



Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia

Edited by David Gogishvili & Alessandro Coppola

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Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia

Geographic Patterns of Tourism in Urban Settlements of Georgia

by Gvantsa Salukvadze
& Temur Gugushvili

Urban tourism
Spatial allocation
Georgian cities

This study discusses the spatial patterns of tourism allocation in urban Georgia through phenomenal changes in tourism performance. Different perspectives are examined towards the role of public infrastructure projects and well-connected internal transportation networks development in the equal distribution of the social and economic gains from the tourism industry. An analysis of statistical indicators of tourism industry performance in the three urban settlements of Batumi, Kutaisi and Tbilisi clearly illustrates the changes that occurred in tourism development in each of the three cities over a ten-year period from 2006 to 2016. Comprehensive analysis and interpretation of statistical data shows the extent to which the expansion of tourism industry in particular cities and regions benefited from the development of infrastructure projects while other cities and regions failed to receive such advantages. Ultimately, the study addresses the research question whether the growth of Georgia's tourism industry still benefits only its capital, Tbilisi or it has also been valuable for other urban settlements.

Introduction

Empirical evidence clearly shows that during Soviet rule, Georgia was a tourism hub (Frederiksen & Gottfredsen, 2017). In the early 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgia was plunged into civil war and economic crisis, and the tourism industry stagnated significantly. It should be noted that tourist accommodation facilities, such as hotels and hotel-type establishments, were used as asylums for internally displaced refugees (Adeishvili et al. 2011). Following the unprecedented economic collapse of the Georgian economy, a slow revival of the tourism industry was initiated in the mid-1990s.

It should be taken into account that since the Soviet era, the tourism industry has played a vital role in Georgia's economic and social development. The potential for tourism to become the fastest-growing industry led to a substantial increase in private investment in this sector, which calls into question its influence on changes in the tourism distribution in urban-type settlement patterns.

Since 2004, the footprints of mass tourism development have been visible. Due to the new wave of state investment and support together with the development of a cohesive strategy for the long-term viability of tourism, several successful projects have been implemented to promote the local economy in various regions (OECD Development Centre 2011). Three primary regional development projects have been carried out in major cities, such as Batumi (Adjara Autonomous Republic), Kutaisi (Imereti Region), Tbilisi, Telavi (Kakheti Region), Mtskheta (Mtskheta-Mtianeti Region) and Signagi (Kakheti Region), and their surrounding areas to upgrade infrastructure and facilities at natural and cultural heritage sites. The promotion of these cities has helped to transform the above-mentioned regions into vibrant destination identities (The World Bank 2015).

Taking into consideration the recent past of Georgia, continuous investment from various donor international organisations and local funds unleashed the potential of the tourism industry in Georgia and led to its fast growth in terms of indicators such as the number of domestic/international visitors, tourism value added and international tourism receipts. It is remarkable that, according to the Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA), the average annual growth rate over a recent ten-year period (2005–2014) was 30%, with the highest growth rate seen in 2012 when the number of international arrivals increased by 56.9%. Between 2009 and 2013, Georgia achieved one of the fastest rates of tourism growth globally, with total arrivals increasing by more than 300%. In 2015, the number of international travellers increased over the same time period last year by 7.0%, and, in 2016, the number of international tourists exceeded 6 million (GNTA 2018).

A limited number of studies have been carried out by scholars to observe the remarkable transformation of diverse variables as a result of tourism industry growth, mainly in terms of comparisons between settlements in rural (Hüller et al. 2017; Paresishvili et al. 2017; Gugushvili et al. 2017) and urban Georgia (Cappucci 2013). On an international level, despite the fact that the increasing trend of urban tourism has triggered a rapid upward tendency to research this phenomenon in the academic arena, urban tourism still remains quite an immature field of research (Pasquinelli & Bellini, 2017). From this standpoint, the present study aims to disclose the spatial distribution of tourism in the Georgian cities of Batumi, Kutaisi and Tbilisi and to provide discussion regarding the primary factors involved in these changes. As a result, this article serves as a contribution towards motivating further discussion pertaining to the urban tourism and its spatial allocation in Georgian cities.

