

## **Fibres Reconfigured: Connectivity, Remoteness and Disconnection In and Around the Caucasus and Eastern Black Sea Region(s)**

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### **Introduction**

Historically, the Caucasus has been at the crossroads of empires. It has often been described as a transit zone, a trading hub and as part of the ancient Silk Road. These imaginaries shape the self-perception of local people until present day. At the same time the Caucasus has always been envisioned as a remote and uncivilized region embedded into rough geographies and inhabited by proud, wild and martial tribes. This perception is reflected, inter alia, in the writings of Russian poets like Pushkin, Lermontov and Tolstoi as well as in the diaries of French and British travellers and novelists like Alexandre Dumas and Lewis Carroll.

Today, the image of the South Caucasus as a connecting link is actively taken up by local elites to promote their countries' strategic relevance vis-à-vis outside actors. As such the South Caucasus' image as a place on Europe's edge or periphery is tried to be "overwritten" by emphasizing the countries' function as geo-strategic trade and logistic nodes. All three countries (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan) have thus actively embraced – even if to different degrees – connectivity projects of outside actors that target the region, such as the EU's TRACECA or Eastern Partnership (all three countries), or Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (Armenia). In particular, however, China's extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with its different dimensions of connectivity to the South Caucasus has been reciprocated with and put into the context of the South Caucasus states' own connectivity projects. These include the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line, port projects at Alat (Azerbaijan) or Anaklia (Georgia), the extension of highway networks and the establishment of free economic zones in all three countries.

By promoting their countries as strategically located hubs, Baku, Yerevan and Tbilisi also aim at ridding the region from the image of being a zone prone to protracted violent conflict and instability – and thus juxtaposing the conflict perspective with one that presents the South Caucasus as a safe haven for outside investments and economic opportunities. The recent escalation of the conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh into all-out war in the fall of 2020, however, has channelled attention (yet again) on dis-connectivity and

rupture. Even before the renewed outbreak of large-scale fighting, this conflict - as well as conflicts about Abkhazia and South Ossetia with respect to Georgian connectivity - impacted regional connectivity. As such, Armenia has been left out of initiatives put forward by Baku and Tbilisi, being largely isolated from East-West infrastructure development projects. The possible (re)opening of additional transit and communication routes, such as the (re)establishment of a transport link between Turkey, the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan via Armenia to Azerbaijan, as stipulated in the ceasefire agreement between Baku, Yerevan and Moscow from November 9, 2020, holds the potential for a significant reconfiguration of the region, not only but in particular as (dis)connectivity is concerned.

Beyond that - as elsewhere - South Caucasus connectivity has been tremendously impacted by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic which has highlighted the states' respective vulnerability. The closure of national borders as well as international travel restrictions have put particular strains on the small economies of Armenia and Georgia with their heavy reliance on open borders and unimpeded flows of goods and people. Negative impact on tourism, labour migration and dependence on currency fluctuations in neighbouring countries have had severe effects on all local economies, however (Meister 2020).

It is the nexus or interrelatedness of disconnection and connectivity that we are particularly interested in. Focusing geographically on the South Caucasus, we strive to move beyond glossy slogans and grand rhetoric of connectivity. Instead, we aim to channel attention to how connections are shaped but also unravelled, how (dis-)connectivity is entangled in multiplex power relations that transcend various scales, and thus how local encounters are embedded in broader global contexts. In the remainder of this paper, we first provide a thorough review of the literature on connectivity. We here look at both: the development of connectivity research more generally as well as specifically as concerns the Black Sea region. Critically scrutinizing and then building on this discussion, we propose central conceptual elements of an innovative approach to analysing connectivity. We illustrate the expediency of our approach by adding empirical examples from our research on three key dimensions of connectivity, namely infrastructures, small-scale trade and tourism.

