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# ZOiS REPORT

## CONNECTIVITY AND THE ENTRENCHMENT OF AUTHORITARIANISM
IN AZERBAIJAN, SERBIA AND GEORGIA

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# Content



# Summary

Connectivity has become a central concept in contemporary policy debates. It refers to the facilitation of trade, mobility and economic integration across countries and regions. Infrastructure projects, including roads, highways, ports and urban redevelopment initiatives, are a key element of connectivity and are often framed as instruments of progress, modernisation and prosperity.

This report focuses on Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia—three countries where national discourses are increasingly shaped by connectivity debates. Our study shows that in this time of seismic geopolitical shifts, small countries like Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia seek to assert themselves in the global politics of large-scale transregional connectivity and to reimagine their 'peripheral' geographical positions as new logistics 'hubs' in international supply chains. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Serbia, including expert and stakeholder interviews, participant observation and site visits, this report demonstrates that the large-scale connectivity projects serve political purposes that extend well beyond their stated developmental goals.

This report argues that infrastructure projects frequently serve to consolidate authoritarian power while shaping regional geopolitical alignments. Our research reveals how such projects reinforce authoritarianism in Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia through three mechanisms, albeit to different degrees:

– **Rhetoric capture.** Governments present infrastructure as evidence of progress. The visible delivery of outputs such as roads, ports and other public goods lends them legitimacy. In Azerbaijan, Baku's Waterfront Promenade, luxury hotels, iconic architecture and the upgrading of the country's image as a 'hub of hubs' between Europe and Asia showcase the regime's modernisation agenda to both domestic and international audiences. In Serbia, the Belgrade Waterfront project and the Metro are publicly linked to President Vučić's personal political legacy, while the Georgian leadership highlights the East–West Highway and the Port of Anaklia as hallmarks of national development. These narratives position political leaders as indispensable drivers of modernisation and progress.

– **Centralisation and elite co-optation.** Project planning and implementation are concentrated in central ministries, with no role foreseen for local authorities and communities. In Azerbaijan, the Baku Promenade is managed directly by central ministries, with economic benefits flowing to politically connected elites. In Serbia, the routing of the metro and flagship development projects favour companies with close ties to the ruling party. In Georgia, the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure tightly controls resettlement processes and contracting and simultaneously undermines public participation. This centralisation secures loyalty and strengthens elite networks, thereby reinforcing authoritarian structures.

– **External legitimation**. Partnerships with China, Turkey, the European Union (EU) or multilateral development banks (MDBs)—provide authoritarian governments, especially in states with budget or construction capacity constraints, with financial support, technical know-how and international credibility. Irrespective of the source of financing, the governance of major infrastructure projects tends to violate social and legal standards. Poor project governance is evident in both Serbia and Georgia regardless of whether the project financing comes from China or MDBs. While resource-rich Azerbaijan does not depend on external financing for its infrastructure projects, it engages transregionally to bolster its image. In all three cases, the result is an infrastructure landscape in which authoritarianism can thrive.

The interplay of these mechanisms demonstrates that infrastructure is more than a technical or economic tool. It is a political instrument that can be used to consolidate authoritarian control and shape regional realignments in a time of geopolitical shifts. Large-scale projects such as the Middle Corridor, Anaklia Port, and strategic urban redevelopments integrate Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia into new Eurasian cross-border networks, often by circumventing Western-led normative agendas. While transparency, local participation and institutional safeguards remain critical levers for mitigating authoritarian capture, their effectiveness is limited when regimes have access to sources of financing and expertise with less stringent requirements, such as China. Recognising these political dimensions is essential for understanding domestic power dynamics and broader Eurasian geopolitical restructuring.

# Introduction

Connectivity has become a buzzword in contemporary policy debates. It is commonly understood as the facilitation of mobility, trade and economic integration, for instance through transport routes, urban infrastructure or integration into global value chains, all of which are celebrated as cornerstones of economic development. Infrastructure projects such as roads, ports, other transport links, as well as urban development initiatives such as city regeneration or waterfront redevelopment are key elements of connectivity. They are typically framed within the ideology of development as a promise of progress, modernisation and future prosperity. This report aims to contribute to a more nuanced policy debate about infrastructure projects in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus by focusing on their effects in the context of authoritarianism, democratic erosion and regional realignment.

Infrastructure projects frequently serve to consolidate authoritarian power.

Research on infrastructure projects in such settings has shown that these projects are neither uniformly beneficial nor politically neutral but frequently serve to consolidate or entrench authoritarian power with implications for geopolitical reordering (Smolnik et al. 2025; see also Ocaklı & Krüsmann 2025, Krüsmann et al. 2023; Börzel et al. 2026). To illustrate these dynamics and reveal the underlying mechanisms through which connectivity contributes to authoritarian entrenchment, this report brings together insights from ZOiS research on infrastructure projects in Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia. These three countries increasingly present themselves as strategic 'hubs' in multimodal networks connecting European and Asian economies. The selected cases vary in terms of the degree of autocratic rule, state capacity, and external dependence, making it likely that the extent to which—and the mechanisms whereby—infrastructure is instrumentalised for regime stabilisation also differ. Over the past two decades, Azerbaijan, a resource-rich authoritarian regime, has used its own financial and administrative capacities to implement large-scale infrastructure projects and reposition itself as a trade and energy hub connecting Europe and Asia. With its centralist mode of governance, it is a textbook example of the authoritarian instrumentalisation of infrastructure projects. Georgia and Serbia have long oscillated between autocratisation and democratisation but are now on a clear authoritarian pathway. Unlike Azerbaijan, however, they have fewer fiscal resources and insufficient technical expertise to undertake major infrastructure projects independently, making them far more reliant on the support of foreign lenders or investors to move those projects forward. Their infrastructure sector is therefore more likely to become an arena for geopolitical competition between actors like China and the European Union (EU). China kickstarted this development when it launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The EU later reacted with the Global Gateway initiative, which it claims is committed to good governance, transparency, sustainability and human rights. Given Serbia's and Georgia's more institutionalised relationships with the EU over most of the period under scrutiny, one might expect a less straightforward autocratic instrumentalisation of infrastructure in those countries.

