

DEFENDING THE RIONI VALLEY: CIVIC RESISTANCE TO CORPORATE TAKEOVER IN WESTERN GEORGIA

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This article presents an example of civic resistance to the construction of a giant hydropower plant (HPP) in the Republic of Georgia. Extractive economic and political institutions, the primary sources for spreading poverty and conflict in the developing world, survive and prosper because they are supported and encouraged by international entities such as multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and the governments of wealthy nations. The new hydropower plant threatened the Rioni Valley in western Georgia with large-scale ecological destruction and the extraction of natural and human resources. The opposition movement to the plan unified civic groups that represented the broadest political representation in the country. The civic opposition successfully halted an international megaproject through joint effort and by employing peaceful means only.

INTRODUCTION

The neoliberal model of economic production is not sustainable because of the growing global population and increased competition worldwide for the means of production. Our planetary resources cannot support the ever-increasing thirst for energy, land, water, and raw materials. Predictions for 2030 suggest that global consumption is likely to increase over 2016

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estimates by 35 percent for food, 40 percent for water, and 50 percent for energy.¹ As populations' incomes rise, the food types that are in higher demand—dairy, meat, fish, sugar—have an especially significant impact on energy and water. According to experts, the interconnectivity between trends in climate change and resource scarcity further amplifies this impact, as climate change can reduce agricultural productivity by a sizable margin. Unsurprisingly, poor and developing countries and their resources represent easy targets for governments of wealthy countries, international financial institutions, and multinational corporations. Acting in concert with corrupt or incompetent national governments of developing countries, the neoliberal model of economic production creates a fertile ground for full-scale exploitation of populations of poor and developing countries and their natural resources. Such alliances of corrupt or incompetent government officials, international financial institutions, and foreign corporations act as triangles of exploitation that have immense power to seize natural resources in their quest of furthering their economic and political goals.

This article argues that it is possible for civic groups to use peaceful means to halt the development of massive destructive projects primarily designed to extract natural resources for the benefit of multinational corporations. The case presented in this essay is civic resistance to the construction of a giant hydropower plant (HPP) in western Georgia. Extractive economic and political institutions, the primary sources for spreading poverty and conflict in the developing world, survive and prosper because they are supported and encouraged by international entities such as multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and governments of wealthy nations. In *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson explore the failure of certain states as a function of extractive institutions dominant in the failed states over extended periods. Institutions or regularized patterns of behaviour are the foremost determinants of whether or not nations develop economically and politically, their geographic location, demography, culture, and so on being secondary factors. By design, extractive institutions exclude the majority of people in a given state from political and economic decision making and income distribution, as opposed to inclusive institutions that enable the broadest layers of society possible in economic production and political governance. In contrast to theories that explain inequality through geography, culture, or ignorance, Acemoglu and Robinson advance an institutionalist explanation for world inequality. They argue that “while

economic institutions are critical for determining whether a country is poor or prosperous, it is politics and political institutions that determine what economic institutions a country has.”² The Namakhvani HPP examined in this article was prepared and organized in secrecy by the government of Georgia under the alleged goals of “economic development” and “foreign investment.” However, the government could not have developed this massive project without assistance from powerful international bodies: two multinational corporations, foreign governments, and international financial institutions. In this case, the multinational corporations, which enjoy strong political backing by their governments, have struck a deal with the government of Georgia to take advantage of extractive institutions in that country in concocting a billion-dollar project funded with loans from international financial institutions.

This article also reports on the valiant and successful effort by groups of citizens in the Republic of Georgia to resist the attempts of the multinational triangle of interests intent on seizing significant portions of a major river and its valley in western Georgia. The government of Georgia's vision of a gigantic HPP in western Georgia was planned in a secret deal with Norwegian and Turkish corporations backed by their respective governments and the blessing of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The deal was premised on a considerable international loan to be repaid by the Georgian taxpayer, with projected meager economic returns to the country.

For most of the twentieth century, HPPs were considered the only source of renewable energy. Since their inception in the late nineteenth century, thousands of HPPs have been built worldwide, with the industrialized world leading in both numbers and size of the dams. Most of the massive hydroelectric dams in North America and Europe were constructed in the 1920s and the 1930s, and then after World War II. However, new dam development slowed down significantly in the late 1960s and ceased altogether in the United States in the 1970s, and in Europe in the 1980s.³ Initially, new large HPPs stopped being planned because dam constructions had already used all the prime locations.

