

Displacement and Resilience: Practices of Informal Place Making in the Cities of Georgia

Joseph Salukvadze (Georgia)

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SUMMARY

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) emerged since the early-1990s as a result of violent ethno-political conflicts and Russo-Georgian war of 2008 on the territory of Georgia. They represent a distinct social group in terms of identity and role in the society, and are labeled as one of the most vulnerable population groups. Almost half of IDPs (more than 113,000 persons) reside compactly in several 'Collective Centers' that comprise former public non-residential buildings. The proposed presentation aims at examining of how IDPs change buildings and adjacent spaces of their new residence in order to adjust them to their residential requirements, implementing by this informal place making practices as a measure of residential resilience. The study employs field observations, as well as quantitative and qualitative research methods based on 900 semi-structured interviews with IDPs and several in-depth interviews with different stakeholders dealing with IDP settlement issues. The study shows that an extremely acute aspect of IDPs existence in almost every city of Georgia is a necessity to forcefully occupy their living spaces and settle non-residential buildings with further adjustments of acquired spaces for living purposes. A shortage of living space and a will to improve the living standards pushed IDPs to extend their living spaces. As a result they have deteriorated safety, healthiness, and image of the living place for a few square meters of extra living space, but the problem of space and safety stays as it was. The utility provision is mostly very poor or non-existent in such collective centers. Due to the lack of living spaces in the majority of collective centers people started the appropriation of public space or "no-man's-land/space" around their living area or inside the buildings. About 20% of non-resettled IDPs report that they engage in some kind of agricultural activities on squatter land around their living space. Such residential resilience process practiced by IDPs usually leads to deterioration of buildings and surrounding areas, and severely destroys an image of IDPs in eyes of local population. Consequently, the implemented resilience and coping approaches, although imposed by external circumstances, do not add to IDPs' capital, presents them as 'negative space producers' and confront them with the rest of population. Although regular Georgian citizens often apply for unhealthy 'do-it-yourself' practices themselves, IDPs' cases of negative impact on built and natural environment are considered as extreme.