five Theses on Understanding Logistics as Power”, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 13, no. 3 (2012): 322–39; Charmaine Chua et al., “Introduction: Turbulent Circulation: Building a Critical Engagement with Logistics”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36, no. 4 (2018): 617–29.

8 See chapter “Dis/connectivity along the Georgian Military Road”, p. 20.

9 Timothy K. Blauvelt, “The Caucasus in the Russian Empire”, in *Routledge Handbook of the Caucasus*, ed. Galina M. Yemeljanova and Laurence Broers (London and New York: Routledge and Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 107–20; Paul

When the current (foreign policy) debate on the South Caucasus rhetorically links current connectivity aspirations and the historical Silk Road, it is usually to underline the cooperative dimension of connectivity. This supports a narrative that presents connectivity as conducive to regional cooperation, transnational (commodity) exchange and overcoming inter-state divides and tensions.<sup>10</sup> Such a notion of connectivity with a view to the region often prevails in initiatives by international actors. The transnational benefits of improved connectivity are emphasised, along with positive effects for domestic socio-economic development. Especially until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, connectivity was seen as a policy field where interests converge and successful cooperation is possible, even if otherwise there is mostly dissent between actors – connectivity as a win-win-win arrangement.<sup>11</sup>

Such an understanding of connectivity conveys a very specific image of political space. In this way, it resembles the idea of placing connectivity predominantly or entirely in the service of inter-state rivalry, although under completely opposite auspices. Both the one and the other discourse, that of hope and that

Manning, *Strangers in a Strange Land. Occidental Publics and Orientalist Geographies in Nineteenth-century Georgian Imaginaries, Cultural Revolutions* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012). The first organised Russian military unit reached Kartli-Kakheti in 1769–70 via this route, which had existed since ancient times. The name Georgian Military Road dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is associated with Tsarist expansion to the south. However, interpretations of this central connecting route were subject to change, according to anthropologist Paul Manning: it was seen respectively as a representation of military, economic or imperial circulation.

10 Winter, “The Geocultural Heritage of the Silk Roads” (see note 3); Ngai-Ling Sum, “The Intertwined Geopolitics and Geoeconomics of Hopes/Fears: China’s Triple Economic Bubbles and the ‘One Belt One Road’ Imaginary”, *Territory, Politics, Governance* 7, no. 4 (2019): 528–52; Andrea Weiss, “Connectivity Narratives as Social Imaginaries: The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway and Its Bare Material Infrastructure”, in *The Caucasus in Europe-Asia Connectivity. The Promise of Infrastructure and Trade*, ed. Thomas Kruessmann (Stuttgart: ibid., 2023), 191–221.

11 Franziska Smolnik, *Cooperation, Trust, Security? The Potential and Limits of the OSCE’s Economic and Environmental Dimension*, SWP Research Paper 16/2019 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2019), doi: 10.18449/2019RP16.

of fear<sup>12</sup>, tend to obscure the view for a differentiated analysis, which above all illuminates questions of power and power relations in the context of connectivity in their complexity. Such questions include: Which form of connectivity is pursued by which actors? Which practices are legitimised by it, which connections are established or cut? What kind of understanding of connectivity is reflected in this, and how are connectivity and disconnectivity related?<sup>13</sup>

## Connectivity and political power

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 at the latest, it has become clear that connectivity is by no means a purely technological intervention, as was often insinuated in previous policy debates. Rather, questions about power, power relations and actors' behaviour and practices are indispensable for an in-depth approach to the topic, since it can be assumed that connectivity and (political) power or power configurations mutually create each other and interact, similar to the "co-production" of logistics and political order that has been identified in logistics.<sup>14</sup>

The introduction of and engagement with concepts such as "chokepoint" in the (academic) debate re-adjusts and sharpens the analytical view for the nexus of transit and restriction.<sup>15</sup> This brings into focus questions of how, by whom and for what purposes connectivity is influenced, regulated or even manipulated. What has been formulated in relation to transit flows also applies to connectivity: it is highly political – "[c]apturing and channelling circulation is a means of enacting political authority at multiple scales" – and the effects of connectivity and connec-

tivity projects from the local to the global level can be far from uniform.<sup>16</sup>

Connectivity as a potential (power) political resource is explicitly underlined by the term "chokepoint sovereignty".<sup>17</sup> It makes clear that power over flows of goods and passengers represents a specific instrument of rule. It enables political authority to be underpinned as well as secured against competing claims. Connectivity, as well as future-orientated imaginaries of connectivity, are accordingly part of a complex negotiation of power and power relations, and they can be instruments for power projection. Instead of a one-sided positive or negative connotation of connectivity, a power-sensitive analysis opens up ambivalences and differentiations.<sup>18</sup> The fact that connectivity can also be read through the prism of vulnerability is evidenced by the recent updating of debates on "economic statecraft" or "geoeconomics", where economic strategies are seen as an instrument for asserting strategic interests or as a means in interstate disputes.<sup>19</sup> There, however, the focus is primarily on the nation-state or governmental level. Debates that refer to the findings of critical logistics studies and critical geopolitics, however, raise more comprehensive awareness of contradictions and complexities at the various (analytical) levels and also include geostrategic discourses themselves in the analysis.<sup>20</sup>

12 Mark Graham et al., 'Geographical Imagination and Technological Connectivity in East Africa', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40, no. 3 (2015): 334–49.

13 See *ibid.*; Matthew Sparke, "Geoeconomics, Globalization and the Limits of Economic Strategy in Statecraft: A Response to Vihma", *Geopolitics* 23, no. 1 (2018): 30–37.

14 Peer Schouten et al., 'States of Circulation: Logistics Off the Beaten Path', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37, no. 5 (2019): 779–93 (786).

15 Ashley Carse et al., "Chokepoints: Anthropologies of the Constricted Contemporary", *Ethnos* (2020): 1–11; Chua et al., "Introduction: Turbulent Circulation" (see note 7).

16 Carse et al., "Chokepoints: Anthropologies of the Constricted Contemporary" (see note 15), 7.

17 Jatin Dua, "Chokepoint Sovereignty", *limn*, no. 10 (2018), <https://limn.it/articles/chokepoint-sovereignty/>.

18 Kristi Raik, "Connectivity of the EU's Eastern Partnership Region: Contestation between Liberal and Illiberal Approaches", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* (published online 12 April 2022), doi: 10.1080/14782804.2022.2064441. Raik distinguishes between perspectives on connectivity located in liberalism and realism.

19 Sami Moiso, "Re-thinking Geoeconomics: Towards a Political Geography of Economic Geographies", *Geography Compass* 13 (2019), doi: 10.1111/gec3.12466; Sparke, "Geoeconomics, Globalization and the Limits of Economic Strategy in Statecraft" (see note 13); Sören Scholvin and Mikael Wigell, "Power Politics by Economic Means: Geoeconomics as an Analytical Approach and Foreign Policy Practice", *Comparative Strategy* 37, no. 1 (2018): 73–84.

20 See Schouten et al., "States of Circulation: Logistics Off the Beaten Path" (see note 14); Sparke, "Geoeconomics, Globalization and the Limits of Economic Strategy in Statecraft" (see note 13).

# Imaginations and expectations

All three South Caucasus countries are striving to expand their transport connectivity and corresponding infrastructures. The associated official communication in which these efforts are embedded conveys imaginaries and expectations of connectivity. There are commonalities between the three states, but also specifics and differentiations.<sup>21</sup>

In Baku and Tbilisi, for example, the respective country is seen as a central regional hub and thus as a (potential) decisive facilitator as well as beneficiary of connectivity. In each country, its positioning as a hub is linked to the ambition and expectation of benefiting from transit flows and investments both economically and (geo)strategically.<sup>22</sup> The South Caucasus states are not alone in this, as the “infrastructure state” is on the upswing globally.<sup>23</sup>

Especially in Georgian statements, its role as a hub is inferred by interpreting it as a revival of the country’s historical significance as part of the historic Silk Road. The country’s claim to connectivity is also underpinned by such arguments, which at times even insinuate a kind of teleological development: “Our initiatives – and I would particularly single out the connectivity among them – towards engaging in the common transport and energy projects together with EU, Central Asia, Middle East and EU member states have returned a function to us which a small country of the Caucasus historically had at the crossroads of

Europe and Asia”<sup>24</sup>, as Prime Minister Gharibashvili said in a speech in 2021, for example.

Many of the regional transport and infrastructure projects do indeed have antecedents in history. These sometimes have an impact right up to the present day. Often, the development histories of current measures go back decades, to Soviet or even pre-Soviet times.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the rhetorical linking of current projects or strategies with (sometimes only supposed) historical references and their use by national elites in the South Caucasus certainly also serves political purposes. In this sense, the historical borrowings become part of “strategic spatial essentialisms”<sup>26</sup> and thus a discursive legitimisation of specific objectives in economics or power politics.

Besides the reference to the historical Silk Road, Tbilisi’s connectivity communication aims to highlight Georgia’s geographical location as a strategic value. It thus attributes to itself a natural bridging function or role as a bridge builder between East and West. In this reading, Georgia is a gateway into the region for both Europe and Central Asia.<sup>27</sup> Based on this understanding of its geographical position,

**21** This chapter is based on a MaxQDA-supported analysis of relevant official (strategy) documents and statements by government officials and heads of state.

**22** For Azerbaijan, see for example Official Web-site of President of Azerbaijan Republic, “Speech of President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev in Video Format Was Presented at the Annual General Debate of the 76<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly”, 24 September 2021, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/53197/print>.

**23** Seth Schindler and Jessica DiCarlo, eds, *The Rise of the Infrastructure State. How US-China Rivalry Shapes Politics and Place Worldwide* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

**24** Press Service of the Government Administration, “Prime Minister of Georgia Congratulates Georgian Diplomats with Their Professional Day”, 5 November 2021, [https://www.old.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=557&info\\_id=80690](https://www.old.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=557&info_id=80690).

**25** Lela Rekhviashvili and Vladimir Sgibnev, “One modernity lost, the other out of reach – Contested post-Soviet infrastructures”, *LeftEast* (April 2021), <https://lefteast.org/one-modernity-lost-the-other-out-of-reach-contested-post-soviet-infrastructures/>.

**26** Mark Graham, “Contradictory Connectivity: Spatial Imaginaries and Technomediated Positionalities in Kenya’s Outsourcing Sector”, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 47, no. 4 (2015): 867–83 (869).

**27** Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, “National Security Concept of Georgia”, <https://mfa.gov.ge/en/national-security-concept>; “Remarks by the Deputy Minister of Georgia H.E. Mr. Alexander Khvtisiashvili, Ministerial ‘Ashgabat Process: Financing for Better Connectivity’, 15–16 August 2022”, [https://www.un.org/ohrlls/sites/www.un.org.ohrlls/files/ministerial\\_georgia\\_text.pdf](https://www.un.org/ohrlls/sites/www.un.org.ohrlls/files/ministerial_georgia_text.pdf).



Georgia also sees a role for itself in supporting the regional neighbourhood in its connectivity ambitions. From Tbilisi's point of view, integration into international infrastructure networks is also linked to moving closer to the European Union.

Both Georgia and Azerbaijan believe their own role in connectivity to be not only regional but also trans-regional. Azerbaijan emphasises its hub function on the east-west and north-south axes.<sup>28</sup> As a result of the so-called 44-Day War in 2020, an additional priority issue for Baku is the integration of the territories that had been under Armenian control since the early 1990s and have now been reclaimed. Azerbaijan aims to integrate these into regional and international transport routes both to expand its global market access and to develop the local economies in these territories. Symbolic political aspects are also likely to play a role.<sup>29</sup>

In the context of the 44-Day War and the regional reconfiguration it occasioned, specific connotations can be teased out on both the Armenian and the Azerbaijani side. These open up a more differentiated view of connectivity than as a blanket win-win and peacebuilding proposition. For example, Armenian statements do say that the expansion of transport networks and the opening of regional communication links are conducive to peaceful development in the South Caucasus. In this sense, they are seen as part of or a prerequisite for the "era of peace in the region" envisaged by Yerevan. As an "Armenian Crossroads", the country is supposed to benefit from East-West and North-South connections.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, the pronouncements from Yerevan are also cautious. Connectivity is thus not viewed as peace-promoting per se, or automatically. Rather, constellations are

also pointed out in which it merely maps the rifts or could further deepen them: "While examining the topic of reopening transport links, we discovered that there are options that aim at sustaining regional isolation and hostility, but there are also options that emphasize regional interconnectedness and can be a step-by-step solution of the problem of hostility. We are an advocate of the latter option."<sup>31</sup> Connectivity, according to Yerevan's perspective, should not come at the expense of Armenia's interests or those of Armenians. Statements from Azerbaijan read almost like a mirror image of this – or else the Armenian nuances can be read as a replica of Azerbaijani positions. Baku, too, announces that connectivity has the potential to bring countries together. Economic interdependencies could minimise the risk of interstate conflict, it claims. However, for the win-win calculation of connectivity to work, certain conditions have to be met from Azerbaijan's point of view, especially with regard to Armenia's role in the region and the two countries' bilateral relationship: "With the aim of providing the peace and stability in the region, we have started discussing transportation projects connecting a number of states. Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iran share the same vision for the implementation of the regional transportation projects. Armenia can also benefit from the process if [it] behaves in [a] normal way."<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context, official communications contain not only win-win rhetoric and references to the bridge-building potential of connectivity but also geostrategic or geopolitical positions that place connectivity in the context of asserting primarily national interests and articulate their own connectivity claims in terms of "geoeconomics".

