

# Constructing Social Space during Displacement: Ethnographic Perspectives from the IDP Settlement of Khurvaleti

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**Abstract.** This article examines the construction of social space among the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) of Georgia residing in the settlement of Khurvaleti, with particular attention to how displaced communities reconstruct identity, memory, and social cohesion through everyday practices. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, the analysis explores how spatial experience is shaped not only by material conditions, but also by symbolic, emotional, and embodied engagements with place. Concepts such as transitional states of belonging, the tension between physical dwellings and emotional attachments, and the significance of everyday memory practices guide the interpretation of data. The findings reveal that IDPs actively participate in gardening, agriculture, and ritual practices as symbolic means of bridging present experiences with their pre-displacement lives, expressing both nostalgia and pragmatic adaptation. Agricultural activities – particularly gardening and fruit tree cultivation – emerge as key mediators of memory and identity, reinforcing a sense of continuity with the past through embodied engagement with the environment. At the same time, the settlement is marked by ambiguity and a persistent search for rootedness, reflecting the emotional complexities of displacement. These spatial and emotional dynamics highlight the interweaving of structure and sentiment in the creation of a sense of home. Ultimately, the article argues that social space in Khurvaleti is continually produced and contested through everyday practices and communal interactions, demonstrating how IDPs actively negotiate continuity and transformation within disrupted lifeworlds. © 2025 *Bull. Natl. Acad. Sci. Georg.*

**Keywords:** internal displacement, construction of social space, embodied memory, vernacular memory, liminality

## Introduction

The experience of forced displacement dramatically reshapes individuals' everyday lives, social relations, and cultural practices, significantly influencing the ways they construct social space. This article examines internally displaced persons

(IDPs) from the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region with a particular focus on the settlement of Khurvaleti in Georgia, established in the aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. The term is employed following its usage (Jalabadze et al., 2022) in their discussion of borderization and

regional identity. The residents of Khurvaleti, originally from various villages in Tskhinvali Region – including Eredvi, Vanati, Ksuisi, and Beloti – were forcibly uprooted and resettled in an unfamiliar spatial and social environment. This displacement gave rise to complex processes of adaptation, memory preservation, and the reconfiguration of community identity.

Central to this analysis is Henri Lefebvre's tripartite conception of the production of social space, which encompasses spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre's framework is employed to explore how displaced communities engage with, conceptualize, and symbolically inhabit their newly constructed settlement environments. This approach is complemented by an examination of liminality among displaced individuals – who exist in an intermediate state between lost homes and new settlements, continually reconstructing their sense of belonging (Murcia, 2019). Moreover, the interrelationship between house and home offers a valuable lens for examining how physical environments and emotional attachments jointly contribute to the production of social space within displacement contexts (Mallett, 2004; Chapman & Hockey, 1999).

Given the significant role of memory in shaping the identities of displaced communities, the concept of vernacular memory provides a critical framework for analyzing the everyday oral narratives and ritual practices, through which these communities sustain and recreate social cohesion (Bodnar, 1989). This analysis is further enriched by the notion of discursive continuity, the theory of embodied memory, and the concept of the taskscape, all of which emphasize the importance of routine practices – particularly agricultural labor – in reinforcing collective identity and social continuity among displaced populations (Zerubavel, 2003; Connerton, 1989; Ingold, 1993).

The primary objective of this study is to demonstrate how IDPs actively shape their new living envi-

ronments, generating complex social and symbolic meanings in response to both material constraints and emerging opportunities. This inquiry seeks to contribute to anthropological understandings of displacement by illuminating the intricate interplay between memory, identity, and spatial organization within Georgian IDP settlements.

## Methodology

The research employs a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine the construction of social space within the Khurvaleti IDP settlement in Georgia. Fieldwork was carried out over several weeks between July and September 2024 and involved a combination of semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations with internally displaced persons residing in the settlement.

A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents representing diverse demographic backgrounds, including both women and men aged between 30 and 80. The majority of participants originated from villages such as Ksuisi, Vanati, Beloti and Eredvi, with their narratives consistently reflecting strong attachments to their specific places of origin. Interviews were typically conducted in familiar domestic settings, such as within participants' homes or gardens.

Participants frequently recalled their pre-displacement agricultural practices, rituals, social interactions, and economic conditions, offering rich comparative material for analyzing their present experiences in the settlement.

The research process was guided by ethical principles outlined in *The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity*. A verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants following a clear explanation of the aims and purpose of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, particularly given the sensitive nature of the context and the personal narratives shared. Special care was taken to ensure respectful and non-intrusive engagement, espe-

cially when discussions touched upon traumatic memories related to displacement and wartime experiences (ALLEA, 2023).

