

# Spatial Transformations

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## A Study of the Spatial Consequence of the Socialist Resettlement Programs in Cuba and Georgia

### Introduction

Resettlements taking place as a part of governmental restructuring projects always involve a planned and controlled relocation of communities from one place to another. In doing so, the state often supports the communities, giving them technical maintenance such as building or healthcare facilities as well as new housings in order to accelerate the process. As the anthropologist Thayer Scudder (1973) underlines in his research on a resettlement project between Zambia and Zimbabwe, the replaced communities experience several physiologic and socio-cultural stress factors, leading to the transformation of their social structure. Physical space plays a central role in this context, since the (governmental) produced space holds the power to structure human practices and is able to transform space understandings and meanings. Starting from the theories of “the production of locality” (1996), “the production of space,”<sup>1</sup> “the space order”<sup>2</sup> and “forms of sociability,”<sup>3</sup> the present article will investigate how the modalities of understanding and the practice of division between the private and the public (and consequently the “semi-public”) can be transformed due to resettlement projects. The attention will be given to the transformation and the strategies communities develop in order to find answers to the governmental planning and production of space. The process illustrated above will be contextualized and explained using the example of socialist mass-housing projects during the 1970s and 1980s in urban contexts of Cuba and Georgia.

As underlined in Arjun Appadurai’s theory on “the production of locality,”<sup>4</sup> the state constitutes individuals through the construction of physical borders and produces his citizens, cities, monuments, and memories as well as homogeneous spaces in order to hold control on them. In this manner, the control over individuals is achieved. A central tool for the construction of realities and subjects can be recognized in public discourses, which represent part of ideologies.<sup>5</sup> Such ideologies hold the power to decide which kind of

**1** Lefebvre 1991 and 1974.

**2** Mümken 1997.

**3** Simmel 1922.

**4** Appadurai 2005: 189; see also Althusser 1971: 132-133.

**5** Althusser 1971: 171; see also Giddens 1988: 86.

6 Lefebvre 1991: 20.

7 Mümken 1997: 17; Simmel 1903: 306.

8 Mümken 1997: 39.

9 Appadurai 1996: 190.

10 Appadurai 1996: 191.

11 Lefebvre 1991: 413.

12 Halbmayer 2012: 20; Lefebvre 1974: 331.

13 Lefebvre 1991: 216.

14 Mansilla 1973: 288.

15 Lourdes-Fernandez and Lopez Bombino 1987: 42-43.

16 cited in Corujo Valejo 2001: 36; Mansilla 1973: 328.

spaces have to be produced, the type of functions with which they have to be filled, and the location of those functions.<sup>6</sup> This governmental production of space through ideologies represents a form of power and conditions the perception and experience of citizens.<sup>7</sup> Considering that, architecture represents a tool for the expression of power in space, materializes it at the same time into built space and is connected with spatial discourses.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the state is concerned to produce “local compliant national citizens and not local subjects,”<sup>9</sup> so that localities “have to be policed almost as thoroughly as borders.”<sup>10</sup> To produce this locality the state needs, amongst other things, the physical production of space.

Since residents on the micro-level are able to react, this top-down planning demands reactions from the individual: if, political power dominates spaces, it cannot on the other hand control dynamics developed by subjects on the micro-level.<sup>11</sup> Actors will appropriate built space and identify themselves with it. They influence, transform and re-produce it with culturally specific meanings, with certain codes of social values according to their own space language.<sup>12</sup> In doing so, they execute control on physical built space. As Lefebvre underlines,<sup>13</sup> space is produced daily on the micro-level in the form of footpaths, corridors, and urban squares, processes that are rooted in pre-existing social practices. These processes can be recognized in the cases of Cuba and Georgia where the government produced social mass-housing districts without considering previous living cultures: elements like staircases and ground floor common spaces in both neighborhoods represent mysterious elements for the inhabitants, materialized into shaped architecture of the building: These spaces bear an element of secrecy because of their unidentified ownership and having been previously unknown as forms of shared spaces. Consequently, it is difficult to define them as private or public and they remain as undefined spaces forming a building. The communities start to transform these spaces according to their previous cultural codes. The following article will pay attention to the urban contexts of the district Calero in Pinar Del Río and Gldani in Tbilisi and illustrate the mutual transformation of spatial and cultural practices in the public and private sphere due to the resettlement and the new understanding of semi-public.