However, by the late twentieth century, researchers started to understand the immense cost that giant HPPs imposed on society and the environment. In addition to the greater-than-anticipated cost of operationalizing HPPs, these dams disrupt river ecology, cause substantial deforestation, damage aquatic

and land biodiversity, affect the food systems near them, displace many of thousands of residents and deteriorate sanitary conditions, agriculture, water quality, and public health. HPPs also release greenhouse gasses and contribute to climate change.⁴ Furthermore, all hydroelectric dams have a finite lifespan. The older they get, the more likely they will collapse either because of their aging materials or the accumulation of sediment behind the dam impoundment. Collapsed dams can cause significant economic damage,⁵ flooding,⁶ dispossession,⁷ and loss of life.⁸ Because of the danger they represent and environmental damage they cause, thousands of dams have been removed in North America and Europe. Repairing a small dam can cost three times that to remove it—an essential factor in the growing trend to remove them.⁹

At the same time, there are thousands of HPP projects in various stages of completion in the developing world. Developing countries push through giant HPP projects to increase their share of renewable energy in the global mix according to sustainable development goals. These hydropower projects affect the vital river basins around the world, including the Amazon, the Congo, and the Mekong. The projects create enormous ecological disruptions in these regions, with extensive hydrologic consequences manifesting as sharp declines in available freshwater as a result of dam construction. Socio-economic problems are also extensive, primarily for those resettling because of dam construction. According to the World Commission on Dams, 40 to 80 million people were displaced in the twentieth century without having been relocated properly.¹⁰ In addition, the living conditions and food security of communities living downstream are often severely affected by the loss of fisheries or flood recession agriculture or other natural resources. According to a conservative estimate, 472 million people worldwide have been negatively affected downstream from dams.¹¹

The first hydropower plant in Georgia was built in the late nineteenth century to provide energy for the Russian emperor's favourite vacation spot.¹² However, a variety of projects started to develop soon after the country was annexed by Soviet Russia in 1921. The Soviet government was keen on creating all sorts of power plants following Vladimir Lenin's GOELRO slogan, according to which communism was equal to "Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country." Georgia's mountainous geography attracted Soviet dam construction, and while most of the HPPs were small or medium sized, the first giant HPP, Enguri, was put into operation in

1978. The Enguri Dam boasts the second-highest concrete arch dam in the world, with a height of 271.5 metres. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev ordered this immense project in 1961, and it was not fully completed until 1987. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Georgia inherited this massive dam with no funds or resources to maintain it. To keep the Enguri Dam intact and its HPP operational, Georgia had to borrow more than USD\$150 million from 1999 to 2011.¹³ Currently, there are more than 140 hydropower plant projects in Georgia in various stages of development.¹⁴

BACKGROUND TO THE NAMAKHVANI HPP PROJECT

The idea for a giant HPP on the Rioni River of Georgia was first proposed in the 1970s. The Soviet government of Georgia commissioned a multi-agency feasibility study for such a project, which took more than fifteen years to complete. The study's conclusions were far from encouraging, and Soviet authorities first delayed the project and then never had a chance to develop it after the Soviet Union collapsed. The end of Soviet rule in Georgia has not changed much in the minds of those who think that gigantic HPPs are a key to a bright and prosperous future, with former communist officials aided and pushed along by Western financial institutions and multinational corporations. Even though almost all Western countries stopped building gigantic hydropower plants in the 1970s and 1980s, former Soviet states and developing countries in general have continued to construct enormous HPPs that cause wholesale destruction of vast ecological areas. Giant cascade dams, including those built in the Soviet Union, have similarly caused the environment great damage.¹⁵ Furthermore, evidence suggests that more than 90 percent of the dams built in the 1930s were more expensive than anticipated. Currently in the developing world, an estimated 3,700 dams, large and small, are in various stages of development—many of them supported and promoted by Western investors or donors.¹⁶ According to the conclusions of the study "Sustainable Hydropower in the 21st Century," large-scale HPPs in the developing world are not sustainable because of the very high costs of operation, maintenance, and external damage.¹⁷

The first feasibility study for constructing a two-step HPP in the upper Rioni Valley was approved by the USSR's Ministry of Energy in 1972. Subsequently, Soviet authorities commissioned a group of scientists in

Georgia to study the Namakhvani project and examine the sustainability issue alongside other aspects of constructing two large-scale dams in this part of the country. As a result of research that demonstrated problems with the two-step cascade design, including the potential to trigger massive landslides and flood some of Georgia's most fertile agricultural lands,¹⁸ by 1983 the HPP design had changed to a three-step cascade design. The Soviet government commissioned relevant studies, which resulted in 125 volumes of technical documentation. The construction of the three-step cascade started in 1988 but was halted in 1989 as the Soviet Union began to experience a series of political crises, and old ideas and projects were re-examined.¹⁹ The total area allocated for the construction of the giant HPP was 1,743.13 hectares, of which 924.71 hectares were supposed to be flooded, including 296.94 hectares of prime agricultural land.²⁰ The cascade project was supposed to have two separate HPPs—the Lower Namakhvani, rated for 333 MW (megawatts), and the Upper Namakhvani, rated for 100 MW. The total surface area for both reservoirs was expected to be 6.1 square kilometres.²¹

