

## **Black Box East: One Modernity Lost, the Other Out of Reach – Contested Post-Soviet Infrastructure**

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Infrastructures serve as basis for developmental discourses, preconfiguring our ideas of the future, and literally building futures because of their decades-long lifespans. It is crucial to note, debates on infrastructures surely relate to materialities – rails, concrete, and wires – yet cultures, regimes and markets, as well as the (unequal) geographies of knowledge production matter as prominently. Indeed, Soviet-era ideas of modernity were not all too different from their capitalist counterparts in their developmentalist ambitions and gigantic scope. The firm will to master and subdue space, time and nature prominently aimed at creating and dominating Man through infrastructures – be it the Soviet worker or the capitalist consumer. Lenin’s famous dictum that “Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country”<sup>1</sup> signified that after the October Revolution, infrastructure investments soared in line with the state-wide industrialisation agenda.

Electricity plants, roads and railways served industrial needs; urban transport networks connected workers’ housing estates to mines and factories. Everyday amenities, however, remained often the last ones to be provided, with rural areas staying under-served in many aspects. Still, combined with mass housing construction, elimination of illiteracy, and medical care provision, major tracts of the population profited from the Soviet-era build-up. Yet after the collapse of the Soviet Union, severe funding cuts, mismanaged privatisation, low maintenance and widespread depopulation brought forth widespread failures in transport, water, heating, electricity, or healthcare provision.

The dismantling of the Soviet Union marked the disruption of infrastructures built in assumption of a political – and thus technological – unity. Conflict-ridden peripheries, rural and de-industrialised areas of Central Asia or the South Caucasus were particularly affected. Infrastructure declined not only because of economic downturns but also due to out-migration of experts, and regional conflicts, with borders cutting through elaborate railway, pipeline or electricity grids. Yet, perhaps most significantly, the shift from a centralised infrastructural regime to individualised, fragmented and ailing systems affected relations between citizens and the state. Unstable provision was coupled with steadily rising costs, which, in many cases was the most important single factor for a still prevailing nostalgia for the Soviet Union as a caretaker state.

While living for two decades off the vestiges of Soviet investment programmes, new globalising infrastructural paradigms have come into being. Particularly since the 2008 financial crisis, previously a-spatial forms of neoliberalism are being displaced by emergent regimes of infrastructure-led development “whose ultimate objective is to produce functional transnational territories that can be ‘plugged in’ to global networks of production and trade.” (Schindler & Kanai, 2021, p. 40). Yet infrastructure futures are anchored in particular pasts, and actors’ interpretations of those. In the post-Soviet context we suggest two powerful and mutually reinforcing discourses to dominate the promotion and contestation of large-scale infrastructure projects: on the one hand, the decay of and nostalgia for Soviet-era modernisation-through-infrastructures; on the other hand, the feeling of inferiority in relation to the West and the catch-up logic of development, as we will argue in the following by referring to public transport provision and the construction of hydroelectric power plants.

The hardships of the 1990s were prominently mirrored by disinvestment in publicly run transport services. Administrative responsibility was transferred from central ministries to municipalities, without any appropriate transfer of funding. No funding was available for the purchase of rolling stock or the maintenance of overhead lines. Municipalities attempted to privatise bus fleets and created legislative frameworks for route tendering in the course of the 1990s, but the factual outcome was a replacement of the public ‘large-volume’ tram or bus lines with dominantly privately provided minibuses, locally known as marshrutkas. At the same time, industrial plants closed down

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/nov/21.htm>

and released thousands of people into unemployment, many of whom the marshrutka sector was able to absorb, assisted by low market entry barriers.

Apart from providing mobility options and livelihoods for millions, the marshrutka business has been inextricably intertwined with local and regional administrations, policymakers and entrepreneurs, with fluid borders between sector development, lobbying and protection racket. Coupled with mass motorisation, political latency and lack of funding, mobility sector reforms are slow, and largely limited to capital cities. Three trends make proof of the uneasy tension between Soviet-era mobility paradigms and their recent capitalist counterparts: first, state and municipal authorities have firmly internalised the Soviet Union's equation of deep-level heavy-rail metro systems as the one and only transport mode worth of a metropolis. The promise of a "real" metro in some decades to come justifies the demolition of tramway and trolleybus systems from Omsk through Ufa to Baku and Ashgabat. At the same time, relegating passengers to the underground has proved nicely compatible with leaving the cities' surfaces up for grabs for the automobile. These cutbacks and the demonising equation of marshrutkas with the "wild 1990s" preclude discussions on how local Soviet and post-Soviet experiences can contribute to urgently needed mobility transitions.