## **State of Research**

Originally connectivity has been a terminology in mathematics, which measures a graph's resilience as a network. From there it entered the study of social networks (Barnes 1969) as well as systems theory (Casti 1979). As a vital concept for informatics and the internet more generally, it gained momentum with the rise of information and communication technologies (e.g. Hawthorn and Klein 1999; Cremer et al. 2000; Haythornthwaite 2005). In recent years 'connectivity' has spread across a wide array of disciplines such as neuroscience (e.g. Yeo et al. 2011, Van Dijk 2012) or the study of ecosystems (e.g. Crooks 2006, Dunn et al. 2019).

Current trends in the social sciences, economics and humanities regarding connectivity can be loosely grouped into two large heterogeneous sets, both of which are in the widest possible sense concerned with the structuring of space and relationships, one more with the **production of scales in synchronic ways** in economics, political geography and critical geopolitics - (e.g. Jessop et al. 2008); and the other one more with **processes that make and shape systems across time** - in area studies, history and anthropology (e.g. LaBianca and Scham 2016, Umurhan 2017, Saxer and Andersson 2019). A third set of studies that may be delineated, even though overlapping with set one and two, emerged in interrelation with a particular political project of connectivity, **China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**.

In the **first** set the connectivity concept from systems theory (Casti 1979) formed one of the bases for a larger trend of spatial analysis in economics (e.g. Beckmann and Puu 1985, Nijkamp and Reggiani 1993). In the 1990s connectivity or inter-connectivity surfaced in the context of transport studies (e.g. Himanen et al. 1998, Nijkamp et al. 2000, van Geenhuizen 2000, Reggiani 2004, Reggiani 2012). In organizational studies, which has drawn on systems theory as well as network analysis, connectivity has continued to play a role throughout (Kolb 2008, Castells 2011). Since the late 1990s the most important strand has been informed by political geographers who have focused on (economic) processes of de-/re-/territorialization (Brenner 2001), regionalisms (Macleod and Jones 2007), and (transcending) scales more generally (Jessop et al. 2008, MacKinnon 2011, Jones et al. 2017). Scale refers to how space is effectively shaped and layered by ongoing processes and practice. It crucially encompasses the subjective and material-discursive nature of how relations across space are constructed and the imaginary entities constituted through these relations, such as for instance center-periphery (McKinnon 2010).

In particular those working in the strand of critical geopolitics have often called to consider connectivity's historical embeddedness as well as its enmeshing in complex power relations (Sparke 2018), yet have rarely lived up to the claims of the former. As critical geopolitics has been concerned with how discourses and practices affect geopolitical agency, connectivity here has been likewise analyzed as a particular discourse or imaginary from a multi-scalar perspective (Bachmann and Toal 2019; Moisisio 2019) - even though studies in this tradition have touched upon connectivity often as part of a cluster of vocabulary that points to (inter-)relations, rather than treating connectivity as a concept sui generis. More recently, feminist scholarship has introduced or underlined the importance of the social, alongside political and economic aspects, and to pay special attention to the interrelation and interdependencies between "micro" and "macro", to how the geopolitical overlaps with the intimate (Mitchell and Kalio 2019).

The **second** set is comparatively more recent and can be characterized by a gaze that shares critical geopolitics' questioning of state containers and looks more at connectivity between and among entities that constitute other types of systems - beyond states - that have historically evolved. In history and archaeology publications from recent years have studied connectivity in ancient empires (Maas and Ruths 2012, LaBianca and Scham 2016), in particular the Roman Empire (Hitchner

2012, Stone 2014, Umurhan 2017, Witcher 2017). Research into connectivity in area studies (Pfaff-Czarnecka and Brosius 2019, Marsden and Reeves 2019), maritime studies (Hung 2013, Horden 2016, Schnepel et al. 2017, Leidwanger 2020) or studies that focus on a particular larger region, such as for instance the Sahara (Scheele 2018, Brachet und Scheele 2019) have explicitly or implicitly drawn on the Braudelian tradition of studying the Mediterranean as a region constituted by its internal links and connections (Leidwanger 2020, Horden and Purcell 2000). Similar to border studies, which recently have started to tap into connectivity as a category (Opitz und Tellmann 2012, Cooper and Rumford 2013, Richardson 2013, Nicol 2018), or above mentioned maritime studies (e.g. Schnepel et al. 2017), area studies have been able to draw on their rich traditions to conceptualize connectivity without a prior emphasis on state borders as boundaries to be transversed, for instance in the form of approaches such as translocality (Freitag and Oppen 2000, Schetter 2012) or transregionalisms (e.g. Wippel 2020). Particularly, Saxer and Andersson's (2019) approach highlights the mutual constitutive relationship - rather than opposition - of connectivity and remoteness.

