

# A Road into the Future: Infrastructure Development in Georgia between Spectres of the Past and Promises of Connectivity

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**Abstract.** Successive Georgian governments have sought to establish their country as a transnational transport and logistics hub. These endeavours have been embedded in, and have reinforced, a related developmental vision where infrastructure development is seen as key to facilitating regional, national, and sub-national development. Focusing on the Kvesheti-Kobi construction project, a major road development project on Georgia's north-south corridor, the paper seeks to think through road infrastructure development from the perspective of scale-making in both its spatial and temporal dimension. It does so by exploring the temporal and spatial reach that is reflected in the discourse supporting the construction project as well as in counter-narratives. The paper demonstrates that in the discourse in support of the project and the one contesting it, spatial-temporal references reflect specific civilisational spectres, which also have geopolitical overtones. The different spatial-temporal imaginaries evince distinct approaches to the past, present, and future. While they remain largely compartmentalised, both affirmative discourse and counter-narratives ultimately revolve around the future being speculative and uncertain. This renders the future essentially a field for political engagement and struggle, emphasising the political dimension of scale-making. The paper contributes to the growing body of research on infrastructure and infrastructure development that challenges its seemingly technical and depoliticised nature.

**Keywords:** Infrastructure, Georgia, developmental imaginaries, spatial-temporal scales, scale-making.



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## Introduction

The North-South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project, also presented as Kvesheti-Kobi Project – New Way of Development and in the following referred to as Kvesheti-Kobi, is a major infrastructure construction project on Georgia's central north-south link. A project advertising video starts by showing a relief map with a frizzy-twisting yellow line, which is soon accompanied by a smoother and sturdier red one. The first line marks the current road, the second the projected new connection. The video continues with computer-simulated, fast-motion imagery of the new motorway as it cuts through the landscape, dwarfing the existing infrastructure. The music and animation of the video suggests that the paving of what to significant extents looks like unspoiled countryside signals promising expectations. Into the depicted state-of-the-art tunnel, a sports car is driving on almost empty roads. Next to the video it reads, among others: "[…] driving for any type of car will be safe at any time of the year."[1] Successive governments have sought to establish Georgia as a transnational transport and logistics hub, with connectivity and the associated development of large-scale infrastructure being integral to developmentalist visions to facilitate regional, national, and sub-national development (Smolnik 2023). Together with developing the east-west highway (Ocaklı and Krüsmann 2025), the improvement of the north-south corridor constitutes one of Georgia's two road development projects attributed strategic importance.

With a focus on the Kvesheti-Kobi project, this paper seeks to think through road infrastructure construction from the perspective of scale-making. In response to Ullberg et al's (2025) call for research on infrastructure to consider *both* temporal *and* spatial scaling processes, my aim is to address this identified lack and examine these processes with equal attention. Understanding temporal and spatial scale-making as closely intertwined, this paper explores the temporal and spatial reach represented in the discourse surrounding the construction. Centrally addressed questions are: Which temporal and spatial framings feature in the discourse supporting the project? And are they challenged by counter-narratives that might convey distinct spatial and temporal references?

The paper shows how in the context of Kvesheti-Kobi space and time are variously referenced, constructed, and interrelated, feeding into, animating, and reflecting specific spatial-temporal imaginaries. Despite a disconnect between the promissory visions evoked by project proponents, such as government representatives, state officials or the multilateral development banks and their consultants, and the project's contested materialisation on the ground, exemplified in two compliance review procedures filed against the two funding banks, the officially promoted spatial-temporal imaginary conjures a linear trajectory that seemingly coherently links past, present, and (promissory) future. I argue that this image of coherence is predicated on the compartmentalisation of distinct visions of the future linked to Kvesheti-Kobi. These coexist alongside their contesting and contested 'others'. Coherence and compartmentalisation engage an eventually contingent and speculative future, rendering the latter "a site for politics" (Mangnus 2021, 6) and geopolitics. Ultimately, however, the counter-

[1] Video and text can be found on the project's website under the heading "What will the new Kvesheti-Kobi road change", https://kveshetikobiroad.ge/en/ (accessed 15 May 15 2025).

narratives do not fundamentally challenge – or have the capacity to challenge – the underlying unequal social relations of the capitalist conjuncture. The paper adds to the discussion on research on infrastructure by foregrounding spatial-temporal scaling practices that amount to a related politics.

