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EN/COUNTERING STIGMA OF TERRORISM: THE CASE OF PANKISI

Research Report

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Part 1. Introduction to the Context

Georgia is historically a multicultural country. Ethnic Georgians (87%) live together with various ethnic communities such as Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Ossetians, Yezidis (Kurds), Kists (Chechens), Greekis, Ukrainians, Russians, etc. Though, the majority of the Georgian population are Orthodox Christians (83%), Muslims constitute up to 11% of the population (Geostat, 2016).

Ethnic Kists, residing in the Pankisi Gorge, constitute part of the overall Muslim population of Georgia. Pankisi Gorge is located in Kakheti region, Eastern Georgia. (Akhmeta municipality). It is interesting to mention that historically, Kists are descendants of Chechen-Ingush people who settled down in the villages of Pankisi Gorge in the beginning of 19th century. 'Kist' is a Georgian name defining their ethnic identity, though they call themselves 'Wainakhs'. According to the census 2014, currently up to 6000 Kists live in the villages of the Pankisi Gorge (Geostat, 2016). Kists officially became citizens of Georgia in the period of establishing the first independent Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921). Later on, they adopted Georgian surnames. Nowadays, most of the Kists have Chechen as well as Georgian names and they speak fluent Georgian (Zviadadze, 2016). According to my study participant, thanks to their ancestors there is no problem of the language in the Gorge. Thus, the entire Kist population speaks in Chechen, Kist and Georgian very well. Moreover, it looks ridiculous in Pankisi if Chechens and Kists speak with each other in another language but Chechen. Though the reaction is the same if Kist cannot speak Georgian. Therefore, *'It is a must to speak both languages. That is why our native language [Chechen] as well as Georgian survived in Pankisi.'*¹

During the Soviet rule and before the late 90's the religion and religious practices of Kists became rather syncretic and looked more like a mixture of Paganism, Christianity and Sufi Islam also known as 'Traditional Islam' (Zviadadze, 2016, pp.5-7). The Sufi Islam existing in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan is shaped by two Sufi

¹ Male respondent, 27

orders/schools (in Arabic it is called *tariqah*) and namely, *Naqshbandiyyah* and *Qadiriyyah* (ibid.). Sufi Islam represents an interesting symbiosis of traditional local cultures and *Shari'ah*. But the latter has never dominated in the North Caucasus because of *'adat* - a set of very local laws related to the cult of ancestors, elders, etiquette, hospitality, funerals, marriage, mutual assistance, vendetta, etc. which are applied in peoples' everyday lives. They are not purely Islamic but rather exemplifies elements of the popular and ethnic culture (Akaev, n.d.). However, historically Islam has become a stronghold for both, Chechen-Ingush people living in the North Caucasus and Kists residing in Georgia in order to preserve their national identity from the Orthodox Christian Russian Empire. For instance, a Mosque that was built in 1902 in the Duisi village in Pankisi turned into a center for the *Kunta-haji order*, a very popular branch of Sufi Islam (Zviadadze, 2016, p6.).

The overall situation in Pankisi has started changing vividly since the late 90's, after the start of the 2nd Chechen War (battle phase 1999-2000). According to Schmid (2014), similar to languages, religious also tend to turn from "dialects" (side-stream variations) to powerful mainstream versions. Similar transformations have occurred in respect to religious landscape of the Pankisi Gorge after more than 10 000 Chechen refugees, predominantly followers of Salafi Islam (Salafism), fled Russian territory towards the Gorge. As a result, the authority of Sufi Islam decreased dramatically among the Kist population. Instead, practicing Salafi Islam became very popular, especially, among the Kist youth who never lived under the Soviet rule (Zviadadze, 2016).

Salafism, a branch within Sunni Islam that emerged in 19th century in Egypt, is also known as 'Pure Islam'. It is a widespread branch of Sunni Islam whose adherents claim to follow the *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* that is 'the pious predecessors' – the first three generations of Muslims: the first of the Prophet's companions and the next two generations that succeeded him (Wagenmakers, 2016; Zviadadze, 2016; Akaev, n.d.). Unlike the 'Traditional Islam', Salafism contradicts to all kind of ethnic customs, traditions and folklore the culture of the Chechen people, including Kists in Georgia is very reach with (e.g. Sufi Zikr circle dance). Instead, Salafism as the conservative/orthodox branch

of Islam discards any religious innovations/addendums, is based on Koran and Hadiths, and supports Sharia the Islamic Law (ibid.).

