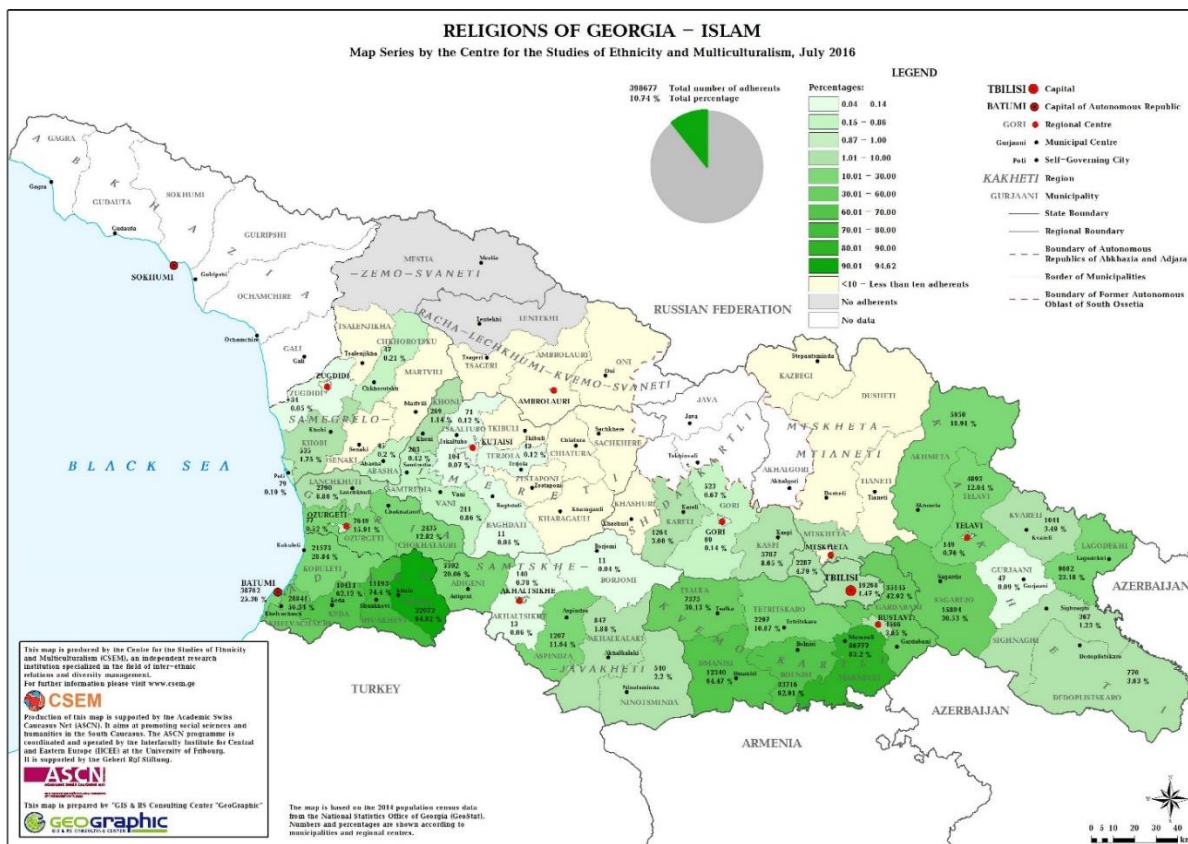


Radical Islam in Georgia: Causes and Consequences of radicalization in Adjara and Guria regions

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Introduction:

Georgia is a unique state with a long religious history. Situated in the Caucasus region, in between Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey, it was one of the first state to adopt Christianity as an official religion in the 4th century under the reign of Mirian III. However, Georgia also has a long experience of Islam influence since the 7th century until the reign of Tamar in the 12th century, and again under the influence of the Safavid and Ottoman Empires since the 15th century. Nowadays the country is inhabited by 3,7 million inhabitants¹ and many Muslim communities can be found, mainly in the South and East Georgia: in Autonomous Republic of Adjara, Guria, Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti and Samtskhe-Javakheti. These regions are shown in green on the following map.



