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## Bigger is Better or how Governments Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Megaprojects

Filippo Menga\*

### Abstract:

Megaprojects, with their sheer size and their physical and emotional impact, can emerge as central elements around which political elites construct an ideology. Following a comparison of the narratives surrounding the Strait of Messina Bridge in Italy and the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan, I find that similar narratives appear in arguments for mega projects across different regime types, as advocates portray large infrastructure as a panacea for varied problems and thus justify the significant investment such projects require. Politicians in both Italy and Tajikistan have embraced images of heroic progress toward a better future to frame megaprojects as inevitable signs of progress and national well-being.

**Keywords:** Italy, Tajikistan, megaprojects, symbolism.

“I have a dream, I always had it in my heart: being able to go through, before I die, the bridge over the Strait, that will make of Sicily a super-Italian land” (Silvio Berlusconi, 2013)

“The Rogun [Dam] is not only a source of light, but of national honour and dignity” (Emomali Rahmon, 2010)

### Introduction

Megaprojects are very large infrastructure investments that generally cost more than US\$1 billion. As Althuler and Luberoff (2003, p. 2) observed, the term megaproject usually denotes “initiatives that are physical, very expensive, and public”. Highways, aqueducts, ports, dams, and bridges can all fall into this category and can become, among other things, drivers of development and powerful political symbols. Iconic structures that fall into this category include the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, the Channel Tunnel linking France to England, the Brooklyn Bridge in the United States, and the Three Gorges Dam in China. Megaprojects appear to have both performative and discursive effects, and they have to be considered as political and physical animals (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003). Despite this, very few studies (among others, Steinberg, 1987; Van Der Westhuizen, 2007; Sovacool & Cooper, 2013; Menga, 2015) have investigated the political value of megaprojects, and academic research has generally focused on their engineering and economic dimensions (van Marrewijk, 2013).

This study aims to contribute to our knowledge of how political elites build support for megaprojects and use them to increase their political capital. To do so, I will discuss and compare the narratives surrounding two projects: the Strait of Messina Bridge (SoMB) in Italy and the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan. This study will point to recurring elements in the megaproject ideology perpetuated by political elites and show that megaprojects typically cease to be the means to an end (such as energy security or faster transportation of people and goods) and become the end itself. The present article also explores the symbolic value of megaprojects, an issue that has thus far received scant attention in the research literature, with the exceptions falling into architectural and urban studies rather than political science (Olds, 2001; Ren, 2008).

The choice of critical case studies (see Flyvbjerg, 2006) located in two extremely different countries is intentional, as it allows this study to explore an uncharted dimension of the politics of

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megaprojects: whether political regimes and the elements forming the ideologies of megaprojects correlate at all. On the one hand, Italy is a democracy with a competitive political system, political alternation, and regularly contested elections. Major political parties have significant access to the electorate through free media (Lijphart, 2012). On the other hand, Tajikistan is an authoritarian regime<sup>1</sup>, where Emomali Rahmon has served as President since 1994. Rahmon's administration tightly controls the media, which is the government's mouthpiece (Olcott, 2012). Italy is a founding member of the European Union, and is part of the Group of Seven (G7) world's leading industrialised countries. Tajikistan was part of the Soviet Union until 1991, and is currently the poorest of all the 15 former Soviet republics (UNDP, 2014). These differences could have produced different ideological standpoints or at least different ways of disseminating them. However, findings reveal that the ideologies Rahmon and his Italian counterpart Silvio Berlusconi used to advance their megaprojects have virtually no difference from one another. In line with the argument of James C. Scott (1998), being an authoritarian or a democratic regime can play a crucial role in determining the fate of a specific scheme.

The remainder of this paper is divided into four sections. The next section lays out the theoretical underpinning of this study and explains how data were collected and analysed. The third section presents the two case studies and the context in which they are located. The fourth section delineates the main elements that form the megaproject ideology. The fifth section concludes with a discussion of the results and makes recommendations for further research.