The paradox of connectivity narratives and imaginaries, especially in the South Caucasus, is therefore that they communicate a dissolution of territorial boundaries ("Entgrenzung"), in the sense of profiting from a vibrant transnational trade in goods, but also a limitation ("Begrenzung"), in the sense of the state prioritising the enforcement of its own sovereign

**28** "Strategic Roadmap for Development of Logistics and Trade in the Republic of Azerbaijan", Approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 6 December 2016, 9.

**29** "Order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Approval of 'Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development'", 2 February 2021, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/50474>.

**30** The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, "We Hope That in Close Cooperation with Russia and Our Partners We Will Be Able to Manage and Keep Our Regional Situation under Control. PM Pashinyan Participates in the Plenary Session of the Eastern Economic Forum", press release, 7 September 2022, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2022/09/07/Nikol-Pashinyan-7-Eastern-Economic-Forum/>.

**31** "Speech of Prime Minister of Armenia at the General Debate of the 76<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly", 24 September 2021, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2021/09/24/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech-at-the-76th-General-Assembly-of-the-United-Nations/>.

**32** Official Web-site of President of Azerbaijan Republic, "Ilham Aliyev Made Speech at Virtual Summit of Economic Cooperation Organization", 4 March 2021, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/50795/print>.

rights and of particular national interests and geopolitical claims. Connectivity does not necessarily mean that nation-state borders are diluted or even broken down.<sup>33</sup>

**Instead of overcoming distance, new transport infrastructures can also consolidate existing dividing lines.**

In the South Caucasus, as elsewhere, initiatives to strengthen connectivity do not encounter a connectivity-free space, but rather enter into a relationship with already existing connections.<sup>34</sup> More connectivity for some may well be reflected in less connectivity for others. Instead of overcoming distance and enabling rapprochement, as connectivity promises often suggest, (new) transport infrastructures can also trace or reinforce existing dividing lines.<sup>35</sup> The fact that Tbilisi and Baku are each far more emphatic in imagining the role of their own respective country as a regional hub can be traced back, among other things, to the regional development of connectivity in the South Caucasus to date. This was and is determined to a considerable extent by existing conflict lines. Landlocked Armenia faces difficult conditions in terms of transport connectivity; two of its four national borders, namely those with Azerbaijan but also Turkey, are closed because of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>36</sup> The conflict with Azerbaijan has also so far excluded Armenia from major regional connectivity projects, such as the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway line. Official statements from Yerevan therefore suggest that, from Armenia's point of view, the country first has to overcome its own long-standing regional isolation and disconnectivity – although

they also credit their country with having hub potential.<sup>37</sup>

State communication on connectivity in the South Caucasus promotes visions of national as well as regional and supra-regional development, but also more instrumental interpretations; for overcoming conflicts but also for asserting one's ideas of power, political and economic order.<sup>38</sup> The connectivity communication from Baku, Yerevan and Tbilisi thus reflects their respective perception of their own geopolitical roles in and for the region.

**33** Josiah M. Heyman and Howard Campbell, "The Anthropology of Global Flows", *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 2 (2009): 131–48.

**34** Ibid.

**35** Dimitris Dalakoglou and Penny Harvey, "Roads and Anthropology: Ethnographic Perspectives on Space, Time and (Im)Mobility", *Mobilities* 7, no. 4 (2012): 459–65; Morten A. Pedersen and Mikkel Bunkenborg, "Roads That Separate: Sino-Mongolian Relations in the Inner Asian Desert", *Mobilities* 7, no. 4 (2012): 555–69.

**36** Asian Development Bank, *Armenia: Transport and Trade Facilitation Strategy, 2020–2040. ADB Technical Assistance Report*, Manila, August 2019, 1.

**37** "Statement by Mr Davit Grigorian, National Focal Point for the Implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries", Geneva, 16 June 2022, [https://www.un.org/ohrrls/sites/www.un.org.ohrrls/files/session\\_3\\_mr\\_davit\\_grigorian\\_armenia.pdf](https://www.un.org/ohrrls/sites/www.un.org.ohrrls/files/session_3_mr_davit_grigorian_armenia.pdf).

**38** See also Carolijn van Noort, *Infrastructure Communication in International Relations* (New York et al.: Routledge, 2021).

# Complex connectivity landscapes

As well as topographical conditions, it is politics that greatly influences transport connectivity in the South Caucasus. Once-important transport routes are blocked not only between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Armenia and Turkey but also between Russia and Georgia (namely those that (would) pass through the Georgian breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia).<sup>39</sup> Together with disintegration processes triggered by the break-up of the Soviet Union, war and conflict have significantly shaped regional connectivity and disconnectivity in the South Caucasus in the post-Soviet period. How does dis/connectivity in the South Caucasus present itself at present, beyond discursive imaginaries?

## From niche option to new opportunities?

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line is a major regional rail infrastructure linking Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. It figures in current debates on the potential capacity to absorb cargo which, until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, was transported on the northern route between Asia and Europe, via Russia. The wisdom of using that route has been increasingly questioned due to security, political, economic and ethical concerns since the Russian attack. Russia's war has fuelled a debate, particularly in Europe, about economic dependencies and the vulnerabilities they create. While future scenarios of de-globalisation and nearshoring are also being discussed, the debate often focuses more on the possibility of developing alter-

native routes. In this light, the disruptions in the transport and logistics sector are also seen as a development opportunity by the South Caucasus countries: as an opportunity to position these countries, or one's own country, even more effectively as an international transport hub for transcontinental flows of goods.

Before Russia's attack on the whole of Ukraine, the route across the South Caucasus, now generally known as the Middle Corridor, was often seen as a niche option. It connects Turkey with landlocked Central Asia in a narrower sense and China and the EU in a broader one, and also includes the BTK. The Middle Corridor was hardly a direct or serious competition for the northern route via Russia. This was because the route is multimodal – i.e. it includes both rail transport and maritime transport across the Caspian Sea (and, as an alternative to Turkey, also across the Black Sea) – and crosses many countries. Numerous actors and standards need to be coordinated along the transport chain and across state borders. Discussions on the latter aspect are being held within the framework of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR)<sup>40</sup>, for example. TITR refers not only to the route but also to the international association in which the state railways and port operators of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia as well as Turkey and Ukraine cooperate.

<sup>40</sup> “Trans-Caspian International Transport Route”, <https://middlecorridor.com/en/>; World Bank Group, *Improving Freight Transit and Logistics Performance of the Trans-Caucasus Transit Corridor. Strategy and Action Plan* (Washington, D.C., 2020), 9. The TITR now operates as the “Middle Corridor”. However, the individual stakeholders of the route(s) have their own interpretations of it. On the Turkish view of the Middle Corridor as a Turkish initiative, see Mustafa K. Bayırbağ and Seth Schindler, “Turkey between Two Worlds: EU Accession and the Middle Corridor to Central Asia”, in *The Rise of the Infrastructure State*, ed. Schindler and DiCarlo (see note 23), 167–79.

<sup>39</sup> Especially in the South Caucasus, it makes sense to understand the permeability of connections as a scale or continuum. How permeable connections are is often (temporally) dynamic, sometimes varies for different groups of people or types and occasions, and/or reflects political constellations. This also applies to permeability towards the breakaway entities.



Until the Russian war of aggression, the northern overland route by rail via Russia was a faster and cheaper way to transport goods and especially containers between China and the EU than the southern alternative. According to a report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, in 2021 around 1.46 million Twenty-foot Equivalent Units (TEU, standard measure of container space, based on a 20-foot container) were transported via the northern corridor but only slightly more than 9,000 TEU via the Middle Corridor.<sup>41</sup> The TITR itself indicates a volume of 25,200 TEU for 2021.<sup>42</sup> Both overland connections are in competition with the cheaper, albeit more time-consuming, maritime connections between Asia and Europe.<sup>43</sup> The rail route in the South Caucasus also has competition on the ground: road transport. In the summer of 2022, Turkey's deputy trade minister said that around 80 per cent of the goods transported between Turkey and Azerbaijan were carried by road, and only a small part via BTK.<sup>44</sup>

Even five years after its inauguration in 2017, the BTK is not yet operating completely regularly.<sup>45</sup> In any case, given the TITR's currently limited capacities, it could only transport a small part of the volume conveyed via northern routes before spring 2022. Interim results of a study by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) on the Middle Corridor indicate a considerable need for investment: "A diversion of transit cargo exceeding 10 per cent of the Northern Corridor's tonnage will require large investment across the entire corridor and its economic efficiency is yet to be assessed. The EBRD estimates immediate investment needs for Middle Corridor infrastructure upgrades to be in the region of €3.5 billion."<sup>46</sup> The economic development opportunities along the corridor also depend on extensive investments.<sup>47</sup> According to experts, just to tap the niche potential of the Middle Corridor, which had been envisaged before February 2022, a number of specific conditions would need to be met. These bottlenecks included the lack of coordination in soft

41 United Nations, Economic and Social Council, Economic Commission for Europe, *Progress Update on the Operational Capacity of the Trans-Caspian and Almaty-Istanbul Corridors* (Geneva, 27 June 2022), 11, <https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/ECE-TRANS-WP5-2022-01e.pdf>. In this report, data for the Middle Corridor is based on data from Georgian Railways. See also Reid Standish, "China's Belt and Road Focuses on New Eurasian Trade Routes Due to Ukraine War", *RFE/RL* (online), 18 July 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-ukraine-war-eurasian-trade-routes-russia-standish/31948987.html>; Anton Usov, "EBRD Researches Sustainable Transport Connections between Central Asia and Europe", *EBRD.com*, 7 November 2022, <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2022/ebrd-researches-sustainable-transport-connections-between-central-asia-and-europe-.html>.

42 "The International Association 'Trans-Caspian International Transport Route' Celebrates Its 5th Anniversary", *MiddleCorridor.com*, 7 February 2022, <https://middlecorridor.com/en/press-center/news/the-international-association-trans-caspian-international-transport-route-celebrates-its-5th-anniversary>. Note that also with regard to freight transit along the northern corridor available data differs, at times considerably.

43 World Bank Group, *Improving Freight Transit and Logistics Performance of the Trans-Caucasus Transit Corridor* (see note 40), 5.

44 BBC Monitoring Caucasus, "Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey Agree to Simplify Customs Transit Procedures. APA News Agency, Baku, in Azeri, 18 September 2022", 19 September 2022. See also UIC and Roland Berger, *Silk Road Middle and Southern Corridors. Presentation of Main Study Findings*, 22 April 2021,

[https://uic.org/events/IMG/pdf/presentations\\_210422\\_uic\\_corridor\\_study\\_2021\\_1.pdf](https://uic.org/events/IMG/pdf/presentations_210422_uic_corridor_study_2021_1.pdf); Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), *Railway Sector Assessment for Georgia*, Manila, March 2021; World Bank Group, *South Caucasus and Central Asia: Belt and Road Initiative. Azerbaijan Country Case Study* (Washington, D.C., June 2020), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34329/South-Caucasus-and-Central-Asia-The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-Azerbaijan-Country-Case-Study.txt?sequence=6>.