¹ Without Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Despite a long tradition of moderate Islam, the past 8 years have been marked by the religious radicalization of some Georgian citizens, that led to the departure of some of them to Iraq or Syria, to fight for the Islamic State. Since the establishment of the Islamic State, the U.S State Department stated that between 50 and 100 Georgian citizens left Georgia to fight in Syria or Iraq at the end of 2015². As approximately 10 jihadists from Adjara and Guria have been reported dead, it is estimated that 20 to 50 foreign fighters from this region were involved in fighting for ISIS. This article aims to explain the internal and external factors that can explain this radicalization, by comparing Adjara and Guria regions to Pankisi Gorge; and understand how Georgia dealt with this new phenomenon.

In Georgia, three main Muslim communities can be identified: The Adjarian Sunnis, the Azeris (mainly Shias but have an important Sunni minority), and Kists Sufis in Kakheti region³. In 2016, Muslims represented approximately 10,7% of the Georgian population⁴. The historical Muslim population was forced to migrate to other regions in the 1980's due to several natural disaster. These ecomigrant settled in Guria and other regions. However, this population is far from homogeneous given their different history. In the Adjara region, the principal influencing country is Turkey, whereas for Azeris minorities, the principal influencing country is Iran. The last census, in 2014, estimates that there are approximately 150000 Muslims in Adjara, Guria and Samtskhe-Javakheti combined⁵. In Adjara, the Muslim minorities represent up to 39,8% of the population, and 83,2% in Marneuli district. Unlike other regions in Georgia, Adjara has an autonomous status since 1921, which allows a local autonomy still present today.

Any study about the Georgian Muslim minority needs to underline the variety of whom can be called "Muslim". The researcher George Sanikidze distinguishes four different groups of Muslims⁶: those who are strictly following the rules and rituals while considering that everyone not observing religion in the same way will be punished by Allah, the one who are declaring themselves as believers but only frequent mosques or pray intermittently, the one who declare believing in Allah but observe religious rituals as a part of family and national tradition, and the last category are agnostics religiously but declare themselves Muslim as Islam is seen as a part of traditional culture of their nationality.

After the fall of the USSR, religion has reemerged in the life of Georgians. The Orthodox Church was used as an important component of the national identity but it consequently left most of the Muslim communities out of the general religious revival. Even though, since the beginning of 2000, foreign investment from Middle East and Turkey have been consequent and specifically

² State Security report, November 2015

³ *Islam in Post Soviet Georgia*, p.338

⁴ Centre for the Studies of Ethnicity and Multiculturalism, based on the 2014 population census data form the National Statistics Office of Georgia

⁵ Geostats, Georgian census, 2014, http://census.ge/files/results/Census_release_ENG.pdf

⁶ George Sanikidze, *Muslim minority in Georgia*, p. 491

targeted the Muslim population, by building or re-building mosques, and creating madrasas⁷. This phenomenon is linked with the radicalization and departure of Georgian jihadists for Syria and Iraq. The majority of them came from the Adjara region and the Pankisi Gorge, however, the latter has received a lot more attention given its history of Chechen migration. Indeed, the Pankisi Gorge are perceived since 9/11 as the main threat to international and national security due to the growing number of Salafis. This explains why most of the scholar work has been written on this region, underestimating the importance of extremism in other regions of Georgia.

As the Adjara region is not linked with any Chechens insurgency, what can explain the departure of Georgian citizens to jihad? This article will analyse the internal and external factors of radicalization in Adjara, and the State's answer.