## Case Study: Calero Developing Social Mass Housing Districts In Cuba, Historical Background

The Cuban revolution can be considered the result of different group and political party efforts to bring about the downfall of Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship.<sup>14</sup> The idea of collectivity and of the “new man” together with values of humanism, patriotism, solidarity, internationalism and social justice have to be seen as the centre of the Cuban ideology.<sup>15</sup> According to Che Guevara,<sup>16</sup> interpersonal relations should serve the interests of collectivity. The collective voluntary work should fill and not fulfill the duty to consolidate interpersonal relations and suspend class differences, where manual laborer, intellectuals, farmers etc.

cooperate for common projects. The Cuban revolutionary propaganda (1959) sought equality for everybody, where house building was considered a right of every citizen, with the creation of social housing becoming a national duty.<sup>17</sup> The improvement of the living conditions during the revolutionary period under Fidel Castro represented a central priority, since the lack of housing in Cuba began in the 1950s and constituted an emergency inherited from the new government.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the 1970s, a program for social mass housing had been developed and carried on from the Cuban government, adopting European housing concepts unknown to the local understanding and tradition.<sup>19</sup>

## The Neighbourhood of Calero

The first social housing in Pinar del Río was built on the outskirts of the city,<sup>20</sup> a neighbourhood officially named Hermanos Cruz but better known as Calero.<sup>21/22</sup> The actual folk advisory council Hermanos Cruz (*Consejo Popular Hermanos Cruz*) consists of three neighbourhoods: Reparto 26 de Julio, Reparto Orlando Heréz, and Reparto Hermanos Cruz.<sup>23</sup> The neighbourhood of Hermanos Cruz counts 21,620 inhabitants,<sup>24</sup> although unofficial sources speak of 60,000 inhabitants. The building analyzed in the present article was built between 1985 and 1986 (fig.1). Following the Cuban ideology, different social classes from different points of origin have been relocated in the building, both from the city centre and from the countryside. The newly erected area of Calero (fig.2) was located near the city centre, enabling the displaced community to maintain continuously existing relationships with relatives and friends. In this way, the dwellers ultimately stayed connected to social practices they used to perform before moving to the new mass-housing district. Even though the new environment has clearly influenced and changed their spatial perception and practice, these social practices from their point of origin still influence the dwellers' current use of space in the social mass housing.

## Local Notions Of Public And Private

Even though the residents of the “new” neighbourhood Calero have different points of origin, they share a similar usage of space: before moving to Calero, they all used to live in one-story houses. In their former living areas, both the space perception and lifestyle of the residents were different compared to the present-day. The social practices and the interaction with neighbors were also very distinct compared to their new homes in the multi-story blocks of Calero. Prior to their resettlement, the residents had access to some spacious free areas like interior courtyards and porches (fig.3), which were considered as private spaces used for different activities.

In the city center the porches were situated at the front side of each house and served as transition areas into private spheres. In spite of their private character, the porches were used for semi-public activities. As the porches were located next to the streets, they were places for social interaction between the pedestrians and residents, having been used as meeting places. There were also commercial activities taking place in these areas, such as the

17 Mathey 1993: 23.

18 Brosenbauer 2009: 17.

19 Mathey 1993: 24 and 46

20 Locals differentiate between the center of Pinar del Río (known as *el pueblo*) and the neighborhood of Calero, considering it as an independent city.

21 According to Segundo Páez Paredes, specialist of the cultural section in Pinar del Río, the whole neighborhood was edified with farms. Some of them were particularly significant, as in the case of the farm Calero

22 Azcuy 1995: 1-2; Centro Provincial 2002: 2.

23 Centro Provincial 2002: 2.

24 Centro Provincial 2002: 3.



Fig. 1 Pinar del Río, Calero district, 2011

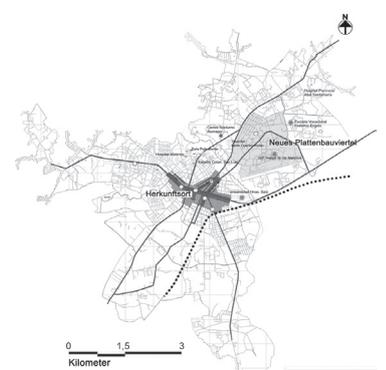


Fig. 2 Situation plan of Pinar del Río: position of the city center and the Calero district, 2009 (Drawing: Centro Provincial de Patrimonio Cultural de Pinar del Río)