Yet our empirical insights reveal fewer differences across the cases than assumed. All the infrastructure projects discussed in more detail in this report—from the modernisation of Baku's Waterfront to the Belgrade Metro and Georgia's Rikoti Highway—were initially supported by the local populations. They were expected to have positive, transformative developmental impacts, and some of them did, as we will show. At the same time, they have

also helped to consolidate or entrench autocratic rule through the following mechanisms, albeit to varying degrees across the three countries:

– **Rhetoric capture.** Infrastructure projects are embedded in developmental narratives and assertive communications that portray ruling parties as the drivers of modernisation and national progress. In public speeches, authoritarian leaders rhetorically frame projects as personal legacies, prestige projects or international 'mega-events', ideas that are also reflected in their visual representation. In doing so, incumbents strengthen their legitimacy in both domestic and international contexts based on the delivery of outputs such as roads, ports or other public goods.

– **Centralisation and elite co-optation.** Infrastructure planning is concentrated in powerful national ministries, thus marginalising local authorities and civil society. This centralisation encourages opacity, weakens accountability and channels disproportionate benefits to political elites, thereby increasing their capacity to tie strategically relevant actors like business elites to the regime ('elite co-optation').

– **External legitimation of non-democratic governance.** Infrastructure development strengthens ties with external actors, especially in the case of states with budget or construction capacity constraints. Close cooperation with China is grounded in norms and practices that legitimise non-democratic governance models and present China's trajectory as a 'new option for modernisation'. Similar tendencies can be observed in cooperation with Turkey. Yet importantly, cooperation with the EU, or Western-led multilateral development banks is not necessarily a game changer. These actors often replicate, enable, or simply fail to challenge non-democratic practices or violations of international norms, thereby contributing—directly or indirectly—to the very dynamics they claim to oppose.

Cooperation with Western-led multilateral development banks is not necessarily a game changer.

Our analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in Serbia and Georgia in 2022 and 2023, which included semi-structured interviews with a variety of national experts and project stakeholders, such as local academics and researchers, multilateral development banks, national ministries and subnational authorities, politicians, contractors, consultancies and broad range of civil society organisations. The empirical insights into the Azerbaijani case are based on previous extensive fieldwork focused on urban renewal and the transformation of urban space in Baku. This was supplemented by on-site observations in 2024 and media and literature research (Smolnik et al. 2025).

This report shows how infrastructure—far from being a neutral instrument of development—can support the consolidation of authoritarian rule in Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia. In the case studies it becomes clear that connectivity projects are more than physical infrastructure and technical modernisation: they create a range of non-material and ideological opportunities for cementing existing power structures and can be used as a political tool for forging new alliances and achieving a multi-vector balance. These dynamics have implications for the broader geopolitical restructuring underway across Eurasia. Rather than connecting countries to the normative agendas of the EU or Western-led multilateral institutions, transnational infrastructure projects such as the Middle Corridor bind states like Azerbaijan and Georgia to emerging regional re-configurations shaped by other political and economic priorities.

## Azerbaijan's Infrastructural Authoritarianism

Azerbaijan's infrastructure policy is rooted in the politics of redevelopment and nation-state building. With the initiation of urban beautification projects like the redevelopment of Baku's Waterfront (see below) and the hosting of major international events since the 2010s, the country's authoritarian regime has sought to stabilise itself from within and project an image of itself as a new regional player with global implications. Unlike Georgia and Serbia, resource-rich Azerbaijan does not depend on financial support from China, the EU or international financial institutions (IFIs) to pursue its ambitious infrastructure expansion. And despite being a partner in the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy, the country has never sought EU membership. Yet, like Serbia and Georgia, cooperation with external partners like the EU, IFIs and China on large-scale transregional connectivity projects is becoming a more attractive proposition for Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime.

Over the past two decades, Baku has witnessed a construction boom that has transformed it from a peripheral socialist city in the landlocked 'Soviet South' to a neoliberal and regional metropolis (population: 2.5 million) on the Caspian Sea. The many showcases of state-sponsored urban renewal—e.g. the waterfront, parks, luxury hotels and metro stations—are held up as evidence of the 'purification' of the city from the Soviet past and its materiality (Darieva 2015; Roth 2019). The irony is that in Soviet centralised city planning, architecture and urban greening were also used to bolster the ruling ideology (Grant 2014). More and more, the city is taking on the mantle of a new 'Dubai' shaped by an authoritarian brand of urbanism, radical gentrification and the assertive marketing of international mega-events.

The UN Climate Change Conference COP 29 (Conference of the Parties) in 2024 was the latest in a series of such events held in Baku. Prior to that, the city hosted many different international sporting and cultural events such as the Eurovision Song Contest (2013), the European Olympic Games (2015), the Islamic Solidarity Games (2017), and the UEFA Europa League (2020). All of these events were occasions for the regime to demonstrate state power and legitimacy, and all were preceded by massive investment in urban redevelopment and landmark projects like Crystal Hall Palace, the Heydar Aliyev Centre, the Flame Towers, the Olympic Stadium and Village, and Sea Breeze, a new coastal resort and residential area.

Authoritarian urbanism is characterised by top-down control and exclusionary development.

This is a hallmark of authoritarian urbanism, a concept we use here to illustrate how Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime mobilises city planning and infrastructure to extend state control over public spaces, consolidate its power, and realise specific political visions (Zupan 2023). This mode of urban governance is characterised by top-down control and by exclusionary rather than participatory development. Spectacular projects are orchestrated by the regime, masking deeper social inequalities and the forced relocations of people from the city centre to the periphery. In many cases, state power merges with nationalism and neoliberal economics to create controlled and exclusionary urban environments. Similar to many Central Asian states (Koch 2022), the Azerbaijani government is positioning itself as the guardian of the stability regained after the perceived disorder of the 1990s.