I. The internal conditions of radicalization

In Georgia, as in many other countries, the early Soviet times were synonym of intense campaigns against religious institutions and ecclesiastical authorities in the 1920's⁸. However, during the Second World War, compromises were made in favor of some religious traditions. Adjara had a specific status, as it was recognized as an autonomous republic, based on religious basis, guarantying cultural and religious rights to each community⁹. This made the region quite particular, as other autonomous regions of the USSR had an ethno-linguistic basis¹⁰. Nonetheless, Adjara and Guria regions suffered of the regime's campaign against religion. For example, in the beginning of 1920's, there were 158 mosques registered in Adjara, against only two in 1936. Islam survived through the entire time of Soviet Union, often by using informal and depoliticized practices, without any official religious establishment. The end of the Soviet period was synonym of the renewal of the historical ties between the Georgian Muslim communities and foreign Muslim communities, especially in Turkey and Iran, but also of economic and political tensions in the region. This chapter will analyse the internal factors that can explain the roots of radicalization for Georgian Muslims. Internal factor is understood as a national phenomenon with little to no connection with foreign states.

⁷ Bayram Balci & Raoul Motika, *Islam in Post-Soviet Georgia*, p.347-348

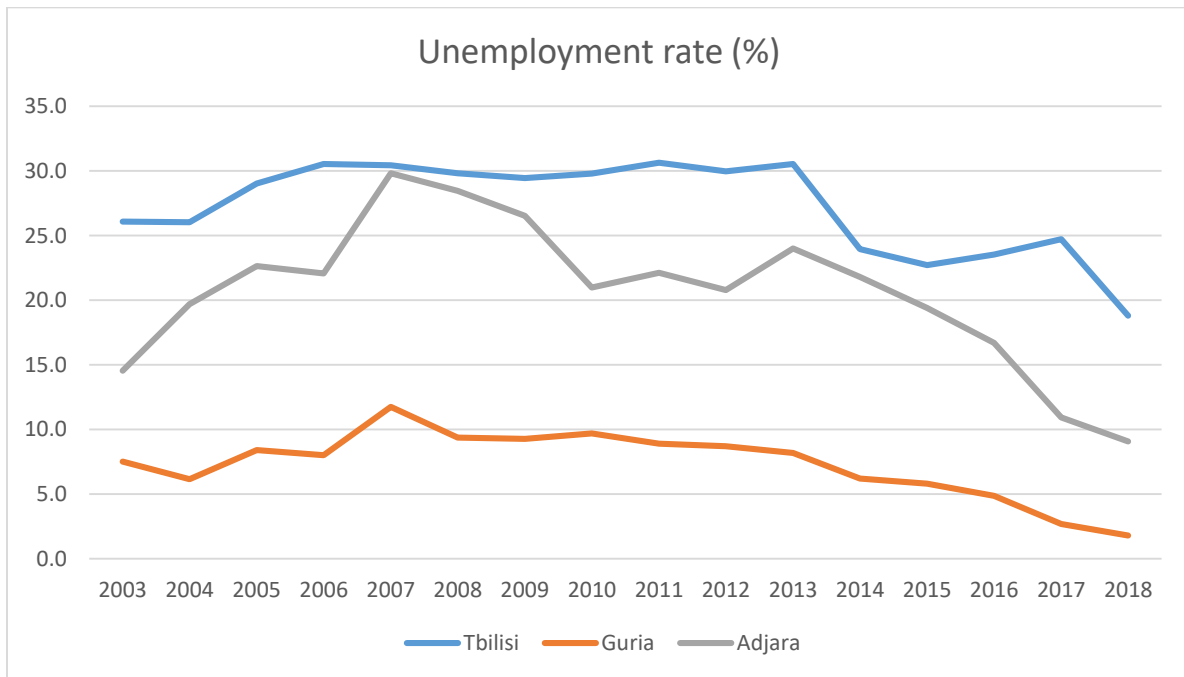
⁸ Sanikidze, p. 491

⁹ <https://www.deutscharmenischegesellschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Vertrag-von-Kars-23.-Oktober-1921.pdf>