45 For an analysis of the BTK and its embeddedness in developmental and (geostrategic as well as economic) integration discourses, see Weiss, "Connectivity Narratives as Social Imaginaries" (see note 10).

46 Usov, "EBRD Researches Sustainable Transport Connections between Central Asia and Europe" (see note 41). A representative of Middle Corridor Logistics estimates the capacity at about 3 to 5 per cent of the northern competition. Nini Gabritchidze, "Georgia, Azerbaijan See Surge in Transit Demand amid Russia's Isolation", *Eurasianet*, 2 June 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-azerbaijan-see-surge-in-transit-demand-amid-russias-isolation>; "Middle Corridor Unable to Absorb Northern Volumes, Opportunities Still There", *RailFreight.com*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.railfreight.com/specials/2022/03/18/middle-corridor-unable-to-absorb-northern-volumes-opportunities-still-there/?gdpr=deny>.

47 Tristan Kenderdine and Péter Bucsky, "The Middle Corridor: Policy Developments and Trade Potential of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route", in *Unlocking Transport Connectivity in the Trans-Caspian Corridor*, ed. Dina Azhgaliyeva and Yelena Kalyuzhnova (Tokyo, 2021), 73–111.

infrastructure (such as standards and regulations), the maritime connections across the Caspian and Black Sea, the rail infrastructure in parts of Turkey, the shortage of logistics centres and the lack of market-based competition. They also point out the limited availability of rail vehicles.<sup>48</sup>

## War, reconfiguration and dis/connectivity

Despite the restrictions and hurdles, Russia's war against Ukraine has led to a steep increase in demand for the routes across the South Caucasus. The head of Georgian Railways is quoted as saying that such growth was not expected for the next ten years. In the first half of 2022, his company transported 13.3 per cent more freight than in the corresponding period in the previous year.<sup>49</sup> Efforts by the countries involved in the Middle Corridor to better coordinate and harmonise regulations received new impetus in 2022, as did investments to increase capacity.<sup>50</sup>

However, intercontinental transit via the northern route and thus Russia has not been completely stopped. Although Russian Railways is affected by the EU sanctions, transit transport per se is not (excluding firearms, dual-use and advanced technology items), as long as it does not require a stopover in Russia.<sup>51</sup>

48 CAREC, *Railway Sector Assessment for Georgia* (see note 44); Kenderdine and Bucsky, "The Middle Corridor" (see note 47); Kanat Shaku, "Central Asia Blog: Is the Middle Corridor All It's Cracked Up to Be?", *bne intellinews*, 15 October 2022, <https://www.intellinews.com/central-asia-blog-is-the-middle-corridor-all-it-s-cracked-up-to-be-258725>; Giorgi Mzhavanadze et al., *Transportation and Logistics Sector Report* (Tbilisi: TBC Capital, November 2022).

49 Irakli Oragvelidze, "Gruziya ispytyvaet golovokruzhenie ot tranzitnykh uspekhev" [Georgia Experiences Dizzying Transit Success], *Echo Kavkaza*, 1 June 2022, <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/31878832.html>; "Georgia's Rail Freight Volume Soared 13.3% in H1", *Business Media Georgia*, 8 August 2022, <https://bm.ge/en/article/georgias-rail-freight-volume-soared-133-in-h1/114519>.

50 Tuba Eldem, *Russia's War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity. Connecting Europe and Asia via Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey*, SWP Comment 64/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022C64.

51 A transit ban on firearms, dual-use and technology items was included in the 10<sup>th</sup> EU sanctions package. European Commission: Q&A, *Tenth package of restrictive measures against Russia*, 25 February 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_23\\_1187](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_1187). Monika

Nevertheless, many companies are looking for alternatives to the northern rail route. In addition to more southerly land connections between Asia and Europe, such as the one through the South Caucasus, there is, however, another proven alternative to the northern route, namely the maritime one.<sup>52</sup>

## The Armenian-Azerbaijani war of 2020 already raised questions about new connections in the region.

Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the outcome of the 44-Day War in 2020 had already raised questions about new (intra-)regional connections and changed routing.<sup>53</sup> Point 9 of the trilateral ceasefire agreement of November 2020 refers to the opening of transport and communication links in the region. Explicitly mentioned under point 9 and discussed in its context is the (re-)activation of the route from Azerbaijan through Armenia to the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan.<sup>54</sup> The latter can currently only be reached from the heartland of Azerbaijan by air or overland through Iran or through Turkey and Georgia (a detour compared to the potential overland route via Armenia). Moreover, from Azerbaijan's point of view, the route would mean a better connection to its close partner Turkey. A trilateral working group with representatives from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia began discussions on the opening of transport and communication links in early 2021. Connectivity issues also play a role in

Kiss, *Russia's War on Ukraine: Implications for Transport*, Briefing (Brussels and Strasbourg: European Parliament Research Service, June 2022).

52 Greg Knowler, "Multiple Pain Points Test Forwarders on China-Europe Rail Route", *The Journal of Commerce online*, (August 2022). For a data-based overview of changes in transit traffic as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine, with a focus on Georgia, see Mzhavanadze et al., *Transportation and Logistics Sector Report* (see note 48).

53 Thomas de Waal, *In the South Caucasus, Can New Trade Routes Help Overcome a Geography of Conflict?* (Brussels: Carnegie Europe, November 2021), [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/de\\_Waal\\_South\\_Caucasus\\_Connectivity.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/de_Waal_South_Caucasus_Connectivity.pdf).

54 "Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation" (9 November 2020), United Nations Security Council, S/2020/1104, 11 November 2020, [https://karabakh.space/commonspace.eu/sites/default/files/2021-05/UNSC%2010.11.21%20trilateral%20agreement\\_Arm%20Az%20Rus.pdf](https://karabakh.space/commonspace.eu/sites/default/files/2021-05/UNSC%2010.11.21%20trilateral%20agreement_Arm%20Az%20Rus.pdf).

talks between Baku and Yerevan, which have been facilitated by Brussels. The exact status of these discussions is not public.

Commentators have seen the (re)establishment of transport links as an opportunity to contribute not only to the economic development of the region but also to the rapprochement of the conflict parties Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>55</sup> Such a perspective echoes existing debates in which economic connectivity is seen as a confidence-building measure, or connectivity as a policy field that offers space for such measures. However, so far, the public debate on the route mentioned above, which has not yet been (re)activated, has tended to reflect antagonisms instead. These manifest themselves in the very terms used and in their interpretations: Baku speaks of establishing a “Zangezur Corridor” whose configuration it has (increasingly) envisaged as similar to that of the existing Lachin Corridor. The latter connects Armenia with the part of the former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region (established in Soviet times within the Azerbaijani SSR) which belongs to Azerbaijan under international law but continues to be populated and de facto administered by ethnic Armenians, and where Russian troops have been stationed as peacekeepers since November 2020. Long it seemed that from an Azerbaijani perspective an alignment of the modalities of the Lachin and the “Zangezur Corridor” would mean that the latter would do without Armenian customs or passport controls.<sup>56</sup> From Armenia’s point of view, however, only a route implementation that guarantees its sovereignty over the transport connection is conceivable. It rejects the concept of a corridor, which in Armenia is read as a cipher for extraterritoriality, — just as it rejects the implied

equality of both connections.<sup>57</sup> More recently, Baku has presented another variant of the alignment, which it seems to consider feasible: namely to introduce controls for both the envisaged route to Nakhichevan via Armenia (through the Armenian side) and the existing Lachin Corridor (through the Azerbaijani side). In late April 2023, Azerbaijan established a checkpoint on the road in the Lachin Corridor, thereby tightening its control over it. Traffic on it had been restricted since December 2022.<sup>58</sup> The controversies surrounding the opening of communication and transport routes are not least an example of the fact that transport infrastructures and connectivity issues do not automatically or by themselves produce potential for cooperation.<sup>59</sup> They also demonstrate how connectivity, and disconnectivity, are intertwined with power and power relations. The word from Baku has been that Azerbaijan is prepared to implement the route to Nakhichevan even against Armenian resistance if necessary.<sup>60</sup>

55 Emmanuel Dreyfus and Jules Hugot, *Opening the Araxes Rail Link between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Why the EU Should Support the Connection*, Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo, no. 713 (Washington, D.C.: Ponars Eurasia, October 2021); LINKS Europe, *The South Caucasus from War to Peace: 30 Measures between Now and 2030. Report of the Joint Armenian-Azerbaijani Liaison Group on Confidence-building Measures in Support of Lasting Peace in the South Caucasus* (The Hague, 2 April 2022), [https://www.commonspace.eu/sites/default/files/2022-04/JOLIG%20report%20CBMs%202022\\_1.pdf](https://www.commonspace.eu/sites/default/files/2022-04/JOLIG%20report%20CBMs%202022_1.pdf).

56 Rahim Rahimov, *Zangezur Discourse: Implications for War and Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan*, Expert Opinion, no. 167 (Tbilisi: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies [Rondeli Foundation], 2021), <https://gfsis.org/files/library/opinion-papers/167-expert-opinion-eng.pdf>.

57 De Waal, *In the South Caucasus, Can New Trade Routes Help Overcome a Geography of Conflict?* (see note 53), 5; Laurence Broers, *Twitter Thread*, 13 December 2022, <https://twitter.com/LaurenceBroers/status/1602720753228587008>; Joshua Kucera, “Armenia and Azerbaijan Stalled in Negotiations over ‘Corridor’”, *Eurasianet*, 20 January 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-and-azerbaijan-stalled-in-negotiations-over-corridor>.

58 Joshua Kucera, “Azerbaijan Steps Back on Demands for ‘Zangezur Corridor’”, *Eurasianet*, 22 February 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-steps-back-on-demands-for-zangezur-corridor>. For a detailed account on the more recent developments around the Lachin Corridor see International Crisis Group, *New Troubles in Nagorno-Karabakh: Understanding the Lachin Corridor Crisis, Q&A* (Brussels et al: International Crisis Group, 22.5.2023), <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-05/NK%20Q%26A%2022v2023.pdf>.

59 See Dalakoglou/Harvey, “Roads and Anthropology” (see note 35); Pedersen and Bunkenborg, “Roads That Separate” (see note 35); “Challenges of Economic Cooperation and Irredentism”, interview by Daha Yaxşı with Laurence Broers, *Youtube*, 12 January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9p4aLS9fU1k>.

60 Laurence Broers, *Is Azerbaijan Planning a Long-term Presence in Armenia?*, London: Chatham House, 26 September 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/09/azerbaijan-planning-long-term-presence-armenia>. See also President Aliyev’s address of 31 December 2022: “President Ilham Aliyev Addresses People of Azerbaijan”, *Report News Agency*, 1 January 2023, <https://report.az/en/domestic-politics/president-ilham-aliyev-addresses-people-of-azerbaijan/>.

## Plans, projects, (geo)politics

When and how the communication link between Armenia and Azerbaijan can be opened remains uncertain, despite occasionally positive signals after 2020, and certainly depends on general developments in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. There are also different assessments of the impact such a step would have on regional connectivity and existing routes. This is partly due to the fact that numerous route projects involving different modes of transport are being developed or planned, which both complement and compete with each other.

The routes and route projects, roughly organised along a north-south and an east-west axis, can be arranged in (interconnected) concentric circles that – from a South Caucasus perspective – encompass other countries and regions in the immediate neighbourhood and beyond. Intra-regionally, in addition to the projects mentioned above, these include various route expansion and rehabilitation projects. In Georgia, for example, the modernisation of the railway and the expansion of the East-West Highway; in Armenia the North-South Road Corridor including connections to Iran and Georgia; and in Azerbaijan the expansion of the ports of Baku and Alat. In a wider framework, in addition to China's BRI – to which the stakeholders of the Middle Corridor, namely the TITR, see themselves as belonging, even though the Middle Corridor was not explicitly included in the original BRI ideas<sup>61</sup> – this includes the multi-modal International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The INSTC was envisaged between India, Iran and Russia as early as the 2000s. In theory, it comprises various routes and now includes Armenia as well as Azerbaijan as potential members. For a long time, the project hardly seemed to gain momentum. But with the war against Ukraine and the resulting sanctions against Russia, the discussion and activity surrounding the activation of this corridor as Russia's

<sup>61</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), ed., *China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment and Finance Landscape*, OECD Business and Finance Outlook (Paris, 2018), <https://www.oecd.org/finance/Chinas-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-in-the-global-trade-investment-and-finance-landscape.pdf>. For example, Turkey and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2015 to link the further development of the BRI and the Middle Corridor. Bayırbağ and Schindler, "Turkey between Two Worlds" (see note 40).

alternative to routes via Europe have gained new impetus, especially in and through Moscow.<sup>62</sup>

Iran's future role in South Caucasian transport connectivity is likely to depend on a number of factors. These include the US-imposed sanctions, the future of the nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), Iran's positioning in the complex configuration of regional actors, and domestic political developments in Iran.<sup>63</sup> It remains an open question whether a stronger integration of the country into regional connectivity and beyond would have the potential to increase the attractiveness of the South Caucasus states as supra-regional transport hubs. This would probably depend on the individual countries and routes. Georgian logistics experts warn, for example, that routes via Iran could become a serious competition for their own transport aspirations due to the infrastructure there if they were pursued so as to bypass Georgia.