The empirical analysis draws in particular on "promissory performances" (Oomen et al 2022, 255). These include statements of project stakeholders, advertising and informational materials as well as the project's external communication. The latter encompasses project website and videos, social media activities, official project documentation and planning documents. The study, moreover, is informed by twenty-five qualitative semi-structured interviews and background talks with different stakeholders, among them officials at national and sub-national levels, representatives of multinational development banks, international financial institutions and of civil society, non-governmental organisations, and media. Additional visual and text-based sources include media coverage, NGO reports, country strategies of international organisations and further secondary and grey literature. These accounts are engaged in qualitative-interpretive analysis (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) as "vehicles of representation" (Abel and Coleman 2020, x) and of meaning.

While the paper zooms in on one particular infrastructure project, the processes discussed below do not bespeak an idiosyncratic case. There has been a growing interest and body of research that engages with large-scale infrastructure construction in Georgia, such as hydro-power development and dam constructions (Rekhviashvili and Lang 2024), port (Gambino and Rekhviashvili 2025), rail (Weiss 2023), pipeline (Firat 2023), and road development projects (Ocaklı and Krüssmann 2025). This increase is part of a wider scholarly effort to scrutinise what is dubbed 'megaprojects' – large-scale infrastructure projects – planned or implemented in the 'Global South' and 'Global East', which are embedded in a powerful developmental discourse and a related global infrastructural turn (Enns 2019), the latter in itself reflective of contemporary "supply-chain capitalism" (Tsing 2009).

**Temporal and spatial scale-making in the literature on connective infrastructure**

Connective infrastructure inherently portends spatial references. It connects (as well as separates) locations, serves trans- or international functions, and enables the movement of people and goods over distances. Beyond such a literal understanding of infrastructure's relation to space, transport infrastructure also has scale-making effects through the spatial reach inscribed in and ascribed by associated discourses and practices. Scale-making is not confined to the domain of space but also manifests in the temporal dimension: infrastructure construction is inextricably linked to different temporalities and has a structuring effect on temporal orders. Exploring spatial and temporal scales has not been neglected in infrastructure research, although comparatively less attention has been paid to theorising how infrastructure has been engaged in producing these scales and "what scaling does" (Ullberg et al 2025, 176). Roads in particular have been studied as transformative vehicles on both temporal and spatial scales, for example in terms of how they transform spatial orders by forging new connections or how they

transform temporal registers by, ostensibly, being an archetypal harbinger of modernity (Harvey and Knox 2012, Larkin 2013).

Recent research on spatial scale-making highlights how the development of transport infrastructure facilitates the integration of localities and regions into global value and supply chains, often through corridor development (Schindler and Kanai 2021). Further studies focus on how local infrastructure development is tied to the geography of global capitalism through infrastructure financing (Heslop 2020, Goodfellow 2020), how infrastructure projects are embedded in and produce social-spatial imaginaries (Weiss 2023), or on infrastructure's geopolitical effects (Firat 2023). In terms of infrastructure's time-scaling dimension, infrastructure construction has been readily inscribed in a tradition of 'fixing' developmental 'gaps' through its embedding in developmental discourse (Goodfellow 2020). While the notion of gap may be understood in the spatial sense, as "*absences* and *spaces* that need filling" (ibid, 257, italics in original), it may also be interpreted in a temporal sense, a gap in time, where infrastructure development is promoted as a way to 'catch up' to 'more developed' countries, respectively to 'leave behind' a less developed past (Lawhon et al 2023, 3). References to both temporal and spatial scaling can also be found in Buier's (2023) more fundamental critique of the status quo of research on infrastructure, specifically of the sub-field of the anthropology of infrastructure. Buier deplores what to her amounts to an as of yet insufficient reflection of how infrastructure is embedded in global capitalist regimes of accumulation, the latter themselves an expression of a particular historical – thus temporal – moment. In her view, instead of "airbrushing capitalism out of the picture" (Buier 2023, 53) consideration of this cross-scale connection is essential for research to be able to be genuinely critical.[2]