## Theoretical framework and data collection method

The shapers of politics include emotions and passions (Crawford, 2000). Aristotle's (1991) hugely influential treatise *The Art of Rhetoric* illustrated how rhetoric can manipulate emotions, introducing the emotional/rational dichotomy to political analysis. This inspired many political philosophers and most notably René Descartes (1989), who made a distinction between body and soul to argue that emotions stem from the perceptions of the soul. Murray Edelman (1985, p. 1) later expanded this perspective in his classic book *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, which explored political symbols and the 'obsessional, mythical and emotional' side of politics. Edelman distinguished between two types of political symbols: referential and condensation. If, on the one hand, "[r]eferential symbols are economical ways of referring to the objective elements in objects or situations... [c]ondensation symbols evoke the emotions associated with the situation. They condense into one symbolic event, sign, or act of patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promises of future greatness: some one of these or all of them" (Edelman, 1985, p. 6). The notion of condensation symbols thus appears to be connected to the creation of meanings, and indeed, as Elder and Cobb (1983: 28) explain, "A symbol is any object used by human beings to index meanings that are not inherent in or discernible from the object itself. Literally anything can be a symbol: a word or a phrase, a gesture or an event, a person, a place, or a thing. An object becomes a symbol when people endow it with meaning value or significance."

Based on this emotional side of politics and on the appreciation of the role of symbols in the creation and dissemination of a political rhetoric (see for instance Weeden, 1999), megaprojects, with their sheer size and their physical and emotional impact, can emerge as central elements around which an ideology is produced. Political elites tend to use public discourse to legitimate their power (Van Dijk, 2008), and the realisation of a megaproject can readily be framed to help them gain and maintain popular support. In this regard, the mass media can play a key role in disseminating an ideology. As Molle et al. (2009, p. 266) noted, the media "often contributes to turning unavailability into common wisdom". Likewise, proponents of megaprojects would most likely disseminate an ideology that represents their construction as necessary, beneficial to society, and inevitable if they want to obtain consent and popular support for their realisation.

1 While there is no consensus on how to measure democracy (see for instance Aslaksen, 2010), organizations and think tanks such as *Freedom House* and *The Economist Intelligence Unit* (EIU) publish yearly assessments of the state of democracy at the global level. For instance, in the Democracy Index 2014 published by the EIU, Italy is classified as a democracy (even though a 'flawed one'), ranking 29<sup>th</sup> out of 167 countries, while Tajikistan is classified as an authoritarian regime, occupying the 156<sup>th</sup> position (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015).

Using discourse analysis, this paper focuses on political elites and on their discursive constructions of the SoMB and the Rogun Dam. While both projects have long histories, both are in initial phases, which makes them ripe for appropriation by political leaders. The sources include both official and unofficial documents. The former include public speeches, official statements, and publicly available government documents. The latter include statements reported by news agencies and national newspapers. These represent some of the key tools the state uses to inculcate a specific ideology in the masses (Wolff, 2005).

Specifically, the news sources in Italy are Factiva, a news aggregator that offers a comprehensive screening of the Italian press, including leading periodicals such as *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica* and *La Stampa*, and news agencies such as the *Agenzia Giornalistica Italia* (AGI) and *ANSA*. The period analysed is from January 2001 to March 2013<sup>2</sup>. This includes four Italian national elections (2001, 2006, 2008, and 2013) and a period in which the bridge gained prominence in the Italian political debate (2001-2006) after garnering little attention for a few decades. Silvio Berlusconi, who ran for Prime Minister in each of these elections, considers the SoMB his pet project and always includes it in his electoral manifestos.

For Tajikistan and the Rogun Dam, I have used another news aggregator, LexisNexis Academic<sup>3</sup>, to analyse the translated transcripts of the flagship news program 'Akhbor' provided by BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit along with the archives of the *Avesta* and *Khovar* news agencies. The period analysed starts in January 2005, when the Tajik government restarted the dam project after 14 years of dormancy. It ends in November 2013, after the latest Presidential elections were held in Tajikistan.

In both cases, the data collection was carried out using as general search terms "Ponte sullo Stretto" and "Rogun" (as well as the other transliteration "Roghun"), and subsequently skimming the results for saliency.

## A tale of two giants

Apart from the differences between Italy and Tajikistan, the SoMB is a suspension bridge and the Rogun Dam is a hydroelectric dam. Yet both projects, if completed, will be the largest projects of their kind in the world. The contemplated SoMB will be a single span suspension bridge with a length of 3,300 meters that will link mainland Italy (the Calabria region) to Sicily. Its length will almost double that of the Akashi Kaikyo Bridge in Japan (1,991 meters), which is at present the world's longest suspension bridge (Brockenbrough & Merritt, 2006). Likewise, Rogun is a planned dam on the Vakhsh River in Tajikistan that with its 335 meters of height would be the tallest in the world, eclipsing the 305-meter-tall Jinping I Dam in China (International Commission on Large Dams, n.d.).