Fig 3. Pinar del Rio, one-story land house, 2012



Fig 4. Pinar del Rio, Calero district, 2012

25 Hesse 2003: 126.

26 Lefebvre 1991: 129 and 143.

27 Dickhardt 2003: 38.

sale of warm meals and jewellery or hairdresser and barbers practices. The interior courtyards of the previous housings of Calero residents were used for household activities, such as cooking and doing laundry, for the traditional practice of pork-slaughter for New Year's Eve, or for the practice of coffee and rice desiccation. Additionally, the courtyards were used as relaxation areas. Even though the courtyards represented outdoor spaces, they still transmitted the feeling of intimacy and represented for the inhabitants private spaces, belonging to the interior of the house. In addition, the isolated positions of the one-story houses in physical distance to adjacent houses and the existing fences and porch areas lent to the houses their own privacy. If one considers that, it becomes clear that the differentiation of public and private played a crucial role for the residents in their understanding of space.

Unlike the previous one-story houses, the social mass-housing neighborhood like Calero shows a different private and public space organization. The buildings in Calero are organized into micro-districts as independent house units (fig. 4). The front side of each building is bordered by a common garden and a public square. The buildings are arranged in pairs thus creating an in-between space for common activities. In general the maintenance of common areas such as staircases, squares, communal gardens, and transit spaces of the buildings are the shared responsibility of the house residents.

According to Hesse<sup>25</sup> the built order, its characteristics and specific distribution within the city space refer to conceptual and ideal social order principles. Space order represents ideas of ideal conceptions, of social and symbolic classification and in that sense even of specific codes of social values. Following Lefebvre space represents the product of social practices. Space controls bodies and influences social relations, which are defined and determined through space and in which they are projected and inscribed.<sup>26</sup> The way social practices take place depends also on the boundaries of activity places, since they are influenced by the physical characteristics of a place (i.e. of a public square or of a house and the rooms in it).<sup>27</sup> Those spaces are produced in our case through a national ideology. If interaction took place mostly in the porch areas of the one-story houses in the city centre (and consequently horizontally), then the lack of those spaces leads to the development of altered spatial practices and to the production of a "new" space language: in Calero the staircases are chosen as replacement for the porch areas. The unclear ownership of those places gives the inhabitants of the buildings, on the one hand, free space for self-realization, leading to the re-use as meeting places according to own cultural space-codes. On the other hand, those places influence the way of interaction (due to their different physical-spatial structures), which now takes place vertically and indoors. Furthermore, conversations in staircases lead often to the situation that entrance doors to the flats remain closed in order to preserve one's privacy. As one can notice, the cases of the one-story houses were different, since the entrance doors could be kept open due to the existence of porch areas and the independent position of the house units. Privacy, which was considered a basic social norm in the one-story houses, cannot take place anymore

in the same form within the high-density of the blocks. In order to re-establish privacy, entrance doors remain closed, leading to a transformation of the space language. Another form of space re-use in the social mass-housings is the appropriation of common spaces and their transformation for private purposes. To mention an example, the communal spaces in the backyards of the buildings are used for the traditional practice of the swine slaughter for New Year's Eve. Previously, this practice took place in the interior courtyards of the one-story houses on the country side. Today, this practice is carried out in collective spaces, especially on the 31st of December, where the swine is cooked after slaughter. The women, who previously sojourned in the house and prepared spices for the food, helping their husbands with the preparation of the swine going back and forth between the courtyard and the kitchen, sit now in the upper floors of their flats and communicate with them only from the balcony, thus limiting that atmosphere of festivity.