While only some authors in both strands engage with (discussion of or explicitly refer to) globalization in reflective ways (e.g. LaBianca and Scham 2016), their research still mirrors the widening, thickening and acceleration of connections across space that the processes commonly known as globalization have come to generate (e.g. James and Steger 2016). Although authors concerned with connectivity often omit explicit self-conscious analysis of larger paradigms (e.g. James and Steger 2016, Östh et al. 2015), discussions of connectivity are firmly embedded in the spatial turn(s) (Massey 1992, Sheller 2017) as well as the following mobilities turn (Sheller and Urry 2006, Sheller 2017).

The above mentioned **third** set of studies encompasses research which has been directly inspired by the recent popularisation of both the issue and notion of connectivity in relation to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Since the common denominator is a particular empirical focus, this set includes approaches representing both set one and two.

Similarly to the rise of for instance to the term 'informality', which was coined by Keith Hart (1973), taken up and popularized by the World Bank in subsequent years, to gain again momentum in academia since the 2000s, 'connectivity' has become widely used in policy-making contexts. First and foremost China's connectivity politics but also its European Union 'counterpart', the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, or other such projects pushed by Japan or India are cases in point and have come to be seen as exemplifying a '(geo)politization of connectivity' (Godehardt and Postel Vinay 2020). In particular in policy research, these connectivity projects have often been discussed as examples of geo-economics or economic statecraft. They thus reflect a "weaponized" understanding of connectivity in a Luttwakian sense as calculated and strategic employment of economic power to serve national interests (Sparke 2007) - displacing a reading of geo-economic processes as integrative. Others, coming from critical geopolitics and taking issue with such a Luttwakian understanding, have called instead for taking a critical look at these geo-strategic

discourses and their integral “hub and flow imagineries” (Moisio 2018, 2019). Sum (2019), Winter (2020) and Karrar (2018) are examples of such a critical approach of China’s BRI. While Sum critically engages with the intertwining of geo-economic and geo-political discourses, Winter (2020) and Karrar (2018) add the dimension of the geo-cultural and show how narratives, a selective reading of history, and a particular cultural embedding undergird the connectivity imaginary.

**In the Caucasus** for many years a ‘hard’ geopolitical gaze has trapped the region being characterized by the rivalry of great powers (US, Russia, Iran, Turkey, China) at a geo-strategic crossroads (e.g. Smolnik and Weiss 2017). So far connectivity has largely been looked at through this prism as well often in tandem with a technocratic policy-making gaze or policy-informing objectives. As elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, in particular China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its inherent connectivity focus have recently triggered and informed the discussion. Here, connectivity has been largely understood as transport and trade connectivity, with a significant share of publications aiming at providing concrete policy recommendations for enhancing it (cf. Humbatov 2017, Khishtovani et. al. 2019). Similarly, research has addressed connectivity within the context of the different regional integration processes or cooperation policies advanced by (other) outside actors (cf. Kuchins and Mankoff 2016; Valiyev and Bilalova 2020).

However, there have been first attempts to look at the BRI and other forms of connectivity from a less policy-oriented-focus. Such studies approach the BRI in the South Caucasus as a complex phenomenon by looking at its diverse implications from a multi-scalar perspective and report on grassroots observations concerning the concrete implementation of BRI and BRI related businesses (Fehlings 2019, 2020, Smolnik 2019, Gambino 2018, Gambino 2019).

