Cities 52 (2016) 39–54

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Cities

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cities

City as a geopolitics: Tbilisi, Georgia — A globalizing metropolis in a turbulent region

Joseph Salukvadze [a,b], Oleg Golubchikov [c,d,*]

[a] Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 1 Chavchavdze Avenue, 0179, Tbilisi, Georgia
[b] Visiting Professor, Technical University of Munich, Germany
[c] School of Planning and Geography, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff, CF10 3WA, UK
[d] Visiting Professor, National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), Moscow, Russia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 13 April 2015
Received in revised form 6 October 2015
Accepted 15 November 2015
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Post-socialist city
Post-Soviet city
Transition
Urban planning
Urban governance
Tbilisi

ABSTRACT

Tbilisi, a city of over a million, is the national capital of Georgia. Although little explored in urban studies, the city epitomizes a fascinating assemblage of processes that can illuminate the interplay of geopolitics, political choices, globalization discourses, histories, and urban contestations in shaping urban transformations. Tbilisi's strategic location in the South Caucasus, at the juncture of major historical empires and religions in Eurasia, has ensured its turbulent history and a polyphony of cultural influences. Following Georgia's independence in 1991, Tbilisi found itself as the pivot of Georgian nation-building. Transition to a market economy also exposed the city to economic hardship, ethnical homogenization, and the informalization of the urban environment. The economic recovery since the early 2000s has activated urban regeneration. Georgia's government has recently promoted flagship urban development projects in pursuit of making Tbilisi as a modern globalizing metropolis. This has brought contradictions, such as undermining the city's heritage, contributing to socio-spatial polarization, and deteriorating the city's public spaces. The elitist processes of decision-making and a lack of a consistent urban policy and planning regimes are argued to be among major impediments for a more sustainable development of this city.

1. Introduction

Tbilisi is the capital of Georgia, a post-Soviet country in the South Caucasus.[1] The 2014 census estimated its population at 1.118 million (Geostat, 2015).[2] Tbilisi is not only the largest city in Georgia, but is also one of the key socio-economic hubs in the Caucasus as a whole. The city presently accommodates 30% of Georgia's population, but produces almost a half of Georgia's GDP and, furthermore, contributes 60–75% to the country's key statistics in entrepreneurial and construction activities (Geostat, 2014a; Geostat, 2014b).

'Tbilisi… is like a Janus: one face towards Asia, and the other Europe', wrote the *Zakavkazskiy Vestnik* newspaper in 1847 (Vardosanidze, 2000). Such hybridity remains a hallmark of the city located at the conjunction of the European and Asian continents, different cultures and geopolitical realms.

Tbilisi rose to its prominence through the centuries of a turbulent history. Its location on the edge of ancient and modern empires (Persian, Byzantine, Arab, Mongol, Ottoman, Russian) and on major trading routes, rendered the city geopolitically and economically significant — if only guaranteeing a continuous struggle for survival. The historical dynamism has left its marks on the social and cultural hybridity of the city. Tbilisi traditionally featured a cosmopolitan and multicultural character, as well as the tolerance of ethnical and religious differences (Frederiksen, 2012). Its urban forms and spatial fabric similarly inherited a peculiar mix of different cultural layers, superposed on the city's rather peculiar topography.

The modern Tbilisi could have recreated itself through this indigenous tradition of distinctiveness, polyphony and tolerance. Becoming the capital of a newly independent Georgian state in 1991, the city, however, found itself entangled in the turbulent economic and political processes. The installation of a market economy coupled with an economic freefall in the 1990s, the rise of nationalism and the territorial disintegration of Georgia, as well as its government's entanglements in the geopolitical tensions between Russia and the NATO powers have all produced a myriad of previously untested challenges — which have also left their marks on the city's social and physical change.

* Corresponding author at: School of Planning and Geography, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WA, UK.
E-mail addresses: joseph.salukvadze@tsu.ge (J. Salukvadze), GolubchikovO@cardiff.ac.uk (O. Golubchikov).

[1] The South Caucasus region refers to Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. It has also been historically referred to as Transcaucasia, from the Russian *Zakavkazye*, "the far side of the Caucasus", reflecting the Russo-centric geopolitics of the previous eras.

[2] This was a 3.4% increase in comparisons with the 2002 census, although this growth was mainly due to the expansion of the city's administrative territory.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.11.013

As a globalizing city in a small nation in an economically peripheral and yet geopolitically strategic region, the case of Tbilisi can make an important contribution to urban studies, such as with respect to the meaning-making of the trajectories of "ordinary" non-Western cities in global urbanism (Robinson, 2006), to comparative and conceptual post-socialist urban studies (e.g. Borén & Gentile, 2007; Golubchikov, Badyina, & Makhrova, 2014; Sjöberg, 2014; Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012; Wiest, 2012), to a better understanding of variegated pathways of transition and neoliberalism (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010; Pickles & Smith, 1998), or even to the critical urban pedagogy of transition (Golubchikov, 2015). However, despite attention to Georgia from the disciplines such as international political studies, there is still a lacuna of internationally circulated knowledge of urban change in Tbilisi (although see Van Assche, Salukvadze, & Shavisvili, 2009; Van Assche & Salukvadze, 2011). With this contribution, we intend to further unlock Tbilisi for urban studies by providing an overview of its urban trajectories as a basis for hopefully further localized and comparative investigations. By doing so, the paper outlines some of the essential, even if controversial, processes, problems and outcomes of the city's convoluted past and present.