## Grandiloquent symbols of authoritarian urbanism

In 2000, Baku's Waterfront Promenade (Bulvar) was included on the list of strategic sites for city redevelopment signed by the 'father' of the independent Azerbaijani nation, President Heydar Aliyev. The seaside Bulvar gained a new status as a state-financed property governed directly by the Cabinet of Ministers rather than the municipal authorities and was renamed Primorsky Park or Denizkenari Milli Park (Seaside Park). The ambitious redevelopment plan foresaw the extension of the existing 3.5-km-long promenade by another twenty-five kilometres after the dismantling of old industrial zones at the harbour.

From the start, the rhetoric on Baku's Waterfront redevelopment was effectively captured in performative developmental narratives emphasising the state's political leadership as the driver of twenty-first-century modernisation:

> 'The extension and development of the National Park is being constantly addressed by President Ilham Aliyev, demonstrating the watchful attention and care of the country's leadership for the National Park.' (Azertac 2022).

With reference to the spectacular architecture that has arisen on the waterfront, the regime hones an image of itself as a state-builder, forward-looking regional player and economic winner of post-socialism. Instead of the cheap asphalt from Soviet times, costly materials such as granite, cobblestones and polished stone tiles are meant to be an outward manifestation of stability, progress and visions of the future.

With reference to spectacular architecture, the regime hones an image of itself as a forward-looking regional player.

**Baku Waterfront with a new complex of high-rise buildings**

*Source: Wikimedia Commons*

This new 'civilised' environment for global business and neoliberal capital, a magnet for international businesspeople and tourists, is less accessible to the local population. As part of the 'purification' and 'territorial innovation' of the original waterfront park, many poorer residents and local migrants were forcibly displaced to other parts of the city to make room for the extension of the promenade and prestigious mega-projects (Valiyev and Wallwork 2019). An epochal shift followed with the building of private residential properties in the former state park and on Baku harbour territory. The Port of Baku was rebranded as the capital city's most prestigious address. The redevelopment included the construction of luxury residential apartments and penthouses, retail and restaurant facilities, on-site leisure amenities, and iconic company headquarters and office space. The developers of elite waterfront residences promote an image of the former industrially polluted area and state park as an exclusive 'gated' community with little or no contact with the rest of the city's population.

As part of the waterfront beautification process, in 2009, dozens of Washington palm trees, cacti and numerous exotic trees from South Africa, the Netherlands, Mexico, the Canary Islands, Mallorca, Saudi Arabia, China and Japan were imported to Baku and planted at great expense as a symbol of global connectedness. These decorative species, however, offer little shade compared to local trees in an example of how practicalities were neglected in the triumphalist logic of the redevelopment.

The new built environment and securitised atmosphere of Baku's Primorsky Park are intended to symbolise a strong, independent nation-state. Nowhere is this clearer than at the site of a 162-metre-high pole bearing a gigantic national flag. Rather than providing a space for urban leisure and recreation for the broader population, the main aim has been to turn the waterfront into a showpiece of Caspian urbanism controlled by the state authorities, new elite groups and international companies. The built environment and green areas are thus a powerful tool for marking the territory as 'modern', 'beautiful' and exclusionary.

Control over the redevelopment process has remained firmly in the hands of the president and his inner circle. In Azerbaijan, local executive authorities like the mayor of Baku and the heads of Baku city districts (rayonlary) are not elected but appointed by the president. In 2018-19, the old cadre was replaced with a new generation of experts educated in Europe and the USA who bring a strong awareness of market mechanisms. They have ushered in a new era of close cooperation with real estate developers, new logistical and functionary elites, large-scale retailers, and representatives of global market and construction firms. This is an important mechanism for securing power and political legitimacy without a change at the top echelons of government (Bedford 2023).

The new shiny districts are controlled by political elites who avoid public oversight and transparency.

Baku's urban redevelopment has completely transformed the city's appearance, but the oil wealth is reserved for a small number of people. The new shiny districts are controlled by a group of political elites who avoid public oversight and transparency in contracting. Usually, urban redevelopment and the hosting of mega-events require massive investment from various sources in the construction of venues, hotels and transportation networks. In the authoritarian context of Azerbaijan, however, the government has a monopoly on the organisation of lucrative international events, air travel,

guest accommodation, logistics and transportation. That explains why those in power often have a large stake in luxury hotels and public goods (LaPorte 2025).

The last two decades have been marked by rapid social change in the city. State-orchestrated privatisation and gentrification led to the demolition of old neighbourhoods and historic residential areas, with a devastating effect on urban sociality and solidarity (Guliyev 2018; Roth 2019; Sayfutdinova 2025; JAM News 2026). The costs of maintaining large venues are huge, and many end up as costly 'white elephants' after the events for which they were built are over. The beautification has changed the face of the city, making it shinier, cleaner and more modern-looking. Yet only a small part of the population benefits from this transformation.

## Imagining Azerbaijan as a new hub in Eurasia

After the second Karabakh war in 2020, Azerbaijan regained full control of Nagorno-Karabakh and the state's leaders began to reposition the country as a new transport hub for regional connectivity, not only in the South Caucasus but in Eurasia as a whole. Indeed, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the recent security crisis at the Suez Canal have led to significant geopolitical shifts and changes in supply chains, elevating the role of the Middle Corridor (the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, or TITR) that passes through Azerbaijan.[1] In the eyes of the country's leaders, Azerbaijan is destined to become a 'hub of hubs' along the new Silk Road. In this scenario, Azerbaijan would no longer be a landlocked peripheral outpost, and the widespread perception of the South Caucasus as a zone of conflict and failure would have to be revised (Mac-Glandières 2024; Guliyev 2025; Harris-Brandts & Gogishvili 2018). To ensure that the country can become a transport hub and develop its own non-oil sector, the construction of strategic infrastructures, including railways, highways, seaports and air networks is seen as crucial. For example, the new Baku International Sea Trade Port and Alat Free Economic Zone located 60 kilometres south of the capital are meant to facilitate the transport of goods from China to Europe via Turkey along the Middle Corridor and along the North-South axis stretching from Moscow to New Delhi. ▶ FIGURE 1

In the eyes of the country's leaders, Azerbaijan is destined to become a 'hub of hubs' along the new Silk Road.