Batumi, located in the south-west of Georgia, constitutes one of the most

visited tourist destinations due to the combination of high mountains and the Black Sea. As a Black Sea resort and port city, Batumi welcomes numerous visitors and is therefore known as a tourism capital of Georgia.

Kutaisi, located in the western part of Georgia, was considered as the capital in the past. In 2012, the Parliament of Georgia was transferred from Tbilisi to Kutaisi to promote decentralisation. Construction of Kutaisi International Airport for budget flights opened additional opportunities for the city in terms of tourism development.

Tbilisi, the current capital and most populous city of Georgia, is located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe and represents an international tourist hub. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia (GEOSTAT), the population of this city exceeds 1 million.

The introduction to this article provides a historical review of tourism formation in Georgia. It is followed by a literature review, which presents the factors involved in tourism, including unequal and equal distribution as well as circumstances pertaining to the concentration of tourist flows in urban settlements. In the part of the manuscript- Magnetism to Urban Core: Limited Distribution of Tourist Flows, several variations of tourism distribution are discussed with the aid of available statistics and survey data. In the concluding section of the article, methodological limitations are discussed, and further research is recommended.

Literature Review

It is remarkable that tourism, as a complex economic activity, has multiple linkages to a wide range of economic sectors; thus, tourism has positive multiplier effects and the potential to act as a catalyst and incubator for economic development (Vellas 2011). Furthermore, tourism is considered to be 'a new urban activity' with the ability to transform the physical, social and economic structure of a place, hence playing a paramount part in place production (Anna & Rocca 2005, p. 9; Pasquinelli & Bellini 2017). In a study of mass tourism and urban systems (Anna & Rocca 2005), it was argued that the balance of a city as a dynamic and complex system can be compromised by an external force, such as the phenomenon of mass tourism. Institutionalised tourism transforms the entire destination in order to process a high number of visitors efficiently and smoothly (Cohen 1972).

It is noteworthy that 'the roots of mass tourism go to the twentieth century when tourism was expanding rapidly due to the advances in transport, which allowed people to travel in masses' (Sezgin & Yolal 2012, p. 73). Several authors (Xiuqiong & Fucai 2010; Yeoman 2012; Ebrahimzadeh & Daraei 2014; Kang, Kim & Nicholls 2014) highlighted the importance of reliable transport infrastructure, which may include the sum of roads, airports and seaports (Seetanah & Khadaroo 2009), in terms of accessibility to a destination and tourism distribution. Yeoman (2012), who considered transportation to be a vital component in the formation process for the future of tourism development (Kang et al. 2014), studied the case of South Korea where the impor-

tance of infrastructure facilities is acknowledged. The development of major highway and railway systems provides accessibility to new destinations for tourist flows, which implies that inclusive transportation linkage plays a crucial role in facilitating tourism activity distribution (Kang et al. 2014). Furthermore, based on evidence of Ebrahimzadeh and Daraei (2014) from Iran, the location of the destination matters in terms of modern transportation routes, which act as bridges between metropolitan cities and small towns. Also, according to Xiuqiong and Fucai (2009), advancement in transportation links and infrastructure lessens the inequity of tourism development.

To explain more precisely, the diffusion of tourism activity has changed into a 'mass phenomenon', which is expanding rapidly due to the fact that cities have become favourite tourist destinations (Coldwell 2017). In fact, tourist flows have become more and more concentrated in cities that are in need of adequate infrastructure and facilities to meet this new demand. If tourist demand exceeds urban supplies of facilities and infrastructure, cities will collapse and become 'unliveable' for both residents and tourists (Anna & Rocca 2005; Novy 2011). In light of recently commenced anti-tourism marches across Europe, considerable concern presently exists regarding the above-mentioned sporadic distribution of tourism in urban settlements (Coldwell 2017; Pasquinelli & Bellini 2017). With regard to this notion, the World Tourism Organization stresses the importance of alleviating the concentration of tourist flows in cities through ameliorated management within destinations and the timely tackling of this issue to prevent the roots of 'tourism-phobia' (Rifai 2017).