¹⁰ Sanikidze, p.494

a. Economic situation

The region of Adjara is characterized by a rather high unemployment rate between 2003 and 2018, which could mean limited economic opportunities for young people, and a fertile soil for frustration. However, when looked at the statistics, since 2008, the region benefits from the developing city of Batumi, which offers more and more opportunities for the local population. The monthly income is still rather limited, especially compared to the capital. For example, during the years of departure of Georgian foreign fighters for Iraq or Syria, the average monthly income was 1077 GEL in 2015 in Tbilisi, compared to 770 GEL in the Adjara region¹¹. However, the economic situation can not itself explain the departure and motivation for foreign fighters to leave the country. Indeed, when one looks further into the unemployment statistics, it is noticeable that the Guria region has a lower unemployment rate than the other two regions. More broadly, economic harshness is a difficulty that touches entire categories of population, not only the Muslims, but when added to other factors, poverty is an important root for radicalization. As GCSD report stated in 2018: “Low standards of living and inadequate access to quality education coupled with socio-cultural factors characteristic to the regions resided by the representatives of ethnic and religious minorities nurtures favorable conditions for radicalization within the public.”¹²



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¹¹ In US\$, 2019 rate, it corresponds respectively to 376 USD and 269 USD

¹² Georgian Center for Security and Development, October 2018, p.22

¹³ Data from Geostats, <https://www.geostat.ge/regions/#>, consulted on July, 10, 2019

Moreover, it seems that the internal movements of internally displaced persons (mainly ecomigrants from Adjara and Svaneti regions) are more likely to embrace jihadism movements. In 2015, an ISIS propaganda video showed 4 Georgians calling for jihadism. They all came from migrants families from Adjara and Guria¹⁴.

b. Political disregard

Researches conducted in Adjara, Guria, Kvemo Kartli and Pankisi Gorge showed that the youth has a feeling of receiving only little attention from the state and are only little engage in civil society and political organizations¹⁵. The youth is therefore disinterested and indifferent towards political processes, which reduce their representativeness in higher positions of the state. Because of this lack of link between the individuals and the state, the latter tends to consider the youth as a threat, which increase the lack of perspective by preventing them to gain social status and respect. In some regions, like Kvemo Kartli, where the Muslims are mostly ethnic Azeris, the determinants of frustration are also ethnocultural. There is not only a language barrier that makes it more difficult to find a job, especially in the public sector. The State engaged in new programs promoting second degree studies for Azeris, by letting them spend one more year in university to perfect their Georgian language before joining bachelor. The political disregard nonetheless is high, and mainstream political parties are paying little attention to those regions, spending less or no time there during campaigns for elections and “almost none of them propose special programs or strategies directed at addressing the primary needs of the ethnic minorities, namely involvement in country’s political and civic life, accessibility to quality education, and overcoming the existing linguistic barrier. Such distorted social constructions, in return, cause a loss of trust towards the political process”¹⁶. The absence of narrative concerning this population also leave space for extreme right movements to impose their ideology and discourses regarding the Muslim population, and strengthen racism and discrimination.

c. Ethnical and religious marginalization

The revival of the Orthodox identity after the fall of the USSR, linked to its valorization within the national ideology created a problem of identity loss, especially in Muslim populations of Pankisi Gorge and Adjara, who can not relate to the “Christian roots”. As Balci and Motika say: “religion fills in the gap of identity loss and seems to stabilize social order by introducing a new system of values. It passes on to the faithful its *raison d’être* and direction, facilitates the development of locally based solidarity communities and serves at the national level as an

¹⁴ Elena Polakova, *Georgia, Terrorism and Foreign Fighters*, p.152

¹⁵ GCSD, p. 21

¹⁶ GCSD, p.25

implicit or explicit element of the new national ideologies.”¹⁷ This is true for the Orthodox Church after the fall of USSR and the complicated years that followed in Georgia, but also for Muslim communities in the last 10 years, especially among new generations.