The official promotion of infrastructure projects—such as those potentially linking the Caspian, Black and Mediterranean Seas—serves to champion national prestige and project an image of a powerful, unified state. After signing the US-brokered peace initiative with Armenia's president Nikol Pashinyan in August 2025, President Ilham Aliyev started to rebrand the region as a new space for international trade, speedy modernisation and sustainable peace. The opening of the border with Armenia and the construction of rail- and highways across the 'Zangezur Corridor' (also known as the Trump route for international peace and prosperity, TRIPP) means

1 The Middle Corridor, or the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), is a multimodal transport route that connects China and Europa via Central Asia and the South Caucasus. It is often referred to as an alternative to the more established Northern Route that connects Europa and Asia via Russia. The Middle Corridor is 2,000 km shorter than the Northern Corridor, so using it can reduce logistics costs and delivery times. Source: https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/middle-corridor-from-western-initiated-traceca-to-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/.

FIGURE 1

**The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor)**


*Source: Wikimedia Commons*

that Azerbaijan can now access its exclave, the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, sandwiched between Armenia and Turkey. In a striking turnaround, Azerbaijan is adopting a new 'inclusive' regionalist policy towards Armenia, which could help to overcome Armenia's economic isolation.

A regional realignment is under way, which may lead to new partnerships with countries in Central and Eastern Asia.

We are witnessing a regional realignment that may lead to new economic partnerships and horizontal infrastructural cooperation with neighbouring countries in Central and Eastern Asia. The Caspian Sea is being reinvented as a maritime connectivity hub. In April 2023, the Port of Baku signed a set of bilateral agreements with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. A Sister Port agreement with Qingdao Port, one of the largest ports in China, is the basis for a collaboration in the implementation of the latest cargo technologies and transit cargo flows through the Middle Corridor (Guliyev 2025; PortNews 2023). In October 2025, Azerbaijan and Serbia signed a Roadmap to advance trade, investments and energy projects. In this context, a direct flight between Baku and Belgrade was launched in 2026 (Caucasus Watch 2025).

The case of Azerbaijan clearly shows that, unlike Georgia and Serbia, a resource-rich state does not seek the external legitimation of its non-democratic governance model through infrastructure cooperation. Instead, the authoritarian regime uses rhetoric capture, elite co-optation and the centralised governance of large-scale infrastructure projects—the latter accompanied by the repression of civil society—to stabilise its power. There is a risk that these infrastructure projects will give rise to experiences of 'disenchanted modernity' (Haller & Weissmann 2024), when the promise of modernisation fails to materialise and local communities lose access to resources and are entirely excluded from decision-making processes. The speedy materialisation of connectivity can also be hampered by geopolitical shifts and wars. For the time being, however, this case shows how infrastructure can be articulated in the illiberal construction of the national space, fostering new alliances across borders and in this way advancing authoritarian power in Eurasia.

## Serbia's Illiberal Turn through the Lens of Infrastructure

Since the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, abbr. SNS) came to power in 2012, the country has embarked on an impressive infrastructure expansion spree. This has seen investment in fixed assets grow three-fold between 2012 and 2024 (ECB 2025), while infrastructure sectors such as road construction have seen spending rise from EUR 273.5 million in 2013 to EUR 791.3 million by 2022 (OECD 2025). In cooperation with banks, developers and construction firms from the EU, China, Russia and the Gulf States, the Serbian state has embarked on several prestige projects including the Belgrade–Budapest railway, a new national stadium in Belgrade, numerous additions to Serbia's highway network, flagship urban developments like the Belgrade Waterfront, and the gradual development of a metro system for Belgrade—each framed as a symbol of national progress and renewal.

This infrastructure expansion is not uncontroversial. The collapse of a newly constructed canopy at Novi Sad's main railway station in November 2024, killing 16 people, sparked the largest anti-government protests since the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The protesters blame the tragedy on negligence and a lack of accountability in state infrastructure projects and are demanding greater transparency, an end to corruption, and the restoration of democratic freedoms. As Serbia reaches a societal boiling point, the country provides a compelling case of how infrastructure development is used to reinforce authoritarian power.

First, as in Azerbaijan, Serbian infrastructures are marked by rhetoric capture. In narratives of progress, modernisation and national pride, President Vučić and the SNS have been presenting the different projects as proof of the government's performance in the hope that this will give them an electoral advantage (Jovanović 2021; Dragojlo 2025). By visiting construction sites, assertively announcing the deadlines by which projects must be finished, and tying infrastructure and modernisation to his personal legacy, Vučić has sought to establish an image of himself as a 'builder'. Echoing the narratives propagated about Baku's Waterfront, he has described the Belgrade Waterfront—a highly controversial new luxury housing-cum-shopping complex—as 'the future and the new image of Serbia' and declared it a 'project of national importance' (Čamprag 2024). In an illustration of the prestige tied to such projects, the tallest tower in the complex was designed by the firm behind the world's tallest building, Dubai's Burj Khalifa (ibid.). Mega-events are another opportunity to draw international attention to the country's modernisation drive. Belgrade will host Expo 2027, and many of city's current construction projects are linked to that event.