The issues addressed in this article acquires particular importance as, in some countries, it has been observed that tourism can be a source of spatial inequality (Yang & Wong 2013). More precisely, several complex spatial factors, such as attractions and transport access, trigger a concentration of visitor flows (O'Hare & Barrett 1999). As Gillmor and Pearce (1996) argued, the additional variable that affects the inequality of tourist flows is unsteady and differentiated regional tourism demand through various spatial patterns. According to their narrative, cities are divided into clusters of popular and unpopular destinations for tourists to visit. The existence of hotspots prevents cities from sound and inclusive tourism allocation (Gillmor 1996). The spatial distribution of tourism should therefore be evaluated to assess the role of growing tourism in regional economic inequality (Goh et al. 2014).

Methodology

Descriptive statistical analysis was used as a research method to explore the expansion of tourism performance in the urban settlements of Georgia over the last decade. The information obtained includes temporal and spatial administrative data. To ensure optimal illustration and depiction of key trends and patterns of tourism formation, tools such as QGIS, R and Excel were applied.

The selected approach, particularly the assessment of geographical peculiarities and aspects of tourism development, is in line with ongoing tourism

studies at an international level. More precisely, recent studies show the importance of integrating and analysing the spatial distribution characteristics of the spread of tourism (Tosun et al. 2003; Jian et al. 2017; Li et al. 2016).

The innovative approach of the present study lies in the integration of geographical patterns in the analysis of urban tourism allocation. More precisely, in the context of Georgia, this article will play a crucial role in filling the existing knowledge gap regarding the spatial diffusion of tourism in the urban settlements of Tbilisi, Batumi and Kutaisi. The sample cities for the study were selected based on their rapid advancement in social and transportation infrastructure; in particular, the chosen urban settlements were the first to build international airports. Moreover, road and railway links in these cities became more accessible over time, and other infrastructural projects were successfully implemented to meet the expectations and needs of visitors.

The information collection stage, which consisted of gathering from websites available data and/or requesting it in the form of public information, demonstrates the novelty of the above-mentioned applied approach (Turmanidze 2017). Existing databases that were expected to contribute to research on the sample cities did not provide separate data regarding indicators such as international tourism receipts, foreign credit card operations of international travellers or tourism value added. Despite the noted limitation, the researchers believe that this work could be a springboard for additional studies addressing tourism as a new activity in urban areas and the formation of the spatial distribution of tourism.

The databases of GEOSTAT were used as a primary source of statistical data. This agency regularly collects tourism statistics from officially registered hotels and hotel-type establishments and additionally conducts household surveys regarding domestic tourist flows. Through information collected from the Civil Aviation Agency of Georgia, the exact quantity of passengers at the airports of Tbilisi, Batumi and Kutaisi was confirmed.

Magnetism to Urban Core: Limited Distribution of Tourist Flows

Air transport, which is inextricably linked to tourism, is an unchallenged means of international passenger transfer (Basnet 2015). It should be pointed out that Georgia has faced many sudden changes related to air transportation development, including the construction of new airports over the last ten years. In addition to Tbilisi International Airport, two international airports were opened in the major Georgian cities of Batumi and Kutaisi. The airport in Kutaisi, which was reconstructed and given international status for low-cost airlines coming from different regions of the world, offers cheap and direct flights. This fact has had a positive impact on the arrival of international tourists and should facilitate the distribution of visitor flows to cities near Kutaisi. Since 2012, a consistently upward trend has been seen in the number of passengers served in Georgian airports. In recent years, Kutaisi International Airport has shown the best performance in terms of the number of passengers served, whereas Tbilisi International Airport served roughly 90% of the travellers arriving in Georgia in 2016. In