Both projects are located in seismic zones and both have raised concerns and controversies about their potential impact. The SoMB has been harshly criticised within Italy by representatives of the civil society, who joined forces through the movement *No Ponte*, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and associations active in the environmental sphere. Notably, five such organisations sent an open letter to Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti in February 2013 asking him to cancel the project. The letter provided four main reasons: i) the project's sheer and unjustified cost; ii) its fundamental unprofitability; iii) the risk of a disaster due the high seismicity of planned location; iv) and the potential environmental damages associated with its construction (Legambiente, 2013). The Rogun Dam has received similar objections, although these have come mostly from outside Tajikistan and not from the country itself. Neighbouring Uzbekistan and its President Islam Karimov have been particularly vocal in their criticisms of the dam, raising concerns about the seismicity of the Rogun site and over a decrease in the amount of water flowing downstream.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout Factiva, over 800 documents were collected and examined. This was integrated with the analysis of the electoral programs of the two major political coalitions in Italy, the centre-right and the centre-left. All of the source documents are in Italian, and I have translated direct citations into English.

<sup>3</sup> Over one thousand documents were collected and examined. The source documents are in English and Russian, and in case of the latter I have translated direct citations into English.

A third point of similarity is that both projects have long histories and yet are still in initial stages. The SoMB has never been started. But the idea of building a bridge crossing the Strait goes back to the Roman Empire. In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder narrates the efforts of the counsel Lucius Caecilius Metellus to build a bridge to take some elephants out of Sicily (Pliny, 1601). A couple of millennia later in 1969, the Italian government launched an international competition to select the best design for the project, and in 1981 the Italian President of the time Francesco Cossiga set up the Messina Strait Company (*Stretto di Messina S.p.A.*) with the aim of building the bridge.<sup>4</sup> Silvio Berlusconi was elected in 2001 after having promised to build the bridge. The Berlusconi III Cabinet assigned a €4 billion tender to a construction consortium led by Salini Impregilo S.p.A. (a large Italian construction company) in 2005. While Romano Prodi cancelled the project after he came into office in 2006, the Berlusconi IV Cabinet revived the project in 2008. Yet, not real concrete actions followed, and in April 2013 the outgoing Prime Minister Mario Monti dissolved the Messina Strait Company and cancelled the project, which was no longer considered a national priority.

The Rogun Dam has a shorter history than the SoMB, as this begins in the 1960s, when leaders of the Soviet Union first proposed the building of a dam that would generate large amounts of hydroelectricity and favour irrigated agriculture. Construction started in 1982, but the collapse of the Soviet Union caused a halt in 1991. In 1993, a powerful flash flood washed away most of the completed work. In spite of this setback, the newly-born Tajik government and its president Emomali Rahmon tried many strategies to revamp the project. Due to the difficulties in finding foreign investors, in 2010 the Tajik government launched an initial public offering to sell shares of the Rogun Dam to its citizens, which restarted construction. In 2012, the World Bank undertook a feasibility study in response to repeated requests of the Uzbek government, that was worried about a potential disaster caused by the dam. The Tajik government halted construction for two years to await results, which provided a green light in 2014 (The World Bank, 2014). However, the project was out of funds and in 2015 the Tajik government launched a new call for expression of interest for the construction of the dam (Hydraworld, 2015).

A crucial point of distinction between the two projects is that power has changed hands repeatedly in Italy, while Tajikistan has had the same president since 1993. As I have illustrated, continuity has supported greater progress on the Rogun Dam than the SoMB. But as I will illustrate in the next section, the nature of the megaproject ideology that the leadership perpetuates in each country is remarkably similar.

## Delineating a megaproject ideology

The stability of leadership in Italy and Tajikistan has influenced the visibility of the projects in the two countries. Emomali Rahmon and his ministers ensure that the national media pays continuous attention to the Rogun Dam. On the other hand, the prominence of the SoMB in the Italian political and popular debate followed the political trajectory of its most enthusiastic proponent Silvio Berlusconi. During the 2001 national elections, the bridge received attention from both Silvio Berlusconi (centre-right coalition *Casa delle Libertà*) and his opponent Francesco Rutelli (centre-left coalition *L'Ulivo*). Since that time, the bridge has been more visible in the media when Berlusconi was in power<sup>5</sup> (2001-2006, and 2008-2011). Because of this, most of the documents and declarations discussed in this analysis were issued by members of the political administration of Emomali Rahmon in Tajikistan and of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy.