Despite a dominant geo-political gaze by many studies on the region, there are some which reflect a bottom-up approach and inside perspective on phenomena related to connectivity. These contributions, many of which are ethnographic do not explicitly use the notion of ‘connectivity’ and do not proceed from the BRI but deal with topics that implicitly address connectivity. They are concerned with pathways of everyday and informal linkages, for example, in the context of labour migration and citizenship (Yalçın-Heckmann 2012, 2016; Aivazishvili-Gehne 2015; Mühlfried, 2010, Ferry 2015), conflict resolution (Huseynova, Hakobyan, & Rumyantsev, 2012; Khutsishvili, 2016), diaspora (Darieva 2011), transnational religion-based relationships (Gasimov 2017, Jödicke 2017), economic and transboundary-exchange as well as inter-ethnic interactions (Yalçın-Heckmann 2014; Fehlings, 2017, 2018, 2019; Khutsishvili, 2017; Dabaghyan & Gabrielyan 2011, Weiss 2012, Weiss and Smolnik 2017).

## **Grasping Connectivity: Elements of a Novel Approach**

The social science literature on connectivity is steadily growing, linked not least, as mentioned, to the uncritical adoption and popularization of the term in the context of China’s BRI. Yet, large parts

of this literature deal with connectivity only tangentially or implicitly, within the context of more salient concepts in individual disciplines (such as global flows, global commodity chains, global value chains and the like). Developing a conceptual approach to connectivity in and beyond the Caucasus region is a complex endeavour. The existing literature provides a variety of points of departure for analysing data on connectivity in a critical, multi-dimensional way; yet so far these have only sporadically been jointly picked up. We propose to simultaneously channel attention to four crucial aspects of connectivity in particular. Thus, our suggested approach will put (critical) emphasis on a) **scale** and its production, b) **historicity** of the present as well as c) **power** and d) **disconnectivity**. In the following, we will start to flesh out these dimensions, providing empirical examples on infrastructures, small-scale trade and tourism as illustration.

### Scale and its production

We propose to tackle connectivity by transcending a simplistic and rigid understanding of scale as fixed relations and perspectives. Globalization talk entailed that de-territorialization had allegedly weakened state power. Yet, de- and re-territorialization are not diachronic processes. In fact, both are simultaneously underlying connectivity, making a **multi-scalar perspective** expedient. We therefore call for tackling connectivity's entangled relations by linking a variety of scalar perspectives, not least grassroots and local perspectives with macro processes. This thus grounds geopolitics in local encounters or, inversely, embeds empirical instances of connectivity in the larger context of complex and interlacing politico-economic and socio-cultural processes. Said analysis of multi-scalar accounts must by default entail the analysis of affect and emotions, including connectivity-related discourse and imaginaries.

Let us briefly turn to some empirical insight, to substantiate the argument: One of the central infrastructure projects in the Black Sea region of recent years, advertised as a key component of (extra)regional connectivity, is the Baku Tbilisi-Kars railway (BTK). Since autumn 2017, this new connection links Baku in Azerbaijan to Kars in Eastern Turkey, via Tbilisi and the town of Akhalkalaki, both in Georgia. The railroad utilizes previously constructed but now refurbished tracks between Baku-Tbilisi, the long-discussed Tbilisi-Akhalkalaki connection, as well as a newly constructed stretch between Akhalkalaki and Kars across the Turkish-Georgian border. The BTK can be read as a powerful geopolitical imaginary that promises to reshape transport connections across a number of scales. The BTK is marketed by Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia as a possible alternative railway route to the so-called Northern Corridor for EU-China traffic, as it is the only railway connection for EU-China rail traffic that passes neither through Russia nor through Iran. At the same time the BTK is the first railway connection that links Turkey and the Caucasus by rail, since Turkey closed the historic railway between Kars and Gyumri (Armenia) in the course of the first Karabakh war in 1993. Locally in Kars people pin hope to some of these narratives, mainly due to an overall trend of prioritizing infrastructure (and construction) by the current Turkish government, but at the same time also retain a good proportion of scepticism. But in terms of scale

the BTK has already slowly contributed to altering the perception of Kars as a remote backwater and has instilled images of new relations to far-away places such as Central Asia or even China. It has also helped re-structuring the perception of previous (centre-periphery) relations to Ankara, Istanbul and important Turkish port cities. So far the BTK has not contributed much to altering how the relation between the respective peripheries (from Turkish and Georgian domestic points of view) Kars/Ardahan regions and Javakheti (the main town of which is Akhalkalaki) is perceived.