The area that would be affected has high-quality ancient viticulture producing a unique vine appellation, Tvishi, which would be lost, and tea plantations—it is the northernmost tea growing area in the world. This area of the Rioni Valley is relatively densely settled with private farms and gardens, most of which would be destroyed. The cattle breeding farms would be affected as well, because the project imposes a prohibitively high cost upon the cattle farmers in the form of biomass processing facilities.²² The project could also trigger a return of malaria in Georgia, which was eradicated by 1970. In addition, scientists preparing the feasibility project in the 1980s identified at least twenty-seven archeological and historical monuments in the region, most of which would be lost.²³ A more recent assessment has shown that the cascade dams threaten a critically endangered fish species in the Rioni River.²⁴ The Black Sea beaches near Poti would be affected as well as the city itself as a result of decreased delivery of hard deposits by the Rioni River to the seaside area.²⁵

It should be noted that the Soviet-period feasibility study, now more than forty years old, used 1970s Soviet standards for health, water, and climate change assessments. The 1970s study concluded that water quality, public health, and climate would not be impacted much. However, since then the standards of assessing threats to public health and water quality have

increased, not to mention the phenomenon of climate change, which may be the most problematic issue in this project. It would be hard, if not impossible, to include climate change impacts in such models because climate change effects are typically unpredictable. It is worth emphasizing the fact that no study on the ecological, economic, or social impact of the Namakhvani project has been conducted since the early 1980s: both the government of Georgia and its international partners have continuously relied on the old Soviet studies in their assessment of the Namakhvani HPP's impact on the geography, climate, ecology, and population of western Georgia. Enka, a multinational corporation from Turkey that “won” the Namakhvani contract, has produced precious little of its own research, primarily relying on superficial assessments.²⁶

Acemoglu and Robinson's theory of world inequality in *Why Nations Fail* centres on national economic and political institutions as the prime cause for poverty and underdevelopment in impoverished countries. Indeed, political and legal institutions can influence economic development and national prosperity a great deal—if through nothing else, at least through property rights that are the bloodlines of the capitalist mode of production.²⁷ However, contemporary political and economic institutions should not be considered within purely national contexts. They are genuinely affected and influenced by much larger international institutions, some of which make the economic development of emerging countries their primary business. In the case of Georgia's Namakhvani project, these international institutions played a crucial role by supporting and advancing a half-baked idea for a gigantic cascade HPP that could have severely damaged the country's natural environment and economy.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

The international corporations that currently hold a licence from the government of Georgia to build a large HPP in western Georgia did not initially divulge their true identities and intentions. In 2017, the tender to construct the Namakhvani HPP was awarded to a group of Norwegian entrepreneurs who had created a shell company called Clean Energy Group, backed by undisclosed investors.²⁸ The Turkish multinational corporation Enka used a Norwegian shell company to obtain the rights to Namakhvani

HPP. The Norwegian shell company is affiliated with the privately held Norwegian company Norsk Mineral, identified as “the majority owner in Clean Energy Invest.”²⁹ Together with officials from the Georgian government, the Norwegian and Turkish corporations coordinated this act to avoid additional questions from Georgian civil society.

According to the original contract, the Norwegian company owned a stake in the project of at least 90 percent, the rest belonging to Enka, a Turkish construction firm.³⁰ Soon after winning the tender, however, this arrangement changed diametrically: the Norwegian company “sold” its 90 percent stake to the Turkish multinational while keeping the other 10 percent of the share. The project managers also subcontracted an Italian company to develop an engineering design for the HPP.³¹ The Georgian government did not raise objections to these developments and went along without asking any questions about this remarkable change in the project’s ownership.

³²Indeed, the ownership switch between two international corporations was dramatic: Norway is far away from Georgia, while Turkey is a neighbour that has historically contested the territory of western Georgia, where the gigantic power plant was supposed to be built. Moreover, according to the contract, the Turkish multinational, which the Turkish government strongly backs, would own the upper valley of the Rioni River for ninety-nine years. Rioni is the second-largest river in Georgia, the primary source of both drinking water and an agricultural irrigation network. The largest river in Georgia, the Mtkvari (Kura), which crosses Georgia from west to east, originates in Turkey. The Norwegian-to-Turkish ownership change looked even more suspicious since the contract details were confidential and not released to the public.³³

The nearly forgotten giant HPP on the Rioni River, in the form of the Namakhvani cascade, less than twenty-five kilometres north of Georgia’s second-largest city, Kutaisi, was resurrected soon after the National Movement party came to power in Georgia in 2004. Under the National Movement, Georgia upgraded its economic and political institutions to meet the demands of a newly independent country, specifically those governing economic activities and investments. The Georgian government also started to improve communications and transportation networks and initiated significant projects to modernize the country’s electricity production and distribution. Once again, Georgia’s geographic location became attractive to those who wanted to build and operate new HPPs. For this purpose, the

government of Georgia resurrected several old HPP projects, among them that of Namakhvani, and asked the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to assess the Namakhvani project and its feasibility.³⁴