The analysis of the documents showed that megaproject proponents in both countries tend to emphasise their symbolic and emotional value, presenting them along three recurring themes: i) megaprojects as symbols of progress and modernity; ii) megaprojects as inevitable and vital;

4 For a thorough overview of the history of the bridge refer to Negri (1999).

5 Silvio Berlusconi gave a prominent role to the SoMB in his electoral programmes in 2001 (the so-called 'Contract with the Italians'), 2006 and 2008. As mentioned, the centre-left coalition supported the project only in 2001, explaining that the project "was favourably reviewed by a team of international consultants and could therefore be built" (*L'Ulivo*, 2001, p. 29). However, in 2006, when the candidate was Romano Prodi, the programme of the centre-left coalition discarded the project as "useless and unrealistic: for its huge cost, [...] and its limited economic impact" (*L'Unione*, 2006, p. 214).

iii) megaprojects as national symbols. In the following sections, I will outline and discuss the ideological underpinning of each of these themes.

### Megaprojects as symbols of progress and modernity

In presenting the SoMB and the Rogun Dam as symbols of progress, success, and modernity, political elites have used rhetoric that recalls high modernism, an ideology that spread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that was marked by “a supreme self-confidence about...the development of scientific and technical knowledge” (Scott, 1998, p. 89). As Scott (1989, p. 5) noted, the carriers of high modernism were powerful officials and heads of state who usually preferred forms of planning such as huge dams and centralised transportation hubs, because they “fit snugly into a high-modernist view and also answered their political interests as state officials”. The fact that the Rogun Dam has a greater chance of reaching completion than the SoMB conforms to Scott’s idea that being an authoritarian or a democratic regime plays a crucial role in determining the fate of a scheme advanced by its political leaders.

The pronouncements of politicians in both Italy and Tajikistan have embraced images of heroic progress toward a better future, which, according to Scott (1998) are the key characteristics of discourses of high modernism. Of further analytical relevance, this also resonates with the scholarship on nationalism. As Menga (2016) argued building upon the work of Nairn (1975), when it comes to megaprojects, nationalism can be essentially seen as a Janus-headed creature, “since it faces both backward to a glorious past, and forward to a promising future” (Menga, 2016, p. 710). Two statements illustrate this point. The first is an interview that Pietro Lunardi, then Italian Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, gave to the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* in 2004. The European Parliament had recently made a key decision in favour of the SoMB.<sup>6</sup> An euphoric Lunardi declared,

*This will be an epoch-making project. The greatest of the 21st century. It is hard to make predictions, but it is also hard to imagine another such daring project in the next 100 years. [...] I know well that that bridge is also a symbol. The sign of the return of a spirit, the spirit of great builders. I love to refer to the Roman Empire. Trajan, Hadrian. I am always fascinated, when I pass along the Via dei Fori Imperiali, from the maps on the wall marking the extension of the empire through the ages. It is evident that the Roman Empire, the largest in history, has been built on roads [...] making of Italy a great bridge between Europe and the Mediterranean. Now, the South must connect once more the two shores of our sea. The Strait Bridge is part of that plan, which includes the corridor 1 from Berlin to Palermo, the corridor 8 from Bari to Durazzo and Varna on the Black Sea, the highways of land and sea, the high speed below Naples; and then the route of the East from Gibraltar to Suez, that will place the South at the centre of the Mediterranean. [...] Unfortunately in the country [Italy] there is still a strong culture of inaction, there are still the greens that would block everything, there are the defeatists, but the Berlusconi government is succeeding (Corriere della Sera, 2004a).*

Lunardi uses the myth of Romanity, dear to Benito Mussolini and the Italian Fascists (Salvatori, 2014) to emphasise how the bridge - together with a series of other ambitious infrastructures - will help Italy regain a central role in Mediterranean politics. Lunardi’s view, which situates the SoMB along the broader trajectory of a millennial Italian nation, can also be interpreted as an appeal to nationalism grounded in a romanticised idea of Italian primordialism (for an overview refer to Ozkirimli, 2010). This enthusiasm recalls that of the President of the Messina Strait Company Antonino Calarco, expressed when he emphatically defined the SoMB as “the most extraordinary civil engineering project of all time, second only to the Moon landing” (*La Repubblica*, 2002).

