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The paradox of building while moving: the ethnographic study of urbanization processes in Dagestan

The project explores the urbanization processes that comprise the dynamic social changes in Dagestan, North Caucasus, Russian Federation. Whereas the mountainous countryside of the republic is depopulating, towns and urban centers located in the plains are rapidly growing. Moreover, this process is connected to big economic migration flows out of Dagestan to other Russian regions. Looking at it, one faces a paradox of building while moving. Both urbanization and migration have a profound anthropological impact: they change lives and lifestyles of masses of people across the world, including the Dagestanis.

Thus, the main goal of the project is to investigate how the urbanization processes unfold in contemporary Dagestan and to what extent they are tied to migration flows, and – furthermore – entangled in the changing ways of land tenure. To achieve this goal, the project entails conducting long-term ethnographic fieldwork in four different locations within Dagestan. The locations have been chosen basing on the preliminary study: two fieldwork research trips the PI conducted in 2018-2019. As the study has shown, the issue of urbanization may serve as a focal point shining light on the republic's key social problems: interethnic relations; relations of power; economic instability and inequalities; and ecology.

Investigating urbanization processes in Dagestan will not only broaden our knowledge of the key social changes taking place in the republic but also contribute to the ongoing discussion on how the global processes inform the daily practices of local societies, and the other way round. Moreover, understanding the social background of urbanization and migrations might be helpful in working out integration policies of refugees and economic migrants coming to the EU countries from Dagestan and the region in general. The scholarly outcomes of the project will comprise: a series of journal articles, academic events, and the development of educational initiatives aimed at popularizing the research for the general public.