In 2006, USAID looked at almost every aspect of the Rioni River HPP project, focusing on its commercial feasibility. In all other facets, the USAID analysis relied on the research done by Soviet Georgian researchers in the 1970s and the 1980s. The USAID study concluded that if the Namakhvani project were to cost USD\$600 million, it would only be profitable and sustainable if electricity were to go primarily for export, or if the domestic electricity price charged to consumers increased. The American analysis estimated output by a cascade of three dams, since the Soviet research had concluded that a two-dam cascade would cause massive landslides.³⁵ In December 2009, Georgia’s National Movement government signed an agreement with an international consortium to build the Namakhvani HPP for \$800 million. South Korea’s energy company KEPCO led the consortium, which included the construction company SK E&C, also from South Korea, and Nurol of Turkey.³⁶ In early 2012, the consortium collapsed after Korea’s KEPCO pulled out of the consortium, ostensibly due to the problems associated with the Great Recession. Later that year, the Georgian government invited the Korean corporations to resume the Namakhvani agreement, but they declined.³⁷ It is important to note that although more ecologically and economically sound means to generate renewable energy, such as wind turbines and solar power batteries, have existed for some time now, development of the Namakhvani project has been pushed since 2006.³⁸ Technology for both wind and solar power generating plants is improving, and as they improve, they get more efficient and affordable. Furthermore, Georgia can develop other alternative sources of energy, for instance, through wave power or geothermal plants.

The most questionable aspect of the deal has been the fact that the Turkish multinational Enka, under the cover of a Norwegian shell company, acquired a large swath of Georgian territory for ninety-nine years. Prior to Georgia’s gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia and Turkey were not as amicable as they are today. From the time Turkish tribes showed up in Asia Minor in the eleventh century, Georgia has experienced several major Turkish invasions. Turkish attacks on Georgia were particularly severe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the Ottoman Turks dominated western Georgia. Incidentally, this is where the large swath of

Georgian land Enka was supposed to get for ninety-nine years is located. Turkey's last acquisition of Georgian land was in 1921, when western Georgia and Armenia were divided between Soviet Russia and the new Turkish republic under the Treaty of Kars.³⁹ Although it is not an official position of the Turkish government, Turkish nationalists, especially those of Georgian descent—among them the current President of Turkey Recep Erdoğan—have been noted as having irredentist designs for southwestern Georgia.⁴⁰

Enka's backdoor acquisition of the Namakhvani project happened under opaque and suspicious circumstances. Oddities associated with the plan to build a giant HPP in western Georgia did not end there. Enka also amended and changed the original designs for the cascade of dams, including the locations where the dams were supposed to be constructed.⁴¹ This change was made without conducting detailed research or examining the impact of the changed design on the environment, agriculture, soil, local communities, aquatic or terrestrial flora, and fauna. When Georgian engineers drew the original Namakhvani plans in the 1980s, the research took over fifteen years and 125 volumes to address all aspects of the HPP's impact on the environment and society. With tacit approval by the Georgian government, Enka set all that aside and moved the dams' location on the Rioni River without ever producing anything that addressed the changes to the project. Most crucially, Enka decided to build a two-dam cascade HPP instead of the original three-dam design, even though the researchers in the 1980s warned that such a design would trigger massive landslides.⁴² The switch from a three-dam to a two-dam cascade was probably motivated by the desire to save funds for construction, even though the project's estimated cost had increased by USD \$250 million from the USAID's 2006 assessment of \$600 million for a three-dam project.

The government of Georgia should have anticipated that the Namakhvani HPP carried significant risks for the country and that the project would trigger considerable resistance and opposition from civil society. Since obtaining independence from the Soviet Union and gaining complete control over its energy resources and infrastructure, Georgia has had bad experiences with operating giant HPPs. During Soviet rule, Georgia's most notorious giant HPP was constructed on the Enguri River. This HPP boasts a very tall and relatively narrow dam, erected in the 1970s, with the HPP itself becoming fully operational in 1987. In the mid-1990s, engineers from

Hydro-Québec inspected the Enguri Dam. They found the dam in a state of severe disrepair and dilapidation. To fix the Enguri Dam problems, the Georgian government had to borrow a massive amount for a developing country that gets international aid every year. At the same time, its population primarily survives due to large remittances from Western nations and Russia.⁴³

Many hydropower supporters argue that water is a renewable resource. They believe that it does not contribute to climate change and decreases the consumption of coal, oil, and gas for power generation. This argument is especially prevalent in Russia.⁴⁴ However, it misses the point that there is a dramatic difference between giant and micro HPPs. The former inflict tremendous damage on the environment, while the latter cause only minimum harm. Moreover, in Georgia's case, the country is excessively dependent on hydropower, while electricity from renewable resources such as wind, solar, tide, is non-existent. The cost of the Namakhvani HPP project, almost 1 billion dollars, has been justified with energy independence and security in mind. However, Georgia could meet its energy independence goals by developing wind and solar power farms capable of generating the same amount of electricity for less money and much less damage to the environment. As solar, wind, and tide power generation develops, the cost per kilowatt of electricity decreases. On the other hand, the cost of generating electricity through hydropower increased by 25 percent from 2010 to 2018. At the same time, the cost for wind power per kilowatt electricity decreased by 25 percent during the same period, while solar power became 76 percent cheaper.⁴⁵