In Tajikistan, President Rahmon used rhetoric similar to Lunardi’s in his 2010 state-of-the nation address, which was broadcast on Tajik Television’s First Channel:

*I want to express my full confidence that with the construction of the Roghun hydroelectric power station we will ensure prosperity for present and future Tajikistan, as well as a happy life for our children and grandchildren. This is because Roghun is a source of endless light which will turn Tajikistan into*

<sup>6</sup> This decision, which related to Trans-European Transport Networks, declared the SoMB a European priority project (*Official Journal of the European Union*, 2004, p. 30).

*an ever-shining star in the ancient East! Roghun is prosperity and affluence for present and future Tajikistan, it is unprecedented development for industry and agriculture, and most importantly, it is 24-hour light and heat in every home for our people! This is both a big responsibility or great pride and honour for our generation! A day will come soon when the flag of sovereign Tajikistan and the gold crown of Tajiks' state will shine with new power in the gleam of Roghun's light. As a leader elected by you, I am obliged to always care about and serve you* (BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, 2010).

Rahmon frames the Rogun Dam as the key for a better future, making use of a political rhetoric based on emotions and metaphors to persuade his citizens of the high value of the project. He has repeatedly used similar rhetoric, emphasising the impact of the Rogun Dam on the future of Tajikistan (and especially on its ramshackle energy sector). During the Nowruz<sup>7</sup> festivities in 2010, for instance, he termed the project 'Tajikistan's palace of light', explaining that "Tajikistan's future development and worthy living standards of the Tajik nation depend on achieving the country's energy independence. And the Roghun hydroelectric power station is a decisive and important step towards achieving the country's energy independence" (BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, 2010b).

### Megaprojects as inevitable and vital

Another point of similarity in the megaproject ideology in each country is that politicians frame the projects as inevitable and vital. They describe their completion as a fundamental matter. Something that did not exist before suddenly becomes necessary and almost miraculous. Of course, given its size, cost, and impact, presumably no one would propose a megaproject if it would not address a pressing need that a smaller project could meet. Megaprojects are also generally controversial, therefore, their construction needs to be well justified. If they are to, in the words of Steinberg (1987: 333), "demonstrate the capabilities and achievements of the state and the regime, legitimizing or enhancing the image of both", as political elites have proposed both the Rogun Dam and the SoMB can do, they need additional justification.

As Molle et al. (2009, p. 264) pointed out, a "classical means of furthering projects is to propose them under the umbrella of politically charged and overriding meta-justifications [...] Such meta-justifications typically include national goals or priorities such as food self-sufficiency, national security, "modernization", or the fight against poverty". For Italy justifications tend to include the promise of economic growth, while for Tajikistan the achievement of energy security has great weight.

Silvio Berlusconi has repeatedly defined the bridge 'indispensable' and 'vital'. This was, for instance, the argument of a letter that he sent to the 87 Italian members of the European Parliament before their vote as to whether the project should be deemed a European priority project. In his appeal, Berlusconi described the vote as being "of vital importance for the growth of Italy" (Corriere della Sera, 2004). In a public radio address and on the radio, Berlusconi underlined that the bridge is a vitally important project that will give a boost to the Italian economy as "it will lead to the creation of 15 thousand jobs" (ANSA, 2006). He delivered a similar message a few years later at the Italian Chamber of Deputies (Reuters, 2008). He also claimed the bridge would dismantle the Sicilian mafia by bringing Sicily closer to Italy (Agenzia Giornalistica Italia, 2002). The Italian Antimafia Commission revealed in 2005 that the mafia had been trying for years to infiltrate the bridge's contract tenders, suggesting the project could easily strengthen the mafia (La Repubblica, 2005). The President of Sicily Salvatore Cuffaro, who was later arrested and convicted for aiding the mafia, supported the project, calling it "historical", as well as "useful and necessary for the economic and civil development" of the region (La Stampa, 2002).

For his part, Emomali Rahmon described the Rogun Dam as the inevitable solution to Tajikistan's energy shortage. In 2009, encouraging Tajiks to buy shares of the Rogun Joint Stock Company, Rahmon noted that:

*Every dignified citizen of Tajikistan is ready to make a worthy contribution to the construction of the Roghun hydroelectric power station because everybody knows that without construction and putting*

<sup>7</sup> Nowruz is the Persian New Year.