Connective infrastructure has lent itself – and has been analysed – as a carrier of images and imaginaries of promissory futures. This has been facilitated by the increasingly complex entanglement of infrastructure as asset and as public good, where "financial and contractual machinations of infrastructure are not easily delinked from the affective sentiments broader publics invest in infrastructure" (Heslop 2020, 374). The promises are not confined to infrastructure that is actually built. Research on infrastructure-not-yet-projected has highlighted the vast potential of it to evoke imaginaries and emotions. This has widened the analytical gaze beyond the physical form as connective infrastructures "also operate on the level of fantasy and desire" (Larkin 2013, 333) and can tacitly draw on deeply rooted modernist visions of progress (Josephson 1995). Given that infrastructure development is by its nature a long-term process, almost by default conditions and requirements will change. Ullberg (2025, 228ff.) therefore has pointed to "historical futures" that infrastructure projects often embody. Other time-scaling processes relate to the different rhythms of project cycles that convey particular temporal orders (Neumann-Stanivokocić 2023). Various scholars have highlighted frictions between different temporalities in infrastructure construction, such as those between promissory future and looming or actual ruination (ibid.). To make sense of this apparent

[2] Such a perspective, however, is gaining traction, as also evidenced in the recent literature on the South Caucasus. See for example Gambino and Rekhviashvili 2025.

paradox, Harvey and Knox (2012, 524ff.) have emphasised the power "to enchant" of connective infrastructure, especially roads.

Research has outlined the potential ascribed to connective infrastructure to bridge and reframe spatial scales or connect across time. Yet, analyses rather often focus on one of the two aspects of scaling, with the respective other dealt with, if at all, more implicitly. Pointing towards the complex interplay of temporal and spatial references, this analysis takes a clue from Jessop (2019, 70) who argues "it would be more apt, if convoluted, to discuss pluri-spatial, multitemporal, and poly-contextual modes of imagining, constituting, and governing" and that "[t]he temporal and spatial are closely connected". Accordingly, this paper focuses on both temporal and spatial references and on how these are engaged and deployed as discursive strategies in the narratives surrounding the Kvesheti-Kobi project.

**Georgia's north-south connectivity**

Implemented by the Roads Department of Georgia's Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, the Kvesheti-Kobi project started in 2019.[3] Its budgeted costs of USD 558.6 million are largely covered by loans from the Asian Development Bank (ADB, USD 415 mill.) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD, USD 60 mil; ADB and Roads Department 2019). Building contracts went to subsidiaries of Chinese state-owned companies, China Railway Tunnel Group Co., Ltd. and China Railway 23rd Bureau Group Co. The project constitutes the first phase of a (planned) multi-stage upgrading of Georgia's north-south connection and includes new and rebuilt roads, bridges, and tunnels, among those a 9 km long tunnel and 420-plus meter long arch bridge (ADB and Roads Department of Georgia 2019). The section is part of Georgia's S3, which runs from Mtskheta near the capital Tbilisi to the Georgian-Russian border. It serves as an important transit connection for the country but also the wider neighbourhood, in particular landlocked Armenia.

The connection across the ridge of the Greater Caucasus mountains had been in use for centuries, even millennia, both for commerce and military purposes. Over extended periods it had rather been a mountain path, one of very few passageways through the 5000-plus meter high mountain range. The route started to be more developed in the 18th century driven by Tsarist Russia's military expansion southwards, to facilitate communication and the movement of troops and military supplies. At the turn of the 19th century, in the context of the Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti first becoming a protectorate of Tsarist Russia in 1783 and then being annexed in 1801, the link was enlarged and came to be known as the Georgian Military Road (Barrett 1999, 41). For a longer period, the route was the only viable connection that made Tsarist Russia's territories in 'Transcaucasia' accessible from the north. It lost in relevance with the establishment of further north-south connections, such as the highway and railway along the Georgian coast at the Black Sea or the mid-1980s inauguration of the Roki-tunnel (Radvanyi and Muduyev 2007, 163). With the ethno-territorial conflicts since the early

[3] At the time of writing, drilling of the major tunnel was completed, unlike the construction project as such. The project website in the FAQs still gives 2024 as year of expected completion. https://kveshetikobiroad.ge/en/faq-page/ (accessed 15 May 2025).

1990s affecting both these routes, the Georgian Military Road basically reverted to its stand-alone status of single land-link between Georgia and Russia.