In sum, the methodological approach adopted in this study enabled an in-depth exploration of how IDPs actively construct social spaces through everyday practices and narrative strategies, generating new meanings and sustaining identities within the constraints of displacement.

## Research Findings

It is important to note that the spatial organization of the Khurvaleti settlement is closely tied to the local identities of its inhabitants. The arrangement of space within the settlement significantly reflects the village origins of the internally displaced persons. According to informants, the settlement is informally divided into zones that correspond to the names of their original villages: Ksuisi, Vanati, Beloti and Eredvi. As one participant remarked: *“Here we have no official neighborhood names, but we all know exactly who comes from which village”*.

This statement illustrates the strong persistence of village-based identities within the new settlement. Residents tend to live near their former neighbors, thereby reinforcing pre-existing social networks through spatial proximity.

This informal spatial segmentation reinforces the continuity of pre-displacement social identities and interactions, effectively transforming the physical space of Khurvaleti into a symbolic reconstruction of their lost villages. Another resident noted: *“Living close to those we knew before makes it easier to adjust. Even though this isn't our real home, it helps us feel connected”*.

These narratives underscore the critical role that informal spatial arrangements play in preserving community bonds and sustaining identities among displaced populations. Notably, pre-war forms of community cohesion are rearticulated in the new environment through agricultural practices, which, as I argue, are deeply embedded with memory and local identity. In Khurvaleti, gardening and fruit

tree cultivation constitute central dimensions of social life and self-representation among IDPs. Participants consistently described gardening not merely as an economic necessity but as a culturally and emotionally significant practice. As one elderly interlocutor remarked: *“Planting trees here is about memory. We plant to remember and to bring back a piece of our past life”*.

Another interlocutor remarked that agriculture was a moral activity reflecting character, stating: *“Some people here don't plant gardens and just wait for assistance – they're seen as lazy. Those who work hard, planting trees and gardens, show who they really are”*.

Moreover, gardening symbolizes continuity with the past, invoking strong sensory and emotional experiences. Residents frequently mentioned how their bodies “remember” agricultural tasks from their villages: *“My hands know how to plant seeds; it's not something you easily forget. It connects me to our old life”*, one informant explained. This embodied practice connects residents physically and emotionally to their lost homes, acting as an anchor in an otherwise uncertain environment.

Cultural and ritual practices significantly transformed following displacement, influencing communal cohesion and identity. Participants noted a marked shift in collective celebrations and rituals. One resident reflected: *“In our old village, weddings or funerals were major events. Everyone contributed, and it bonded us closely. Now, in Khurvaleti, even when we gather, it feels different. We're scattered inside”*.

This transformation led to a decline in communal obligations and reciprocal relationships. Formerly common practices of mutual aid, referred to by residents as “Ulam,” became rare and are often replaced by formal transactions. A female interlocutor remarked, *“In our village, helping neighbors in weddings or funerals was a duty. Now it is about who can afford to participate. Everything has changed”*. Thus, displacement not only disrupts

ted traditional cultural practices but also reshaped social dynamics within the community.

Despite the other factors mentioned above, Economic hardships and resource scarcity significantly shape daily interactions and social relationships within the Khurvaleti settlement. Residents consistently highlighted the difficulties caused by limited resources, especially water shortages, impacting both agricultural activities and interpersonal relations. As one participant observed: *"We often argue over water – it's scarce, and sometimes it creates conflicts between neighbors. Before displacement, we didn't have these kinds of conflicts"*.

Residents of Khurvaleti often expressed nostalgia for their lost village communities and former modes of social interaction. Interviews and informal conversations revealed strong emotional ties to former communal structures and ways of life. Reflecting on these changes, one elderly respondent stated: *"Life in the village was better because we knew everyone; here, even though we live close, we became distant"*.

Another noted: *"We still speak regularly with neighbors by phone, but it's different. Physical presence mattered more"*.

Informal meeting places, such as the community center, hold special meaning for residents, becoming spaces where collective memories and emotions are shared. One resident explained, *"Here we sometimes meet and remember our village days. It is comforting but also painful. We live between the old memories and this new reality."*

Such statements illustrate how everyday interactions are continuously shaped by nostalgia and the ongoing effort to reconcile their past lives with present circumstances.