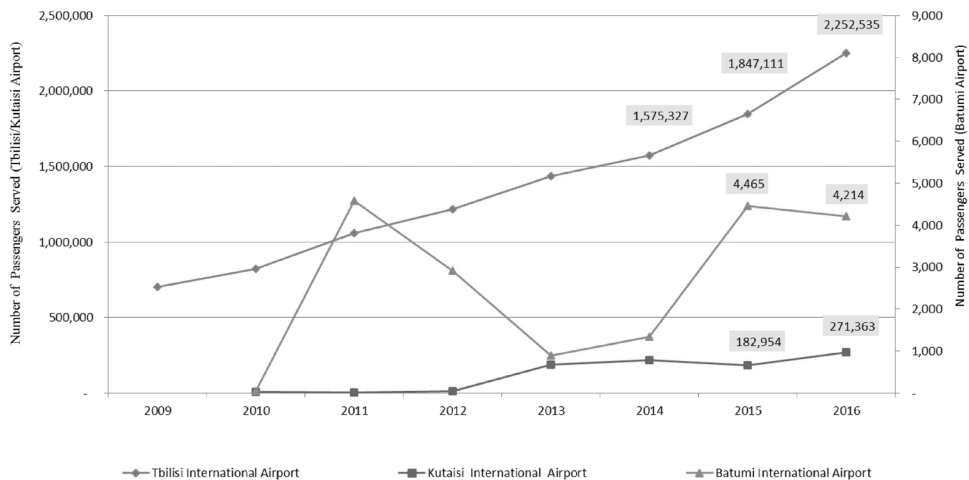


Fig.1 Number of passengers served in the Batumi, Kutaisi and Tbilisi International Airports.

Source: <http://gcaa.ge/eng/regular.php>

sharp contrast to these two airports, the absolute number of passengers arriving in Batumi International Airport has been much less; however, since 2013, an upward trend has been observed (Georgian Civil Aviation Agency 2017)(see Fig.1).

It is remarkable that through investments made to upgrade railway systems, the internal distribution of travellers has developed equitably. Since 2016, passengers of Georgian Railways are able to travel to Black Sea resorts on a double-decker train. Importantly, new trains have been ordered from a leading Swiss train manufacturing company, Stadler Bussnang AG. As it is said, tourism expands more with better tourist-friendly transportation systems (Kimar 2012). Therefore, the ambition of Georgian Railways to integrate the global transport logistic network by increasing its standards and infrastructure can clearly be seen.

The statistical data used for the present study clearly shows the allocation of the below-stated tourism indicators in the three sample cities during the period of positive changes in destination development processes, as described above. The overall annual average growth of employees in hotels and hotel-type establishments in recent years is visible, particularly in big cities such as Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi. Even though the proportion of such employees in Tbilisi gradually decreased from 47% in 2006 to 38% in 2016, Tbilisi still represents the city with the highest percentage of employees in hotels and hotel-type establishments. In sharp contrast to the statistics for Tbilisi, the percentage of employees in this sector during the same time period rose twofold, to 20%, in Batumi, while the percentage in Kutaisi amounted to a mere 2% (see Fig.2).

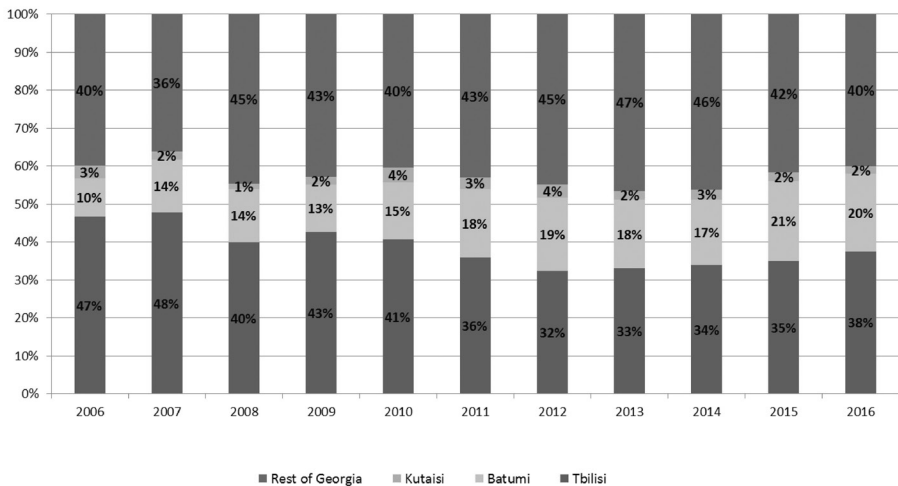


Fig.2_ The annual average percentage of employees in hotels and hotel-type establishments between 2006 and 2016.