In the ISIS propaganda video featuring 4 young Georgians from Adjara and Guria, the main argument was the unfair treatment of the Muslim population in the region. Badri Iremadze, Mamuka Antadze, Roin Paksadze and Tamaz Chagalidze are the four Georgian represented in the first ever Georgian language propaganda video for the Islamic State. The video is very directly attacking the Orthodox Christian by telling them to abandon “idols and crosses” and to adopt Islam¹⁸. The interesting part of that video is that they are also criticizing the “traditional” Islam practised in Georgia by targeting the mufti of the Adjara region and describing him as schismatic and conformist, accusing him of confusing the believers in a false version of Islam. This also shows the great difference between the different Muslim communities in Adjara. These few foreign fighters are a very modest part of the Muslim population and it is interesting to understand why they, unlike the vast majority of Muslims, turned into this extreme. All of them have been declared dead in 2016.

However, the internal factors cannot explain entirely the radicalization phenomenon. Indeed, they are acting more as “push” phenomenon, encouraging the population to search for new locations where Islam is, according to them, more accepted. There are also “pull” factors that attract these radicalized Georgians in the ISIS system, and the next chapter will analyse these.

II. The external conditions of radicalization

The end of the Cold War permitted to Muslim minorities to regrew the historical relations with international Islam organizations and communities (*Umma*). This renewed linked went in both directions: from Georgia to Turkey or Iran via individuals, and from external States into Georgia via funds or clerics. The investments of radicalized movements into Georgian Muslim communities are the main external conditions for radicalization. This chapter will analyse how the investment of foreign states and organizations in Georgian religious institutions deepened the generational gap between Islam believers and pictured the Islamic State as a promise of a better future, nurturing all the conditions to radicalize youngsters.

a. The investment of foreign states in religious institutions

¹⁷ Balci and Motika, p.338

¹⁸ <https://eurasianet.org/georgias-isis-video-exchange>

The reestablishment of Islamic practices after the fall of USSR caused a problem of Muslim minorities who lacked experienced and educated clergymen and theologians to answer people's needs¹⁹. One of the solution to compensate that was to send individuals into neighboring Muslim countries to receive religious education. For example, even if Azeris minorities in Kvemo Kartli had a religious center in Baku, many turned to Iran to become imams.

In Adjara, the Soviet Union considered Turkey primarily as an occupier and fought vehemently Georgian Muslim communities. After the fall of USSR, Georgian church feared a wave of islamisation by Turkey and launched an intense campaign to promote Christianity. Only few religious schools (*Madrassa*) were left, and as for Azeris minority, young people went to Turkey to receive religious education. It is estimated that between 1991 and 1997, approximately 150 young men from Georgia graduated from Turkish religious schools and were appointed as village imams back in Georgia²⁰. Those imams made a huge difference in the next decades, as their religious education did not always fit the historical and traditional Islam of Georgian minorities, creating sometime a generational gap.

In the Pankisi Gorge, the low quality of education and the lack of schools and kindergarten (only 4 in 2015) caused two different phenomenon: firstly it was observed that the lack of educational programs and activities were synonym of disinterest for the young boys who were more and more inclined to skip classes on Fridays to go to the mosque; secondly, it allowed the spread of fundamentalist ideas via Arab countries financing programs promoting extremist ideology targeting specifically Pankisi's youth²¹. For example, Saudi Arabia have financed new mosques and imams in the region. The same phenomenon can be observed in Adjara region. As noted in GCSD report:

“A certain number of Turkish religious organizations and foundations are actively represented in the mentioned region, particularly when it comes to donation to boarding schools existing in Mountainous Adjara. As interviews in Adjara revealed, most of the attendees come from socially vulnerable families, which means that absence of the terms for substance drives parents to send their children to boarding schools to provide them with food, basic education, and primary living conditions. An opportunity to travel and study abroad is also considered an additional benefit. However, these schools are not really monitored by the state, and very little information is given to non-Muslim students, representatives of civil society organizations, academic sectors or the media.”²²