Second, projects have become highly centralised and co-opted by elite interests, with participatory practices and community engagement either deprioritised or abandoned altogether. Centralisation has brought opacity and regulatory arbitrage, allowing those close to the SNS to unilaterally determine the rules of the game. For example, since the SNS-led city government of Belgrade transferred control of the Belgrade Metro to the national finance and transport ministries in 2019, project planning has been shaped by elite priorities rather than public needs. In decisions that key stakeholders have

In Belgrade, project planning has been shaped by elite priorities rather than public needs.

**The Belgrade Waterfront**

*Source: Wikimedia Commons*

Centralisation encourages contracting practices that have disproportionately benefited firms associated with the SNS.

denounced as 'highly illogical', the announced metro routes have been designed to connect prestige developments such as the Belgrade Waterfront rather than essential transport nodes like the main railway station or Republic Square, the city's historic centre. Our research shows that projects such as the Belgrade Metro have sidestepped public consultations, do not disclose key project information, and ignore critical civil society positions. Centralisation also encourages contracting and subcontracting practices that have disproportionately benefited firms associated with the SNS and resulted in elite-centred developments. Millenium Team, for example, a construction company closely associated with Finance Minister Siniša Mali, has become involved in most large-scale infrastructure projects. In parallel, such governance practices have eroded institutional checks, as courts, procurement procedures and parliamentary scrutiny have all been weakened in favour of the executive branch. In 2016, reportedly at the request of Mali as the then mayor of Belgrade, masked men illegally demolished the Savamala district at night to make way for the aforementioned Belgrade Waterfront project, forcibly evicting residents as the police was told to stand down (Čamprag 2024).

Third, engagement with foreign partners provides the SNS with the financial support and international credibility it needs to use infrastructure as a means of bolstering authoritarian power. In contrast to Azerbaijan, which can finance its infrastructures largely through its national budget, Serbian budget constraints mean that international finance plays a key role in financing infrastructures. While the EU and multilateral institutions remain large extenders of loans to Serbia, Chinese finance has become highly competitive, with data suggesting that China's concessional loan portfolio has surpassed that of the EU.[2] Indeed, over the past decade, China has emerged as Serbia's key foreign partner in this sector, something that has contributed

2 Measured by percentage of GDP. See Jovanović & Stojadinović 2025.

to the wider erosion of Serbian commitments to EU candidacy obligations. Based on a 2009 intergovernmental agreement,[3] Chinese firms and banks can bypass Serbia's EU-aligned Public Procurement Law and may negotiate projects on a bilateral basis. Importantly however, French president Emmanuel Macron and Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez have also directly negotiated the involvement of French and Spanish companies in the sector, despite a clear warning from the EU that such intergovernmental agreements significantly undermine the efficacy of procurement laws (European Commission 2024; Kosovo Online 2025). Here we see the EU's waning ability to ensure the rule of law in the sector, and how difficult it has become to enforce candidacy policies.

Infrastructure expansion has been a key factor in the deepening of Serbia's economic and political relations with China, and projects with Chinese involvement—be it as a contractor or a financer—are contributing to the wider erosion of Serbia's rule of law. Firms closely associated with SNS elites have been known to benefit disproportionately as subcontractors in projects contracted to Chinese firms.[4] And numerous projects involving Chinese firms have been plagued by legal violations or gross negligence, the most prominent example being the modernisation of Novi Sad's main railway station, whose primary contractor was a Chinese consortium.[5] In several cases, albeit largely in the industrial sector, Serbian courts have ruled in favour of Chinese firms when confronted with litigation, underscoring the judiciary's tendency to protect Chinese commercial interests.[6] Warm bilateral relations, grounded in Chinese support for Serbia's assertive position vis-à-vis Kosovo, are generally welcomed by Serbia's population (Vladislavljev 2021). Polls show that 88 per cent of Serbians have positive views of China (International Republican Institute 2024). This, combined with the ability of Chinese firms to deliver projects at speed,[7] has allowed the SNS to boost its political capital. Moreover, in contrast to EU funding, Chinese financing is often easier to obtain and comes with fewer bureaucratic hurdles, and it is more likely to support projects that the EU or MDBs would reject on economic-feasibility or environmental grounds—and thus highly attractive for a regime that prioritises construction (Zweers et al. 2020; Curdy 2025). In the words of one Serbian analyst,[8] Chinese involvement in Serbia has seen remarkable growth because 'the Chinese do not ask many questions, the Chinese do not ask for much values alignment, or there are no conditions that have to be respected with regard to the rule of law, environmental standards, labour regulations. So, basically, whatever you want, if the Chinese can provide it to you, and the Chinese usually can, you can get it from the Chinese.'

Infrastructure expansion has been a key factor in the deepening of Serbia's economic and political relations with China.

3 Framework Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People's Republic of China (signed on 20 August 2009).

4 According to a national expert and practitioner in public procurement law, contracts concluded with Chinese construction contractors in Serbia typically include provisions stating that that around 45 per cent of project value can be subcontracted to Serbian companies who are chosen by the main contractor (Interview, Belgrade, April 2023).

5 The construction of the canopy itself was executed by a Serbian subcontractor.

6 Key industrial projects where Serbian courts have protected Chinese interests in the face of litigation include the Linglong Tyre factory in Zrenjanin, HBIS's steel operations in Smederevo, and Zijin Mining's extractive operations in Bor. Interview with an environmental litigation firm, Belgrade, April 2023.

7 With the notable exception of the Belgrade Metro. Interview with a Serbian procurement expert, Belgrade, April 2023.

8 Interview with a Serbian researcher, Belgrade, April 2023.

For the SNS, efficiency in project delivery justifies autocratic infrastructure practices, but deepening political relations with China also contribute to a wider legitimation of non-democratic modes of governance. This allows the SNS regime to tighten its control over national institutions. Serbia has expanded its state surveillance infrastructures on the basis of cooperation with Chinese firms, opening the door to the mass monitoring of citizens. Moreover, the Serbian government has consistently paid lip service to Chinese foreign policy concepts such as the prioritisation of sovereignty or the Community of Common Destiny, principles widely regarded as illiberal (Kim & Kim 2023). The SNS has also agreed to deepen 'experience exchange and mutual learning in state governance and administration' with the Chinese Communist Party (IDCPC 2024). As the viability of Serbia's EU integration continues to dissipate, its engagement with China is thus playing a key role in legitimising the country's authoritarian consolidation.