*into operation this important energy facility it is impossible to prevent electricity shortage and to ensure further socioeconomic development of the country* (BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, 2009b).

On another occasion, in a speech that was broadcast on Tajik Television First Channel, the Tajik President noted that “by attracting foreign investments, we will certainly build the Roghun power plant, which is the only way for the Tajik nation to weather current problems” (BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, 2009c). Rahmon’s suggestion that electricity shortages are the main obstacle to the development of the Tajik economy, or that the Rogun Dam is the remedy may or may not be correct. In any case, the logic of Rahmon gives the dam existential significance to an extent that it becomes a matter of life or death for the Tajik nation (Rahmon, 2008). Accordingly, he framed Uzbekistan’s opposition to its construction as an opposition to the existence of Tajikistan as a country (BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, 2009).

## Megaprojects as national symbols

The third element marking the megaproject ideology is the representation of the projects as national symbols. A review of the scholarly debate on nations and nation-building would go beyond the scope of this article. Anthony Smith’s (1998: 72-73) claim that national symbols ‘can provide a sense of community and...can also be linked to populist leadership figures who gain influence in crises and dislocating situations which often produce anxiety’ provides sufficient context for this aspect of megaprojects. Large construction projects can provide a sense of patriotism and community as can more traditional national symbols, such as flags, national anthems, and coats of arms (Heine, 2015).

Silvio Berlusconi asserted the value of SoMB as a national symbol by emphasising the Italian nature of the bridge. Citing the assignment of Salini Impregilo S.p.A., he guaranteed the project would be “a fruit of Italian work” (Corriere della Sera, 2008). By connecting Calabria to Sicily, “thus ensuring the territorial continuity of Italy and contributing to change the mentality of Italians”, Berlusconi claimed, it would symbolise and create national unity (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2002). Further, it would “make Sicilians 100% Italians” (Apcom, 2008), and ultimately “make of Sicily a super-Italian land” (Il Giornale, 2013). He also claimed the bridge would make Sicily more European, saying he would dedicate its construction to the politician Ugo La Malfa, as a symbol of the Europeanisation of Sicily (Agenzia Giornalistica Italia, 2003). Raffaele Bonanni, the leader of a large confederation of Italian trade unions, shared Berlusconi’s enthusiasm about the symbolic value of the bridge; in a speech, he called the SoMB “a large accomplishment that will motivate an entire people” (Il Giorno, 2006).

The idea of a megaproject as a national symbol is even stronger in Tajikistan. As a former Soviet republic, Tajikistan is still in the process of building a national identity. It is also common for political elites in the post-Soviet space in general, and in Central Asia more specifically, to use non-traditional tools and approaches to disseminate their own ideas of the nation.<sup>8</sup> Emomali Rahmon urging all “patriots and sons of our land to take active part in constructing the first phase of the plant” was thus predictable (The International Herald Tribune, 2008). Further stressing the unifying effect of the dam, Rahmon often appealed “to the children of Tajikistan, living and working in other countries, and always thinking about the welfare of their ancestral land and the prosperity of their houses” to show their patriotism and buy shares of the Rogun Dam (BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, 2010). To promote the purchase, the Tajik government declared the day that the initial public offering began the “Day of Solidarity for the Construction of Rogun” (Eurasianet.org, 2010). A newspaper reported that a boy born that day, on 6 January, 2010, was named *Roghunshoh*, King Rogun, to honor the dam (Ria Novosti, 2010). Tajik Education Minister Abdujabbor Rahmonov explained that the “purchase of Rogun shares is a voluntary act [and] how many shares a student will buy depends on his patriotism” (BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, 2010a). As an extreme consequence of this nationalistic framing, those who support the dam are patriots, while those who oppose it become enemies of the nation. Significantly, Suhrob Sharipov, the head of the Strategic Research Centre of Tajikistan, was quoted as saying that “if somebody in the country opposes construction of the Rogun hydroelectric power station, he will automatically turn into a traitor” (BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, 2009a).

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Isaacs & Polese (2016).