On the other hand, dozens of young Muslims went to educational institutions in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Syria to broaden their religious knowledge, and some of them were radicalized

¹⁹ Balci and Motika, p.342

²⁰ Balci and Motika, p.350

²¹ Gogvadze and Kapanadze, *Daesh and the challenges facing Georgia*, November 2015, p.11

²² GCSD report, 2018, p.19

in these institutions and later joined ISIS. For example, Khvicha Gobadze, known as Abu Mariam Jurji was born in Adjara and displaced in Kvemo Kartli. He received religious education in Batumi before going to Egypt where he met radicalized Salafis. He came back to Georgia and became a religious authority for Salafi jihadist and translated ISIS propaganda to Georgian. He was killed in 2016 after joining ISIS ranks.

b. The generational gap

The differences in religious education created a generational gap between the youth born in the post Soviet era and the precedent one. Indeed, as George Sanikidze notes, there are two main categories of Muslim practices: the “traditional” ones, such as burial rites, circumcision, marriage ceremony etc... Many of these religious practices have Christians characteristics interlaces, like vine tree ornaments in mosques²³. The other category is all the religious rituals like daily prayers, the recitation of Quran etc... The main schism layed in the fact that the followers of the most fundamentalist Islam are practicing it in separated place. For instance, it was noted that a relative of one of the fundamentalists interviewed by G.Gogvadze and S.Kapanadze said that the followers of the fundamentalist Islam gather separately and do not visit the places where the followers of traditional Islam pray or gather²⁴. Therefore there is a generational conflict between the elders, in favour of traditional Islam, and a part of the younger generation that follows stricter rules and consider the combination of other cultures or religions as perverse and impure²⁵.

c. The lure of a better future in ISIS

When the internal and external factors are combined, the perspective to fight for Daesh can seem appealing for the young radicalized people. Firstly, it allures the individuals into thinking that leaving for Syria or Iraq will be an answer to their socio-economic problems. The intense propaganda makes them think that they will quickly obtain a respectable social status and depict the idea of heroic bravery. This was especially true in the Pankisi Gorge where some foreign fighters, like Tarkhan Batirashvili, known as Omar al-Shishani. He was a former soldier of Georgian army and fought in the Second Chechen war and in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. In 2014 he became one of the senior commander of the Islamic State and killed in 2016.

The open image of Georgian foreign fighters was often very positive among young radicalized people in Georgia. Even among young people with no particular interest in ISIS, the image of the

²³ George Sanikidze, p.496

²⁴ Gogvadze and Kapanadze, p. 13

²⁵ George Sanikidze, p. 498

“Chechen hero” was present in the Pankisi Gorge²⁶. This can be explained by the fact that many foreign fighters belonging to the “first wave” of Islamist fighters had previous military knowledge by fighting in Ossetia or Chechnya and obtained responsibility positions in Daesh. However, for the younger generation, known as the “second wave”, the reality was very different, and most of them died within the year they joined ISIS rank. As the Muslim communities in Pankisi Gorge are small and close-knit, it is likely that everyone knows personally the Muslim who left for Syria or Iraq, and if these people succeed, they then become role-model for their relatives and some other radicalized member of the community.