The so-called Salafi 'New Mosques' built in several villages of Pankisi are attended intensively by the young Kists. Actually, these are the main spots for young people to socialize, learn Arabic, gain theological knowledge and practice Salafism with the help of preachers educated in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The older generation in Pankisi, socialized mostly under the Soviet regime, are still practicing Sufi Islam (including the members of Elderly Men and Women's Councils) and progressively losing their legitimacy in the Gorge (Zviadadze 2016, Gelava 2016).

Since early 2000's Pankisi Gorge is firmly associated with crime and terrorism. In fact, Pankisi was turned into a center for arms, drug and human trafficking in 2000-2003 in the South Caucasus. Moreover, it was a spot for the smuggling gangs to move freely and a shelter for the so-called Chechen 'boeviks' (Zviadadze, 2016). This situation gave hand to Russia to blame Georgia for ineffective control of country borders and support for 'international terrorism'. The information warfare ran by Russians was obviously affecting badly Georgia's political reputation at the international scale. On the other hand, the high officials of Georgian security and law-enforcement bodies were blamed in by locals and field experts to cooperate with Chechen criminals for making profit.

Due to such a heavy criminal situation in the Pankisi Gorge, the governmental officials were reluctant to any forceful interventions considering them too dangerous for the country's security. Following the Rose Revolution in 2003, Saakashvili's Government (2003-2012) in cooperation with Russian security forces started 'cleansing' the Gorge from criminals and gangs, and strengthening the borders. Moreover, the government carried out an infamous Lapankuri special operation against the so-called illegal armed group of more than 10 people in the Lopota Valley in August 2012 that ended up in death of several Kist young men. This case drastically decreased trust towards Saakashvili's Government among the Pankisi people (ibid. pp.11-13).

Unfortunately, 'negative image' of Pankisi Gorge has not improved much since then. At some point, it got even worse as a result of young Kists intensively joining the jihadist groups in Syrian and Iraqi military conflicts in 2014-2016 since the establishment of so-called 'Islamic State' (ISIS). Although the ethnic Georgian Muslims from Adjarian villages as well as Georgia's ethnic Azeri population can be also found in the datasets of foreign fighters from Georgia, Pankisi Gorge became an area of particular interest to the international media. Special attention towards Pankisi can be explained by the fact that the majority of Georgian-born foreign fighters participating in Iraqi and Syrian conflicts were Pankisi residents and moreover, at least seven of them became mid- to senior- level commanders in the various jihadist groups (Bennett, 2017).

The latest traumatic experience for the Pankisi Muslim community is related to the death of 19-year-old Temirlan Machalikashvili who was badly injured during what authorities called a counterterrorist operation in the Gorge in January 2018 (RFE/RL's Georgian Service, 2018). Machalikashvili was suspected in cooperation with the wanted Chechen IS jihadist Akhmed Chatayev killed during a 20-hour siege in December 2017 in the Georgian capital Tbilisi (BBC, 2017). In fact, the death of Machalikashvil became a turning point for emerging a discourse against the stigma of terrorism among the Kist population they have been experiencing for more than fifteen years already. They were strongly supported by the certain media facilities and human rights organizations who helped them bring their message to the wider public (Kunchulia, 2018; Human Rights EMC, 2018).

Considering the abovementioned context and especially, the changing overall social landscape in Pankisi, my research project aimed at identifying the young Kists' responses countering the stigma of terrorism and related issues such as the outflow of Pankisians to Syria, the spread of Salafism in the Gorge and the role of the State in maintaining peace and security in this region. Therefore, I collected the narratives of young Salafi as well as non-Salafi respondents through conducting the focus-groups

and in-depth interviews in the period of January-March 2018. In total, I have analyzed up to 20 narratives of female and male respondents aged 20-33.

In the following part I propose the discussion based on the main study findings. It should be considered that the research results are derived from the qualitative research methodology, thus they describe only the general tendencies and shouldn't be generalized. Due to confidentiality agreements, I'm unable to divulge the names of research participants. Only respondents' gender and age are indicated in the report.

Part 2. Discussing Young Kists' Counter Responses

Who's in Charge of Stigmatization of the Pankisians: The Role of Government, Media and NGOs

Stigma of terrorism is one of the biggest challenges the Kist population in Pankisi is facing both at national as well as international level. Based on my study participants' narratives it is obvious that the Georgian Government along with Media and non-governmental organizations (with some exceptions) are seen as the main 'catalysts' in labeling Kists as (potential) terrorists. Besides, marking Kists as dangerous people and associating them with terrorism is considered to be even easier compared to Muslims living in mountainous villages of Adjara. This statement is explained by the fact that the Muslims residing in Adjara are ethnic Georgians, whereas those living in Pankisi are ethnic Chechens and belong to the ethnic minority groups in Georgia.