## Georgia's Illiberal Connectivity Hub

Under the Georgian Dream (GD) government, in office since 2012, Georgia has similarly been undergoing an infrastructure expansion drive, particularly in the domain of connectivity. While previous governments claimed to pursue a connectivity-centred growth strategy, the GD regime has gone a step further by launching economic development strategies that prioritise connectivity and infrastructure development (Government of Georgia 2015; 2021). Although several announced projects have failed to materialise, it has indeed been building. Key projects include four-lane highways along the country's East-West and North-South axes, upgrades to the country's railway network, as well as a planned new deep-sea port at Anaklia. By presenting itself to international partners as an up-and-coming connectivity hub—a key transregional node along the nascent Middle Corridor—Georgia has effectively mobilised multilateral development finance (particularly from the EIB, World Bank, and ADB) and Chinese state-owned construction enterprises to transform its connectivity landscape. Like the SNS in Serbia, GD has successfully attracted a variety of foreign actors into the country's infrastructure sector by appealing to various, often competing strategic or commercial interests.

Under the GD regime, Georgia has also seen rapid democratic backsliding, which has only accelerated in recent years, resulting in a retreat from its once-declared EU integration goals. While the linkages between infrastructure and authoritarian entrenchment are subtler than in Serbia, the mechanisms are similar: Infrastructures entrench authoritarian power by projecting legitimacy through captured rhetoric, centralizing decision-making, and deepening Georgian relations with foreign powers, particularly China.

The Georgian leadership uses the rhetoric around infrastructures as a means of presenting itself as a herald of progress.

To begin with, by embedding projects in grand developmental narratives and promises of economic revitalisation, the Georgian leadership has sought to capture the rhetoric around infrastructures as a means of presenting itself as a herald of progress and modernity, especially in the domain of connectivity infrastructures. For example, the former prime minister Irakli Garibashvili has described the East-West Highway as a hallmark of Georgian development, asserting that the 'construction of highways and roads has a tremendous importance for the development of our country' (EU

in Georgia 2023). The road, it is claimed, 'will bring social and economic benefits to Georgia, bringing with it logistic centres, ports, and improved connectivity.'[9] Similarly, the Anaklia Deep-Sea Port is, in the words of the then Deputy Prime Minister Levan Davitashvili, 'not just a berth where ships unload' but will 'also be a place where many economic activities will consistently develop' (Georgia Today 2025). Confirming the suspicion that the GD uses infrastructure development to gain an electoral advantage, it has often been noted that both the initiation of projects as well as progress in their construction tend to happen prior to national or local elections.[10]

Both the initiation of projects as well as progress in their construction tend to happen prior to elections.

As in Serbia, our research indicates that centralisation has become a defining feature of Georgian infrastructure development (Ocakli & Krüsmann 2025). This is especially clear in the case of the Roads Department of the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure in Tbilisi (ibid. and Krüsmann 2025). By restricting information flows and sidelining local governments, the department maintains tight control over project-related procedures. In the words of one local mayor in the Rikoti area, even public consultations are organised and convened by the Roads Department, while their office is simply tasked with 'regulat[ing] communications with the locals.'[11]

**Construction work at the Rikoti Pass Highway in September 2022**

*Source: Wikimedia Commons*

9 Interview with an official from the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia ministry in Tbilisi, April 2022.
10 Interviews with civil society organisations in Tbilisi, April 2022.
11 Interview with a local GD mayor.

Infrastructure projects are tarnished by violations of environmental, labour, social impact management and transparency safeguards.

Top-down decision-making in the capital has produced a persistent lack of transparency, while local considerations are effectively relegated as the state pursues its projects. Based on extensive field research and document analysis, our research further demonstrates that projects such as the Rikoti section of the East-West Highway are, despite multilateral funding, tarnished by violations of the environmental, labour, social impact management and transparency safeguards that its lenders nominally impose (Krüsmann 2025). Local populations were not sufficiently informed about the project, resettlement and compensation practices were questionable and often arbitrary, local livelihoods were adversely affected, and local workers are often employed without contracts. Numerous environmental and safety violations and several accidents and deaths have been reported. Georgia's civil society sector, increasingly under attack in recent years, has called for those responsible to be held accountable. While weak monitoring on the part of creditors and poor adherence to standards by contractors has to be called out, it is ultimately the responsibility of national authorities to ensure that laws and regulations are enforced. Indeed, as noted by one Georgian legal expert, 'the state appeases companies to get investments for Georgia' and shields firms and financial institutions from backlash by 'taking the brunt of the attacks'.[12] Beyond excluding citizens from formal channels of democratic participation, such as meaningful engagement in public hearings, the Georgian state uses disinformation campaigns, police brutality and shaming to silence those who have campaigned about the nature of infrastructure development in the country (Rekhviashvili & Lang 2024).

Engagement with external actors, particularly China, also plays an important role in how infrastructures contribute to authoritarian entrenchment in Georgia. In contrast to Serbia, whose warm relations with China are rooted in shared political goals[13] and spread across a variety of sectors, Georgia-China relations are largely defined by the infrastructure sector itself. While China is Georgia's fourth-largest trading partner and only a minor source of incoming foreign direct investment (FDI), the majority of the country's large-scale infrastructure projects are being constructed by Chinese state-owned construction enterprises,[14] while the roads construction sector is almost entirely dependent on Chinese contractors, as shown in Figure 1.[15] This, it is important to note, has come about despite Chinese banks not committing finance to projects in the country, with most external funding coming from MDBs. The most probable explanation for this is that a) China is able to reach strategic ends without financing projects and bearing the risk of being a creditor, or b) Georgia is not a key priority for Chinese financial institutions.