III. The State struggle to face radicalization

a. Monography of Georgian foreign fighters

When a closer look is taken to analyze the common traits of the deceased foreign fighters, the previous factors underlined are visible. For example, drawing from the list of seven foreign fighters that have been declared deceased and who have available information on their life, common traits are found. These 7 people are: Badri Iremadze, Mamuka Antadze, Rokodin Paksadze, Tamaz Chagalidze (the four foreign fighters who appeared in ISIS propaganda video addressing the Muslims of Adjara); Levan Nakaidze, Khvicha Gobadze and Murman Paichadze, who left for Syria with his wife, children and grandchildren²⁷. Among them, 3 have had an influencing status in Muslim communities before joining ISIS: Khvicha Gobadze received religious education in Batumi and Egypt become becoming a religious authority for Salafi-jihadists in Georgia; Tamaz Chagalidze was a Muslim activist and Murman Paichadze served as an imam for 10 years. At least two of them, Badri Iremadze and Mamuka Antadze spent significant time in Turkey and worked there before deciding to join Syria or Iraq. However, it is difficult to know if it was during their time in Turkey that they radicalized or if their decision to join ISIS was preceding that.

The case of another foreign fighter, Ruslan Shavadze, is particularly interesting. He has been sentenced for supporting terrorism in 2018. Born in 1977, he was a member of Akhmed Chataev’s group, a well-known Chechen jihadist, who is thought to have organized the attacks on Istanbul airport in 2016. Ruslan Shavadze travelled and fought with Chataev’s group in Syria and Iraq. This

²⁶ Goguadze and Kapanadze, *Daesh and the challenges facing Georgia*, November 2015, p.13

²⁷ Bennett Clifford (2018) Georgian foreign fighter deaths in Syria and Iraq: what can they tell us about foreign fighter mobilization and recruitment?, *Caucasus Survey*, 6:1, 62-80

shows how foreign fighters, even when coming from different regions or fighting for different reasons, can have interests in joining other groups, like Chechens or Kists.

b. The governmental strategy to tackle potential terrorist threat

Georgia has never faced serious terrorist threat on its territory since the fall of the USSR. However, the use of Pankisi Gorge as a passage point for the Chechen fighters created tensions towards Russia and served as a motive of intervention for the latter. Moreover, in the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Russian occupation are “maintaining a capability to initiate and stage various terrorist activities in compliance to their aims and objectives.”²⁸ However, when coming from ISIS, it can be said that it is impossible for ISIS borders to move close to Georgia, and the project of a Caucasus caliphate held by some Salafi jihadist from Chechnya or Pankisi Gorge is very unlikely to be realized. Unlike many European countries, Georgia never had a terrorist attack on its territory from an Islamic action. Even though, the low level of threat must not induce a lack of vigilance from the authorities, especially that ISIS terrorism strategy have changed since it lost most of its territory by encouraging radicalized individuals to take action where they are, without travelling to Syria or Iraq. Two main threats had to be dealt with: the first one was to stop the source of recruitment by the Islamic state in Adjara, Guria, Pankisi Gorge and Kvemo Kartli; and the second one is to prevent Georgia from becoming a safe haven for returning foreign fighters and homegrown terrorists.

The European ambitions of Georgia put even more pressure on the latter to deal with the radicalization problem. Even if most of the Georgian foreign fighters died in Syria and Iraq, as early as 2015, 5 foreign fighters had returned to the Pankisi Gorge. Georgia has mainly two solutions to overcome the radicalization problem: act on the socio-economic level by implementing programs preventing radicalization, and act on the legal level by implementing new laws.

The first part is the most complicated one. Indeed, unlike European countries like France or UK with large and various Muslim communities, the Muslim communities in Georgia are small and close-knit, especially in Pankisi Gorge and Adjara region. It is complex to reintegrate a former combatant in a small community where everyone knows each other, and where the one who left may still be seen as heroes. To avoid them to become influence agents at any point in the future, the situation in fragile areas need to be improved with a stronger economy and better education. The problem in Adjara and Pankisi Gorge is complex and needs a state driven strategy for a long term solution. However, it seems like the socio-economic work is mostly done by civil-society

²⁸ State Security Report, 2018

partners, and not by the state itself, and even if associations are playing a great role in the region, it can't be enough to solve the entirety of the radicalization problem²⁹. The state usual solution to avoid the return of foreign fighters is often to arrest them for connection with terrorism. The first reported arrest took place in June 2015 when Giorgi Kuprava was charged for joining a terrorist organization and assisting terrorist activities. But these arrests needed legal changes that were made in April 2014.