'Though we [Kists] are trying hard to get rid of this irrational terrorism stigma and portray ourselves and our culture from different perspective, Media keeps labeling us intensively through making the News based on sensitive topics such as Islam and terrorism. Say, if you google the word 'Pankisi', you will find eight articles or News out of ten exclusively about terrorism.' (Male, 25)

'When Georgians went to Syria from different parts of the country, again it was only Pankisi that got a lot of stick. Can't say the exact number but I'm pretty sure no less fled from Adjara. Nevertheless, it is always easier to label ethnic minority groups [Kists]. Every time something happened there [in Adjara], Media was rushing to Pankisi to get the information because Pankisi is perceived as the hotbed of terrorism in Georgia. t This is where all the trouble comes from.'(Male, 28)

As one of the respondents admitted, the main objective to start a local radio station ('RadioWay') was to eliminate widely spread stereotypes about the Gorge. The radio was going to produce and disseminate an actual reality from within Pankisi and serve

as an alternative source of information to other media outlets producing only negative, one-sided news. Thus, contributing to maintaining the dangerous image of Pankisi.

‘Media gets interested in Pankisi only in case someone goes to Syria or is killed in a combat there. Any other positive news has never been reported from the Gorge. That is why we decided to show the real face of Pankisi to the rest of the Georgian public who gets under the wrong impression all the time.’ (Male, 26)

Focus group respondents make comments almost identical to these when speaking about the Georgian non-governmental organizations (including the regional ones). Despite some exceptions, NGOs are not much trusted in Pankisi as they tend to *‘use Pankisi related stereotypes for their own interests and get finances for their projects’*.² Therefore, according to the respondent, like media and the state institutions, labeling Pankisi as the dangerous place serves to the organizations’ best interests. Otherwise, they will not have any resources to continue working.

According to one of the interviewees, a geopolitical context should be taken into consideration as well. It was mentioned that several countries such as Iran, Russia, Turkey, US and Saudi Arabia try to influence the situation in the region. Among those countries Russia is considered to be especially tricky and dangerous. In case of any ‘messy’ situation in Pankisi, Russia might interfere with the argument that Chechens are oppressed by the Georgian Government or that the region harbors the terrorists. This statement itself is not far from the truth as back in August 2002 Russian air forces bombed certain areas in the Gorge with the excuse of fighting against terrorism (Zviadadze, 2016). Besides, in January 2016 Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made a public announcement that the Islamic State has its military training base in Pankisi. According to him, such a big threat was one of the main reasons for launching a visa regime between Russia and Georgia (Tabula, 2016). Thus, it should be in the

² Male respondent, 25

Georgian Government's best interests to support stable and peaceful situation in the Gorge. However, the study participants see the opposite picture.

All the focus group participants admitted that after 19-years-old Themirlan Machalikashvili's death there is an increasing fear intertwined with losing trust towards the current Georgian Government among the Kist population. 'Tragedy', 'shameful security operation', 'despair', 'injustice' and 'crime' are the words the young Kists use to express their attitudes and experiences caused by the teen's death.

'Many people in Pankisi are afraid that tomorrow the security officials can come to their places and kill their innocent children... It was a shame the Government authorities announcing later that the operation was carried out successfully! In my opinion, it was a crime committed not only against the Pankisians and Themirlan's family in particular, but against the whole Georgia.' (Male, 28)

'Before the incident with Machalikashvili, trust towards the current Government and state institutions was much higher among the Pankisi residents. State security service is now associated with a real threat for the people. Actually, this was the first time when the security officials exceeded their power in the Gorge.' (Male, 25)

According to the respondents' narratives, at some point each Georgian government has been trying to portray Pankisi as a hazardous area. Some of the interviewees believe it happens due to the officials' personal interests: first they create destabilization in and around the Gorge purposefully and afterwards, demonstrate to their Western partners how well they perform in dealing with the unstable situation in the Gorge. The study participants think that it has become obvious especially in the period of Mikhail Saakashvili's government (2003-2012). Moreover, his actions contributed strongly to creation of a certain tension between the Salafi and Sufi community leaders, though it did not lead to the disagreement or split within the Pankisi population itself. As it was mentioned, the Saakashvili's Government helped Salafi Islam become '*empowered, expanded and free*'³ but only for its own political

³ Female respondent, 27

and financial interests. So far as *'Salafi Islam and the Salafists are perceived as potential terrorists worldwide'*⁴ it is always beneficial for the government to have such a threat within its own country. For instance, a special operation carried out in the Village of Lapankuri in August 2012, which was widely promoted as an act of liquidation of terrorist formation on the territory of Georgia, is appraised as a performance of the Saakashvili's government for building its 'anti-terrorist image' at the international scale.