### The Covid pandemic and the war against Ukraine in particular have revealed how vulnerable transport links are.

Beyond the multitude of projects and the questions of how they relate to each other and how much cargo they can attract, the Covid pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine in particular have revealed how vulnerable such connections are. Routes in and including the South Caucasus countries also depend on regional as well as global developments. This is especially true if the freight potentials are not only considered intra-

<sup>62</sup> Charu Sudan Kasturi, "Is the INSTC Russia's New Economic Escape Route? The INSTC, a Pipe Dream for Years, Is Offering a Vital Economic Escape for Moscow as It Battles Sanctions", *Aljazeera*, 27 July 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/7/27/russias-new-economic-escape-route>; Fardin Eftekhari, "Putin's Iran Trip: Why Moscow and Tehran Need Each Other More Than Ever", *Middle East Eye*, 19 July 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iran-russia-putin-trip-need-each-other-why>; Emily Ferris, *The Backbone of Russia: Russian Railways Turns to Iran* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 10 August 2022), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/backbone-russia-russian-railways-turns-iran>.

<sup>63</sup> Alex Vatanka, *Iran, Turkey, and the Future of the South Caucasus* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 4 May 2022), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-turkey-and-future-south-caucasus>.

regionally, but are embedded in the development of intercontinental trade between Asia and Europe.<sup>64</sup> Besides a possible geostrategic added value, the expansion of transport connectivity in economic terms involves a bet on future socio-economic dividends, be it in the form of possible (follow-on) investments or transit revenues, or in the form of profit through embedding in supply chains or through increased tourism.<sup>65</sup> The fact that connectivity-specific dividends do not necessarily materialise can be seen in (temporarily) failed infrastructure projects.<sup>66</sup>

In view of the complex landscape, even statements on the current status quo of connectivity in the South Caucasus are at least debatable. While the physical infrastructures can be mapped, comparative region-specific data on how much freight and how many people are actually transported via the various routes and using different modes of transport are incomplete and sometimes contradictory. The few pertinent studies with a comparative perspective are already several years old and therefore do not include more recent (geo)political and economic developments.<sup>67</sup> Estimates of future transport potential in freight and passenger traffic and the associated opportunities for socio-economic development in the region also diverge, as the example of the Middle Corridor shows.<sup>68</sup> The war

against Ukraine and its effects on the transport sector also contribute significantly to the fluidity.

**64** Kenderdine and Bucsky, “The Middle Corridor” (see note 47).

**65** Evelina Gambino has referred to this future-orientated angle, especially in her research on Georgia, and drawn attention to the nexus of connectivity and performativity. In this context, she speaks of a “futuristic promise”. Evelina Gambino, *Excavating BRI Futures* (Toronto: Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, 21 June 2021), <https://munkschool.utoronto.ca/belt-road/research/excavating-bri-futures>.

**66** Tekla Aslanishvili and Orit Halpern, *Scenes from a Reclamation* (Brooklyn, NY: e-flux, February 2020), <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/new-silk-roads/313102/scenes-from-a-reclamation/>.

**67** For example, TRACECA IDEA II Project, ed, *Eastern Partnership Regional Transport Study. Final Report* (June 2015). ADB issued a tender in 2021, among other reasons to help improve data: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/55118-001-tor.pdf>.

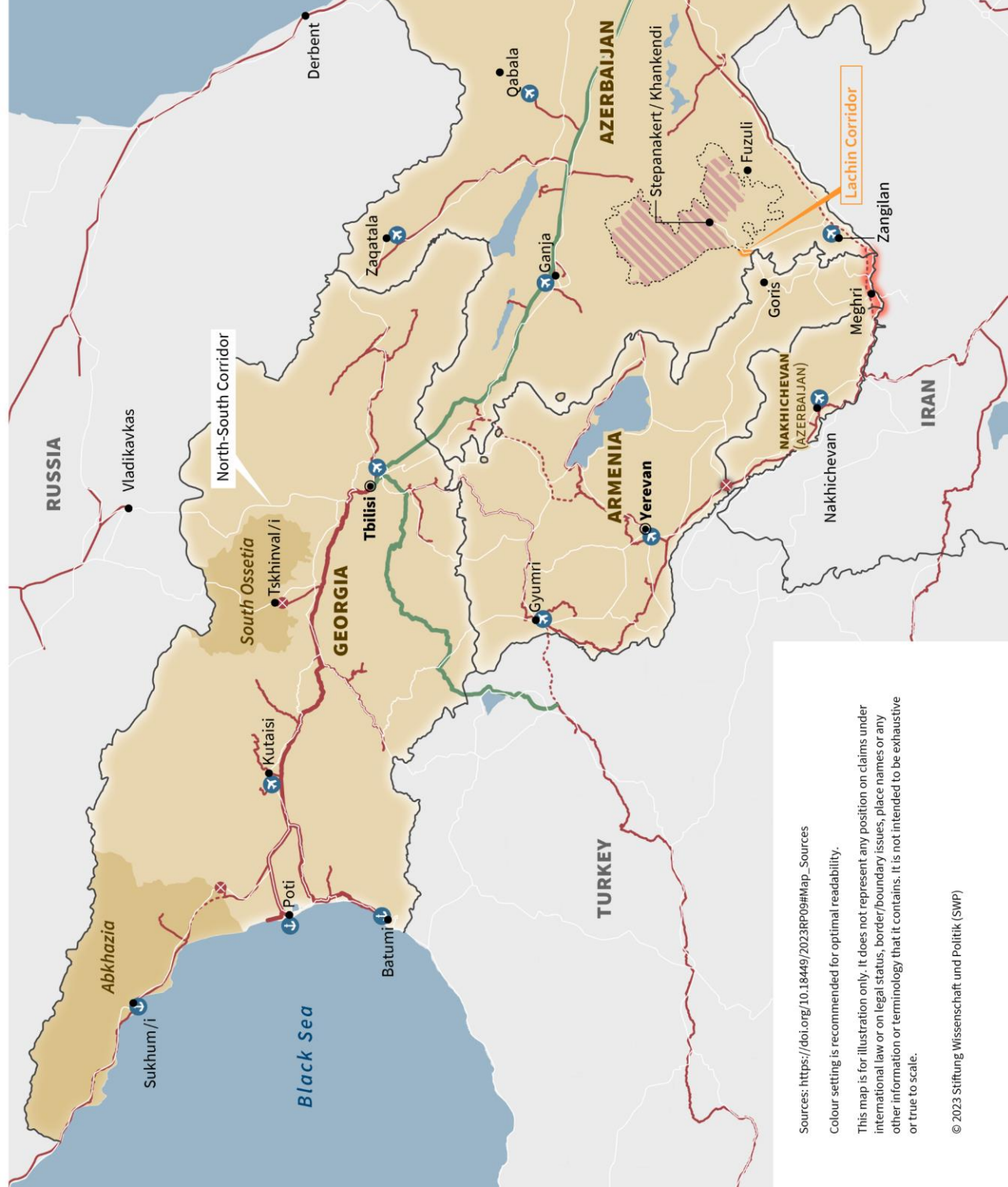
**68** Kenderdine and Bucsky critically assess the available data on the Middle Corridor, arguing: “Much extant analysis of the Iron Silk Road avoids data, policy and theory, instead relying on tired geopolitical tropes, open speculation and lived-experience travelogues.” Tristan Kenderdine and Péter Bucsky, “China’s Belt and Road Rail Freight Transport Corridor — the Economic Geography of Underdevelopment”, *Die Erde. Journal of the Geographical Society of Berlin* 152, no. 2

(2021): 91 – 111 (104). See also Kenderdine and Bucsky, “The Middle Corridor” (see note 47).



# Transport Connectivity in the South Caucasus

- Rail
- Rail (partially/wholly) disused or closed
- Rail (partially/wholly) disused or closed
- BTK (Baku–Tbilisi–Kars)
- Capital
- City/town
- Port
- Airport
- former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast remained under de facto Armenian control after the 2020 ceasefire, Russian peacekeepers
- transport link (under discussion) between Azerbaijan and its exclave Nakhichevan, via Armenia



Sources: [https://doi.org/10.18648/2023RP09#Map\\_Sources](https://doi.org/10.18648/2023RP09#Map_Sources)  
 Colour setting is recommended for optimal readability.  
 This map is for illustration only. It does not represent any position on claims under international law or on legal status, border/boundary issues, place names or any other information or terminology that it contains. It is not intended to be exhaustive or true to scale.  
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50 km

# Case Study: Dis/connectivity along the Georgian Military Road

Connectivity can be mapped in the big picture but also manifests itself concretely “on the ground”. Here, too, the complexity and contradictions of connectivity become apparent, but the individual actors affected or involved come more into focus. This can be illustrated by the example of the North-South Corridor in Georgia and its current expansion.

**The North-South Corridor is a key element of Georgia’s initiative to position itself as a transit and logistics hub.**

The road expansion under the title North-South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project on a north-south axis along the historic Georgian Military Road is one of the two priority road infrastructure projects of the Georgian government with national strategic importance, along with the expansion of the East-West Highway. It is a key element of the initiative to position the country internationally as a transit and logistics hub. Within Georgia, the North-South Corridor connects, among others, the capital Tbilisi with the ski resort Gudauri and, even further north, with the hiking areas around Stepantsminda in Kazbegi municipality, which have been developed for tourism. In a transnational dimension, the North-South Corridor is currently the only open connection to Georgia’s northern neighbour Russia and an important transit route not only for Georgian but also Armenian, Turkish, Central Asian, Azerbaijani, Belarusian and Iranian goods transports. As a result of Russia’s war against Ukraine, connectivity via the North-South Corridor has gained additional attention, and the

route has once again experienced increasing demand.<sup>69</sup> The route was not actually intended for supra-regional or international transit traffic, especially not on the current scale. Such traffic ran via the road along the Black Sea coast in Abkhazia or through the Roki tunnel and the territory of South Ossetia, as well as via rail along the Black and Caspian Seas. However, Abkhazia and South Ossetia broke away from Tbilisi in armed conflicts in the early 1990s; both territories remain outside of Tbilisi’s control. The August War between Georgia and Russia in 2008 completely blocked the route via the Roki tunnel, and the Georgian Military Road was de facto the only remaining connection to Russia.<sup>70</sup>

## Expansion of the North-South Corridor

One of the main reasons identified by the Georgian government and international donor organisations for the expansion of the route is the increased requirements imposed by the growing transit traffic, even beyond the current situation. Other reasons are the desire to improve road safety and to contribute to local regional development, especially by stimulating

<sup>69</sup> Nini Gabritchidze, “Ukraine War Leads to Traffic Jams in Georgia”, *Eurasianet*, 6 October 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/ukraine-war-leads-to-traffic-jams-in-georgia>.

