Road to Russia – Special Report

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The road that makes it so easy for Russia to invade Tbilisi that the Georgian government may not even have time to declare mobilization – we are building ourselves, with a billion-dollar loan. After the start of the war in Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions, this road became one of the main channels for supplying goods to Russia. The government of Georgia is in a hurry to build a highway leading to its own occupier, and justifies it with economic interests. However, the government withholds the documents which should explain what benefits the project should bring to the country. In fact, the income from transit tax covers only 65% of the wear and tear damage caused by the trucks. The unique Khada Valley already fell victim to the construction of the road, and now the existence of Pasanauri village is in question.

The unique Khada Valley is being sacrificed for the construction of the new road leading to Russia. And it's not just Khada.

''If a mudslide sets off from here it will flood Aragvi river and completely erase every trace of Pasanauri'' – fears Gela Kobaidze, engineer-mechanic from Pasanauri. By the current project, one of the sections of the new Mtskheta-Stepantsminda-Larsi will pass directly over Daba Pasanauri. The state plans to longitudinally drill the mountain system above the resort, where tunnels and their connecting bridges will be arranged.

''The danger is immense. This is a huge landmass of rock, stone, and rubble, which can cause an inexorable disaster and take many lives.

> **After that, no apologies will be acceptable; there will no longer be any use for their helicopters or any kind of rescue teams'' – says another Pasanauri resident Ani Kavtaradze.**

The mountains, at the foot of which the resort lies, are always crumbling and are characterized by frequent landslides. Locals think that additional drilling and engineering works in the mountains will lead to inevitable disaster in Pasanauri.

Nino Gujaraidze, Executive Director of Green Alternative: **''The route which has been selected, in our and local's point of view, is particularly dangerous.''**

Georgia is in a hurry to build a new link road with Russia. However, what benefits this brings to the country is unclear.

Eter Veshaguri – Khada Valley resident: **''This devastated Khada Valley! It didn't help anything. If it starts to rain in the middle of the night, I run out! I have a big trench coat, I throw it on and listen for the sound of the ground starting to shift. I think about where I would escape. I'm so scared! If they announce that it will keep raining, I go up to the neighbor's house or run down to flatland.**

Environmentalist Nino Gujaraidze is one of the main critics of this new road project. She has been researching the issue for years and has specific remarks: **''Any such large-scale project should be preceded by technical-economic justification. The executor should justify why this road is necessary. We requested the documents, and the Roads Department told us that based on our request, they reassessed the value of the document and decided it is their commercial secret.''**

We returned to Gujaraidze with a question:

- Why is all this being done if we cannot benefit from it?

- Yes, this is a very logical question, and I guess we all have our own answers.

> **The locals are saying that nothing like what's occurring now on the old so-called military road connecting to Larsi has ever happened before. The situation changed after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war.**

Georgia has become one of the main pipelines for channeling goods to Russia, which, despite favorable weather, creates a bottleneck on Jvari Pass.

- **In 2021, 332,070 freight trucks passed** through the roads of Georgia.

- **In 2022**, after the war began, this number **ballooned to 450,000**.

- And **in the first 7 months** of the current year, Georgia already funneled up to **300,000 lorries**, which extrapolates to well over 500,000 by the end of the year.

Manana Kochladze – Chairwoman of Green Alternative: **‘’cargo transfer to Russia has increased a lot in recent years, approximately 16% in 2022.‘’**

If we read the objectives of the North-South Corridor project, we will see that one of the set priorities is the promotion of transit cargo traffic.

Manana Kochladze: **‘’We keep hearing that increasing this transit will bring in more money to the state budget. But in reality, we have to factor in both income and expenses, that is, how much income the transit actually brings, and how much we are spending on road maintenance and repair.’’**

In a study commissioned by the Asian Development Bank, we read that **one truck traveling 400 kilometers in Georgia causes a damage of $200 to the road infrastructure. The road usage fee is 350 GEL. At the current exchange rate that converts to 130 USD, meaning, the transit tax covers only 65 percent of the damage.**

Manana Kochladze: ‘’Roads are quite expensive in Georgia. The maintenance of this section of Mleta, as well as that of the Kobi-Kvesheti section, will cost us about 15,000 dollars per kilometer a year.’’

Another reason given in the documents for the construction of this road is realizing the tourism potential of the region. In their study, they write that the local population, the cultural heritage, and the landscape make the valley attractive to tourists. But, the reality is that the locals are fleeing and nature is increasingly spoiled.

Sofio Aptsiauri: **‘’Khada was viewed as a resort, but since they started building this road, everything got ruined.’’**

Nikala Rostiashvili, the husband of Sofio Aptsiauri, is being forced to leave the place where he spent his whole life at the age of 88.

- What can we do? I don’t want to leave but I have no choice. They told us they would give us money and we should go resettle somewhere else.