Although wealthy Western nations do not approve of giant HPP development within their national borders, especially near large metropolitan areas, the same reluctance does not apply to developing countries. The Namakhvani HPP construction was planned just north of Kutaisi, the largest city in western Georgia and second-largest city in the country, in an area known for seismic activity and in a river valley where there is significant potential for massive landslides because of partial deforestation. The approval and promotion of like projects through such institutions as the International Monetary Fund and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, as well as through various diplomatic activities, are justified with the buzz words of "sustainable development," "renewable energy," "economic development," "cooperation," "eradication poverty," and so on. Many of these terms are

borrowed from the UN document entitled “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”⁴⁶ Even though projects like Namakhvani have the opposite effect, it is very difficult for civil society to counter the tides of such propaganda when national governments combine forces with international economic institutions, and diplomats from wealthy countries try to ram things through.

One more essential item missing in the discourse designed to promote and justify giant HPPs is the question of fresh water. Water is a critically vital resource, and this fact is especially pronounced in poor and developing countries.⁴⁷ According to the World Health Organization, water scarcity impacts 40 percent of the world’s population, and “as many as 700 million people are at risk of being displaced as a result of drought by 2030.”⁴⁸ In Georgia, 6 percent of the population has no regular access to fresh water, while almost half of all families lack access to clean drinking water. In rural and remote areas of Georgia, only one third of the population has regular access to clean drinking water.⁴⁹ The Rioni River is the most crucial source of fresh water in western Georgia. It flows from the Caucasus Mountains south and then southwest, feeds the important Vartsikhe reservoir, a significant source of fresh water for people, cattle, and agriculture in western Georgia. By privatizing the upper valley of the Rioni River, the Georgian government essentially was selling this vital source of fresh water in western Georgia to a Turkish multinational corporation, which subsequently could have controlled the flow of water downstream for economic gain or political objectives.

Georgia’s state institutions have been oriented toward the extraction of natural resources at a very high cost to environment and society; however, they could not have achieved much without encouragement and support from international institutions. The Georgian government presented the Namakhvani HPP project to the IMF at least twice as a project designed to alleviate poverty and promote economic development.⁵⁰ The IMF did not raise objections to the project, which gave the government of Georgia the green light to attract potential investors. After Clean Energy Group, as a cover for Enka, won the bid for the giant HPP, the government of Georgia immediately accepted the latter as a legitimate contractor with a new uncontested deal, which Georgia’s own Ministry of Justice recommended against.⁵¹ Moreover, Georgia’s Ministry of Finance later revealed that it had never authorized a partnership deal with Enka, which was a necessary

precondition for this partnership to have legal standing.⁵² Around the same time, the government of Norway opened its embassy in Georgia with Ambassador Helene Sand Andresen in charge. She later played an active role in promoting and supporting the Namakhvani HPP project, acting more like a consortium official than an ambassador. The Turkish-Norwegian consortium then worked to secure loans from the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the Institute of International Finance (IIF), with the government of Georgia serving as a guarantor for the massive loans.

THE PEOPLE’S RESISTANCE TO THE PROJECT

Under the broad umbrella of societal opposition to the construction of the Namakhvani HPP were three distinct groups: local residents, NGOs representing various causes, and the religious right. The initial opposition to Enka’s giant HPP project was organized by a small group of residents headed by Varlam Goletiani, the son of a local priest. This group started protesting in the early fall of 2020 in the location that was expected to be flooded. Just as Enka was starting its construction work, some of the details of the Namakhvani HPP project were published, which triggered the protests. The group initially demanded that the project be reviewed and construction be halted until the review was completed.⁵³ This group of locals, known as the Defenders of Rioni Valley, was soon joined by the second, broader group of opponents to giant HPPs, represented through environmental activists, NGOs, social-political movements, and informal organizations primarily based in the capital city, Tbilisi.

The leading environmental NGO in Georgia opposed to Namakhvani HPP’s construction and to the development of new giant HPPs has been Green Alternative. From its founding in the mid-2000s, the organization’s mission has been to develop and promote economically viable and socially desirable development alternatives and to protect Georgia’s environment and biological and cultural heritage.⁵⁴ The Namakhvani project attracted Green Alternative’s attention soon after the organization had started operations in the second half of the 2000s. After the outlines of the contract between the government of Georgia and Enka leaked out, Green Alternative began to lobby the government and publicize the topic through the mass media. Georgia’s Greens, or the Green Movement of Georgia, have been an active

opponent of giant HPP projects for even longer. Founded during the Soviet period of *perestroika*, the Greens started opposing the gigantic HPP plans in the 1990s, when the government started discussions about resurrecting the massive Hudoni HPP venture. Social networks and the internet in general have played a crucial role in mobilizing resistance to the Namakhvani HPP dams. In fall 2020, the group called For Justice in Energy Policy started organizational efforts to support the Defenders of the Rioni Valley and coordinate their actions with environmental movements and NGOs. The group's objective was to transform the small protest action by residents in the Rioni Valley into a broader civil resistance movement,⁵⁵ which they accomplished by late 2020. This informal group, among other things, organized fundraising efforts to support those manning protest lines in the Rioni Valley. In addition to environmental groups, social justice groups as well as those representing sexual minorities, scholars, and human rights organizations have all opposed the Namakhvani HPP construction.