Other activities such as rice and coffee drying take place in the front and transit areas of the house, also due to the lack of inner courtyards (fig.5). Such practices lead to the blocking of passageways and ground floor areas. The social space of a group consists, for Lefebvre,<sup>28</sup> of the physical, the mental, and the spatial field. A mutual reaction takes place between the spatial (perceived and lived) and the mental field (the space of representation, the ideological conceptualization), which together form the physical field. In other words, the inhabitants of the buildings not only inscribe themselves into the lived space but they transform it through non-designated spatial practices. The character of the staircases, of the street entrances to the buildings, and the collective spaces as transit areas are transformed by the inhabitants into a vivid and lived-in place, preordained with unplanned new functions, meanings and codes of cultural elements, which clearly do not correspond to the mental field (for example to the ideologically planned space). Apart from transformation and appropriation of communal spaces, modification of the buildings can also be observed in Calero's housings. The governmental flats of Calero are spatially organized in a way that their transformation becomes almost impossible. In some cases, when the family grows, the flat becomes too small and the dwellers are forced to look for new housing. In Calero, as a consequence, friendships in the neighborhood get lost.

Before moving to Calero, the inhabitants from the city centre and the country side had no need to change their houses, since the big spaces of the interior courtyard allowed them to build extensions in case of family growth. This way it was possible to keep lifelong friendships.<sup>29</sup> In Calero, the expansion of flats is only possible in the backyards of the buildings (fig. 6). The common spaces are appropriated by the inhabitants and used for the extension of the interior rooms of their flats. In some cases the transition areas between two buildings are used for private practices like workshops or small shops (fig.7).

The illegally built self-made construction of local practices in Calero are tolerated by the government because of the incapacity of offering an alternative. All the above-mentioned examples show that the public space in Calero



Fig. 5 Pinar del Rio, Calero district, rice drying, 2011

28 Lefebvre 1974: 333, 336, 339 and 340.



Fig. 6 Extension, E. Griesi, p.8

29 Nikita Chrushev's speech on the All-Union Conference Of Builders, Architects And Building Industry Workers in Moscow, on 7th of December 1954.



Fig. 7 Pinar del Rio, Calero District, workshop, 2012



Fig. 8 Pinar del Rio, Calero District, garden for commercial uses, 2011

30 Van Assche, Salukvadze, 2013: 91.

31 Secretary General of the Communist Party of the USSR 1953-1964).

32 Nikita Khrushchev 's speech on All-Union Conference Of Builders, Architects And Building Industry Workers in Moscow, on 7th of December 1954.



Fig. 9 The original Model from Gldani from the architect Teimuraz Bochorishvili archive

buildings is transformed and cannot be used anymore as meeting place. In some cases on the ground floors, balconies are broken down in order to create direct access to the outside. This way, the ground floor inhabitants in Calero can just sit outside and cook their meals, a practice that was usually carried out by inhabitants of the countryside. There are other examples of space appropriations where the residents of ground floors adopt a communal garden in front of their flats. These areas are usually occupied for commercial uses (fig.8). Due to such spatial interventions, it is not possible anymore to distinguish between what belongs to the community and what is private.

## Case Study: Gldani Developing Social Mass Housing Districts In Georgia, Historical Background

After a short independence period between 1918-1921, Georgia became part of the Soviet Union until 1991. The capital city of Georgia, Tbilisi, is mainly a soviet city where most of its residents live in neighborhoods that were built during soviet times.<sup>30</sup> As in other communist states, the construction of mass-housing settlements in Tbilisi was, an attempt of the government to encounter the housing shortage problem. Moreover they catered to the socialist ideal of rapid urban growth, which, along with their uniform appearance and recognizable style, assisted in the state control of the population.

In order to achieve this goal, cheaper and more effective construction methods were introduced; the houses were no longer built but were instead mass-produced. The period that mostly affected the mass production of the prefabricated blocks in dormitory suburbs like our case study Gldani was greatly influenced by Nikita Khrushchev,<sup>31</sup> who denounced Stalinist architecture and called for architects, planners, and engineers to develop “Cheaper, Better and Quicker” construction methods. After Nikita Khrushchev’s speech in 1954<sup>32</sup> the concept of ‘Micro District’ (Micro Rayon) planning became accepted as the essential building element for planning urban expansion. According to the construction rules and regulations of the Soviet Union, Micro Rayon was formed by residential blocks accommodating 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants, providing necessary amenities like kindergartens, schools, health-care, grocery shops, and a few public facilities like cinemas or libraries.

## The Neighborhood of Gldani

Gldani is often referred to as a separate city, a micro town that is situated in the northern peripheral part of Tbilisi. This densely populated area originated some 40 years ago and was a result of a master plan that the Soviet government prepared for Tbilisi in 1970, including the new mass-housing districts to the north and north-western parts of the city (fig 9).