<sup>70</sup> From 2006 to 2010, Russia kept the border crossing closed, officially due to reconstruction work but presumably for political reasons. During this period, all overland connections between Russia and Georgia were cut. Dimitri Avaliani, “Georgia: Russian Border Opening Plan under Scrutiny. Mixed Motives Seen in Proposed Move to End Three-year Frontier Closure” (London et al.: Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 26 November 2009), <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgia-russian-border-opening-plan-under-scrutiny>.

tourism in the regions along the route. The total cost of the project of about US\$558 million is covered by loans from the Asian Development Bank (ADB, US\$415 million) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD, US\$60 million) as well as by funds from the Georgian state budget.<sup>71</sup>

The Kvesheti-Kobi project is the first and probably the most elaborate of three interconnected (planned) sub-projects along the North-South Corridor. Among other things, it includes the construction of an almost 9-kilometre-long tunnel, which is intended to relieve the existing road, especially to the ski resort of Gudauri. The project also includes the construction of a 23-kilometre-long road section as well as six bridges and four additional tunnels.<sup>72</sup> The project is being implemented by the Roads Department, an agency under the umbrella of the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia. The contractors are from China: China Railway Tunnel Group Co., Ltd. and China Railway 23rd Bureau Group Co., both subsidiaries of Chinese state-owned enterprises. The construction is being supervised by a company from Turkey. Ideas for a tunnel on the line date back to the century before last and circulated now and then, especially after the Second World War.<sup>73</sup> For example, Georgia's president at the time, Mikheil Saakashvili, imagined the town of Stepantsminda (then Kazbegi) as a "suburb of Tbilisi" because of the time it would save on the route from the capital.<sup>74</sup>

## Dis/connectivity and state-society relations

According to the official Georgian discourse on the added value of improved connectivity, one objective of the Kvesheti-Kobi project is to contribute to regional development within Georgia. Essentially, it is

about improving the living conditions of the local population through increased transport links, i.e. more effective local connectivity, as well as the opportunities to develop new tourism projects arising from this. Among other things, a visitor centre, advertised as a flagship initiative, and (business) training for the local population are to help promote sustainable tourism in the region concerned.<sup>75</sup> Officially, the project operates under the slogan "Kvesheti-Kobi Road – New Way of Development".

### Infrastructure development is not exclusively seen as positive but also as a threat to the environment, cultural heritage and tourism.

Not everyone shares such an optimistic vision of the future. Environmentalists and conservationists as well as representatives of the tourism industry criticise that the expansion of the infrastructure is more likely to jeopardise the development of tourism and, beyond that, of the entire region. In particular, they see it as threatening the tourism potential of the culturally important Khada Valley, through which the new transport link will run. One allegation is that the project's approval is based on an incomplete list of cultural heritage sites. In fact, later studies list many more sites than were originally identified.<sup>76</sup> Representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) claim that the project is incompatible with ecotourism, for which the Khada Valley is predestined, as well as with the protection of the extensive cultural heritage and biodiversity there.<sup>77</sup> For them, the Master Plan+, which is

71 The feasibility studies for the project were financed by the World Bank.

72 Kvesheti-Kobi, "About the Project", <https://kveshetikobiroad.ge/en/about-the-project/>.

73 N. I. Kvezereli-Kopadze, "The Problem of Year-Round Traffic through the Pass of the Cross on the Georgian Military Highway", *Soviet Geography* 15, no. 3 (1974): 163–74.

74 Maradia Tsaava, "The Georgian Military Highway or 'Bottleneck' of the Caucasus?" *JAMnews*, 5 April 2021, <https://jam-news.net/the-georgian-military-highway-or-bottleneck-of-the-caucasus/>; Kvezereli-Kopadze, "The Problem of Year-Round Traffic through the Pass of the Cross on the Georgian Military Highway" (see note 73).

75 Kvesheti-Kobi, "About the Project" (see note 72).

76 Two compliance review processes have confirmed that there are deficiencies in the consideration of cultural heritage, see below.

77 On criticism of the project, see Green Alternative and CEE Bankwatch Network, *Unsolved Problems of the North-South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project* (Tbilisi, October 2021), [https://greenalt.org/app/uploads/2021/11/Khada\\_report.pdf](https://greenalt.org/app/uploads/2021/11/Khada_report.pdf); Manana Kochladze, *Will Georgia's North-South Corridor Boost Trade, or Make It Dependent on Russia?* Issue Paper (CEE Bankwatch Network, May 2022), [https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2022-05-10\\_EBRD-issue-paper\\_North-South-Corridor-Georgia.pdf](https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2022-05-10_EBRD-issue-paper_North-South-Corridor-Georgia.pdf); Manana Kochladze, *North-South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project*, Issue Paper (CEE Bankwatch and Green Alternative, May 2019), [https://greenalt.org/app/uploads/2021/04/Issue\\_Paper\\_new\\_Kobi\\_Kvesheti\\_Sarajevo\\_2019.pdf](https://greenalt.org/app/uploads/2021/04/Issue_Paper_new_Kobi_Kvesheti_Sarajevo_2019.pdf); Green Alternative, *Potential Socio-Economic and Gender Impact of the Kvesheti-Kobi Road Project on the Local Popula-*



supposed to set the framework for the long-term development of the affected region, is unlikely to bring much change. The project leaders had initiated it retrospectively and are now developing it in parallel with the ongoing project implementation.<sup>78</sup>

Those responsible say that they are in dialogue with the local population and that the decision to implement the Master Plan+ goes far beyond the originally envisaged project support.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, the rifts are deep, and mistrust prevails. While environmentalists and conservationists organised protests, those responsible for the project viewed the NGOs as acting in isolation from the interests of those actually affected: the local population. Indeed, the protests were only able to gain limited momentum; a larger mobilisation against the construction seems to have failed so far.<sup>80</sup> Minutes of the stakeholder engagement

tion (Tbilisi, 2020), [https://greenalt.org/app/uploads/2021/04/kvesheti\\_kobi\\_road\\_2020\\_ENG.pdf](https://greenalt.org/app/uploads/2021/04/kvesheti_kobi_road_2020_ENG.pdf); The National Trust of Georgia, "Landscape", <http://www.nationaltrustofgeorgia.org.ge/landscape/>; Manana Suramelashvili, "Khada Cultural Landscape at Risk", in *Heritage at Risk. World Report 2016–2019 on Monuments and Sites in Danger*, ed. Christoph Machat and John Ziesemer (Berlin, 2020), 48–51; *Appeal. Kvesheti-Kobi Road Project: Risks for Cultural and Natural Heritage of the Khada Valley* (Tbilisi, April 2021), <http://www.nationaltrustofgeorgia.org.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Academic-open-letter-comb.pdf>; "CENN Position Regarding the Project on Construction and Operation of the New Kvesheti-Kobi Motor Road", <http://environment.cenn.org/cenn-position-regarding-project-construction-operation-new-kvesheti-kobi-motor-road/>.

**78** The Master Plan+ is composed of the Community Needs Assessment, Historic-Cultural Reference Plan, Development Plan and Priority Investment Programme. Asian Development Bank and Roads Department of Georgia, *Stakeholder Brief: Community Development and Livelihood Improvement. North-South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project* (Manila and Tbilisi, May 2022), <https://kveshetikobiroad.ge/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Community-development-and-livelihood-improvement.pdf>.

**79** "Khada Valley Development Plan. Preliminary Vision for the Development Plan" (May 2022), <https://kveshetikobiroad.ge/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Preliminary-Vision-for-the-Development-Plan.pdf>.

**80** Smaller local protests under the slogan "Khada is not for sale" did take place. It is unclear to what extent the Covid pandemic and related restrictions had an impact on protest activities. Tazo Kupreishvili, "Chada ar ikhideba!" — chadas cheobashi adgilobrivebma aktsia gamartes" ["Khada is not for sale." Locals held rally in Khada Valley], *Netgazeti*, 26 October 2019, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/401290/>.

meetings, however, suggest that the mood among the valley's inhabitants is ambivalent at the least.<sup>81</sup>

The preliminary development plan for the region affected by the construction, part of the Master Plan+, concludes that a prerequisite for implementation is minimising the impact of the road. It does not specify what this means in concrete terms. NGO representatives, meanwhile, lodged an official complaint with the donor organisations ADB and EBRD. At the end of March 2021, the panel set up under the ADB's accountability mechanism came to the conclusion after an initial review that there were indeed indications that regulations had not been complied with. This concerns, among others, negative impacts of the project and measures to avoid them in environmental, socio-economic development, gender or heritage protection.<sup>82</sup> The final report of the ADB review process, published at the end of January 2023, confirms that the ADB did not sufficiently meet its due diligence obligations in a number of points and that additional measures were advisable, both before and after project approval. Complaints were made, for example, about the protection of natural and cultural heritage, compensation for and impacts on the livelihoods and living conditions of the local population, and the fulfilment of supervisory duties. The evaluation refers solely to the ADB. (Potential) misconduct by the borrower, the (construction) companies involved or the implementing agency are explicitly not part of the assessment. At the same time, the report critically notes that due to the specific design of the project, essential monitoring and mitigation measures are delegated to the borrower or the executing agency and criticises: "The persistence of contractor non-compliances [...] poses risk to affected persons, their communities, and environment. It also poses a

**81** Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia. Roads Department, *Land Acquisition and Resettlement Plan (LARP). Kvesheti-Kobi Road. LOT 2* (Tbilisi, July 2019), <https://kveshetikobiroad.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Land-Acquisition-And-Resettlement-Plan-LARP-Lot-2.pdf>. See, e.g., the discussion with residents of Kvesheti, 98. The report of the compliance review process (see below) also refers to the criticism of the project by those directly affected.

**82** Asian Development Bank Accountability Mechanism Compliance Review Panel, *Report on Eligibility*, 24 March 2021, [https://compliance.adb.org/dir0035p.nsf/attachments/CRP-GEO-KK-Eligibility%20Report-24Mar2021.pdf/\\$FILE/CRP-GEO-KK-Eligibility%20Report-24Mar2021.pdf](https://compliance.adb.org/dir0035p.nsf/attachments/CRP-GEO-KK-Eligibility%20Report-24Mar2021.pdf/$FILE/CRP-GEO-KK-Eligibility%20Report-24Mar2021.pdf).

reputational risk to ADB.”<sup>83</sup> The report of the EBRD compliance review was made public a few months later, in early June 2023.<sup>84</sup> The investigation found EBRD non-compliant in several aspects regarding (tangible as well as intangible) cultural heritage, which was a specific focus of this complaint procedure. A major shortcoming identified concerns the inadequate consideration of Khada Valley’s cultural heritage, which has resulted in inadequate impact assessment and insufficient mitigation measures.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, the investigation deplored the lack of effective involvement of all relevant (civil society) stakeholders from the very early stages onwards. The instances of non-compliance identified relate both to the EBRD’s own activities and to its ability to ensure compliance with EBRD provisions on the part of the borrower, while the borrower and contractors as such were not assessed. Construction work continued in parallel with the compliance procedures.

The divergences in state-society relations and in the various actors’ view of connectivity are not only revealed by the Kvesheti-Kobi project. A recurring theme, for example, is compensation for land or property claimed for infrastructure development projects or endangered by construction. Conflicts over this seem to have a significant impact on whether or not projects are accepted at the local level. Especially in rural regions of Georgia, property rights to land are often not officially certified but only informally legitimised through customary law. As with other con-

struction projects, according to media reports and NGO statements, it has sometimes been difficult in the case of the Kvesheti-Kobi project to officially register land that has been privately used for generations under customary law. Critics claim that the lack of registration makes it difficult for those affected to obtain compensation, and that the plots of land in question are in any case insufficiently registered as such.<sup>86</sup> Those responsible for the project do not share this assessment. The final report of the ADB review procedure does not identify any omission on the part of ADB with regard to these issues. However, it emphasises that the ADB should continue to monitor the process and that it is important to reassure those affected that registrations are still possible.<sup>87</sup>

Greater transparency and trust in the processes might have been provided by greater involvement of independent watchdog organisations in the project’s grievance procedures. However, civil society organisations are only represented to a limited extent in the institutions provided for grievance redress. According to the project’s Social Monitoring Report of November 2021, the Grievance Redress Committees established at the municipal level include representatives from the affected localities, but apparently no NGO representatives. Neither NGO representatives nor affected people are represented on the Grievance Redress Commission, higher up in the hierarchy, according to the report.<sup>88</sup> An additional complicating factor is that local governments in Georgia still do not operate sufficiently independently of the central state and government, despite the decentralisation efforts made.

**83** Asian Development Bank Compliance Review Panel, *Final Report on Compliance Review Panel Request No 2021/1 on the North-South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project in Georgia*, Asian Development Bank Loan 3803 (Manila, 18 November 2022), 119, [https://compliance.adb.org/dir0035p.nsf/attachments/CRP-GEO-KK-FinalReport-2Feb-ForWeb.pdf/\\$FILE/CRP-GEO-KK-FinalReport-2Feb-ForWeb.pdf](https://compliance.adb.org/dir0035p.nsf/attachments/CRP-GEO-KK-FinalReport-2Feb-ForWeb.pdf/$FILE/CRP-GEO-KK-FinalReport-2Feb-ForWeb.pdf). The final report also notes that various processes have not been completed, so remaining risks cannot be ruled out.