The third broad association of societal actors actively campaigning against the Namakhvani HPP has been the religious right. Several clergy, among them at least one bishop, have voiced their opposition to the Namakhvani project. On 29 October 2020, religious activists organized a march to the place designated for one of the dams, carrying a massive iron cross. Police tried to intervene and stop the procession, but the activists prevailed and erected the cross in its intended place.⁵⁶ Right-wing religious groups also played an essential role in organizing mass protests in western Georgia; specifically, in March 2021 protests rallies were held in Kutaisi. Once again, rally participants carried crosses and national and religious symbols. According to Nino Antadze and Kety Gujaraidze, traditional rituals laden with religious symbolism could be significant tools for resisting injustices observed in energy production and distribution.⁵⁷ The mass rallies, processions, and protest vigils organized by these diverse groups from October 2020 to June 2021 attracted tens of thousands of participants from all over Georgia. In May 2021, the protest rallies reached the country's capital, Tbilisi, where tens of thousands of people showed up for the rally just before Georgia's Independence Day on 26 May. Speakers included leaders of the Defenders of the Rioni Valley and other activists, and striking workers and representatives of other dissatisfied groups that warned against abusing natural resources.⁵⁸ The Namakhvani protest in Tbilisi was highly unusual in that no mainstream political party joined it, nor did the organizers of the rally invite them to

join. Mainstream political leaders displayed snobbish attitudes toward the protesters, many of whom were women or elderly or from rural Georgia.⁵⁹

The most unusual opponent of the Namakhvani HPP was Georgia's alt-right group. A group of individuals loosely associated with the Alt-Info streaming channel generally condemn Western values, globalization, and liberalism of all sorts, and position themselves as proponents of an authoritarian style of governance. Religious and extreme right-wing groups allied themselves with those opposing the giant HPP by focusing primarily on the fact that the government of Georgia had sold a large part of Georgian territory for ninety-nine years to a Turkish corporation closely tied with the Turkish government for what amounted to USD\$5.⁶⁰ In return, the promoters and sponsors of the Namakhvani HPP charged their opponents with xenophobia and Turkophobia. However, at the same time, the Namakhvani protests received favourable coverage in leftist Turkish publications. A publication by Turkey's leftist union movement noted that Enka, a corporation of Turkish oligarchs, was following a "familiar" scenario in Georgia.⁶¹ A Marxist environmentalist group pointed out that although there were some anti-Turkish slogans during the Namakhvani protests, the movement's leaders had distanced themselves from anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic sentiments and stressed their friendship with the Turkish people. Further, *Polen Ekoloji* accused Enka of participating in "a massacre of the environment" in Georgia and employing predatory methods in Georgia by "using law enforcement there and sponsoring manipulative rhetoric by the Turkish Embassy."⁶² The publication added that the sponsors and supporters of the giant Namakhvani HPP were hiding behind familiar buzzwords such as "energy security" and "energy independence."⁶³

Supporters of the Namakhvani project were alarmed that the resistance movement had attracted groups from across Georgia's political spectrum. Through the efforts of green movements and social justice groups, by October 2020 the protests around the Namakhvani project had spread and started to attract the attention of national media outlets, including those working primarily for the ruling party. From then on, the protest action became impossible to ignore. A range of mass media outlets in Georgia that usually sympathize with various political parties and follow their lead could no longer ignore the mass protests around Namakhvani. At the same time, most media outlets did not know how to understand and report on the anti-HPP demonstrations—it was an unusual protest movement in Georgia. For

the first time since the early 1990s, social and political groups ranging across the political spectrum were united around the same socio-economic issue. At the same time, none of Georgia's numerous political parties, a couple of them large and many small, managed to hijack the protest movement. The ruling party, Georgian Dream, ended up firmly on the wrong side of the debate with Enka and the Turkish and Norwegian embassies.

EFFORTS TO DEFEAT THE PEOPLE'S RESISTANCE

The anti-HPP protests that erupted in Georgia in the fall of 2020 were themselves noteworthy and attracted national attention because societal groups of very diverse interests and orientations were active participants. Social and non-governmental groups not usually seen together found a unified voice, which disturbed the Georgian government and the Namakhvani project's foreign backers alike. By presenting a united front, the opposition to the Namakhvani HPP prevented the government and its foreign sponsors from branding the group with a particular political moniker that would have discredited them in the public's eye. Instead, the government resorted to using police force to break and subdue protests, specifically the ones organized by the local population of the upper Rioni Valley.