## Space and time in and around Kvesheti-Kobi

### *Connecting towards a brighter future*

Georgian officials and strategic documents emphasise Georgia's geographic location as a crossroads and its seemingly natural function in connecting a variety of markets both closer to home and further afield (see for example Government of Georgia 2020). The vision for the country's future as a transport hub, echoed in the Kvesheti-Kobi project, finds support among multilateral development banks. Not least through the latter, projects like Kvesheti-Kobi are embedded in a global developmental discourse of megaprojects and smooth connectivity. This hegemonic storyline (Oomen et al 2022) links them to a global geography of infrastructure development (Eradze 2024) and reflects the predominant circulatory needs inherent to the accumulation paradigm of global capitalism (Harvey 1975).

The global discourse constructs infrastructure both as a hindrance (in its inadequacy) and a solution (through its building) to a country's prosperity, the latter understood above all in terms of economic growth, increased employment, and stronger investments (Enns 2019, 366; Goodfellow 2020). In the Kvesheti-Kobi project, too, anticipated local-level growth through tourism and national-level growth through increased global market access are construed as to mutually, and rather by default, support each other. The project is advertised as combining global reach and connectivity through supply chain inclusion and extended market access, regional integration through facilitating trade flows and improved regional connectivity, and a local dimension through allowing local communities to benefit from increased tourism, "'plugged in' to global networks of production and trade", as Schindler and Kanai (2021, 40) put it.

Kvesheti-Kobi's purported multi-scale advantages are therefore largely iterative of the framing of many big infrastructure projects worldwide (Wethal 2019). Still, in the context of Kvesheti-Kobi, references to these different spatial scales have been employed with some gradation, nuanced in a manner that they carry specific (geo-)political connotations: Whereas in a 2019 fact sheet on Kvesheti-Kobi its significance was linked to the north-south corridor being "a vital transport and trade network that facilitates connections across the country, from Armenia to Russia and beyond" (ADB and Roads Department of Georgia 2019, 1) and in a 2018 technical assistance report even as "a lifeline for Georgian and Armenian economic activities as the only land access to the Russian Federation" (ADB 2018, 1), the project website's about-the-project-section[4] does refer to the potential for leveraging transit, yet leaves unspecified which countries the route actually connects to.

The current upgrading of the road is not only presented as a harbinger of a promissory future; it is also situated within a longer history. Citing high demand for the route due to the

[4] https://kveshetikobiroad.ge/en/about-the-project/ (accessed 1 September 2025).

closure of alternative connections – a situation further exacerbated by Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine – the road is referred to as a bottleneck in need of correction. Such references tie the project into a century-old history of political and engineering thinking on how to improve the north-south link and make it more resilient against weather- and topography-related challenges. A treatise from the 1970s exhorts, "The Georgian Military Highway will fully become the principal and shortest link between Transcaucasia and the Northern Caucasus and southern oblasts of the RSFSR only when it will be accessible and safe for motor traffic during the winter season." Adding that "[f]or more than a century this problem has been a matter of concern for some of the best road builders of the Caucasus" (Kvezerili-Kopadze 1970/1974, 165). Another half century later, efforts to revamp the road reverberate such assessment, with uninterrupted year-round traffic and a significant saving of travel time among the construction's identified benefits. This is indicative of what Ullberg (2025, 228ff.) has subsumed under the notion of "historical futures", the fusion of past aspirations with presently articulated promissory futures. Yet it also speaks of a temporal reference that associates speed with progress and epitomises roads' "promise of speed and connectivity" (Harvey and Knox 2012, 523). The saving of travel time as a harbinger of progress and development, reflective of time-space compression, is a long-standing trope with regard to the route (Pipia and Tsaava 2021), actualised in the current project's promotion. Often blocked by heavy traffic or completely closed due to bad weather, images of kilometer-long traffic jams provide the visual backdrop against which the Kvesheti-Kobi project is presented as to provide a critical remedy. And to which the initially cited video with the sportscar travelling empty roads could not demonstrate a starker contrast.