## Conclusions

This paper set out to explain how megaprojects can become condensation symbols through the rhetoric used by political elites to increase their popularity and achieve legitimation. Taking as case studies the discursive constructions around the planned SoMB in Italy and the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan, the research has delineated the main traits of what can be defined as a megaproject ideology. Proponents of megaprojects from countries with different political regimes, Italy and Tajikistan, have adopted similar narratives to portray a costly and controversial infrastructure as the panacea and thus justify its realisation. In what seems like a twenty-first century revamp of high modernism, both projects have been framed as inevitable and vital for progress and national well-being. The discourse had three main themes: i) megaprojects as symbols of progress and modernity; ii) megaprojects as inevitable and vital; iii) megaprojects as national symbols.

While the three themes are indeed distinct, they are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they overlap and feed into each other along the common thread of nationalism, as evidenced by the recurring references to the national pride and wellbeing that the two projects would bring about. There is a parallel between an idealised view of the nation and an unproblematic, uncritical approach to megaprojects, to the extent that both have arguably become part of a broader national idea disseminated (or even imposed) through top-down means. This resonates with Flyvbjerg's (2005, p. 18) argument that project proponents often tend to present them using a Machiavellian formula, one that implies "misleading parliaments, the public and the media about the costs and benefits of projects", which ultimately results in "an unhealthy 'survival of the unfittest' for large public works and other construction projects".

Also, and in line with Scott's (1989) claim that the legibility of a society will affect the actual implementation of utopian social engineering schemes, there is one key difference between the SoMB and the Rogun Dam. While Italy seems to have abandoned, at least for the moment, its ambitions to build the SoMB, Tajikistan is still determined to pursue its plans with the Rogun Dam. Italy's political alternation, as juxtaposed to Tajikistan's immutability of power, led to the gradual sidelining of the leading supporter of the bridge in recent years, Silvio Berlusconi. Furthermore, the active engagement of the Italian civil society raised awareness of the potential environmental and economic complications that would come with the bridge, which thus became a nationally debated issue. This did not happen in Tajikistan, where a top-down decision-making process in a domestic setting with little civil society engagement contributed to the dissemination of a dominant discourse that no powerful internal voice has challenged.

This being said, recent developments in Italy suggest that the SoMB is buried, possibly forgotten, but certainly not dead. In September 2016, the then Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi addressed Pietro Salini, the CEO of Salini Impregilo S.p.A., at the company's general assembly and stated, "If you are ready to resume the project, we are also ready [...] This infrastructure will help us have a closer, and more easily reachable, Sicily, removing Calabria from its isolation" (La Repubblica, 2016). Renzi, who has based his political career on the concept of scrapping (*rottamazione*) and on a critique of Italian ruling elites, contradictorily followed their path (and especially that of Berlusconi, as argued by Bordignon, 2014) in his attempt to revamp, once again, the SoMB, less than three months before a national referendum that led him to resign (ANSA, 2016). While, at present, the construction of the SoMB seems unrealistic, its permanence in the Italian political debate (especially before electoral checks) points to the fact that even in liberal democracies, financially and politically controversial schemes continue to fascinate political leaders.

As it was mentioned, the outlook is better, at least on paper, for the Rogun Dam<sup>9</sup>. In July 2016, the Government of Tajikistan awarded a US\$3.9 billion contract to the same company involved in the SoMB, Salini Impregilo S.p.A., which announced that the dam and the first two power stations will be completed by 2018 (Energio CEE/FSU, 2016). And indeed, in November 2016 Emomali Rahmon rode a bulldozer to officially start, for the third time in four decades, construction works at the Rogun site (Eurasianet.org, 2016). This notwithstanding, important questions related to Tajikistan's ability to mobilise the financial resources necessary to complete the project remain unanswered,

9 This article was finalised in July 2017, and it therefore does not take into account events occurred after this date.

and the fate of the dam is unclear (Menga & Mirumachi, 2016).

The findings of this research could serve as a foundation to develop a better understanding of the political value of megaprojects, a topic that has so far received little attention in the research literature. For instance, further research could expand this analysis to include more case studies to explore additional rhetorical turns politicians use to justify the construction of megaprojects. In addition, this study has adopted an elite-centred approach. Future research could explore how different social groups receive the megaproject rhetoric, including those that the construction affects in different ways. Finally, if a megaproject has an international dimension, as it is often the case, interesting insights could emerge from the analysis of the differences between the discourses disseminated by the elite at the national and at the international level, exploring how the two levels interact between each other in line with the two-level game logic Robert Putnam (1998) has proposed.

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