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Samozakhvat (Kyrgyzstan)

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Abstract: Samozakhvat, literally ‘self-seizure’ (sam – self and zakhvat – seizure), is a Russian term, designating the practice of unauthorized land grabbing in Kyrgyzstan. Although samozakhvat can also refer to the seizure of buildings (often government administrative buildings – see also squatting and Schwarzwohnen), in Kyrgyzstan it is predominantly linked to land (zemlia) and land squatting (zakhvat zemel’). People who practice samozakhvat are known as zakhvatchiki (literally ‘grabbers’) and their settlements are referred to as zhany konush in Kyrgyz, or novostroika (‘new-build’) in Russian. Three waves of squatting can be distinguished.

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Samozakhvat (Kyrgyzstan)

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By *Eliza Isabaeva, University of Zurich*

Samozakhvat, literally 'self-seizure' (*sam* – self and *zakhvat* – seizure), is a Russian term, designating the practice of unauthorized land grabbing in Kyrgyzstan. Although *samozakhvat* can also refer to the seizure of buildings (often government administrative buildings – see also squatting and Schwarzwohnen), in Kyrgyzstan it is predominantly linked to land (*zemlia*) and land squatting (*zakhvat zemel*). People who practice *samozakhvat* are known as *zakhvatchiki* (literally 'grabbers') and their settlements are referred to as *zhany konush* in Kyrgyz, or *novostroika* ('new-build') in Russian. Three waves of squatting can be distinguished.

The first mass land occupation in Bishkek, the capital and largest city in Kyrgyzstan, took place at the end of 1980s and early 1990s. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, unemployed youth from rural areas came to Bishkek in search of employment (Hatcher 2015; Mambetaliev 2016). Lacking housing possibilities, rural youth occupied land plots, formed settlements and demanded formalization of the settlements from the government. The settlements were legalized and their dwellers registered as Bishkek residents shortly after having claimed the plots. In the early 2000s, the high prices of private property encouraged massive land squatting for the second time. Internal migrants, who after living in Bishkek for several years have not been able to improve their chances of purchasing urban property, began settling on the outskirts of the capital city. These settlers have likewise managed to formalize their property and register their settlements after several years.

The latest large land seizure in Bishkek took place in the regime change after the Tulip Revolution in March 2005, when president Askar Akayev was forced to resign under allegations of corruption and authoritarianism. Similar to the previous cases, *samozakhvat* resulted in the emergence of several new shanty town settlements. However, this time achieving the legalization of the property became more difficult. Opponents of the squatting practice argued that such an expansion of Bishkek would be burdensome for the city's infrastructure and budget and that the unauthorized *samozakhvat* was not a legal act. Considered to be illegal, these settlements were earmarked for demolition. Initial threats notwithstanding, the demolitions have not yet taken place, and the struggle of settlers for gaining property documents, recognition and inclusion into the formal state structures are still acute and relevant issues.

Samozakhvat

Location: Kyrgyzstan



Definition: Unauthorised settling on vacant suburban land

Keywords:

Kyrgyzstan – FSU – Squatting – Migration – Urban informality – Shanty town

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Ak Zhar squatter settlement to the north of Bishkek. Source: Eliza Isabaeva. © Eliza Isabaeva.

At present, most of the grabbers are urban dwellers who cannot afford urban property or long-term rent and settle on cities' peripheries (see also favela and campamento). The large Kyrgyz cities of Bishkek and Osh have seen geographic expansion as well as demographic growth due to the emergence of squatter settlements on the city fringes. In Bishkek, an estimated 300,000 residents live in around 50 peripheral settlements that have emerged in different times since the collapse of the Soviet Union, according to some sources (Shambetov 2015; Ivashenko 2016). According to others, the estimates are down to 168,000 dwellers in 26 settlements (Nastritdinov et al. 2015: 152).

Seen from these developments, *samozakhvat* around Bishkek serves mainly to provide residence and represents an alternative way of obtaining otherwise inaccessible private housing in Bishkek. Due to violating the state law, *zakhvatchiki* have bad reputation and tend to be viewed as criminals or law-breakers. This attitude has resulted in the state neglecting the welfare of the Bishkek squatter settlers and their living conditions. The shanty towns that emerged after 2005 lack both material and social infrastructure: the roads are unpaved, there is no sewage system, the electricity and drinking water provision is incomplete, there are no schools, kindergartens or medical services in the area, and waste is not collected. The residents have to provide vital resources such as lighting and water themselves and travel long distances to reach schools or hospitals in the neighbouring formalized settlements or in the city.

Poor living conditions of illegal settlement residents as well as their 'illegal' existence and ensuing invisibility to state authorities have been a major topic in the media covering shanty towns in Bishkek (Abdykalykova 2013; Timofeenko 2014, Kaktus-Media 2017). Acknowledging an illicit act of squatting media reports seemed largely sympathetic towards the residents of *novostroika*, drawing the public's attention to hardships and social problems of people. Rarely have they been depicted as marginalized people and instigators of riots (Mitenko 2011). This has not always been the case. During the mass land squatting after the Tulip Revolution, the popular Vechernii Bishkek newspaper described squatters and urban poor negatively, as *samozakhvatchiki* and emphasized the authority of law against illegal acts of squatting.

To politicians, the growing number of *novostroika* residents represent an attractive electoral site. Kyrgyzstan still uses the old Soviet electoral system, by which voters vote in their places of registration. While some residents possess a temporary voter registration or are registered at the address of their relatives, many *novostroika* residents lack such registration in Bishkek and are unable to vote. Amendments of the electoral law for national presidential elections partially resolved this by introducing two special voter application forms for unregistered residents (Kaktus-Media 2017). One allowed casting a vote at any polling station, the other enabled voters to add their name to the voting register in case they did not find it there. During election campaigning, the *novostroika* settlements are frequently a target of political promises of resolving the settlers' pressing problems. However, elections for local office (the Bishkek City Council), more important for the particular issues *novostroika* residents are facing, remain subject to mandatory residence registration.

Legalization of squatter settlements is one of dwellers' major worries, but the argument of public agencies (regional or city architecture offices, planning agencies and construction departments) poses a serious obstacle. They claim that many new settlements are located on hazardous sites such as close to a landfill, on potentially explosive gas pipelines or under high-voltage power mains. Facing residents' unwillingness to relocate, state agencies drafted a document, requesting the residents to relinquish their right to state protection, should a disaster occur as a consequence of settling on a

hazardous site. In a settlement where I have conducted my fieldwork, many dwellers have signed this document. They perceived the threats described by the state agencies as a pretext for allowing their eviction and signed the document in an attempt to prevent it. Squatters have also continued to demand provision of basic infrastructure to improve their lives and property documents to secure land tenure. Their demands took the form of protests, road-blocks, unannounced visits to influential politicians etc. Given the absence of public resettlement policies or affordable housing programs, and strong political pressures by the squatter-settlement dwellers, these settlements will likely be legalized in the near future.

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