Infrastructure projects are readily associated with connectivity. Tourism builds on, respectively overlaps with these, yet has not been as zealously embraced by connectivity scholarship, especially as concerns the South Caucasus. While people-to-people contacts form one strand of relations that is being promoted as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, one of the most prominent connectivity grand designs in the Eurasian space in recent years, tourism has been analysed in such context only tangentially. Possibly due to its quotidian identification with leisure, relaxing or (organised) adventure, tourism's role as a powerful driver, beneficiary and manifestation of connectivity seems to have been underrated. In the South Caucasus, tourism has been declared an official economic and development priority in all three countries. Notably in Georgia, tourism constitutes and is officially seen as a key sector with the potential to drive overall economic growth. Development of local tourist infrastructure, not least in the country's mountainous areas, shall attract foreign tourists, especially affluent travellers from Western Europe, the US and parts of Asia. This is also in line with the officially promoted geopolitical imaginary that situates Georgia in the Euro-Atlantic realm. Thus far, the great majority of tourists and travellers come from neighbouring countries, alongside Turkey and Iran the post-Soviet states of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

While tourism links sending and host countries on an international scale, tourism by default has also key implications on the individual, regional and national levels. For example, Georgia has tried to advertise its mountainous region of Svaneti as a destination for foreign travellers. Road infrastructure in the region has been poor, though, and many villages hard to reach, not least due to difficult terrain and weather conditions. The development of local tourism infrastructure, including access by building roads and even a local airport, pushed forward by the centre in Tbilisi, has not only affected local connectivity. It also reflects and effects power relations that link periphery and centre.

Similarly, trade links, which were established after the dissolution of the Soviet Union created new links between so far geographically distant regions, which were not only difficult to reach during Soviet times, but were equally off mental maps and perceived as cultural terra incognita. New transportation infrastructures, the acceleration of travelling, digitalization, respectively online communication as well as personal relationships created in the context of business, however, have reduced perceived distances between places (of productions and markets), people, and individuals.

### Historicity of the present

As argued above, thus far diachronic and synchronic approaches have often found selective application in an “either-or” fashion. But as the above introduced examples of infrastructure, tourism and trade show, we have to think both together to describe processes of change. In the past decades many such processes have commonly been subsumed under the term globalisation, a term which is a discursive paradigm to be analysed rather than an analytical concept (Friedman and Friedman-Ekholm (2013). We aim to address an insufficient understanding of current social and economic realities of the Caucasus region by **studying connectivity in a wider historically grounded perspective** that takes connected (or entangled) histories and „history of the present“ (Wolf 1982) seriously to better make sense of contemporary processes of connectivity.

The case of the history related to the BTK railway illustrates how closely infrastructure is linked with issues of tourism and trade. From 1878 until the collapse of the Russian Empire, the Kars region, as well as another portion of Eastern Anatolia, formed part of the Russian Empire. A historical railway line that ran from Tiflis via Alexandropol (today’s Gyumri in Armenia) to Kars was built to militarily secure these acquired territories. The Russian Empire settled many heretics in its borderlands, in the case of Kars there were Molokans, spritual Christians who had branched off from the Russian-Orthodox Church, which engaged in cheese-making. Cheese-making, which Kars is famous for in Turkey, was knowledge that was brought in by Swiss who had settled in Borchali, now part of Kvemo Kartli in Georgia, and was practised as a craft by the re-settled Molokans. In the past couple of years, Kars has become an “exotic” touristic place domestically in Turkey, marketing its rich historical heritage. With the BTK, inhabitants of the Kars region also hope to draw more on tourism from outside Turkey.