Both the Turkish ambassador to Georgia, Fatma Ceren Yazgan, and the Norwegian ambassador Helene Sand Andresen, made public appearances in support of the corporate entities from their respective countries that were involved in the Namakhvani project. The Turkish ambassador took a rather aggressive stance early in 2021 by admonishing the Georgian government for not doing enough to suppress the protests and making veiled threats toward those she saw opposing Turkish interests in Georgia.⁶⁴ During the protests, Yazgan exaggerated the scope and significance of anti-Turkish sentiments around Namakhvani and reported to the Turkish public through Turkish mass media that the "anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic propaganda" was continuing "in Georgia throughout this [2020] year," which was more than a slight exaggeration.⁶⁵ A leftist Turkish publication noted that throughout the protests, Ambassador Yazgan acted like an officer of Enka or an investment specialist for Turkish capitalists, while always "playing the role of a victim."⁶⁶

Late in the fall of 2020, the government of Georgia, Enka, and their supporters launched a nationwide misinformation campaign. Designed

to mislead the public and demonize the protest groups, the campaign accelerated in spring 2021. Several pro-HPP round tables were organized, some of them televised. Sympathetic news media interviewed supporters of the project, some with technical backgrounds in HPP operations. Enka prepared an animated segment for television broadcast depicting how HPPs work.⁶⁷ The campaign amplified the old message that giant HPPs are absolutely safe, eradicate poverty, and promote progress and development. Through the misinformation campaign, the Georgian government and Enka spokespeople, among them the Turkish ambassador, tried to explain the widespread civil resistance to their plan by invoking Russian influence and even Russian funding as the moving force in the protest movement. They used the presence of the religious right in the resistance movement, alleging close collaboration between Orthodox Christian groups in Georgia and Russia. Still, they could not convincingly explain why Russia's religious right would support Georgia's Western-oriented liberals, environmental groups, or those representing sexual minorities, all equally vocal opponents of the Namakhvani HPP.

To remove the protesters' camp from the Rioni Valley, the government first dispatched a couple of senior officials to convince the Defenders of the Rioni Valley that they were in grave error. In March 2021, Minister of the Economy Natela Turnava and her officials met the Defenders of the Rioni Valley and valley residents. It did not take long to discover that the government officials had nothing but empty assurances and were utterly unprepared for the meeting. Earlier in the Rioni Valley protests, the government had resorted to a heavy-handed approach, sending police forces to remove protesters camping on the public land just outside one of the dam construction sites. A police force was also tasked with disrupting the vigil kept by the Defenders. Police forcefully removed the vigil site and detained several people in the process.⁶⁸ Undeterred, the Defenders relocated near the original protest site and continued their vigil. In order to keep the protesting groups from the original vigil site, police erected a tall metallic wall across the only road connecting northern and southern portions of the valley, disrupting travel and commerce for the villagers residing beyond the police barricade.⁶⁹

The most significant opportunity to break up the broad-spectrum opposition to the Namakhvani HPP presented itself on 5 July 2021. This was the day a small group of Georgian LGBTQ had planned to hold a March for Dignity

in the centre of Tbilisi. It is well-known that such demonstrations for the rights of sexual minorities can trigger a violent reaction from right-wing vigilante groups. Police usually show up in sizable numbers to separate the opposing groups, but they did not on that day. The LGBTQ activists postponed their rallies, but the right-wing extremists attended a rally organized by the alt-right group in large numbers. A number of them started to look for trouble, and after failing to locate anyone from the LGBTQ community, they attacked the journalists covering the event. The attacks took place simultaneously and appeared to be coordinated and organized in advance. The few police officers present tried to intervene, but they were not equipped with riot gear and could not do much without proper support. As a result of these attacks, at least fifty-three journalists sustained injuries.⁷⁰ Extremist groups participating in this mass disturbance also attacked offices of one of the youth opposition groups and that of Tbilisi Gay pride. These violent acts by thugs affiliated with the religious right broke the unity of the anti-Namakhvani protest movement. The 5 July 2021 events significantly weakened the movement and undermined the credibility of the common cause.⁷¹

The protest movement against the Namakhvani HPP was not the first one in recent Georgian history. Residents of the mountainous Svaneti region have actively opposed another project for the giant Hudoni HPP since the late 1980s. The local population has strongly resisted this on-again-off-again HPP pattern with mass protests and rallies held as soon as the government remembers to revive the Hudoni plan. Objection to this massive project, seen as alien, destructive, and threatening to the local population, has strengthened a sense of community and unity among the residents of this remote and mountainous area of Georgia.⁷² In June 2021, the government of Georgia reported that the developer of the Hudoni HPP, India's Trans Electrica, had abandoned it.⁷³ Yet another new HPP in southwestern Georgia, the Shuakhevi dam, completed in 2017, had its tunnels collapse two months after its launch.⁷⁴ The problem has since been fixed and the power plant reopened but without inspiring confidence in the local population.⁷⁵ In the case of another giant HPP, called Nenskra, independent review bodies found in September 2020 that two international financial institutions backing the project, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank, had both violated their own human rights and environmental protection policies, specifically those

affecting Indigenous peoples' rights, the protection of cultural heritage, gender issues, the assessment and management of environmental and social impacts, information disclosure, and engagement with local communities and other stakeholders.⁷⁶