**84** European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Independent Project Accountability Mechanism, *Compliance Review Report North-South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project*, EBRD Project Number 50271, Case 2020/01 (London, November 2022), <https://www.ebrd.com/documents/ipam/2020/01-compliance-review-report-eng.pdf?blobnocache=true>.

**85** EBRD’s Independent Project Accountability Mechanism has come to the “opinion that the Bank should not have allowed the Project to advance to the construction stage without an accurate CH [Cultural Heritage] (both tangible and intangible) baseline [...]”. *Ibid.*, 37.

**86** “Kvesheti-kobis gzis zonashi mitsebis tarliturad dauplebis braldebit mokalakeebi daakaves” [In the Kvesheti Kobi Road area, citizens were detained on charges of fraudulently acquiring land], *Mtisambebi.ge*, 16 December 2021, <https://www.mtisambebi.ge/news/people/item/1400-qvesheti-kobis-gzis-zonashi-mixebis-tagliturad-dauplebis-braldebit-moqalaqeebi-daakaves>; “Rogor devnis chelisupleba chadelebs gzis msheneblobistvis” [How the government is persecuting Khada residents for road construction], *Mtisambebi.ge*, 10 December 2021, <https://mtisambebi.ge/news/people/item/1398>.

**87** Asian Development Bank Compliance Review Panel, *Final Report on Compliance Review Panel Request No 2021/1 on the North-South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project in Georgia* (see note 83), 95.

**88** Sopho Omanadze, *Georgia: North South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project Social Monitoring Report. Kvesheti-Kobi Road Compliance Report No 1–3 (CR1–3)* (Tbilisi, November 2021), 28–30, [https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/project-documents/51257/51257-001-smr-en\\_6.pdf](https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/project-documents/51257/51257-001-smr-en_6.pdf).

This affects how effectively they (can) represent the municipal interests and concerns of the local population, especially against central government and ruling party interests – or projects that the government considers to be of national strategic importance.<sup>89</sup>

## Dis/connectivity and transnational transit traffic

As well as contribute to local development, the expansion of the North-South Corridor should provide for better transnational transit. Especially in this dimension, the prevailing (media) image of the route is not one of traffic flow, but of kilometre-long traffic jams. Sections of the road are closed up to 100 days a year due to bad weather, snow and avalanche danger. Due to the politically induced high demand, these traffic jams were particularly long and serious in 2022.

For the government and international donors, the need to expand the north-south route alongside the east-west one as the country's central (transit) arteries seems obvious, even if Georgia does not have a comprehensive transport strategy.<sup>90</sup> There is far less disagreement about the bottlenecks on the route having negative impacts than there is about the consequences for the Khada Valley. The problems resulting from the congestion are obvious: besides air pollution, there are the logistical challenges of providing the truck drivers, who are often stranded for many days, with food, water, sanitation and first aid kits, and removing their waste. This applies primarily to the

affected regions and municipalities, which are currently helping the drivers provisionally, either directly or by supporting private initiatives.

The Georgian fixed transit rates were GEL 200, the equivalent of about EUR 69, until mid-June 2022, when they were significantly increased to GEL 350, about EUR 122. Critics in Georgia have long complained that the low fixed rates do not even cover the maintenance costs for the Georgian road infrastructure. This is now also the official justification for the rate increase.<sup>91</sup> From the point of view of Armenian hauliers, however, the fixed rate is only one component in the cost calculation. For landlocked Armenia, whose most important trading partner is Russia and whose own national borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan are closed, the route is of existential importance.<sup>92</sup> Costs due to congestion-related waiting times are a major factor here, all the more so if they lead to freight loss or cancellations.<sup>93</sup> As it stands, Armenia has hardly any scope to diversify its routes to Russia. The North-South Corridor is the only overland connection to its main trading partner. Armenian transport companies that transport perishable goods, such as foodstuffs that need to be kept fresh, are

<sup>89</sup> Ana Tshitidze, “The Problem of the Political and Fiscal Decentralization of the Local Government in 2012 – 2019”, *Globalization and Business*, no. 7 (2019): 148 – 54; Peter Wiebler, “Local Governance Reform Can Strengthen Georgian Democracy from the Ground Up. Op-Ed”, *Civil.ge*, 2 February 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/470647>.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas Day et al., *Decarbonisation Scenarios for the Transport Sector in Georgia* (Berlin and Cologne: New Climate Institute, January 2021), 31, [https://newclimate.org/sites/default/files/2021/01/NewClimate\\_Decarbonisation-scenarios-for-Georgia-transport-sector\\_Jan21\\_2.pdf](https://newclimate.org/sites/default/files/2021/01/NewClimate_Decarbonisation-scenarios-for-Georgia-transport-sector_Jan21_2.pdf). The lack of such a strategy is also pointed out by the EU in its report on Georgia's capacity to pursue EU membership: European Commission, *Analytical Report Following the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council Commission Opinion on Georgia's Application for Membership of the European Union. Commission Staff Working Document*, SWD (2023) 31 final (Brussels, 1 February 2023).

<sup>91</sup> “V pervom polugodii Gruziiyu tranzitom pereseblo rekordnoe kolichestvo fur” [A record number of trucks passed through Georgia in the first half of the year], *JAMnews*, 2 September 2022, <https://jam-news.net/ru/v-pervom-polugodii-gruziiyu-tranzitom-n/>; Tsaava, “The Georgian Military Highway or ‘Bottleneck’ of the Caucasus?” (see note 74). By comparison, transit via Azerbaijan is reported to cost Turkish transport companies between US\$500 and US\$700 per truck, depending on the type and weight of the cargo. Fehim Tastekin, “Russian Invasion of Ukraine Slams Turkey's Transportation Industry”, *Al-Monitor*, 22 April 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/russian-invasion-ukraine-slams-turkeys-transportation-industry>.

<sup>92</sup> On Armenia's situation as a landlocked country, see Tigran Zakaryan, “Landlocked with Closed Borders: Armenia's Problem of Access to the Sea”, *Caucasus Survey* 9, no. 2 (2021): 192 – 208.

<sup>93</sup> Information on the cost of the delays varies. While some sources estimate additional costs of around US\$100 per additional day, others put the figure even higher, citing the high cost of refrigeration alone: Alexandr Avanesov, “Transit Tariff Rise Blow to Armenian Exporters”, *ArmInfo Financial Portal*, 20 June 2022, [https://finport.am/full\\_news.php?id=46272&lang=3](https://finport.am/full_news.php?id=46272&lang=3); Gayane Sargsyan, “New Problems at the Upper Lars Checkpoint – A Blow to Armenian Business”, *JAMnews*, 5 December 2022, <https://jam-news.net/new-problems-at-the-upper-lars-checkpoint-a-blow-to-armenian-business/>.

particularly dependent on smooth transit.<sup>94</sup> To be able to offer a more reliable route for such goods, Armenia's government has been working for some time on an alternative ferry connection from the Georgian port of Poti to Russian Kavkaz.<sup>95</sup> Since spring 2022, it has pursued this plan with renewed zeal. In October 2022, however, Armenia's Minister of Economy indicated that the sanctions imposed on Russia were making it difficult to realise.<sup>96</sup>

Georgia's connectivity has been under special scrutiny since February 2022, especially the transit of goods via Georgia to Russia. Traffic via the north-south route is of special significance in the current situation: road hauliers are extremely flexible and adaptable when conditions change – an advantage over rail freight.<sup>97</sup> Georgia has not explicitly joined the Western sanctions against Russia. Nevertheless, Tbilisi says Georgian officials are checking transit freight at border crossings for sanctioned goods, and control measures have been stepped up.<sup>98</sup> The Georgian government has strongly denied allegations that Georgia plays a role in circumventing the sanctions.<sup>99</sup>

**94** These currently enjoy preferential treatment under a "Green Corridor". "Vlasti Gruzii uprostiti propusk gruzovikov s produktami cherez granitsu" [Georgian authorities have simplified border passage for trucks carrying food-stuffs], *Kavkazkij Uzel*, 23 May 2022, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/377417/>.

**95** Nini Gabritchidze and Ani Mejlumyan, "Armenia to Set Up Ferry between Georgia and Russia", *Eurasianet*, 16 August 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-to-set-up-ferry-between-georgia-and-russia>.

**96** "Armenian Economy Minister Hopes Ferry Communication Will Be Launched before Bad Weather Starts", *Armenpress*, 3 November 2022, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1096360/>. In spring of 2023, reports about a possible ferry connection now from Georgia's Batumi to Russia's Novorossiysk appeared in Armenian media. Nini Gabritchidze, "Russia's transport ambitions create new headaches in Georgia", *Eurasianet*, 25 May 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/russias-transport-ambitions-create-new-headaches-in-georgia>.

**97** CAREC, *Railway Sector Assessment for Georgia* (see note 44), 16.

**98** Revenue Service, "Statement of the Revenue Service", press release, Tbilisi, 3 June 2022, <https://rs.ge/NewsArchive-en?newsId=657>; Inna Kukudzhanova, "Vlasti Gruzii iskljuchili vozmozhnost' kontrabandy v Rossiju sanktsionnykh tovarov" [Georgia's authorities have ruled out possibility of smuggle of sanctioned goods to Russia], *Kavkazkij Uzel*, 9 April 2022, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/375019/>.

**99** Kyiv has repeatedly accused Tbilisi of circumventing the sanctions. This has contributed to political tensions between

Irrespective of the current exceptional situation, from the Georgian point of view the central bottleneck for transit traffic along the Georgian Military Road is across the border, on the Russian side. Interlocutors in Georgia claim that, in addition to weather-related road closures, congestion-related transit losses are mainly due to delays at the Russian border control.<sup>100</sup> If the assessment of Georgian interlocutors is correct and the bottleneck of the North-South Corridor is indeed on the Russian side,<sup>101</sup> then – at least in terms of transit capacities – the expansion of the Kvsheti-Kobi route should only bring limited improvement, because the bottleneck is beyond Georgia's control.

## Dis/connectivity and geopolitics

In this context, it is debatable to what extent the expansion of the route contributes or can contribute

the countries. On the question of Georgia's handling of the sanctions, see also Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), *Georgia's Implementation of the International Sanctions Imposed on Russia. February-August* (Tbilisi, 2022).

The analysis is largely based on 204 documented cases where goods destined for Russia or Belarus were turned back at Georgia's borders. The authors of the IDFI study point out that the data considered are incomplete and that more transparency would create greater confidence in the controls.

**100** The reasons given in talks for the existence of this bottleneck are manifold and include claims that unlike Georgia's 24-hour service, the border crossing on the Russian side was only open during the day and that the clearance capacities there were low. On 19 May 2022, Georgian customs declared that their own capacities would be increased due to the increased freight volume throughout Georgia in order to guarantee the 24-hour service. Reconstruction and expansion work on the Russian side, which had been ongoing since 2021, was also said to have led to the loss of further transit capacity in the meantime. Also, there is no electronic data exchange between Georgia and Russia. This would facilitate the clarification of customs issues and is used, for example, for the transport of goods across the Turkish-Georgian border. See Tastekin, "Russian Invasion of Ukraine Slams Turkey Transportation Industry" (see note 91); Gabritchidze/Mejlumyan, "Armenia to Set Up Ferry between Georgia and Russia" (see note 95); Revenue Service, "Statement of the Revenue Service of the Ministry of Finance", press release, 19 May 2022, <https://rs.ge/NewsArchive-en?newsId=644>.

