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Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement (MYPLACE): 'Interpreting the Past' work package in Telavi

“The historical events that happen in people’s formative years leave a permanent imprint on people’s memories” concluded one of the founding fathers of classical sociology, Karl Mannheim, in 1952. Georgian teenagers today remember living in a country where electricity failures and lack of money for basic needs were common everyday issues. Their perceptions are as dramatic as the perceptions of adults, especially for IDPs from the separatist region of Abkhazia. The experiences of young IDPs represent one of the most salient topics in Georgia’s post-Soviet history – an unexpected and often tragic reality the country has had to face since the 1990s. Since the issue is, to date, largely understudied by historians and social scientists, all we can rely on to learn more about these experiences are the narratives of IDP youth themselves. These narratives are closely connected with various aspects of post-Soviet transformation.

One of the aims of the recent Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement (MYPLACE) project’s work package *‘Interpreting the Past: The construction and transmission of historical memory’* in Telavi was to reveal how IDP youth view the history of Georgia and, specifically, the period of the war in Abkhazia. Some questions examined were how young IDPs and their lives are viewed by their non-IDP peers, and how close or how distant these two groups are from each other. Through participant observation in a non-academic partner institution (YMCA-Telavi), expert interviews, and focus group discussions with young people, CRRC researchers tried to shape outlines of history and self-identification that prevail among youth. Young respondents, however, often needed additional explanations when questions about ‘official’ vs. ‘unofficial’ interpretations of history were asked.

At the beginning of the 1990s, people in Georgia had to deal with separatist movements for autonomy, the rise of militarized criminal groups and the outbreak of strife between supporters and opponents of the newly elected president. Although most of the young people that were questioned by MYPLACE did not remember life in Abkhazia (many of those born in Telavi had never been to Abkhazia), they admitted to having a very strong self-identification with the IDP group and often did not see themselves and their families staying in Telavi forever. Rather, they saw themselves returning to Abkhazia at some point after the conflict is resolved.

Young respondents also did not expect the ongoing IDP situation to last for such a long time. There was an overwhelming and long-lasting hope that IDPs would spend a much shorter time away from their homes, and that they would be able to return home relatively soon. Even today this myth of a quick return plays a very important role in the self-identification of the respondents and members of their families. Very young respondents who have spent their entire lives in Telavi are also reluctant to consider Telavi to be their true home. This shows that this group of IDPs is not fully integrated into Telavi society, in spite of having lived there for two decades.

According to official rhetoric, they should eventually be given the possibility to return to their homes in Abkhazia once the conflict is resolved and their security is guaranteed. However, there is

no realistic estimate of when (and if) this could actually happen (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2012).

Discussing this experience with teenagers enables us to see the process of transmission of memory (mostly within families) regarding important and painful historical events. At the same time, we are able to observe the attitudes of young people (both IDP and non-IDP) towards the processes which have occurred in Telavi during recent years.

A schoolteacher from Telavi mentioned that many of the tragic events that she has read about in her world history books (e.g., territorial conflict, civil war, IDPs, political terror) have all happened in Georgia within the past 20 years. One of the difficult challenges for today's Georgia is to encourage IDP youth to redefine themselves in the new environment, give them opportunities and encourage them to find their place in current Georgian history.