12 Interview with a lawyer in a Georgian law firm, Tbilisi, April 2022.

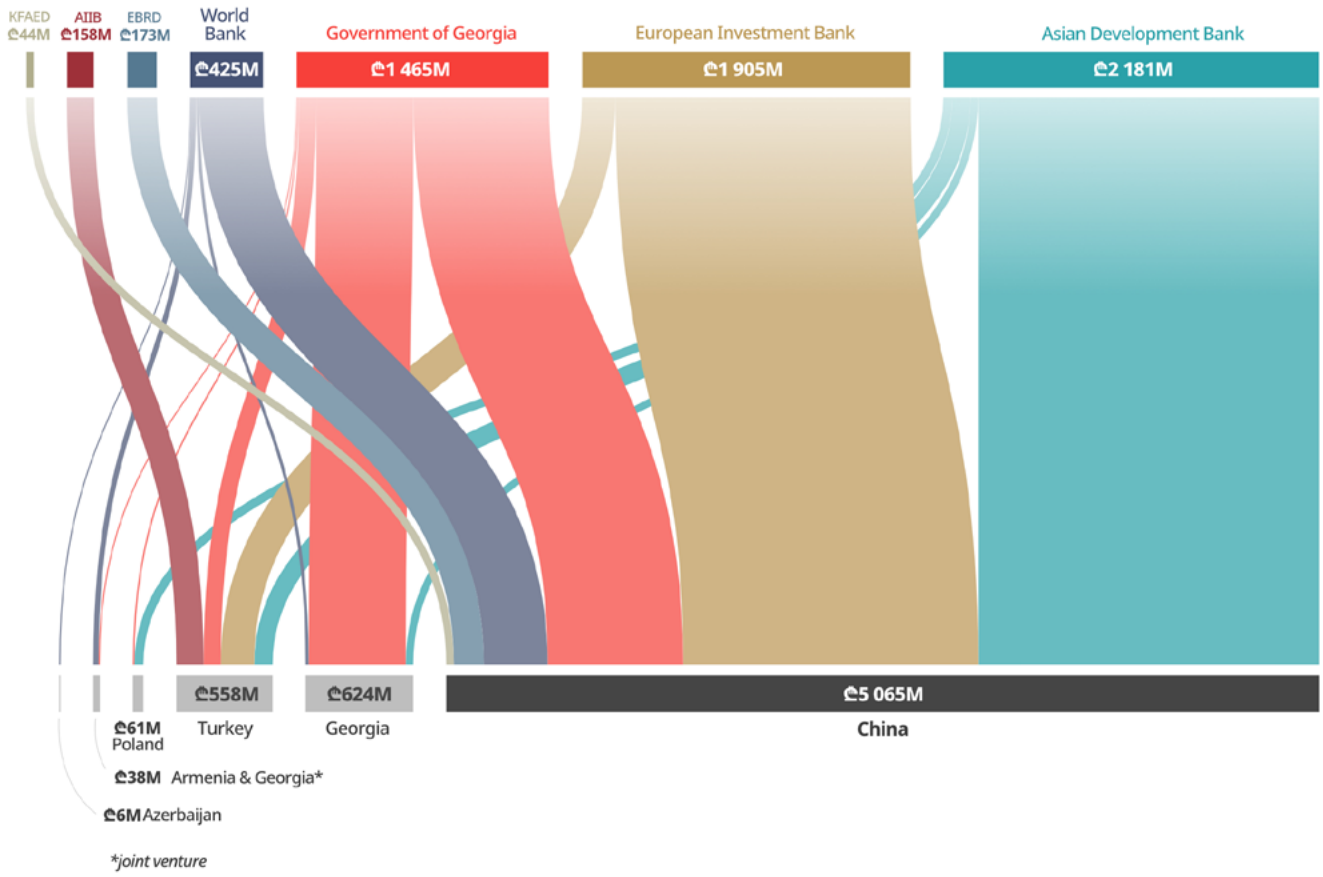
13 For example, the mutual recognition of what China and Serbia consider to be renegade provinces, Taiwan and Kosovo, respectively.

14 Self-reported procurement data from the ADB shows that Chinese contracts make up 80 per cent of its financed projects in Georgia's transport sector. At the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, this share is 99 per cent, and at the World Bank it is 35 per cent. No data from the EIB is available.

15 Between 2015 and 2023, Chinese contractors secured 90 per cent of EIB-funded, 91 per cent of ADB-funded, 100 per cent of EBRD-funded, 87 per cent of World Bank-funded, and 54 per cent of Georgian state-funded road construction contracts. While projects are typically funded by MDBs and thus nominally awarded to Chinese firms on the basis of tendering procedures organised by the Georgian state, opposition figures have questioned the legitimacy of such tenders.

FIGURE 2

**Flows of finance per source of finance to contractor country of origin in the road construction sector, Georgian GEL, 2015 – 2023**




**For abbreviations, see** **list on p. 20.**

*Source: Author's calculation based on data from the Georgian Roads Department (Allheilig et al. 2023; Gugushvili 2023).*

In any case, the political importance of the sector is reflected in key political agreements and policy documents, such as the 2023 Georgia-China Strategic Agreement or the Georgia-China Free Trade Agreement, both of which stress the role of infrastructure as the foundation of economic cooperation. The dominance of Chinese contractors in the sector has also led to a situation where even multilaterally financed projects, including those funded directly by the EIB—an EU institution—are often presented as 'Chinese' or as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative by both Chinese and Georgian state actors.[16] ▶ FIGURE 2

Deepening relations with China carry two key implications for the country's authoritarian entrenchment. First, with EU officials and the EU parliament warning that Chinese involvement in the country's strategic interests could have negative security implications and jeopardise its EU integration pathway due to 'incompatibilities', closer political relations with China are

Closer political relations with China are likely to have played a role in the country's distancing from EU integration.