The paper is structured as follows. We start with outlining the location, demographic and physical conditions of Tbilisi and then proceed with its main historical development phases — from the medieval period to the Russian Empire and Soviet eras and to the more recent period of post-socialist transition. We then consider the establishment of the real estate markets and recent urban policies and transformations in the built environment, and pay particular attention to the current urban development initiatives and associated political, planning and governance issues and concerns.

2. Physical, administrative and demographic settings

Tbilisi is located 120 km south of the Great Caucasus Mountains, on the Kura River (*Mtkvari* in Georgian). It shares the latitude of cities such as Rome or Barcelona, similarly enjoying a mild climate. The city has a complex topography, shaped like a large amphitheater surrounded by mountains on three sides. These physical conditions, once favorable for controlling the valleys, today represent a physical obstacle for urban growth. However, the climate, topography, and hydrography have also granted Tbilisi a unique cityscape, attractive panoramas, and peculiar architecture featuring laced wooden balconies and internal patios, traditionally used as places for socialization (Fig. 1).

The present-day Tbilisi has a special status of the capital of Georgia. Internally its territory is divided into six administrative districts, with five of them being further subdivided into *Ubani* — 30 in total. These spread on the territory of 504 km^2. However, the city topography circumscribes an island-like geography, with a few densely built-up areas surrounded by undeveloped land: more than half of the city's incorporated territory is not built-up. The mountainous environment particularly limits new development on the right bank of the Kura River; at the same time, the built-up area on the left bank of the Kura stretches for 40 km.

Tbilisi's present spatial structure is a product of a long historical process and expansion (Fig. 2). However, the city's territorial expansion mostly occurred during the Soviet era: between 1921 and 1991 Tbilisi expanded six times in terms of population (Fig. 3) and ten times in terms of incorporated territory. Tbilisi's Master Plan (Fig. 22) illustrates the city's resultant layout, including built-up areas squeezed between mountainous areas. The city expansion has recently accelerated even further, aggravating the problems of the integrity and connectivity of the city.

After gaining the independence, Tbilisi experienced a dramatic 15% population reduction. This was due to a mass outflow of population, mostly to Russia, coupled with a very low natural growth to compensate the out-migration (Meladze, 2013; Salukvadze & Meladze, 2014). However, the population growth reversed to positive in the 2000s, fuelled by migrants from rural Georgia. The city has consequently undergone 'Georgianization' — the acceleration of even a longer-term trend of the replacement of its once multinational composition by ethnic Georgians, due to a disproportional outmigration of Russians and

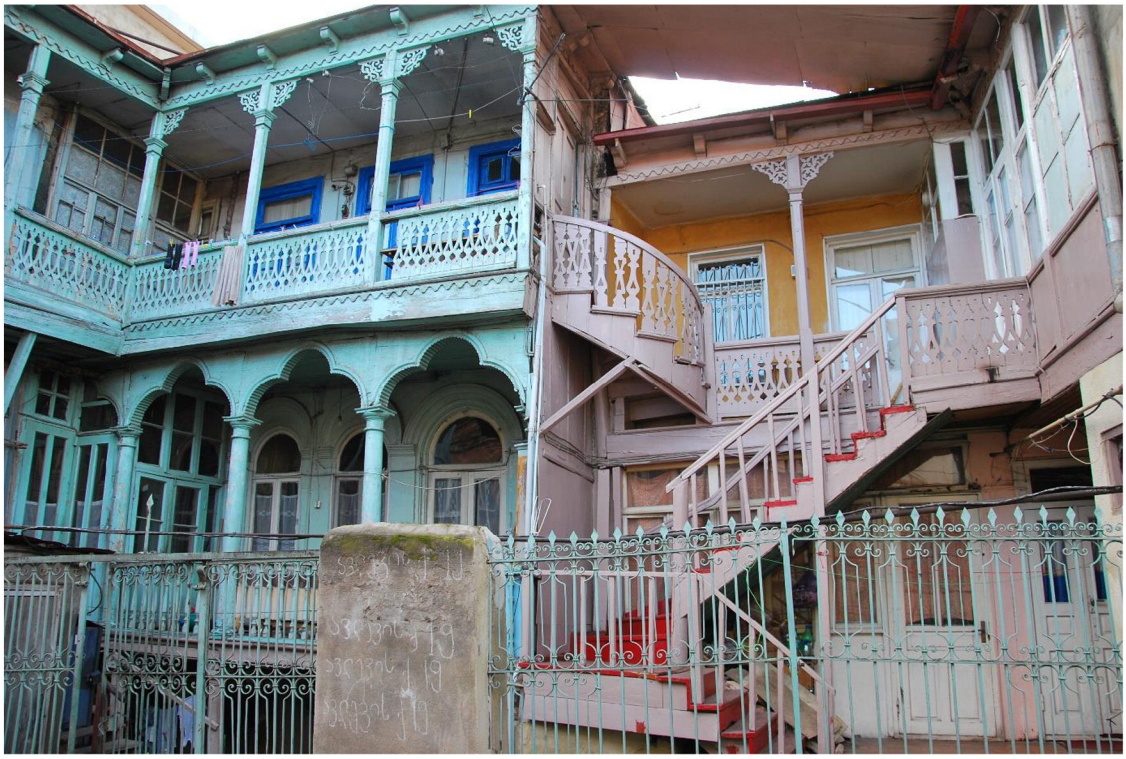

Fig. 1. Traditional wooden balconies in Old Tbilisi. Photo by Oleg Golubchikov.