Gldani was named after the village on the location of which it was built. The construction of Gldani started in the 1970s and took about 20 years to finish. The initial residents who received the flats in Gldani in the 1970s were mostly people from different regions and villages who came to work in var-

ious factories of the city. A few others came from older neighborhoods of Tbilisi. There is no official data about how many people live in Gldani today, according to the municipal elections in 2014 there were 132,358 electorates in Gldani.<sup>33</sup> Some unofficial sources claim that there 170,000 inhabitants live in Gldani today. Therefore one can say that this number clearly exceeds the amount of the initial population, as the settlement was originally designed for 147,000 inhabitants.

<sup>33</sup> According to the Election Administration of Georgia during the municipal elections of Tbilisi in 2014 in Gldani 132,358 electorates were registered ([www.cesko.ge](http://www.cesko.ge)).

## Local Notions of Public and Private

In Gldani, the residents who first settled there have mainly received the flats from the state; they mostly originated from villages and came to the city to work in the factories. The residents who were rural inhabitants abruptly became urban dwellers. The situation was similar to that in Cuba, where the residents' previous lives were taking place in one to three-story housings. Most of the residents were not used to living in the multi-story city blocks and had previously perceived space differently.

The most significant processes that took place in the urban context of Gldani were after the break up of the Soviet Union, during the transition period from state regulation to the market economy. The documented changes of the public and private spaces of Gldani mainly date from the 1990s and early 2000s. In the transformation period, the living conditions in Gldani changed drastically. Almost all apartments were privatized. Along with formal privatization, an immense and unrestrained adoption of public space for private gardens, shops, parking spaces, etc. took place. The transformation period brought residents new opportunities, freed them from everyday standardized living conditions, and gave them possibilities to adjust the soviet blocks to their living needs. Of course, the changes were possible only for those who could afford it.

It has to be mentioned that the phenomenon of the external extensions on the multi-story buildings was officially allowed in 1989, in the last years of Soviet Georgia. This action was taken in order to solve the existing housing space problems and calm down the anxious residents who aspiringly protested for independence. The residents could extend their flats at their own expense. In some cases, the external extensions actually solved the space problem. As a result, the transition processes produced several space elements that led to conflicting understandings of private and public. Two elements will serve as examples: the ground floors and staircases. These areas of Gldani blocks exemplify an unusual phenomenon of space formation.

The apartments in Gldani are mostly privately owned, but responsibility for spaces like staircases, elevators, patios, and rooftops is shared. Legal ownership can be extended through usage practices of those who show responsibility for a certain space. Sometimes the families who lack space or simply want to expand their living area naturally appropriate the communal zones. These actions, in some cases, unite the individual interest for community or, in other cases, provoke conflicts between dwellers.



Fig. 10 Extended Ground Floors in Gldani



Fig. 11 Urban Gardening in Gldani



Fig. 12 The degraded staircase in one of the Gldani's residential blocks.

Normally all ground floors lack of light, but the residents of soviet blocks like in Gldani have found a way to compensate this disadvantage. Almost all ground floor dwellers have claimed the land in front of their apartments as theirs, and, as a result, ground floors are sometimes converted into private spaces or even into commercial places like shops or kindergartens (fig. 10). In the few cases where residents do not appropriate the ground floor patios, the degradation of this space is highly visible. One of the examples shows the creation of a private urban garden (fig. 11), where the resident occupied and cleaned the area in front of her flat and converted it into a small vegetable plot. This kind of action creates feelings of responsibility in residents and only in such cases is the space more or less in a good condition.

Even if some of the apartments are renovated from inside, most staircases remain unpleasant, dark and dirty places. The appropriation of a place ends at the front door of the flats. The staircases are generally the most unpleasant places of the soviet blocks and it is usually unclear who is responsible for taking care of these transition spaces, which don't belong to anyone and at the same time are the property of each resident that lives in the block. The responsibility for the collective areas is lost and the residents prefer to deny the existence of these spaces and use them only for transition purposes (fig. 12).