## Conclusion

The ethnographic evidence presented in this article offers a detailed account of how internally displa-

ced persons (IDPs) in the Khurvaleti settlement actively construct and negotiate social space in the aftermath of forced migration. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's (1991) tripartite model of spatial production, the study shows how perceived, conceived, and lived spaces intersect within the Settlement. Residents informally organize their environment according to former village affiliations, embedding symbolic meaning into the physical landscape through everyday practices such as gardening and fruit tree cultivation. Perez Murcia's (2019) conceptualization of liminality further elucidates the unsettled condition of displacement, wherein IDPs exist between loss and renewal, suspended between the memory of home and the challenge of resettlement. The interrelationship between house and home, as theorized by Mallett (2004) and Chapman and Hockey (1999), is expressed in residents' narratives and actions, which reveal strong emotional attachments to former dwellings and efforts to restore a sense of belonging. The study also draws on Bodnar's (1989) notion of vernacular memory and Zerubavel's (2003) theory of discursive continuity to explore how oral histories and symbolic labor practices maintain communal identity. Connerton's (1989) theory of embodied memory and Ingold's (1993) taskscape concept illuminate how habitual actions – planting, digging, harvesting – serve as embodied links to the past. While nostalgic recollections of collective life persist, economic hardship and resource scarcity – particularly water – introduce tensions and reshape social relations. Nonetheless, the residents of Khurvaleti demonstrate resilience and agency in their efforts to adapt, remember, and reimagine home. By integrating ethnographic detail with spatial and memory theory, this study contributes to a deeper anthropological understanding of displacement as an ongoing, negotiated process of place-making and identity formation.

## ეთნოლოგია

# სოციალური სივრცის კონსტრუირება იძულებით გადაადგილებისას: ეთნოგრაფიული პერსპექტივები ხურვალეთის დევნილთა დასახლებიდან

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წარმოდგენილ სტატიაში განხილულია ხურვალეთის დევნილთა დასახლებაში მცხოვრები იძულებით გადაადგილებული პირების მიერ სოციალური სივრცის შექმნის პროცესი. განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება მახვილდება დევნილების მიერ ყოველდღიური ყოფითი პრაქტიკების მეშვეობით იდენტობის, მეხსიერებისა და სოციალური კოჰეზიის რეკონსტრუირების პროცესზე. ეთნოგრაფიული სავსე კვლევის საფუძველზე, სტატიაში გაანალიზებულია, თუ როგორ ყალიბდება სივრცითი გამოცდილება არამხოლოდ მატერიალური წინაპირობებით, არამედ სიმბოლური, ემოციური და სივრცეში განსაკუთრებული ჩართულობის ფორმებით. მონაცემების ინტერპრეტაციისას განსაკუთრებული როლი ითამაშა მიკუთვნებულობის ტრანზაციული მდგომარეობის, ფიზიკურ დასახლებასა და ემოციურ მიჯაჭვულობას შორის ურთიერთმიმართების, ასევე მეხსიერების ყოველდღიური პრაქტიკების კონცეფციებმა. კვლევისას მოპოვებული მონაცემები ცხადყოფს, რომ იძულებით გადაადგილებული პირები აქტიურად არიან ჩართულნი მეზაღეობაში, მიწათმოქმედებასა და რიტუალურ პრაქტიკასთან დაკავშირებულ სიმბოლურ მოქმედებებში. ამგვარი პრაქტიკები კი მათ აწმყო გამოცდილებებს დევნილობამდელ ცხოვრებასთან აკავშირებს და გამოხატავს როგორც ნოსტალგიას, ასევე ახალ გარემოსთან პრაგმატულ ადაპტაციას. სამეურნეო საქმიანობა, უფრო კონკრეტულად კი მეზაღეობა და მეხილეობა, წარმოადგენს ერთგვარ მედიატორს მეხსიერებასა და იდენტობას შორის, რომელიც დევნილებში წარსულთან განგრძობითობის შეგრძნებას გარემოსთან აქტიური ჩართულობის გზით აძლიერებს. ამ ყველაფერთან ერთად, დასახლება გამოირჩევა გაურკვევლობითა და წარსულთან კავშირის გამუდმებული ძიებითაც, რაც იძულებით გადაადგილების ემოციურ კომპლექსურობაზეც მიუთითებს. ამგვარი სივრცითი და ემოციური დინამიკა, სახლის განცდის ჩამოყალიბების პროცესში, სტრუქტურასა და სენტიმენტს შორის არსებულ მჭიდრო კავშირს გამოკვეთს. ამრიგად, რომ ხურვალეთში სოციალური სივრცის შექმნა მუდმივად ქმნადი და წინააღმდეგობრივი პროცესია, რომელიც ყოველდღიური პრაქტიკებისა და სოციალური ინტერაქციების გზით მიმდინარეობს. ეს პროცესი კი გვიჩვენებს თუ როგორ ახერხებენ დევნილების განგრძობითობისა და ტანსფორმაციის აქტიურად შეთანხმებას დარღვეული ცხოვრების სამყაროში.

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