'Information that the public was receiving very intensively was all about avoiding the great threat coming from the North Caucasus through liquidation of certain terrorist groupings. And in fact, you know you have seen these guys a week ago alive and healthy walking in the village peacefully. Many questions have been raised whether the government is using its own citizens, the Kist people to build its international image.' (Female, 28)

As for the financial issues, it was emphasized that since 2000's and especially, during the Saakashvili's government, great investments for empowering Salafi Islam in Pankisi was made by the Arab countries. In addition to the financial support provided to the young Kists to receive education overseas (mainly in Egypt and Saudi Arabia), they were financing constructions of the 'New Mosques' as well. On the one hand, it is a big grace and even duty for every Muslim to help each other (despite distance between them or one's location). Thus, *'building a Mosque for other Muslims counts as a very kind and virtuous thing'*⁵. On the other hand, it is perceived that Arabs willing to provide financial support for their Salafi comrades in Pankisi served as good source for the government to gain extra financial benefits.

'In those times, unbelievably huge funding was coming from the Arab countries. Salafi leaders were saying themselves that 70% of the funding was taken usually by the government and the rest was left for the Gorge. The locals in charge of these financial issues were

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Male respondent, 25

bragging that they could enter Merabishvili's⁶ office even without knocking on his door.' (Female, 27)

Actually, the same opinion was expressed in respect to the current government as well. Two recent incidents - the liquidation of Akhmed Chatayev in November 2017 and Temirlan Machalikashvili in January 2018 (both cases still being under investigation), give a solid ground to the doubt that it is in Georgian government's best interest to keep the image of the Salafi community as of the *'radicalized group'*.⁷ It was also outlined that the state security service (SSG) is the main state agency, which can benefit from all this mess, as *'everybody knows the SSG is in charge of controlling the situation in Pankisi.'*⁸

In the respondents' opinion, the only difference between the previous and current Georgian Governments ('Georgian Dream' is the ruling party since 2012) is that the latter has chosen the Sufi community leaders as its most trusted and 'favored' people in the Gorge. Thus, the current Georgian Government is strongly criticized for its exclusive loyalty and support to only certain group of people (Sufis) within the Kist community. In fact, on the basis of #117 Ordinance of the Government of Georgia issued on 30/01/2014, the Imams of Traditional Mosques are officially receiving salaries from the national budget (Legislative Herald of Georgia, 2014). Besides, the 'favored' Sufis are perceived as 'control tool' and 'mediator' between the officials and the rest of the community, since the majority of the community are the followers of Salafi Islam and pray at the 'New Mosques'. In turn, such a situation contributes to maintaining the abovementioned 'tension' between the Sufi and Salafi community leaders, which is mainly caused by 'political legitimacy'-related issues rather than religious factors and differences between Salafi and Sufi Islam. The thing is that, the Sufi community leaders, trusted by the Government, have a very small number of followers. And despite of the lost authority among the Kist population, they are still legitimized by the Georgian Government that keeps their historically determined legacy still on the ground. On the

⁶ Former Prime Minister of Georgia (4 July - 25 October 2012) and Georgia's Minister of Internal Affairs (2004–2012)

⁷ Female respondent, 27

⁸ Male respondent, 28

other hand, Salafi community leaders enjoy legitimacy from the majority of the Pankisi population (as I was told they have up to 5000 followers in Pankisi), but are not acknowledged by the Government. Thus, as long as the dangerous image serves as an opportunity to gain extra funding to 'fight terrorism in Georgia,' it is believed that the government will not legitimate the Salafi community in Pankisi.