### *The spatial-temporal spectre of civilising missions*

Spatial and temporal reach inextricably inform each other. In the portrayal of Kvesheti-Kobi, moreover, they coalesce and conjure a vision of the future, which bespeaks civilisational, and by extension also (geo-)political, undercurrents. At least three such undercurrents reflect in the discourse supporting the project: one that evokes associations with Tsarist Russian appropriations of the Georgian Military Road, one that echoes Soviet-era infrastructure megalomania, and one that refers to the EU as Georgia's political destination post-independence.[5]

In addition to joining long-standing efforts of road development, Kvesheti-Kobi is situated within a broader history of travel, trade, as well as conflictual encounters. The Georgian Military Road typified at once an important physical thoroughfare and an emblematic place of negotiating complex Russo-Georgian relations, between an imperial centre, self-ascribed as 'modern' and 'civilised', and its periphery, constructed as 'backward' and

[5] Empirical research for this paper was carried out before the Georgian Dream party has stalled Georgia's integration with the European Union. Exacerbated since the party announcing in November 2024 that it would suspend the accession process until at least 2028, the ruling authorities have adopted an increasingly EU-critical (dis)course. Future research will have to determine to what extent this shift is reflected in the framing of the country's large-scale infrastructure projects.

'subaltern' (Manning 2012, Reisner 2007, Suny 1979). An understanding of infrastructure construction as vehicle for development was inherent in Tsarist Russian policies towards the Caucasus, which were not least framed as bringing enlightenment and civilisation to a remote region (Jersild 2002, 64). In another advertising video, titled "Georgia's Road to the Future"[6], video captions read, "For centuries, the Tbilisi to Larsi route has connected the South Caucasus countries with the Russian Federation." This is not only an imprecise recourse to a sensitive history – before the collapse of the Soviet Union the road had connected the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and before that Tsarist Russia – but it situates the project in a specific, or specifically-framed, spatial-temporal trajectory. This is substantiated in a later video still, where the route is promoted "as a regional trade hub and tourist destination" against pictures of tourists visiting the Russia-Georgia Friendship Monument. Erected at the side of the road in 1983, the monument celebrates the 200th anniversary of the Treaty of Georgievsk as well as Soviet Russian-Soviet Georgian friendship. It was in 1783 that the Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti came under Tsarist Russia's protection, laying the foundation for the road to be transformed into the main conduit between the northern centre of the empire and its southern frontier (Jersild 2002, 13-14). In the context of difficult, if not outright conflictual relations between Tbilisi and Moscow in much of the post-Soviet period, reflective "of not only colonial histories, but of the remaining imperialisms" (Batiashvili 2022, 10), the Kvesheti-Kobi project through the employment of particular representations of history imparts a specific modernisation narrative but also conveys geopolitical connotations. Moreover, in a subtle way, earlier, imperial forms of centre-periphery relations and extractivist ideas appear to resonate.

Another civilisational streak becomes manifest in the discourse of Georgian officials on the Kvesheti-Kobi project (and not only as Ocaklı and Krüssmann 2025 demonstrates), such as when then-Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili hailed the project's central tunnel "the biggest tunnel in the entire South Caucasus", which "in terms of its parameters has no analogue in the world" (Ekho Kavkaza 2021, my translation). Or when he declared the entire project "a landmark project of this century" (Taktakishvili 2021). Such statements appear to emulate a Soviet era rhetoric on infrastructure development, which emphasised the uniqueness and grandeur of the constructions (Josephson 2024), and where a particular understanding of progress placed large infrastructure in a "politics of display" (Josephson 1995, 542). As Josephson has shown, Soviet era infrastructure projects were frequently framed as 'projects of the century' and "[e]verything qualified as superlative, as the 'best' or the 'biggest' in the world" (1995, 530). With the 1970s-1980s construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline, for instance, having been dubbed "project of the century" as well as "path to the future" (Povoroznyuk 2021, 1064; Ward 2001, 76), parlance of the, comparatively much more modest, Kvesheti-Kobi project as a 'landmark project of the century' and 'road to the future' is only a slight variation.[7]

[6] Asian Development Bank: Georgia's Road to the Future, 28 June 2019, https://www.adb.org/news/videos/georgias-road-future (accessed 27 November 2023).

[7] At the same time, during the Soviet era, too, road-building served a particular civilisational-modernising function, see for example the portrayal of road-building in the 1930s film "Salt for Svanetia" by Mikhail Kalatozov.