How in the context of the BTK domestic heritage tourism in Turkey is intertwined with its transport history illustrates that tourism as such is grounded in a particular long-durée or historical conjunctures. As mentioned, tourism has been an important factor in matters of connectivity and disconnectivity in the South Caucasus since at least Tsarist times. In the early 19th century, the Caucasus developed into a key destination for Russians, first for military officers who were finding rest during Tsarist Russia’s campaign of expanding southwards (Bamberger 2019, 86). Particularly, imaginaries of Georgia as an exotic place of leisure, but likewise of peripheral backwardness against the backdrop of the Russian imperial centre’s alleged civilizationally advanced status, have been reproduced during the Soviet Union and are still prevalent today. They merge in the image of “sunny Georgia”, identified with fruitful lands and beautiful landscapes but also reflecting a particular “tourist gaze” of Russians vacationing in post-Soviet Georgia, representing a passed-down entitlement to the region as a “space of leisure” (Bamberger, 2019, 103). Also in a more narrow understanding of connectivity, there have been significant continuities between past and present, as the Georgian Military Highway, once the main thoroughfare from the Russian empire’s centre to its periphery, is still an important route for Russian tourists to enter Georgia, for example for reaching the country’s winter sport resorts.



A long-durée perspective also adds value to understanding transregional small-scale trade that connects the Caucasus region with a multitude of places abroad. The Caucasus is often associated with Silk Road imaginaries, thus with travelling merchants, bazaars, trade routes, caravans and trading posts, which, indeed shaped the region's economy and connectivity in the past. However, the so-called Silk Road probably never really existed. The Silk Road was neither a road, nor solely related to silk trade. It was not even perceived as an entity. The term, that is associated with a millennium old history, was coined in the 19th century by Ferdinand von Richthofen, who used it to build economic and strategic alliances (Millward 2013, Rippa 2020). Today, the notion has a revival for similar reasons: for promoting foreign policies and global economic strategies (e.g., in the context of BRI) thereby referring to allegedly historical links (Karrar 2018). In parallel, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the opening of borders with western countries and China, bazaars and open air markets popped up like mushrooms across Eurasia including the Caucasus regions. Since the 1990s one can observe an increase in bazaar, shuttle- and long-distance trade that is based on informal economic practices, individual mobility and trade connections, which are managed through personal social relationships and link markets and individuals from the Caucasus and abroad (Fehlings & Karrar 2020). Traders operating in this economic sphere (together with labour migrants) have often been seen as the driving actors of a so-called “globalization from below” (Portes 1997). The activities and connections of contemporary bazaar, shuttle and long-distance traders can hardly be seen in continuation with a Silk Road heritage. However, this modern trade, which creates, builds on and adapts to different forms of connectivity might share some characteristics of the exchange practices of the ancient past — and certainly has its own historical rooting in Soviet and post-Soviet conditions.

### The Complex Workings of Power

In the early 1980s when globalization as a concept was only emerging, the social anthropologists Eric Wolf (1982) and Sidney Mintz (1986) combined a global historical and political economy perspective with social anthropology's strengths – empirical gazes departing from the very local. Wolf (1982) has not only shown how the history of the European expansion silenced the history of the “encountered” and how the capitalist expansion affected and connected different people around the globe in manifold ways. But he has convincingly argued to regard the history of the present as a history of power that consists chiefly of such interconnected cultural and socio-economic processes; an insight which many contemporary studies of connectivity are oblivious to. Similarly, post-colonial studies more generally, which have advocated for the writing of entangled histories (e.g. Espagne 1999, Conrad and Randiera 2002), have pointed to the bidirectional character of exchange relations despite power asymmetries. Unimpeded smooth flows (of people and goods) across the globe that connect formerly remote places are a dominant image that has shaped much of how globalisation has been envisioned - not least in and with view to the Caucasus region. Connectivity as it has hitherto been addressed perpetuates such an imagery of ever more intense smooth flows. Yet, this image of smoothness straightens out much of the ruptures and inequalities produced by

these flows as well as deep underlying asymmetries (see e.g. Tsing 2004, Scheele 2018, Saxer & Andersson 2019).