Note. Information was officially requested from the National Statistics Office of Georgia.

An analysis of international and domestic visitor distribution in hotels and hotel-type establishments is relevant for gaining an understanding of the spatial diffusion of tourism in urban settlements in Georgia. In 2016, the proportion of tourists reached 44% in Tbilisi, which attained a higher percentage in contrast to Kutaisi and Batumi (3% and 21% respectively) (Anon, 2016). It is notable that in recent years, a slight positive change appeared in Batumi and Tbilisi with regard to number of visitors in accommodation units. In sharp contrast, changes in the proportion of tourists levelled off in Kutaisi.

According to the given data of the GNTA (Georgian National Tourism Administration 2018), key trends towards the construction of hotels are observable in the three urban settlements. In particular, accommodation units newly opened between 2016 and 2017 as well as units planned for 2018 and 2019 clearly show the leading position of Tbilisi (33 units in total) compared to Kutaisi (4 units in total) and Batumi (14 units in total). In the short run, the least change in establishment of the building process is expected in Kutaisi.

Interestingly enough, according to a household survey conducted by GEO-STAT (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2016) between 2014 and 2016, the majority of domestic travellers visited Batumi for holidays, leisure and recreation. On the other hand, motives such as business trips or meetings with friends and relatives accounted for most domestic travel to Tbilisi and Kutaisi. More precisely, during these years, the percentage of domestic visitors travelling to Batumi (12,8% of all visits) for holiday, leisure and recreational purposes was much higher than the percentage of visitors travelling to Kutaisi (2,4% of all visits) or Tbilisi (6,2% of all visits). Conversely, local tourists with other intentions travelled predominantly to Tbilisi (24,4%) and Kutaisi (8,1%) rather than Batumi (7,4%).

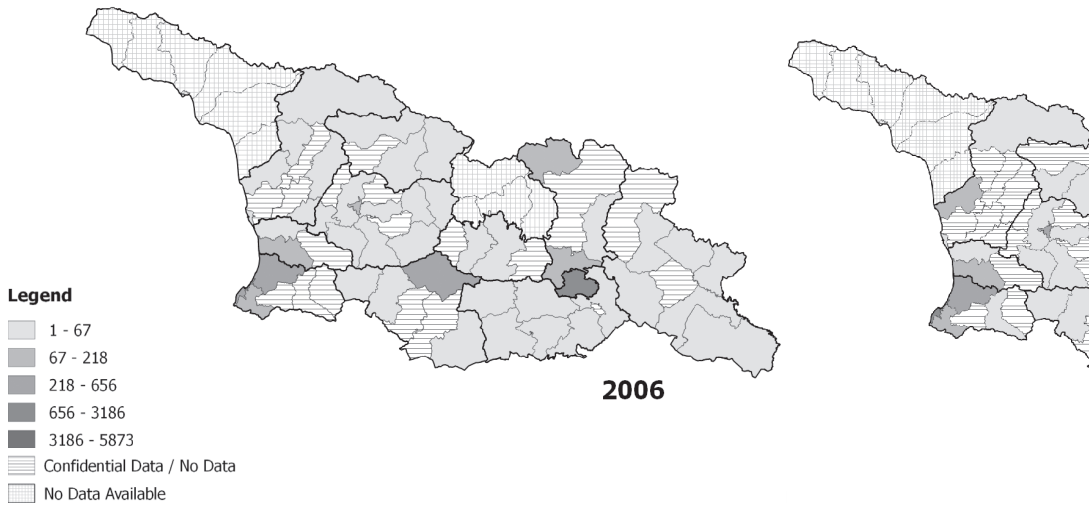


Fig.3_ *The geographic characteristics of the annual average number of employees in hotels and hotel-type establishments in Georgia.*

Note. Information was officially requested from National Statistics Office of Georgia.