It may be a stretch to draw a line between Tsarist developmental policies or Soviet infrastructure megalomania and Georgia's contemporary large-scale infrastructure development. Nonetheless, previous endeavours appear to recur in both planning and promissory visions (Enns and Bersaglio 2019). The project thus seems to echo a set of familiar and readily available spatial-temporal themes and scales (cf. Vonderau 2007, 11; Ward 2001, 78). The discursive embedding of the contemporary construction project in a specific, or specifically interpreted, history reflects the temporal dimension of scale-making, where future-building in the present is carried out by attending to a particular reading of the past (Adams et al 2009). Yet it also suggests a particular spatialisation: The contemporary project is construed as being situated within a seemingly frictionless regional neighbourhood, including good neighbourly Georgian-Russian relations, where the highly contentious aspects, which emanate from the "colonial histories" and "remaining imperialisms" (Batiashvili 2022, 10) cited above, are omitted.

References to Europe, too, engage closely interrelated temporal and spatial scales. In the project's representation 'EU-rope' – where Europe and the European Union are used rather interchangeably – stands at once as a reference point for an aspirational future in terms of developmental progress and modern standards as well as for geographical affiliation. The project's external communication emphasises EU-standards as regards construction and road safety (ADB and Roads Department of Georgia 2019). Then-Prime Minister Gharibashvili proclaimed that the construction would transform the town of Gudauri, which is located on and affected by the current route, into a "modern European-style resort" (Ekho Kavkaza 2021, my translation). More broadly, Swiss Alps and Italian Dolomites tourism is drawn on to illustrate the region's future.[8] References to Europe as well have historical antecedents. European standards were already referred to in the context of the road's 19th century upgrading (Kvezereli-Kopadze 1970/1974, 171) and the then upgraded Georgian Military Road was compared to the Simplon (also known as Napoleon) Road over the Alps – a comparison meant to speak of the quality of the construction (Manning 2012, 62).

Thus, beyond substantiating a longue durée of infrastructure construction on the route, the discussed civilisational undercurrents also speak to – and support claims made elsewhere – "how colonial processes continue to scaffold contemporary large-scale infrastructure projects" (Kimari and Ernstson 2020, 827) and how ostensibly local projects, in effect, rather often also bespeak perspectives that extend beyond the local scale.

### *Counter-narratives under a hegemonic discourse of commodified connectivity*

Despite the promissory future outlined in support of Kvesheti-Kobi, its materialisation departs from the promoted imaginary. Affected locals together with representatives of environmental and preservationist NGOs filed complaints against both lending organisations. The inspections concluded that several due diligence and review requirements had not been

[8] Khada Valley Development Plan, https://kveshetikobiroad.ge/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Khada-Valley-Developement-Plan.pdf (accessed 2 September 2024).

adequately addressed, including those relating to the protection of cultural and natural heritage, the environment, and livelihoods (Asian Development Bank Compliance Review Panel 2022, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Independent Project Accountability Mechanism 2022). Such disconnect is not unique to Kvesheti-Kobi. Research has rather pointed to an at least latent paradox of infrastructure development, where the latter, despite a euphonious rhetoric, is often not yielding seamless connectivities (Gambino 2019) but encompasses possibilities of decay, disruption and broader developmental visions remaining unfulfilled (Wethal 2019, Schindler and Kanai 2021, Neumann Stanivuković 2023).

Critique of the construction encloses a number of counter-narratives. Preservationists have voiced concerns that the approval of the project and its routing through historically significant Khada Valley was based on an inadequate survey of cultural heritage sites, with subsequent studies identifying them in a much greater number (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Independent Project Accountability Mechanism 2022). Against the backdrop of the fragile fabric of remaining structures, the International Council on Monuments and Sites included Khada Valley as 'heritage at risk' in its World Report 2016-2019 (Suramelashvili 2020). As the valley had not been adequately archeologically surveyed when the highway project commenced, an implicit fear was that part of the valley's cultural heritage would never be uncovered. Referring to a landscape and cultural heritage of defensive structures, voices critical of the construction, too, have resorted to the route's history, albeit in a distinct way. Rather than presenting Georgian-Russian relations as historically amicable, at least stable, or emphasising a traditionally connective function of the road, these accounts draw on historical evidence and archeological remains to emphasise the protective and divisive function of the landscape. Seeing the latter as a natural bulwark against invaders from the north, the time-space compression thought to be facilitated by the construction is framed as disquieting, rather than as signifying progress (Kokhladze 2022, Georgian News 2023).