- Can you afford a house in the neighboring villages with this money?

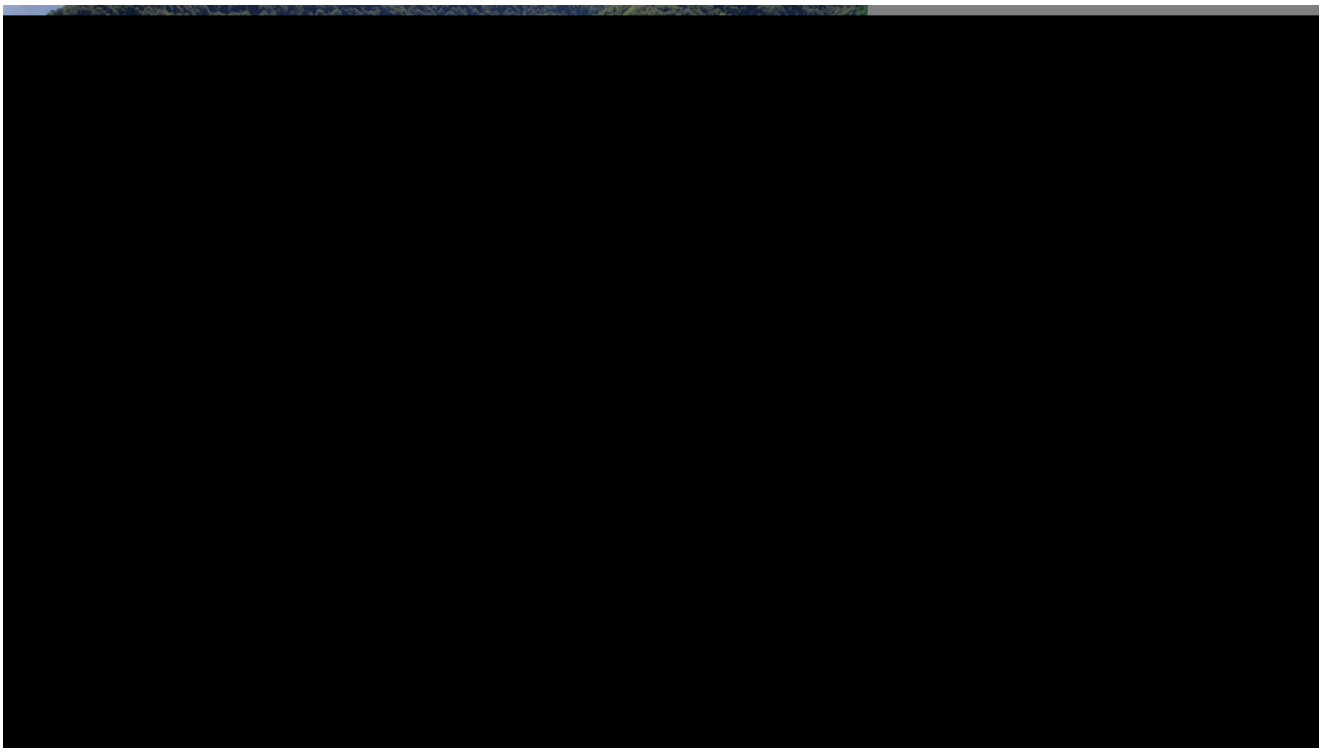
- No! It would not be enough for blocks and cement alone.

‘’In fact, this region was great, untouched, and with some proper planning, it could benefit both the population and the state through ecotourism, much more than with this road.

They say that one of the larger bridges, which is supposed to span 500 meters, is going to beautify this valley. How can any, even much cooler bridge, add anything of value to this valley,'' says Kochladze.

Nino Gujaraidze: This was a haven for nature lovers, attractive to people who love to explore nature. Tourists don't like exploring highways! It will be used by Russian tourists to enter into our country.

Manana Kochladze: We know that people lived here since the Neolithic period. It is a very important valley for the history of Georgia. There were archeological excavations a little further down, where a part of a historical complex was discovered, but after it turned out that this historical complex overlaps with the road, the archaeological research inexplicably stopped.



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Danger of Pasanauri disappearing

To express their protest, the people of Pasnauri gathered and stated their common views in a meeting:

- There should be no talks about the tunnels, end of story!

-They mockingly told us that we should be thankful that the workers would rent our houses and we would have some cash income. What houses?! Where will we go?

-Imagine if these people, who live at the foot of the mountain, were evicted. Then what do we do to those people living on the lower side? Here's a clear example: In April of last year, a ravine collapsed as a result of flooding and engulfed the entire Pasanauri.

Before that, the same people confronted state representatives, when the roads department presented the Khando-Pasanauri bypass road construction project in the center of Pasanauri. The people of Pasanauri complained that:

- The soil hasn't been studied! Geologists never went up the mountain!