16 Former president Garibashvili, for example, claimed that the East-West Highway, financed by multilateral development banks, is part of China's BRI.

Georgia is not only acknowledging China's political system but also sees it as a model for Georgia.

likely to have played a role in the country's persistent distancing from EU integration in recent years (GIP 2024; Mikser 2022). China, as the world's second largest economy, offers Georgian elites an alternative to EU integration, even if China is not currently extending infrastructure loans. And with Chinese investment in the Port of Anaklia, Chinese FDI is now beginning to play a critical role in Georgian infrastructure. Second, and relatedly, the wording of political agreements between the two countries suggests that Georgia is not only acknowledging China's political system but also sees it as a model for Georgia. Mirroring the Serbian case, the 2023 Strategic Partnership Agreement (Chinese Embassy Georgia 2023), for instance, states that 'Georgia believes that Chinese modernization offers a new path and a new option for mankind to achieve modernization', calls for legislative exchanges with China, and recognises several Chinese global governance concepts[17] that are generally seen to challenge the liberal international order (Kim & Kim 2023).

## Conclusion

Roads, highways and ports are key components of large-scale infrastructure that are often framed as symbols of hope and modern development in local contexts. Insights from Azerbaijan, Serbia, and Georgia show that states play a crucial role in the ideology of development, which partly derives from the legacy of communist authoritarian practices and is fed by a new global vision of connectivity. Promises of connectivity and an ideology of infrastructures that emphasise becoming the 'hub of hubs' or a 'vehicle of progress' and 'development' carry political effects that can reproduce authoritarian practices on the ground.

Across the three countries under scrutiny, this report has shown that infrastructure is not a neutral public good but functions rather as a key instrument in the consolidation of authoritarian power.

The three mechanisms identified—rhetoric capture, centralisation and elite co-optation, and external legitimation—operate in mutually reinforcing ways. Developmental narratives portray ruling elites as national modernisers, insulating them from accountability while mobilising infrastructure as a tool for creating legitimacy based on the delivery of roads, ports or other public goods. Centralised planning structures weaken institutional checks, exclude affected communities, and channel resources towards loyal networks, facilitating elite co-optation as a central mechanism of authoritarian stability. Meanwhile, cooperation with foreign partners—including China, but also EU countries, Turkey, and MDBs—provides financial and material resources and international credibility, even when projects violate environmental, social and legal standards. The result is an infrastructure policy in which authoritarian governance can thrive regardless of the origins of funding.

These dynamics carry significant geopolitical implications. First, opaque bilateral agreements and strategic partnerships—particularly with China—

17 Such as the Community of Common Destiny.

often cater to the interests of authoritarian governments, anchoring them more strongly in alternative political alignments and reducing the transformative leverage of the EU and Western-dominated finance institutions. At the same time, the latter, along with Western governments, often contribute to these dynamics when they fail to enforce their own standards or prioritise infrastructure provision over democratic decision-making processes.

Second, beyond domestic power consolidation, infrastructure development plays an increasingly important role in the geopolitical reordering of Eurasia. Through cooperation among autocratic or hybrid regimes like Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia, infrastructure facilitates regional realignment aimed at managing and balancing the influence of surrounding great powers—including the EU, China, Russia and Turkey—via multi-vector foreign policies.[18] The ongoing development of the port of Anaklia in Georgia illustrates this logic. Supported by Chinese foreign direct investment, and with Kazakhstan's national railway company (Kazakhstan Temir Zholy) seeking to construct a major terminal there, the port is intended to facilitate the transshipment of goods to Black Sea ports such as Constanța, Burgas and Varna—bypassing transport routes through both Russia and Turkey. Similar dynamics are visible in political and economic agreements across the region: Serbia and Azerbaijan signed a roadmap on trade, energy, and regional connectivity in 2025; Serbia and Georgia have started to negotiate a free trade agreement; and in 2017 Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia established the International Association 'Trans-Caspian International Transport Route' to facilitate transit and foreign trade cargo along the Middle Corridor. Infrastructure thus integrates these countries into a new regional constellation rather than simply disconnecting them from the normative agendas of the EU or other Western-led finance institutions.

That said, public funds, donor financing and concessional loans from major international financial institutions, such as the EBRD, EIB, World Bank and the ADB, remain central to infrastructure financing across Eurasia (OECD 2023, p. 123; Krüsmann 2025). This provides these institutions with continued leverage in contexts of autocracy or democratic backsliding, but only if these actors recognise the political effects of infrastructure, ranging from redistributing power and reshaping state-society relations within these countries to forming new regional alignments. This requires strengthening transparency and accountability mechanisms, ensuring real local participation, and making external support conditional on meaningful institutional safeguards—not simply the promise of connectivity. Georgia's experience with Western-financed but China-built infrastructure projects is a case in point. At the same time, our insights also show that this approach reaches its limits in contexts where authoritarian governments have alternative sources for financing and building infrastructure projects, such as China, at hand. Ultimately, the effects of infrastructure development in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus will depend as much on the scale or speed of construction as on whether infrastructure is embedded in governance arrangements that reflect democratic priorities. Otherwise, new roads and routes may continue to contribute towards deeper authoritarian entrenchment within a reconfigured Eurasian geopolitical landscape.

18 We thank Richard Schmidt for making this argument.

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| **AIIB** | Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank |
| **BRI** | Belt and Road Initiative |
| **COP** | Conference of the Parties (UN Climate Change Conference) |
| **EBRD** | European Bank for Reconstruction and Development |
| **EIB** | European Investment Bank |
| **FDI** | Foreign Direct Investment |
| **GD** | Georgian Dream |
| **IFI** | International Financial Institution |
| **KFAED** | Kuwait Fund for Arabic Economic Development |
| **MDB** | Multilateral Development Bank |
| **TITR** | Trans-Caspian International Transport Route |
| **TRIPP** | Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity |

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