Oberserving the ground floors and staircases in Gldani, it is possible to say that the Gldani residents, still struggle with understanding notions of private and public and in general lack common responsibilities. As the periphery areas like Gldani are amongst the poorest in Tbilisi, administrative attention is relatively absent. Today, the district that was planned according to the soviet norms and standards and built during the soviet era has established itself in the radically different capitalist system of an independent country. Meanwhile, life is flourishing in Gldani. The area surrounding the district's only metro station "Akhmeteli" and the modern center of Gldani is packed with local businesses such as exchange kiosks, a shopping mall, street vendors, casinos and cafes.

## Conclusion

The two case studies discussed in this paper are from entirely different geographical and cultural backgrounds. They show how residents are influenced by the built environments they live in and interact with the existing architecture, trying to adjust them to suit themselves. In the examples shown, the inhabitants do not bow to the demands that the socialist planning puts on them, but keep influencing the built structure around them. Through the examples, it becomes clear how socialist architecture "forced" the inhabitants to become active in the design and production of their surroundings.

The discussed examples show that similar processes took place in both districts of Gldani and Calero. Even though the radical change of the system took place in Georgia as the USSR collapsed and the new capitalist system took over—leading to space transformation—many similarities between the appropriation of public and private spaces are to be observed in both districts of Georgia and Cuba, where the system change did not take place.

Comparing the different examples, although the ideas of collective and collectivity (connected to the idea of collective spaces) were central to the Cuban ideology, it has been clearly shown, that there has been little understanding for them, since previously this ideology was unknown to the Cuban society. This can be observed if one considers that common gardens on the front and backside of the ground floor houses have been appropriated, fenced and transformed from the inhabitants for private purposes. In Gldani, the transformed spaces appear mainly in the transit areas, where collective responsibility is lost and feelings of private ownership takes over.

Both examples show that in spite of long years of living in those buildings, the state has not been able to achieve the ideals foreseen in the socialist ideology. This can be connected with the fact that by the planning of those districts, the state did not consider previous spatial and cultural codes and this led to the transformation of social relations and use of space. The permanent discrepancy between political aims and reality led inevitably to tensions, uncertainties and dissatisfactions among the inhabitants: Considering that, the actors on the micro-levels started to find and develop their own answers and occupied pockets of space to express their values (filled with old known norms and imaginaries). In doing so, inhabitants could escape the control of the state and re-establish a clear division between public and private areas, according to previous spatial and cultural codes. Giving an outlook, it can be affirmed that social mass-housing can work in the way they have been conceived only if previous living cultures and spatial practices are integrated into the new planning.

## Authors

Elettra Griesi is an Italian architect and anthropologist. She studied architecture at the RWTH Aachen and anthropology at the FU Berlin. She worked as a research associate in the frame of a DFG research project on architecture and urbanism in Cuba since the years of the revolution to the present day at the University of Kassel, chair of Architectural History. She is currently director of a project for the construction of a self-built and ecological multifunctional Centre in Senegal. This paper is based on her Master's thesis and she is currently preparing her PhD thesis focusing on the transformations of the built space and self-help building practices in Senegal and in the South of Italy.

Tinatin Gurgenzidze is a PhD candidate at CODE (TU Berlin). Her work concerns the (post-) Soviet mass housing settlement Gldani that is located in Tinatin's hometown, Tbilisi. Tinatin's work concentrates on a sociological approach towards architecture and urban space. In her work, she tries to understand what happened with the Gldani neighborhood in the transition period after Georgia became a country independent from the Soviet Union. Tinatin is author of several publications and is one of the founders of the Tbilisi Architecture Biennial, which is scheduled to take place for the first time in October 2018.

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## Figures

*Fig. 1* Griesi, Elettra

*Fig. 2* Centro Provincial de Patrimonio Cultural de Pinar del Rio

*Figs. 3-8* Griesi, Elettra

*Figs. 9* Sikharulidze, Salome

*Figs. 10-12* Gurgenedze, Tinatin

## Recommended Citation

Griesi, Elettra and Tinatin Gurgenedze (2018): "Spatial Transformations." In: Feldhusen, Sebastian and Eduard Führ (ed.): Public Space in Architecture. Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, International Journal of Architectural Theory, vol. 23, no. 37, [www. cloud-cuckoo.net/leadadmin/issues\\_en/issue\\_37/article\\_griesi\\_gurgenedze.pdf](http://www.cloud-cuckoo.net/leadadmin/issues_en/issue_37/article_griesi_gurgenedze.pdf) (enquiry date): 179-191.