'There is no confrontation as such between Sufi and Salafi people. It's more like a tension between four or five people in total. Anyway, there is nothing bad happening between their followers, the ordinary people. The difference is that Salafi leaders have many followers and thus, are making the weather in the community. They have power, they have a bunch of young followers unlike the Sufi leaders. But the Salafists are not legitimized by the Government, and this is what they lack and what they want.' (Male, 25)

Besides, based on my study respondents' narratives it is obvious that the young Salafi followers don't feel themselves to be treated equally with Sufis as they are ignored and rejected by the Government even till today, although they represent the majority of the Kist community in Pankisi (these complaints of the Salafi Kists are stated in the previous study findings as well. See Zviadadze, 2016; Gelava, 2016).

'Similar to the followers of Traditional Islam, Salafi people should also be acknowledged as citizens by our Government. Every Government has its own policy. While the previous one cooperated with Salafists, the current Government chose others [Sufis] in order to keep an eye on Pankisi. The problem is that the officials are not getting in touch with us, with ordinary people without some mediators.' (Male, 27)

Religious Preferences of the Pankisi Youth: Why Salafism?

As it was mentioned in the previous parts of this paper, certain (geo) political factors stimulated spreading of Salafism in the Pankisi Gorge. However, in addition to the reasons on the political level, there are extra social factors working on the population level as well. According to the study participants, the main reason for the young Kists to convert to Salafism is the lack of in-depth knowledge of Islam among the the followers of 'Traditional Islam' (Sufism). Due to this, they are not able to answer the questions young Muslims have in respect to their religion. The Sufis usually read prayers in Georgian as they don't speak Arabic. Unlike them, the young men educated in Arab countries have a comprehensive religious knowledge, speak Arabic fluently, thus can read and preach Koran in original at the 'New Mosques'. Consequently, they are able to provide more thorough responses to questions concerning the religious issues. This is why the youth in search for accurate explanations find Salafi preachers and Salafism itself meaningful, sufficient and convincing.

“For decades we did not have a religious leader in the Gorge who would have any religious education. Can you imagine this? They have some prayers translated from Arabic into the Georgian language and they pray in Georgian. So, they don't fully understand the meaning of this prayer. And if you go to a religious leader and ask opinion about any religious issue, they will give you only “yes/no” answers. For modern young people this kind of responses are not enough. Besides, the following question is “why?” and if you don't have an answer to this question, you don't have their trust. That's why most young people leaned towards Salafism - their [Salafi] religious leaders know the religion better.”
(Female, 27)

It is also apparent that those young respondents who pray in the Salafi Mosque consider Salafism to be the genuine and 'correct' version of Islam. And the teachings of Koran by the people educated in Theology overseas are perceived as the most legitimate source of gaining the accurate knowledge in Islam. While discussing the superiority of

Salafism compared to the ‘Traditional Islam,’ some of the respondents mentioned that the latter is followed by only in Chechnya and Ingushetia, whereas Salafism is practiced ‘*all over the world*’.⁹ Moreover, ‘Traditional Islam’ is described to be more ethnicity-related and based on cultural specificities predominated in the North Caucasus.

As it was already mentioned, unlike ‘Traditional Islam,’ Salafism contradicts to all kind of ethnic customs, traditions and folklore (e.g. Sufi Zikr circle dance) in the culture of Chechen people (including the Kists in Georgia). Therefore, it seems that Sufism for young Salafi people is rather associated with ‘ethnic attribute’ for ‘non-religious’ older generation who had been socialized mostly in the period of Soviet regime and did not follow the Islam rules strictly (e.g. drink alcohol or smoke tobacco). Thus, in overall ‘Traditional Islam’ is not considered to be ‘*the right form of Islam*.’¹⁰

‘On Fridays we go to Mosque and they [preachers] share the knowledge with us; they read the text from Koran in Arabic and translate it in Kist for us. We are learning a lot and I think, they are telling us the right things. Also, there are schools at the Mosques and children who are willing to go there can learn Arabic.’ (Male, 19)

‘It [Sufism] was practiced during the Soviet times. And actually, the older generation is non-religious in the entire country, including Pankisi. But if Traditional Islam is known only in Chechnya and Ingushetia, Salafi Islam is spread all over the world. Now we have very well-educated people who returned from the Arab countries. They hold master’s and doctoral degrees. They have showed us this true path of Islam.’ (Male, 28)

‘Though I don’t know Koran very well, for me it is right and acceptable what is written in Koran. If Koran doesn’t teach us to do something that my grandfather invented himself, why should I do that? People want to learn the true Islam and not the Islam of our grandfathers.’ (Female, 23)

⁹ Male respondent, 28

¹⁰ Female respondent, 23

Another interesting point in respect to advancing Salafi Islam in Pankisi is its positive impact on the community's social life. Despite their religious affiliation, in the respondents' opinion, Salafism and those educated abroad in Theology, played a crucial role in reducing crime and overall deviant behavior in the Gorge. As the study participants underline, the sermons at the 'New Mosques' have been intensively addressing the problems such as drug use, theft, illicit trade of weapons and other crimes through condemning and defining them as great sin. Though the interviewees do not deny the state's contribution in stabilization of the situation in Pankisi (though through a very harsh policy), they believe *'fear of God'*¹¹ is what made this really happen.