**101** Turkish hauliers who use the route also complain about the bottleneck on the Russian side. Tastekin, "Russian Invasion of Ukraine Slams Turkey Transportation Industry" (see note 91).

to a smooth transnational transit and thus to improved transnational North-South connectivity. Equally questionable, however, is whether this would be in Georgia's interest at all, especially in the current political situation. Critics of the project attribute a different strategic importance to the expansion of the connection than the government. The former fear that, given the current geopolitical confrontations, it will further increase Georgia's vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia.<sup>102</sup>

### The historical connection across the Caucasus served trade but also military purposes and raids.

Historically, the connotations of the connection across the Caucasus, which came to be known as the Georgian Military Road, were not exclusive positive. In addition to its function as an essential link between the North and South Caucasus, which made trade possible, it also served military purposes and raids. The reservations currently expressed tie into a specific narrative in Georgia, which classifies the historical Georgian Military Road and its predecessor as an instrument (of conquest) of the Russian Tsarist Empire, which used it discipline the Georgian mountain people rebelling against Tsarist rule.<sup>103</sup> The re-opening of the border crossing in 2010, too, after it had been closed for several years, raised security concerns on the Georgian side.<sup>104</sup>

The fact that Russian troops are stationed in break-away Abkhazia and South Ossetia means that any qualitative differences in the direct threat level and military vulnerability vis-à-vis the northern neighbour that might be caused by the expansion of the North-South Corridor should be discussed. However, the security dimension of the connectivity project can also be measured in a less direct way. This ties in with locating the bottleneck on the Russian side and refers to the debates on "chokepoint sovereignty": Russia has repeatedly shown Georgia that it is ready

to use economic dependencies and vulnerabilities to assert its own hegemonic interests. In the past Moscow already used air connections to Georgia, gas supplies from Russia and restrictions on the import of certain goods as political leverage against Tbilisi. The closure of the border crossing from 2006 to 2010 probably also had a political background, as it coincided with a spying scandal between Moscow and Tbilisi.

The fact that connectivity via the North-South Corridor plays a central role not only for the movement of goods but also for the mobility of people manifested itself in a dramatic way in autumn 2022. Moscow's (partial) mobilisation on 21 September resulted in an interim rush to the Russian-Georgian border crossing. Russian authorities in North Ossetia said there were about 5,000 vehicles, of which about 3,500 were passenger cars.<sup>105</sup> Pictures showed kilometre-long traffic jams on the Russian side of the border. The Georgian Interior Minister said that the number of daily border crossings from Russia to Georgia had temporarily increased from around 6,000 to about 10,000.<sup>106</sup>

On the Georgian side, the inrush from Russia has given further impetus to a geopoliticised and securitised view of connectivity. After the Russian attack on Ukraine at the end of February 2022, there had already been a wave of arrivals from Russia, with tens of thousands moving (temporarily) to Georgia.<sup>107</sup> This wave had already intensified the debate about how open Georgia should be for Russian entrants. They do not need a visa to cross the border and can stay in the

**105** Emma Marzoeva, "Rossiyane na Verkhnem Larse rasskazali o prichinakh ot'ezda" [At Verkhni Lars Russians report on the reasons for their departure], *Kavkazkiy Uzel*, 27 September 2022, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/381531/>.

**106** According to data from the Georgian Interior Ministry, the number of entries from Russia into Georgia jumped after 22 September 2022: While on that day 6,150 people had crossed the border into Georgia, the following day the number was 9,307. After that, the number continued to climb, while the number of departures from Georgia to Russia decreased. Mariam Bogveradze, "MVD Gruzii opublikovalo statistiku perececheniya granitsu grazhdanami Rossii" [Georgia's Interior Ministry published statistics on border crossings by Russian citizens], *Netgazeti*, 27 September 2022, <https://ru.netgazeti.ge/43277/>.

**107** Sebastian Staske, *Relocation from Russia and Belarus Boosts Economy*, Newsletter Georgia, no. 48 (Berlin: German Economic Team, September-October 2022), [https://www.german-economic-team.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/GET\\_GEO\\_NL\\_48\\_2022\\_en.pdf](https://www.german-economic-team.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/GET_GEO_NL_48_2022_en.pdf).

**102** Kochladze, *Will Georgia's North-South Corridor Boost Trade, or Make It Dependent on Russia?* (see note 77).

**103** See Khatuna Kokrashvili, *Anti-Russian Demonstrations in Georgia in the First Half of the XIX Century, Russian Expansion in the Caucasus and Georgia* (Tbilisi: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies [Rondeli Foundation], 14 May 2020), 3f., <https://gfsis.org.ge/files/library/pdf/English-2801.pdf>.

**104** Avaliani, "Georgia: Russian Border Opening Plan under Scrutiny" (see note 70).



country for up to one year. Questions about whether entry from Russia should be, if not prevented, then at least more restricted and better controlled through the introduction of visas became even more prominent in political and social debates from September 2022.<sup>108</sup>

Opinion polls for the National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted just before and after the start of the Russian invasion reflect an increased sensitivity among Georgians about their country's economic cooperation with Russia. The share of those who thought Georgia should deepen economic ties with Russia plummeted from 53 per cent in February 2022 to 25 per cent in March 2022. In contrast, the share of those in favour of limiting relations grew from 23 per cent to 39 per cent.<sup>109</sup> In a later NDI poll in August 2022 (and thus before the Russian mobilisation), 29 per cent of respondents said Georgia should deepen economic ties, 30 per cent favoured a reduction and 28 per cent wanted to maintain the status quo.<sup>110</sup> According to a September 2022 poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI), 89 per cent of respondents see Russia as the greatest political threat, 80 per cent as the greatest economic threat. Only 14 per cent support visa-free entry for Russians, according to the poll.<sup>111</sup>

Politically, the issue has become another bone of contention in the ongoing domestic dispute between the government and the opposition. While an opposition politician warned of a possible “annexation without tanks” in view of the wave of arrivals, the governing Georgian Dream party affirmed in autumn 2022 that the border with Russia should be left open

because there is no increased security threat.<sup>112</sup> With regard to the transnational dimension of the North-South Corridor, the government continues to emphasise its function as an economically important transit route for freight and tourists.

On the other hand, a growing narrative among the Georgian public, which emphasises the risks of connectivity with Russia, could lead to the expansion of the North-South Corridor becoming more directly implicated in these debates – contrary to its official presentation as a geopolitical non-issue. The project website emphasises the added value of the construction project for regional development within Georgia. Where it refers to the added value for the transnational transit potential, it does not specify which countries the corridor actually connects. In contrast, the project's June 2019 procurement plan explicitly referred to Georgia's historical hub function and classified the Kvesheti-Kobi project as a key infrastructure investment, to improve the northern dimension of this hub, namely the connection to Russia, and to accommodate the increased transport volume on this route. The plan considers the “deterioration of bilateral relations with neighbouring countries” to be a key risk, but exclusively from an “economic and financial” perspective.<sup>113</sup>

**108** Giorgi Lomsadze, “The Septembrists, Russia's Latest Wave of Emigres to Georgia”, *Eurasianet*, 12 October 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/the-septembrists-russias-latest-wave-of-emigres-to-georgia>.

**109** “NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, February 2022”, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nf2022ge/codebook/>; “NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2022”, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nm2022ge/codebook/>.

**110** National Democratic Institute, *Taking Georgians' Pulse. Findings from August 2022 Face to Face Survey* (September 2022), 59, [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Poll%20Results%20%28English%29\\_0.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Poll%20Results%20%28English%29_0.pdf).

**111** International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia* (Washington, D.C., September 2022), 52, 54, 59, [https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/IRI-Poll-Presentation-Georgia-September2022\\_Final.pdf](https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/IRI-Poll-Presentation-Georgia-September2022_Final.pdf).

**112** “Should Georgia Close Its Border with Russia? Authorities and Opposition on the Mass Exodus of Russians”, *JAMnews*, 27 September 2022, <https://jam-news.net/should-georgia-close-its-border-with-russia-authorities-and-opposition-on-the-mass-exodus-of-russians/>; Irakli Oragvelidze, “Lars atakuyet” [Lars attacks], *Ekho Kavkaza*, 27 September 2022, <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/32054634.html>. The polls also show differences between respondents who indicate a political closeness to the ruling party Georgian Dream and those who locate themselves closer to the opposition party United National Movement: While 42 per cent of the first group were in favour of deepening economic relations in the summer of 2022, only 24 per cent of the second were. In contrast, only 17 per cent of the first group were in favour of a reduction, but 53 per cent of the second. “NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, July-August 2022”, [https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nj2022ge/ECOREL\\_RUS-by-PARTSUPP/](https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nj2022ge/ECOREL_RUS-by-PARTSUPP/).

**113** Asian Development Bank, *North-South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project: Procurement Plan* (Manila, 20 June 2019), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/project-documents/51257/51257-001-pam-en.pdf>; Asian Development Bank, *Risk Assessment and Risk Management Plan*, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/51257-001-ra.pdf>.

# The EU as a connectivity actor in the South Caucasus

The EU has also given increasing weight to the inter-linked nature of transport connectivity and geopolitics. De facto, transport connectivity has long been part of the EU's policy towards the South Caucasus, even if the term connectivity itself – and connectivity's more geopolitical embeddedness – only found its way into EU documents later.

The EU has already been involved in this area with the Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia project, better known by its acronym TRACECA, which was launched in 1993.<sup>114</sup> TRACECA was intended to develop connectivity along an East-West corridor through technical assistance and to promote cross-border cooperation between states – and thus advance the establishment of transport routes in the post-Soviet space beyond the traditional centre of gravity, Russia. The current geopolitical upheavals could give TRACECA new relevance, however, it is now independent of the EU. In 1998, responsibilities were already transferred to the participating states; Brussels has reduced its financial support.<sup>115</sup>

Connectivity cooperation continued to be an increasingly important item on the EU's agenda for the South Caucasus. From 2009 onwards, an important framework for this was the Eastern Partnership.<sup>116</sup> Aspects of regulatory convergence or alignment were also pursued bilaterally, for example in the Association Agreement with the Deep and Comprehensive

Free Trade Area (DCFTA) between Georgia and the EU.<sup>117</sup>

**Within the EU's Eastern Partnership, the issue of connectivity has increasingly taken centre stage.**

Within the Eastern Partnership, the topic of connectivity has continuously been given more space. Since 2011, there has been the Eastern Partnership Transport Panel, an exchange forum on related issues for the participating countries. The 20 Deliverables for 2020 adopted at the EaP Summit in November 2017 identify the development of connectivity as a cooperation priority. With regard to transport connectivity, it was agreed to extend the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) into the EaP area. The aim is to strengthen coordination between transport networks within the EU and within (as well as to) the neighbourhood. Ultimately, this should lead to increasing economic exchange.<sup>118</sup> Priority projects and investments for the period up to 2030 were identified with the help of indicative maps and an investment action plan and together with the partner countries. In its communication of December 2021, the Euro-

**114** The member states are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Romania, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

**115** "Interview: Asset Assavbayev, Secretary-General of TRACECA, Talks to commonspace.eu about the Work of the Inter-Governmental Commission in Promoting Connectivity Europe-Caucasus-Asia", *commonsplace.eu*, 8 June 2021, <https://www.commonspace.eu/interview/interview-asset-assavbayev-secretary-general-traceca-talks-commonspaceeu-about-work-inter>.

**116** See also Raik, "Connectivity of the EU's Eastern Partnership Region" (see note 18).

**117** "Eastern Partnership Platform 2 'Economic Integration and Convergence with EU Policies'. Panel on Transport" (Brussels, 23 September 2011), <https://transport.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2016-09/2012-eap-transport-panel-terms-of-reference.pdf>; "Joint Declaration. Future of Eastern Partnership Transport Cooperation", September 2016, <https://transport.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2016-09/2013-10-09-declaration.pdf>.

**118** Eastern Partnership (EaP), "20 Deliverables for 2020: Bringing Tangible Results for Citizens. Factsheet", <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31690/eap-generic-factsheet-digital.pdf>; Michal Beim, *So Near and Yet so Far. The Challenges of Transport Cooperation between the European Union and Eastern Partnership Countries*, Raport, no. 6/2017 (Cracow: Centrum Analiz Klubu Jagiellońskiego, 2017).

pean Commission confirmed and prioritised the extension of the trans-European transport network to the neighbouring regions, including the countries of the EaP — among other reasons because it found considerable need for further action here, as well as in the Western Balkans.<sup>119</sup>

The 2019 review of the EaP and the core areas that it defined for the follow-up agenda to the 20 Deliverables for 2020 also prioritise connectivity: building resilient and sustainable integrated economies is one of five long-term goals. In addition, investment in smart and sustainable connectivity is one of the ten key targets agreed in the EaP until 2025, namely the construction and rehabilitation of 3,000 kilometres of roads and railways prioritised in the TEN-T. The new agenda was underpinned by a multi-billion-euro economic and investment plan. While this was developed in the context of the Covid pandemic and should aid socio-economic recovery after the pandemic shock, the flagship initiatives of the country plans for the three South Caucasus states also include transport connectivity projects, such as support for the development of the North-South Corridor for Armenia, support for the Baku Green Port project for Azerbaijan, and the improvement of transport connectivity with the EU across the Black Sea for Georgia.<sup>120</sup> As far as the interlinking of transport networks is concerned, the fact that none of the three South Caucasus countries has a direct border with the EU and all are therefore dependent on multimodal solutions is admittedly a complicating factor, in particular with regard to road and rail networks.