We suggest to **pay special attention to the complex workings of power**, exercised by a variety of actors and establishing different levels of agency. In the context of shuttle trade, traders' activities depend on many constraints imposed by, for instance, border regimes, national and international bodies of law, economic treaties and agreements between governments, which again cooperate with powerful economic organisations. The risky business of shuttle and bazaar trade also depends on the global economy more generally, on exchange rate fluctuations, consumption patterns, and shifts in supply and demand, which again, result, as Mintz (1986) and others have argued, from power relations and global history. Still, many goods and ideas reach the Caucasus because of traders' individual activity and mobilities and would not have been accessible otherwise. Traders, choosing to buy goods from China and Turkey shape consumption patterns at home. They are mediators between local consumers and foreign producers and industries and it is their agency that connects local and global markets.

Similar to trade, the mere construction of transport infrastructure, such as the BTK, usually evokes many imaginaries of future (economic) opportunities for the many that accompany the alleged smooth and uninterrupted global flow of goods. The BTK has barely started its operation to an extent that the amount of goods running through it might be noticeable economically. Yet, the public – be it locally in Kars or in other parts of Turkey and beyond have started to pin cautious hope to the BTK's potential future impact on their lives. The way in which the BTK as a nascent infrastructure has so far been embedded in global production networks rather indicates that only scrambles will reach the many. So far the BTK constitutes bare infrastructure in the form of a track, but lacks most elements of soft infrastructure needed to economically successful railway operation, including a high enough traffic volume. Part of the soft infrastructure is a logistical centre in Kars, which was officially inaugurated in late 2020 by the Turkish president – to feed development imaginaries. However, as of March 2021 not even the customs check of freight traffic has been moved out of overcrowded Kars station to be handled at the logistics centre as planned, not to speak of a centre with logistical operations that add value locally. The future is very likely to depend on the ways in which the Turkish state will manage to live up to these developmentalist promises. Many fulfilled and unfulfilled symbolic development promises in large-scale infrastructure projects across Turkey and elsewhere underpin the BTK's history in the making. Such past trajectories also illustrate how much the intrinsic link of infrastructure and development promises is about power relations in the (constant) making.

As argued above, tourism connectivities are deeply impregnated with power and power relations. These span a wide continuum, from more subtle forms, such as a sense of superiority between Russian guests and Georgian hosts, reflecting passed-down and reproduced centre-periphery relations, to the politically motivated instrumental and purposeful use of asymmetries and dependencies, such as was illustrated by a centrally imposed interdiction of Russian direct flights to

Georgia in the summer of 2019. In the case of Georgia, the vulnerability is not least linked to the enormous share of tourism in the local economy. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, in 2019 tourism's total share in Georgian employment was 27.7%, total travel and tourism's contribution to Georgia's GDP was 26.3%. Yet, asymmetries and dependencies are hardly ever absolute and therefore allow for counter-practices or tactics. As such, in 2019 Georgia managed to compensate at least for part of the foregone revenues from Russian tourists by reacting with a creative campaign that called for international solidarity through vacating in Georgia. This is a matter in point, as tourism is usually more readily associated with soft power through effective nation and destination branding, rather than forms of hard power or coercion. Power relations and asymmetries, however, are not only inherent on the international level but also below. Thus, Voll and Mosedale (2015) have shown how in the case of Svaneti, local tourism development has been in particular promoted by external actors, be it the central Georgian government or Western European countries and the US development agencies. Moreover, they have pointed out how local development has been shaped by decisions taken elsewhere - in particular if local resilience towards external influences has been weak.

### Instances of Disconnectivity

We have pointed to asymmetries and how power plays out in nodes of interaction (Wolf 1982) of global and (trans-)regional relations across a variety of scales. As the concept of nodes of interaction insinuates, vectors of connectivity are far from being one-way. Allegedly powerless people living in allegedly remote peripheries not only adapt to but also shape globalizations with a variety of tactics (and strategies) between appropriation of infrastructure or knowledge and resistance to these, which help them cope with and manipulate power relations (as e.g. in Sahlins' (1999) indigenization of modernity). Thus, our approach aims at tackling connectivity in a more holistic perspective, which specifically **involves being mindful of (simultaneous) instances of disconnectivity** or 'dispossessing forms of connection' (Sparke 2007, 346). As Saxer et al. (2019) have emphasized remoteness is all but the flip side of connectivity, as well as ostensible disconnectivity also constitutes a connecting relation.