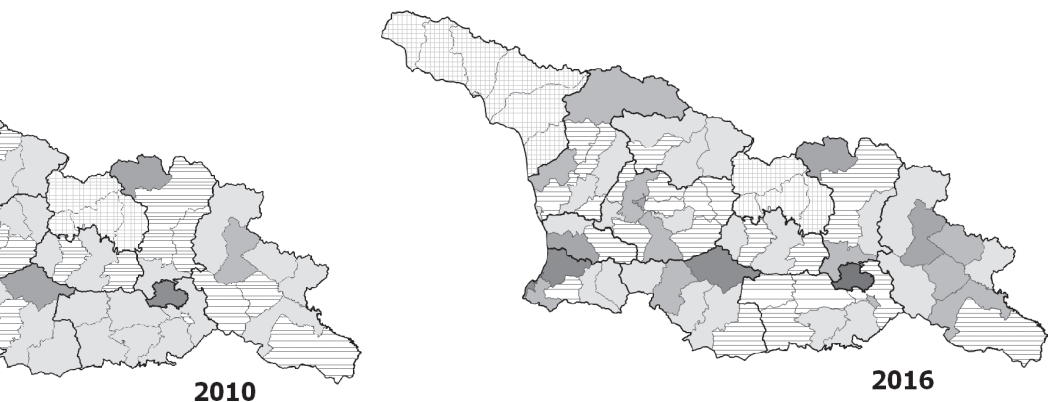
The map in the illustration below becomes progressively more colourful over time, which reflects the increasing number of employees in hotels and hotel-type establishments between 2006 and 2016. Even so, ‘open spaces’ still remain in several parts of the maps of Georgia, which means that tourism is distributing with slow peaks, but its pooling continues to exist in some destinations (see Fig.3).

Last but not least, additional statistical material draws attention to dissimilarities in trip length of domestic visitors staying in accommodation units in various locations at a regional level. The heat map below clearly illustrates that Tbilisi received visitors for trips of a longer duration than other regions. The duration of visits to Tbilisi varied according to seasonal tendencies (see Fig.4). According to the GEOSTAT household survey, trips of the longest duration were made in the third quarter of each year analysed (2014–2016). This means that visitors preferred to stay for longer periods of time in Tbilisi during the summer. The length of tourist trips was more or less equal to the obvious leadership of Tbilisi as a tourism destination together with seasonal patterns.

Conclusion

The present article summarises tourism distribution with its geographic patterns in three major cities of Georgia: Batumi, Kutaisi and Tbilisi. The primary finding is that despite the facts that two recently built airports welcome international tourists and local transportation networks have been developed, the benefits generated from tourism are still unequally distributed among urban settlements of Georgia.

Another main conclusion drawn is that Batumi is much more associated with,



and visited for, recreational, leisure and holiday purposes in contrast to Tbilisi and Kutaisi. Moreover, the present study found that considerable progress has been made in the area of employment in hotels and hotel-type establishments of the depicted three cities but with different degrees of improvement. To explain, the findings of this study indicate that, as opposed to Batumi and Kutaisi, the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi, is not only dominant in employment, but also constitutes the most visited city.

The analysed statistics in the article represent Kutaisi as a city with huge tourism development potential; however, the limited available data gives a first impression of a fairly different reality. In Kutaisi, the number of people employed in the tourism industry is low. Tbilisi and Batumi outpace Kutaisi in this respect as well as in terms of the number of international and local tourists and the volume of planned construction of accommodation units.

While the uneven allocation of visitor flows is evident throughout the above discussions of implemented transport infrastructure projects the spatial distribution of tourism in Georgia is becoming progressively more balanced. Nevertheless, an uneven allocation of visitor flows is glaring in several settlements that are absolutely left out of the mentioned process and not able to enjoy similar sequential progress.