Critique grounded in environmental concerns has also been articulated through a civilisational-geopolitical lens, with the EU conceived as both spatial and temporal reference point – outlining another kind of (hegemonic) core (Sajed and Seidel 2023). Integration with EU-rope is articulated based on the need to adopt and 'advance' to 'modern' EU environmental legislation and best practices, even though it is acknowledged that European development banks have been implicated in the controversial constructions (Sabuko 2023, 2023a). Counter-narratives on environmental grounds have highlighted the detrimental effects on biodiversity (Sabuko 2023a), cautioning that the project's negative impact is not limited to the construction site but that waste disposal affects far wider areas and gravel and sand extraction from rivers elsewhere in Georgia inflicts irreversible loss to habitats and river fauna. Whereas the affirmative discourse embeds Kvesheti-Kobi in a global geography of large-scale infrastructure projects and a related developmental imaginary, from the perspective of its critics the project by contrast aligns with a national geography of ecologically dubious economic endeavours that risk irreparable damage to the country, be these highways, dams, windfarms, or mining.

IFIs and multilateral banks have demonstrated an increased awareness of the conflicting objectives between tourism development and sustainability, while they are far from questioning the underlying paradigm of putting local landscapes and communities into value by embedding

them in a global commodified connectivity. The counter-narratives reflect a different approach to the past, present, and future, calling into question the road's potential to contribute to local development through tourism, given the (actual and anticipated) damage caused by the construction. It seems, however, that the counter-narratives, too, cannot entirely escape the hegemonic imperative of creating "landscapes of value" (Rissing 2022) – in the current conjuncture to be understood as "capitalist landscapes" (Buier and Franquesa 2022).

Protests, even though limited[9], took place under the slogan "Khada is not for sale!" (Netgazeti 2019). When outlining an alternative future, however, the commodification of space was still attended to. Cultural heritage organisations together with local tour operators in an open letter of appeal referred to Khada Valley as a "vital asset" and its "huge educational and tourism […] potential" (Society and Cultural Heritage Foundation et al 2021, 2-3). The difficulty of counteracting the tourism paradigm was acknowledged by the construction's critics, who appear to have acquiesced to it by advancing a more lenient version in form of ecotourism. As Buier and Franquesa (2022, 12) argue, "worth-assigning frameworks may strive for autonomy from the capitalist law of value, but they are never independent from it, for they work within a terrain defined by it", reflecting asymmetric power relations and the expansionary drive inherent to capitalism. In that respect, value in the context of Kvesheti-Kobi can be understood as ultimately not defined only on the local or national scale but as reflecting global social relations and a related unified or universalised valorisation logic (Altvater 1987, 38-39), where space itself becomes commodified and subject to a specific form of extractivism (Gago and Mazzedra 2018).

**How to fathom the disconnect**

Affirmative and counter-narratives convey diverging visions of the project, reflecting the juxtaposition of a heterogeneity of different, or differently connoted, spatial and temporal references. Following Hoyng and Es, I suggest that such different spatial-temporal visions can coexist because a variety of communication channels "both connect and set apart publics and the material event at stake, as they render the issue visible, sensible, and actionable in particular ways but also ignore and obfuscate it in other ways" (2020, 1736), thereby facilitating compartmentalisation. Two compliance review procedures have not significantly disturbed project implementation, with additional monitoring and reporting obligations and remedial measures readily included in project timelines, amounting to, in the idiom of IFIs and multilateral banks, 'organic project management'.

Neumann Stanivuković (2023) has demonstrated how the ceremonial inauguration of project sections or the announcement of distinct steps in the construction as completed keep

[9] The sentiment of affected residents has been mixed at best. Grievances, however, have not translated into wider protests, as has been seen with other large-scale constructions in Georgia. Possible reasons given include: Khada Valley, most affected by the construction, being barely populated; a non-uniform reception of the construction's potential benefits and potential harm beyond Khada; the construction overlapping with the Covid-19 pandemic; initially only incremental notice of the project; residents not daring to be more vocal (see also Orjonikidze 2021).