The changing practices of traders reflect their adaptability to changing trading conditions. Such conditions are shaped by infrastructures, transport means, production costs, formal institutions and rules related to visa regimes, export- and customs regulations and political stability as well as safety etc. These conditions and trust relationships with business partners abroad determine the decisions of traders and their personal connections. If conditions for trade are unfavourable, if trade becomes unprofitable in one place, traders adapt and travel to new destinations and build new connections (Fehlings 2020). Thus, connectivity and disconnectivity in this specific contexts has an ephemeral character and each describe a temporally restricted condition. Sometimes, it is disconnectivity on official levels, that form a source of income on grassroots levels of informal exchange. For many years shuttle traders have profited from the lack of official exchange between China and the

Caucasus, which made them the main providers of Chinese goods in the Caucasus. This might well change with BRI policies.

No matter whether promising imaginaries of increased future economic activity stipulated by the BTK in Kars and in other transit stops along the way such as Akhalkalaki are deceitful. Said places will be connected to economic centres in much faster ways spatially, again altering time-space compressions. Nodes of interaction, such as hiring local personnel needed for railway operations and for instance their cooperation with colleagues across the border, have already been created. Yet, the nascent and evolving re-shaping of centre-periphery relationships remain ambivalent and are highly dialectic. The probable risk of being drawn into global production networks merely as non-places or at least peripheral in economic terms persists for places like Kars and Akhalkalaki.

As concerns tourism, while there certainly are, as outlined above, important historical continuities, there are also significant disruptions to earlier practices of tourism and South Caucasus tourism geographies. For example access to and the condition of the “Soviet Riviera” at the Black Sea Coast have been significantly detrimentally affected by the protracted conflicts between Georgia and the renegade region of Abkhazia, respectively the related fraught relationship between Georgia and Russia. The conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh as well has cut off important communication links, thus impeding South Caucasus intra-regional transport. While the protracted conflicts have been for a long time sources for regional disconnectivity – but also for the emergence of new routes of connectivity – tourism has been affected by other forms or sources of disconnectivity as well. Most recently, a major driver of disconnectivity has been the global Covid-19 pandemic. Restrictions on international travel but also local movement as well as quarantine stipulations and other measures to curb the virus from spreading have not only led to a fundamental slump in tourism revenues but also highlighted tourism’s vulnerability and dependence on open borders and unimpeded movement. Such vulnerability also opens ways to purposefully manipulate access, thereby exerting (political) power. As shown above, in the summer of 2019 Russia used disconnectivity as a sanctioning mechanism or political instrument, when it restricted direct flights to Georgia at the start of the summer vacationing season over a bilateral political row.

## **Conclusion**

By focussing on the Caucasus we have tried to move beyond glossy slogans and a grand rhetoric of connectivity. We have reviewed the literature on connectivity and identified two major perspectives on connectivity, one of which is more concerned with the **production of scales in synchronic ways**, while the other is more interested in **processes that make and shape systems across time**. A third perspective, which we regard as closely linked to the other two perspectives, has emerged in interrelation with a particular political project of connectivity, namely **China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**. While these bodies of literature have provided important insights and starting points for further research and theorizing, we have also identified several gaps in the current

research on connectivity. In order to address these we propose to simultaneously channel attention to four crucial aspects of connectivity in particular: a) **scale** and its production, b) on **historicity** of the present as well as c) on **power** and d) **disconnectivity**. We have illustrated such an approach by combining examples from three research fields integral to connectivity: infrastructure, tourism and trade. By doing so, we have shown how connectivity and disconnectivity are intertwined and how they are constituted by different scales, history, and changing power relations. We thus aim to contribute to a broader discussion of connectivity as a theoretical concept but also to provide insights into the complex landscape of connectivity in the specific regional context of the Caucasus region, which — on the one hand, has often been portrayed as disconnected and a periphery at the edge of Europe — and on the other hand promoted as a trading hub and transit zone by local actors.

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