- Are you taking responsibility for if something happens to us?!

- Will the state's condolences help me when the disaster strikes?!

Salome Tsurtsumia, the deputy chairwoman of the Roads Department, who chaired the meeting, left without answering our question about how this new road benefits the state.

We went up the mountain along with Gela Kobaidze and two other locals in order to assess the situation on the slopes on site.

Gela Kobaidze: ''All this rubble has been brought down from above. That collapsed slope, grass hasn't even grown over it yet, it's clearly recent. As if some wall is going to stop a destabilized rock that has already started to shift. How can this be?! We are talking megatons, not gigatons. Which wall, which reinforcement is going to hold this?!

- Are they saying they will safeguard with a wall?

- Yes, they say walls will be built… let's not artificially cause erosion and trigger landslide processes… let's not disturb this mountain too much. We know the character of these mountains full well; they are not going to forgive such intrusion.

- When you were settling here, could you imagine such a large tunnel being cut here?

> **- No, and we won't let them! If they bring tanks, we will lay before them! They shouldn't mess with us! Everyone will rise up!**

The total cost of just the Kobi-Kvesheti section, which connects to Russia, is up to 550 million US dollars. The selected routes often require the relocation of existing infrastructure. As in the case of Zhinvali.

Manana Kochladze: ''A lot of infrastructure overlaps with this zone. Apart from GWP, there's an oil and gas company pipeline that comes from Russia and goes to Armenia. There are also power lines owned by Energo-Pro, as well as the SOCAR gas pipeline. All this will have to be moved.''

Nino Gujaraidze: ''First of all, we should ask

Why we are incurring so much expense and why are we putting up with this. Why is it worth it? When such complex routes are selected, the only logical suspicion that arises is the possibility of siphoning construction costs.''

Research by the American National Academy of Engineering has found that in the global engineering/construction industry, more than $500 billion is lost to embezzlement every year. It is internationally recognized that publicly funded road construction projects are exceptionally prone to corruption compared to all other sectors.

Manana Kochladze: ''The section up to Lars is divided into two parts. One is four and a half kilometers long and the other is one and a half kilometers, so why is that? Well, according to the Environmental Assessment Code of Georgia, if the road is shorter than five kilometers, it does not have to undergo an environmental impact assessment. That four-and-a-half kilometer section is still being evaluated on environmental impact, but on the most difficult sections, which is visually apparent, because they are narrow, very problematic, and include sensitive areas which should not be disturbed, they avoided it.

There is yet another, military-political risk.

Helping the enemy

Colonel Lasha Beridze: **''No one can conquer us from the air. Soldiers must come in and establish land control. Tbilisi is a large city, Russia would need at least 100,000 men to mount a successful attack, assuming Georgian forces defend it.**

It would take Russia more than two weeks to concentrate such force, which cannot go unnoticed. This leaves the Georgian government the time to declare mobilization, prepare and position armed forces, receive aid from international partners, and influence Russia. This road completely negates this advantage. Georgian authorities may not even have enough time to declare mobilization.

Considering the last 200 years, the threat always comes from the north.

Manana Kochladze: ''In 2022, after Russia invaded Ukraine and became subject to a plethora of sanctions, the transit of goods from Europe to Russia ceased, and Georgia became one of the primary transit countries which Russia uses to import goods, just like Iran and Armenia, also, the transit of Turkish lorries through Georgia has increased.''

Nino Gujaraidze; **''First and foremost, we should define our national trajectory.**

If we say we need a high-capacity road with Russia, this means it falls in line with our long-term plans in this regard. This is not just a matter of a road, this is a matter of overall national policy.

Based on your national policy, you make decisions about what to build, which direction to pursue, and what plans you have in terms of relations with specific countries. This project is being implemented with complete disregard for public opinion, they refuse to alter any of their decisions, which makes us think that they are pursuing a very specific agenda, which they stay true to no matter what.

Apart from rain and landslide, Eter Veshaguri shares another fear of hers with us: **‘’People are afraid. This road is very dangerous. Russia can strike us anytime it wants.’’**

Colonel Lasha Beridze: **‘’We should not just think of ourselves. We should think of future generations. No one foresaw the dangers posed by the Roki tunnel during the Soviet Union. Well, they couldn’t have envisioned it, so I don’t blame them. The tunnel caused serious problems for President Zviad Gamsakhurdia in the 90s; it caused problems for Shevardnadze – it was a gateway for contraband and one of the pathways of draining the nation, and it caused us major problems during the 2008 war.**

Russia may have its choice of routes for invasion, but we should at least not make it easier for the enemy to conquer us. This road makes it much easier for them.’’

Authors: **Davit Tamazashvili, Lasha Chonkadze**