In 2014, the Criminal Code was amended to add new articles that would, for example, about the participation in international terrorism, or supplying military aid to a group of individuals of a foreign country or a related body for terrorism purposes (art. 232-2). Other articles of the code, like art 327 and 328 criminalize the recruitment, assist and joining a terrorist group in a foreign state. One of the most interesting article that was added in 2014 is the criminalization of terrorist propaganda, under the article 330, which says that nationwide dissemination of information or otherwise nationwide calls with the aim of conducting a terrorist activity shall carry a punishment of imprisonment from 3 to 6 years³⁰.

c. The foreseeable future

The last known Georgian citizen who died in Syria fighting for ISIS was in March 2019. For other foreign fighters still on Syrian or Iraqi territory the future is still very unclear. Georgian legislation states that any person who participated in combat under ISIS flag or other terrorist organizations are facing jail time if they return to Georgia. This causes two issues: the first one is the question of trial in Iraq or Syria, knowing that the former has already sentenced foreign fighters to death this year; and secondly it poses the threat of a potential illegal return via unofficial routes. The returnees are likely to pose a terrorist threat, as it was seen in November 2017, when a counterterrorist operation took place to localize and dismantle a group of terrorist that was hiding. This group was allegedly planning terrorist attacks in Georgia and Turkey.

If Georgian foreign fighters decide to or cannot come back to Georgia, there is a chance that they join other terrorist groups that do not belong to Daesh, like al-Qaeda or else. There is also the question of women and children who are returning but did not directly participate in any combatant or terrorist activity. According to Zurab Batiashvili, one obstacle to the reintegration of women and children returnees is the absence of programs providing psychological support³¹.

²⁹ Goguadze and Kapanadze, *Daesh and the challenges facing Georgia*, November 2015, p.16

³⁰ See note above

³¹ Zurab Batiashvili, *Post-ISIS period: Threats and Challenges Globally and Locally*, GFSIS, 2019, p.6

It is difficult to know precisely how many Georgian are still on the Syrian or Iraqi territory, given the sensitivity of the information and the difficulty to know for certain if they are dead or not (for example Takhlan Batirashvili was pronounced dead several times before it was proved).

Conclusion:

To conclude, one can say that radicalization and terrorism issues were rather new in Georgia when the Islamic state appeared. Even though the first generation of foreign fighters had already experienced fights in Chechnya or Ossetia, the majority of Georgian foreign fighters underwent radicalization for other reasons. In the case of Adjara and Guria regions, three main factors can be identified: a socio-economic factor that reduces the opportunities to overcome the overall financial difficulties; a political factor that makes the Muslim minorities less integrated in the civil and political Georgian life and identity; and finally, a foreign factor that shows the investments for Muslims countries into the religious and education places promoting extremist ideologies. Like many other European country, the main leverage of the State was to modernize and amend its Criminal Code to include new tools that now permit to prosecute anyone related to a terrorist organization. In the case of Adjara and Guria, however, it seems that the practice of Islam is freer and more open than before, and that both push and pull factors are being dealt with. On the “push” side, Georgia has improved a lot economically in the last few years, and even though the average wage and wealth is not high, Georgia is on the right path. The State is paying more attention to education and healthcare programs, having introduced recently universal health insurance program. Moreover, in Adjara, the investment of Turkey on the coastal lowlands improve the situation by making the region, especially Batumi, more dynamic. On the “pull” side, the Islamic State has lost most of its territory and does not represent an immediate threat, as most of the Georgian foreign fighters did not return to Georgia after fighting in Syria or Iraq. However, the existence of other terrorists’ groups maintain a certain level of threat, but further away of Georgia, like in Yemen or Somalia for example.

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