The increasing weight of connectivity within the Eastern Partnership is intertwined with a general increase in EU attention to it but also precedes it. The

adoption of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy in 2018 marked the beginning of a more geopolitically and geostrategically oriented European connectivity debate. The strategy can be read as a European replica of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Even more explicitly, a geostrategic perspective on connectivity can be found in the conclusions of the Council of the European Union, "A Globally Connected Europe", of July 2021.<sup>121</sup> Taking up the points made therein, the EU Global Gateway Initiative was presented in early December 2021.<sup>122</sup> Similar to the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, connectivity is defined in a broad sense in Global Gateway. Alongside digitalisation, health, climate and energy, education and research, transport is just one of several priority areas. As previously in the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, the Global Gateway understanding of connectivity is closely linked to criteria such as sustainability, transparency, high quality standards and legal standards, good governance and the rule of law. According to Global Gateway (and the EU), connectivity should follow an ethical approach and be generally value-based. It is also explicitly stated, however, that Global Gateway projects should reflect the intersection of needs communicated from partner countries and the EU's own strategic interests.<sup>123</sup> At the first meeting of the Global Gateway Board in December 2022, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen reiterated: "Global Gateway is above all a geopolitical project, which seeks to position Europe in a competitive international marketplace. It is a critical tool because infrastructure investments are at the heart of today's geopolitics."<sup>124</sup> The German government also em-

**119** European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the extension of the trans-European transport network (TEN-T) to neighbouring third countries*, COM(2021) 820 final (Brussels, 14 December 2021), 12, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0820>.

**120** EU Neighbours East, "The EU's New Investment Plan for the Eastern Partners", 25 November 2021, <https://eu-neighbourseast.eu/news/explainers/eus-new-investment-plan-for-the-eastern-partners/>; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Staff Working Document. Recovery, Resilience and Reform: Post 2020 Eastern Partnership Priorities*, SWD(2021) 186 final (Brussels, 2 July 2021), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/swd\\_2021\\_186\\_f1\\_joint\\_staff\\_working\\_paper\\_en\\_v2\\_p1\\_1356457\\_0.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/swd_2021_186_f1_joint_staff_working_paper_en_v2_p1_1356457_0.pdf).

**121** Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions – A Globally Connected Europe* (Brussels, 12 July 2021), <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10629-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

**122** European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank. Global Gateway*, JOIN(2021) 30 final (Brussels, 1 December 2021), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=JOIN:2021:0030:FIN:EN:PDF>.

**123** European Commission, "Questions and Answers on Global Gateway" (Brussels, 1 December 2021), [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_21\\_6434](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_6434).

**124** European Commission, "Global Gateway: First Meeting of the Global Gateway Board", press release, Brussels, 11 December 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_7656](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7656).



phasises the geostrategic orientation of Global Gateway.<sup>125</sup>

Global Gateway is not least the attempt by the EU to bring together its various initiatives under a single branding and thus to give the EU more visibility as a global actor, including in a strategic sense; as such, the label competition with the BRI seems intentional.<sup>126</sup> Around €300 billion are to be raised by 2027 for the implementation of Global Gateway. However, in the South Caucasus the initiative has so far mainly subsumed programmes already underway, such as many of the connectivity-related projects of the Eastern Partnership. The extension of the trans-European transport network into the EaP region and thus also the South Caucasus now falls under Global Gateway. The same applies to the economic and investment plans announced in 2021 that Brussels has agreed with Tbilisi, Yerevan and Baku. This seems deliberate, as Brussels sees a large overlap between the existing plans and Global Gateway and emphasises their complementarity and interdependence. Nevertheless, in the South Caucasus and elsewhere, the question arises: to what extent is Global Gateway more – and should it be more – than the totality of the projects subsumed or to be subsumed under it? In other words, is the EU pursuing in Global Gateway the goal of generating new impulses for its own connectivity policy, for example in the South Caucasus, or is the focus on the publicity-effective bundling of existing initiatives? Global Gateway is certainly a work in progress. Whether this initiative can live up to its own ethical and value-based assertions as well as the strategic orientation it postulates remains an open question – one and a half years since its launch.

**125** Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Fraktion der CDU/CSU – Drucksache 20/2405. Engagement der Bundesregierung für die Global-Gateway-Initiative der Europäischen Kommission, German Bundestag, 20th Election Period, Printed Paper 20/2876, 21 July 2022.

**126** Sebastian Holz and Lisa Flatten, “Bei Konnektivität geht es um unsere Wettbewerbsfähigkeit, Interview with Romana Vlahutin”, *Markets International*, October 2021, <https://www.marketsinternational.de/interview-konnektivitaetsstrategie/>.

# Dis/connectivity in the South Caucasus: Conclusion and Outlook

The issue of transport connectivity has gained enormous importance in recent years in and with regard to the South Caucasus. This is probably also due to the fact that it marks a policy field in which the interests and policies of extra-regional actors such as China or the EU, as well as the strategies of international financial institutions, converge with those of the three South Caucasus states. The latter construe their respective geographical positions as strategic nodes on an East-West and/or a North-South axis and accordingly try to position their own countries profitably. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the resulting shift in global transport routes and supply chains have given new impetus to these efforts. Even before that, connectivity in the South Caucasus had taken on new significance due to the shifts in the configuration of forces resulting from the Armenian-Azerbaijani 44-Day War in 2020.

The picture of South Caucasus transport connectivity is a highly complex one. Numerous regional and extra-regional actors are involved, and there is a plethora of transport infrastructure projects planned or already under development. At the same time, highly dynamic processes of political reconfiguration can be observed in the South Caucasus and beyond, accompanied by an erosion of the previous, albeit precarious, order. Comprehensive data sets on freight and passenger volumes along the various multimodal routes, which are a prerequisite for any data-based comparative view, are just as rare as corresponding analyses. Meanwhile, political imaginaries have taken up much space in policy debates conducted in and about the region. It is worthwhile, however, to take a closer look at the multiple implications of transport connectivity on different levels and especially at the ambivalences with which connectivity is interwoven. This also applies to the EU, which envisages an impor-

tant role for itself as a connectivity actor in the South Caucasus, and whose connectivity policy the German government explicitly supports.

The EU's connectivity policy in the South Caucasus pursues a number of interests and objectives. From the EU's point of view, increased connectivity offers an opportunity to intensify ties and exchange with its neighbourhood, not least in the form of a growing volume of trade. Its engagement also entails the aspiration to anchor the EU's own standards and values in the partner countries. While improved and sustainability-oriented connectivity should bring concrete benefits to the people on the ground, from Brussels' point of view this field of cooperation also opens up opportunities for synergy effects in other EU priority areas, such as environmental and climate protection or economic development. Furthermore, the EU sees its connectivity engagement in the South Caucasus as a vehicle to promote intra-regional cooperation and peaceful exchange between partner countries and thus to contribute to stability in the region.

For Brussels, a key unique selling point of the EU's connectivity policy is its value-, standards- and sustainability-based orientation, as formulated for instance in Global Gateway. However, the experience with Georgia's North-South Corridor suggests that execution and implementation of due diligence in connectivity projects could certainly be improved.<sup>127</sup> The Kvesheti-Kobi project is neither part of the TEN-T

<sup>127</sup> The final report on the complaint procedure against ADB points out that ADB has de facto outsourced some of the impact assessment and impact management tasks to the contractors. Asian Development Bank Compliance Review Panel, *Final Report on Compliance Review Panel Request No 2021/1 on the North-South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project in Georgia* (see note 83).

extension nor of the Eastern Partnership Economic and Investment Plan for Georgia. However, the EU regards the ADB and especially the EBRD, the project's two central donors, as its partners in implementing the connectivity projects it supports and in its own understanding of connectivity. The EBRD is also part of the Team Europe approach, which aims to pool foreign and development policy initiatives and resources of the EU, EU Member States, the European Investment Bank and EBRD for greater effectiveness.

For the EU to meet its own connectivity requirements, it would seem necessary for it to think even more holistically about the different perspectives on and dimensions of transport connectivity, and to bring them together even more. This includes geopolitical, security and power-political, economic, ecological, developmental, environmental, conservation and cultural aspects. Such an approach might be facilitated in specific projects through genuinely inclusive, transparent and effective multi-stakeholder processes, in which actors from different levels and sectors are in continuous exchange. To contribute to more transparency, additional monitoring of the projects from the start could be implemented, which is completely independent of directly involved actors and keeps an eye on all levels and stakeholders.

Beyond such monitoring of individual infrastructure projects, it is conceivable that the EU could also promote the facilitation of broader societal debates on transport connectivity in the respective countries and offer its support for this. For example, the EU could help to create appropriate forums or platforms. Consideration could be given to more closely involving the relevant working groups of the EaP civil society forum here. In this way, elements of bottom-up governance could be more firmly anchored, which in turn could lead to more inclusive participation in the field and a more active contribution to relevant projects. For Georgia, for example, the case of the North-South Corridor has shown that such a debate is at best in its infancy.

So far, policy debates on transport connectivity have been dominated by government positions. This is probably not least a reflection of the close intertwining of the topic with power-political issues, both at the regional and intergovernmental level, as well as the domestic one. The EU primarily takes account of such intertwining within states, linking its own commitment to connectivity to such criteria as transparency, good governance and the rule of law in the partner countries. This in turn means that the EU's

connectivity policy ultimately goes far beyond the technical implementation of transport infrastructure projects or the coordination and adaptation of transport-specific regulations. For the South Caucasus, this would have to result in the EU's rigorous implementation of its announced linking of the investment and governance pillars of the EaP post-2020 priorities.<sup>128</sup>

From the EU's perspective, a values-based or ethical approach and a more geopolitical and geostrategic connectivity policy may complement each other, as formulated by Global Gateway, at least in theory. However, it should not be assumed that this will work in practice and that the interests of the governments in the South Caucasus will overlap with those of Brussels. It is precisely where a values-based approach would have a significant impact on the local power structure that it is likely to meet with resistance. A nuanced view of connectivity and disconnectivity should help to define the actual intersection between EU claims on the one hand and the needs and interests of the individual South Caucasus states on the other – and thus also identify specific challenges for EU engagement.

This also applies to the intraregional level. Beyond bilateral cooperation, the EU sees connectivity as enabling more intensive cooperation among partner countries, with the potential to promote processes of regional integration. However, the securitisation of connectivity and the latter's use for the enforcement of particular ideas of power-political or economic order or of geostrategic interests show that connectivity by no means guarantees intraregional win-win arrangements. Here, too, it depends on how it is implemented and what the concrete political context is. This is reflected, for example, in the disputes over possible transport connectivity between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Beyond the intra-regional dimension of South Caucasus transport connectivity, the example of Georgia's North-South Corridor illustrates how geopolitical and geostrategic issues and perceived risks are subject to change or vary between different actors. It is important for the EU not to lose sight of these embeddings of connectivity in regional power politics and the conflicting goals that may arise from them, not least for an EU connectivity policy that aims to promote stability. A holistic approach to regional transport connectivity could therefore also be more firmly anchored in specific institutional arrange-

<sup>128</sup> EU Neighbours East, "The EU's New Investment Plan for the Eastern Partners" (see note 120).

ments or existing structures, for example a strengthened EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus.

Furthermore, there would be added value in feeding the more differentiated findings from academic discussions on transport connectivity into the policy debate in Germany and at the EU level so that they can be received more attentively there. This would enable a critical analysis of connectivity and its complexity – not only regarding global effects and dependencies, but also the embedding of connectivity in local (power) structures.

# Annex

## Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BTK	Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (railway line)
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EU	European Union
IDFI	Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (Tbilisi)
INSTC	International North South Transport Corridor
IRI	International Republican Institute
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Paris)
RFE	Radio Free Europe
RL	Radio Liberty
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network
TEU	Twenty-Foot Equivalent Unit (standard measurement for container volume, based on a 20-foot container)
TITR	Trans-Caspian International Transport Route
TRACECA	Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia

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