expectations of road development alive amid delays and unforeseen events. But it is also through a perpetual dissemination of information of how the construction is progressing, including via social media[10], that a seemingly coherent and linear trajectory is produced from the past into the promissory future (Durrant et al 2023). This, too, bolsters the hegemonic vision and solidifies the disconnect between the imaginary of project proponents and those alternatively proposed: While the past and the promissory future are made performative in the present, at the same time other, possibly interfering spatial-temporal framings and related visions are isolated, such as the much gloomier ones of the project's critics (Luning 2018, 282). As it "naturalises" (Pelgrims 2020, 95) and "misrepresents […] as largely technical and apolitical" (Forough and Fünfgeld 2025, 1596), the affirmative discourse (re-)produces and perpetuates the imaginary of prosperity based on large-scale connective infrastructure in an era of global supply chains and of "[c]apitalism operating in the infrastructural mode" (Buier 2023, 57). In that infrastructure is endowed with agential capacities, such as the power to enchant, moreover, the underlying unequal social relations that make such attributions possible in the first place are concealed, and tacitly affirmed, in what amounts to commodity fetishism (Hornborg 2024; Pelgrims 2020). Such mystification also helps obscure the violence that infrastructure development is often accompanied by (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012).[11]

While both discourses, in support of and contesting the project, adopt a distinct approach to the past and the present, they essentially revolve around, employ, and act on an ultimately speculative and uncertain future (Adams et al 2009). Loan-based construction contributes to transforming territory into functional, infrastructuralised space, thereby hedging an infrastructuralised future through its material enactment. Research, however, has demonstrated that the identified infrastructural deficits (Goodfellow 2020), and similarly the envisaged developmental benefits, are rather discursively constructed and the latter often not forthcoming (Schwanen 2018), reflecting capitalism's "prospecting logic" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017, 199). Counter-narratives, too, bespeak a speculative future of potentials, such as drawing on yet undiscovered cultural heritage and archeological sites in their own vision of leveraging the area's – (eco-)tourism – potential and of the country's future development more broadly. Whereas the economic and developmental benefits are relegated to an uncertain future, at least some of the foreshadowed adverse effects also become visible only with a time delay. Time and temporalities, therefore, are central in realising the project (even if not necessarily the assumed benefits) as they are salient in the project's contestation, albeit in different ways. These "futuring practices" (Oomen et al 2021, 254ff.) have political and social consequences: They coalesce different actors, where the future, or futures, become(s) "a site for politics" (Mangnus et al 2021, 6) – reflecting particular power relations and power differentials as well as geopolitical orientations. Even though rendering the project implementation linear may

[10] The project's social media channels were in particular analysed for the year 2023, when the drilling of the flagship tunnel mainly took place.

[11] I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to this. See also DiCarlo and Bachrach (2025) who draw on commodity fetishism to highlight corridorisation as commodification in Southeast Asia. Harvey and Knox (2012, 529), too, refer to commodity fetishism when pointing out that the manner of road development tends to be disguised. Yet, the notion of (commodity) fetishism may also be productively drawn on to scrutinise the very agency attributed to material artifacts themselves (Hornborg 2024).

disguise the construction as non-political (Li 2007, 7), both civilisational spectres and voiced concerns in fact testify to the contrary. This is all the more the case with infrastructure development in the region being increasingly geopoliticised and securitised in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a shifting global order.

## Conclusions

Georgia's infrastructure construction heyday echoes global trends that push infrastructure development as a key to prosperity. State policy has been directed at positioning the country as a transport and logistics hub to serve as well as profit from regional and transcontinental connectivity. The Kvesheti-Kobi project forms an essential part in such efforts. Neither imagination nor speculation is new to Georgia's north-south connection, as it can draw on an extended history of road development and associated future-building. The study builds on research that approaches both space and time from a relational perspective and as socially produced. The spatial-temporal framings in the discourse surrounding the Kvesheti-Kobi project are multiple, heterogenous, and at times conflicting, ultimately amounting to and bespeaking a "politics of scales" (Gonzales 2006). Whereas the promissory vision linked to Kvesheti-Kobi unites images of speed, efficiency, and prosperity, mirroring a variety of "enchantments" (Harvey and Knox 2012) that have been attributed to connective infrastructure, the affirmative discourse has also evoked more distinct civilisational-developmental spectres. It is, however, mute on the inconsistencies and ambivalences of the invoked spatial-temporal scales and their (geo-)political connotations. Conversely, counter-narratives on Kvesheti-Kobi seem compartmentalised, and the critique has, to some extent, remained more localised, rather than foregrounding underlying global exploitative logics and power asymmetries. In the face of mounting geopolitical polarisation and the contested shifts in Georgia's regional and foreign policy trajectory, the frictions around Kvesheti-Kobi and other large-scale infrastructure projects may become even more acute, not least given infrastructure essentially does embody political aspirations.



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