Second, instead of embracing universal mobility provision as their goal, current public transport systems have narrowly kept the label of public transport as a welfare benefit from the Soviet era, well-fitting the neoliberal agenda of "targeted assistance". Free rides for the elderly and disabled have brought public authorities to conceive of public transport as an option only for those who have no other choice, one that can at will be curtailed and neglected in scope and quality. The ever-growing group of young "urbanist" activists struggling for walkable and transport-friendly cities largely falls victim to the shiny appeal of low-floor tramways, uncritically adopting Western sustainability agendas, all while vulnerable groups fall behind. This, thirdly, resonates with the hijacking of sustainability discourses by (capital) municipal authorities from Moscow to Tashkent, where their reinterpretations of green and smart urban development rhyme with dispossessions and authoritarian rule, which has since been termed as "Hipster Stalinism"<sup>2</sup>.

Equally, ongoing contestations about the Georgian Namakhvani hydroelectric power plant illustrates the conflicts and contradictions of mobilising the socialist past, the capitalist present and an undecided future when debating infrastructural projects. Those promoting the project – the Georgian government, Turkish and Norwegian companies, ambassadors, large media outlets and hydropower lobbyists – demonise protesters, accusing them of having underdeveloped consciousness, backwardness and standing in the way of the country's energy independence. This labelling is far from new, especially in peripheral capitalist societies (Chatterjee, 2004). Namakhvani supporters refer to the widespread exploitation of hydro-resources in core, West European economies, particularly referring to Switzerland, Norway or Austria. They argue, given that Georgia lags behind developmentally, it should pursue large infrastructure projects to catch-up with core economies. Only afterwards, environmental and social costs could be seriously taken into consideration. Second, they argue that Georgia and similar small peripheral countries have to offer particularly beneficial conditions to foreign direct investors, turning unequal contracts today into prospects of growth tomorrow.

A further complication is the selective and contradictory reference to the socialist modernity project. Hydropower supporters argue that protesters serve Russian interests and strive for Georgia's return to the Soviet Union. Clearly, there is no Soviet Union to return to. However, the paradox lies elsewhere: the very same groups emphasise the importance of Soviet-built large hydropower stations for Georgia's energy system, local generation capacities and affordability. Georgia's prime minister even foregrounded the project's Soviet history, arguing that the best Georgian researchers had made invaluable contributions thereto in the 1980s. Hence the state, despite inconsistencies in its' narratives, attempts to utilise nostalgia for the Soviet modernity on the one hand, and the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.archdaily.com/577906/the-growth-of-hipster-stalinism-in-areas-of-moscow>

craving for a Capitalist modernity on the other, to justify compromises it makes in relation to large infrastructure projects currently.

In turn, those opposing also make claims over the socialist past, yet to argue the opposite. They indicate how the Namakhvani project was discarded in Soviet-times based on studies indicating unsuitability, high seismic risks and other environmental hazards of the project. Further, they spell out hydropower's controversial externalities and the role of EBRD and other development banks in greenwashing their portfolios at the expense of livelihoods and environment, particularly in the Caucasus to the Balkans. They foreground plans in Europe and the US to demolish dams to free up rivers. They condemn the enslaving relations with foreign investors: Georgia would relinquish access to land and water resources for free, remove tax burdens, and mitigate investors' construction- and distribution-related risks out of the state budget. Most importantly, protesters defend the value of publicly accessed natural resources, and alternative forms of living and being, local agriculture-based economy and sociality. It is yet to be seen how far the protest succeeds, but with its insistence on democratic involvement and accountability, it has already been challenging dominating depoliticisation of infrastructures and development in the name of lost and yet to be attained modernities.

Both with mobility systems or hydroelectric power plants, past and future are activated to defend a compromised present. We need to comprehend both the socialist past and the loss of Soviet modernity; global capitalist market logics and inferiority discourses in order to understand such conflictual narratives. Conceiving of infrastructures as inherently political allows to reveal where large-scale investments are pursued without democratic accountability, at the expense of social and environmental costs, and sometimes even without clear economic benefits, and, more fundamentally, to question the primacy of infrastructure-led development for the region's future.

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