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## **Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia: Infrastructure as a tool of authoritarian rule**

*Connectivity promises progress, modernisation and prosperity, and has become a key concept in modern infrastructure policy. But who really benefits from these large-scale projects – and whose interests lie behind them?*

A new ZOIS report examines how Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia are reimagining their ‘peripheral’ geographical position – and the goals that are being pursued in the process. Roads, ports, transit routes and, not least, urban development projects are regarded as drivers of economic development and regional integration. In times of profound geopolitical change, these smaller nation-states are using transregional infrastructure projects to position themselves in global politics and to escape their supposed geographical periphery. Three mechanisms make infrastructure an instrument for maintaining authoritarian rule: rhetoric capture, centralisation and elite co-optation, as well as the external legitimisation of non-democratic governance.

### **Azerbaijan’s ambitious megaprojects**

Baku shines: magnificent boulevards, luxury hotels, a revitalised waterfront. For two decades, President Ilham Aliyev has been transforming infrastructure into an instrument of power. “Authoritarian urbanism is characterised by top-down control and urban development that is exclusionary rather than participatory,” explains Tsypylma Darieva, one of the report’s authors. Baku’s waterfront is a prime example of this: the new construction projects are controlled by political elites. Through large-scale connectivity projects such as roads, new routes and port facilities, the regime cultivates its image as a forward-looking regional player. Since the 2020 Karabakh war, it has increasingly positioned the country as a central hub between Europe and Asia. The Middle Corridor is intended to make Azerbaijan an indispensable transit country – and keep the regime firmly in the saddle.

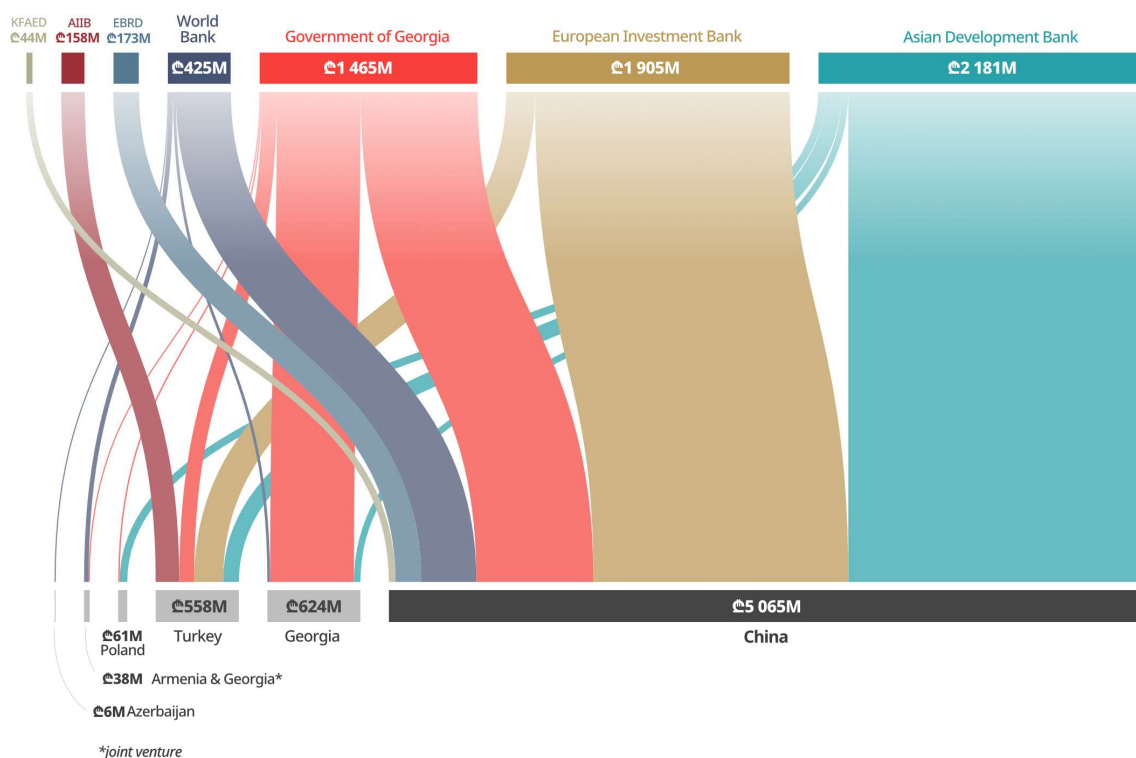
### **Serbia: Expanding power through infrastructure**

Serbia is building motorways, underground rail lines and luxury residential developments. Since 2012, President Aleksandar Vučić has tripled infrastructure spending. Yet in November 2024, the roof of the Novi Sad railway station collapsed – killing 16 people. This was followed by the largest protests in the country since the break-up of Yugoslavia. The demonstrators are voicing what the report confirms: infrastructure projects are being carried out without proper oversight and with a lack of transparency – they serve to consolidate authoritarian power. Vučić links initiatives such as the ‘Belgrade Waterfront’ project to his personal legacy. “Here, project planning was determined more by the priorities of the elites than by the needs of the public,” reports Valentin Krüsmann. Planned metro lines bypass major transport hubs and instead lead to prestigious construction projects such as the ‘Waterfront’ project. Chinese construction firms deliver these projects quickly – and without critical scrutiny. Democratic rules give way, and authoritarian structures are consolidated.

## Georgia's turn towards China

Motorways and a new deep-sea port in Anaklia – the ‘Georgian Dream’ government is investing in connectivity, and in its own power. Even with Western funding, the lion’s share of road construction contracts goes to Chinese firms (see chart). Local authorities are left out. Public consultations are organised by the central authority itself. Anyone who protests risks state harassment. Politically, meanwhile, Georgia is moving closer to Beijing and further away from Brussels. “Closer political relations with China are likely to have played a role in the country’s distancing from EU integration,” says Krüsmann.

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



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

The report shows that infrastructure strengthens authoritarian rule – in Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia. Connectivity projects are more than just concrete and technology. They create a range of opportunities for cementing existing power structures. All of this feeds into the geopolitical realignment that Eurasia is currently experiencing. The report also shows that, regardless of the source of funding, the governance of major infrastructure projects frequently violates social and legal standards. “International financial institutions, such as the World Bank, should give greater recognition to the political implications of infrastructure projects and act accordingly,” says Julia Langbein. Yet their power is limited as long as authoritarian governments have access to alternative sources of funding for infrastructure projects, such as China.

## Publication

Tsypylma Darieva, Valentin Krüsmann and Julia Langbein: *Connectivity and the Entrenchment of Authoritarianism in Azerbaijan, Serbia and Georgia*, ZOIS Report 3/2026.

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