Fearing a complete deadlock and collapse of the Namakhvani HPP project, in early June 2021 the government of Georgia agreed to hold negotiations with all the stakeholders, with two senior officials from the European Energy Union mediating the process.⁷⁷ The negotiations officially commenced in mid-June with all the stakeholders joining except Enka. Enka has never satisfactorily explained why it refused to join the mediation process. According to Green Alternative, Enka saw the writing on the wall: it looked doubtful that the European Energy Union would endorse the half-baked Namakhvani HPP plan.⁷⁸ The best outcome that the Turkish multinational could expect was a directive to substantially revise the giant HPP construction plan. However, that would also require more time and investment. The worst outcome for Enka and the best outcome for the people of Georgia would have been the mediators recommending not to pursue the project at all. In mid-September 2021, the Defenders of the Rioni Valley left the mediation process, citing some unsatisfactory factors that they found increasingly difficult to accept.⁷⁹ In their statement, the grassroots group noted that with respect to the pre-conditions for the mediation process, the government had fulfilled only one promise— dismantling the metal wall blocking the only road in the valley. Nor had the government made any effort to ensure that Enka joined the mediation process. Instead, the Turkish multinational was trying to operate as if nothing was amiss around the Rioni Valley, staging attempts to enter the construction sites that the protesters blocked.⁸⁰

Finally, at the end of September 2021 Enka withdrew from the Namakhvani HPP project, citing “long-standing breaches of contract and force majeure.”⁸¹ The contact between the government of Georgia and Enka, kept secret by both sides but made public through the efforts of the investigative group ifact.ge, listed many circumstances that would allow Enka to pull out, among them “protests [that] threaten or hinder construction for more than 21 days within any six-month period.”⁸² Observers have noted that by not joining the mediation process and behaving as if it was, in fact, attempting to pursue the construction project from June to September 2021, Enka positioned itself to drop the project and seek a monetary settlement with the government of Georgia or, failing that, seek compensation through an

international arbitration process.⁸³

CONCLUSION

Destructive national institutions guided by false ideas or desires to extract maximum resources from the environment and society are powerful instruments of exploitation and environmental destruction, especially since they are almost always aided and sponsored by international financial institutions and multinational corporations. However, they can be deterred and even pushed back if civic groups manage to deploy a unified front across the broadest political spectrum possible: this is what the popular resistance to the Namakhvani HPP plan in Georgia demonstrated. The departure of the Turkish multinational corporation marked a significant victory for the civic groups opposed to the predatory conditions of the destructive project. Especially remarkable has been the resilient efforts by the grassroots group Defenders of the Rioni Valley, which kept an uninterrupted vigil in the valley for more than a year.

Scholars who identify institutions as primary obstacles to economic development argue that institutions are powerful because they influence economic and political processes. Once established and entrenched in societies, they are challenging to change. Indeed, institutions have lives of their own, and their influence often goes beyond what their original designers may have intended. Both formal and informal institutions can contribute to furthering underdevelopment, resource exploitation, and environmental damage. Such processes may seem overwhelming if national extractive institutions are supported and encouraged by powerful international ones. The case of the Namakhvani giant HPP project demonstrates that national economic and political institutions alone are not sufficient to pursue hugely destructive projects without powerful international support. The same is likely valid for national extractive institutions in operation elsewhere in the developing world.

The model offered by Acemoglu and Robinson, which singles out national institutions as the reason for ongoing poverty and underdevelopment in impoverished countries, has many merits. However, besides missing the role of international institutions altogether, the model appears to be static. The extractive institutions in this model are indefinitely fixed regardless of what and where they are. The Acemoglu and Robinson model attaches much

weight to political and economic institutions but largely ignores civic ones. The civic resistance to the Namakhvani HPP demonstrates that it is possible to stop and reverse harmful activities by extractive institutions. Civic institutions may not be able to change or reform the damaging behaviour of extractive institutions, but they are capable of stopping or pausing their destructive activities.

The Namakhvani case is noteworthy for the unique reason that made it successful: it unified civic groups in Georgia from all points in the political spectrum. The internet amplified their messages, specifically through various social networks, so the mainstream media could not ignore their efforts. Once the problem achieved national prominence, the government was forced to explain its policy, which it could not do reasonably and rationally. At the same time, the enthusiastic propaganda machine funded by the Turkish multinational Enka, together with the arrogant behaviour displayed by the Turkish and Norwegian ambassadors toward Georgia, triggered more questions and suspicions about the workings of this disgraceful alliance between Georgia's extractive institutions and their international supporters. In the end, unwilling to become embroiled in a multi-year losing battle with Western-oriented liberals, environmental activists, local population, nationalists, the religious right, and right-wing extremists, the Turkish multinational made the only reasonable decision: it abandoned the Namakhvani HPP project.

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