Despite the fact that Georgia has all the makings to become a viable tourism hub, the country is still in its early stage of tourism development. Uneven allocation of visitor flow requires attention and proper planning at this early stage to avoid negative outcomes.

The present study clearly has some limitations. It is notable, that the

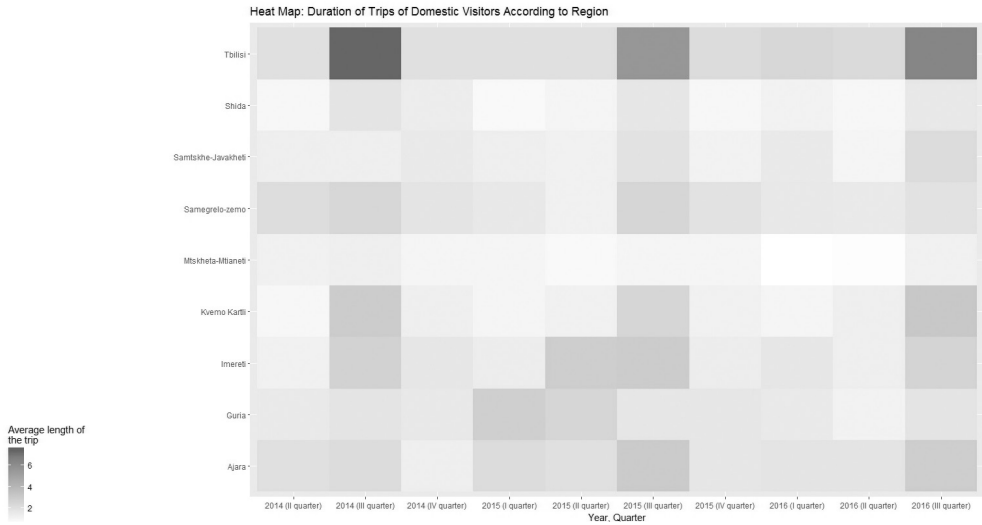


Fig.4_ Heat Map: Duration of Trips of Domestic Visitors According to Region

Note. Information was officially requested from the National Statistics Office of Georgia; Survey of Domestic Tourism

Source. National Statistics Office of Georgia

researchers take into account the particular nature of tourism, namely, its backward linkages with several economic dimensions and propose that further study be undertaken to employ statistics, which would measure the indirect and induced effects of tourism. However, a more important limitation to this study lies in the researchers' inability to analyse the impact of increased tourism performance on transformation within urban settlements. Thus, on a wider level, qualitative sociological/anthropological studies are needed to estimate the changes that appear in urban organisation as a result of tourism for a more thorough investigation.

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Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia

After the collapse of the USSR and the regaining of independence, Georgia has experienced a dramatic set of political, economic and social changes which have had marked impacts on Georgian cities that further intensified with the early 2000s, political and economic stabilization and the greater role assumed by the state in leading urban restructuring initiatives. While similar developments in some other parts of the former Socialist Bloc have attracted much interest among urban scholars, the attention towards Georgian cities has been limited. With this special issue we make a step towards bridging this knowledge gap by providing contributions on topics such as spatial hierarchies and restructuring, urban regeneration, tourism, urban memories and lifestyles. But first, the editorial text by the editors of this special issue first introduces the reader to the broader transformations in Georgia and its cities since 1991, an overview of the topics treated by the authors and some conclusive points on further research on Georgian and South Caucasian cities.

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QU3 is a peer-reviewed scientific journal promoted by scholars working in the urban studies area of the Department of Architecture of Roma Tre University (Italy). The journal is edited by Giorgio Piccinato and has a Scientific Board of Italian and international scholars and an Editorial committee of lecturers, researchers, PhD students and department staff. QU3 provides space where current research on urban and territorial transformations could be shared. QU3 is part of UrbanisticaTre an online platform that gives researchers, PhD students and professionals an opportunity to present emerging research in a variety of media such as scientific articles, photoreportages, videos and other.