'Those young people who know Arabic, can read Koran in original and are well-educated in Islam, gained big trust in our community. This knowledge was translated into their everyday lives: no women, no smoking, no alcohol and no drugs. All this was unacceptable for them! So, they became an example to be followed for other young people.' (Female, 27)

'As you may know, a lot of bad things like drugs, trafficking, arms trade, etc., were happening in 2000's in Pankisi. Just by that time our comrades returned from Saudi Arabia and started explaining how sinful this was. Of course, the Government played an important role in improving the situation in the Gorge but so did these young educated people. There is almost no crime happening in Pankisi nowadays.' (Male, 28)

'One should have a fear of something, whether of God or something else. As you can see, there are very few crimes such as theft and murders in Pankisi now; almost zero. I can freely say that this is because of the fear of God.' (Female, 23)

It is interesting to mention that those interviewees who affiliate themselves neither to Salafi nor to Sufi Islam made additional, attention-grabbing points during our conversation about advancing Salafi Islam in the Gorge. According to them, such a strong attraction to religion among the young Kists is partly stimulated by various social

¹¹ Female respondent, 23

factors like unemployment, lack of entertaining facilities and possibilities for self-realization. Under the circumstances when one cannot invest time and energy in anything, usually religion/God turns up to be a shelter or solution. One of the interviewees even recalled a case when one of his acquaintances with considerably conservative religious views became quite moderate after getting job.

‘There was a quite radically predisposed [Salafi] guy who was hired by the organization I was working at. Several weeks later, when he finally sank into his work, he started shaving, made a new hairstyle and stopped thinking in a way he did before. It was really hard to recognize him. So, I mean, when young people have to sit all day long without any actual job, their only sanctuary is religion. Religion calms you. Even if you have nothing, God will look after you anyway.’ (Male, 25)

Considering ‘Traditional Islam’ being perceived as something rather local, traditional, ‘invented by grandfathers’ and thus, ‘incorrect religion’ by the majority of the youth (Salafists), some kind of identity crisis has taken place in Pankisi during the last years. It was already mentioned that Sufi Islam is recognized to be more interreligious, intercultural and therefore, more liberal and ‘open’ branch of Sunni Islam. According to some scholars, it due to religious (Islamic) identity experienced as rather ‘cultural identity’ (Roy, 2006, as cited in Zviadadze, 2016). Sufi Kists, who migrated from Chechnya and are very well integrated with the Georgian population, feel and understand their national identity as *‘being the children of the Caucasus mountains’*. Unlike the Sufis represented mostly by the older generation in Pankisi, it is religion/religious identity (instead of ethnic and national markers) that comes forefront for the younger Salafi community members (ibid. p. 24-25; RegTV, 2016).

In March 2016 a very interesting public debate was held concerning the traditional and conservative Islam (Salafism) in Pankisi with participation of both, Traditional Islam as well as Salafi community representatives (RegTV, 2016). The main discontent and basis for alienation mentioned from the Sufi side concerned the replacement of the ancestral

kinship (which is considered to be a cornerstone for the Kist social structure) with the religious one, i.e. *Jamaat* (meaning assembly). It was underlined that as long as conservative Islam in the form of Salafism refutes and even prohibits drinking alcohol, playing musical instruments, performing ‘Zikr’, celebrating secular (like the New Year, birthday) and other non-Muslim religious holidays (e.g. Christmas, Easter), it automatically contradicts the local Kist customs and religious views which are much more liberal and culturally syncretic as it happens to be in the whole North Caucasus. While the young Kists with comprehensive knowledge of Islam actively made references to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad in Arabic, discussed what is acceptable or unacceptable according to the pure Islam, the main concerns from the side of (Sufi) Elders were preserving the Kists’ local customs and traditions (which are not seen contradictory to the rules of Islam) and respecting the ancestors. It was mentioned that even though they (elderly) might not be as much knowledgeable of Islam as the modern youth, anyway they managed to bring Islam (as it is) to the modern days in the Gorge, and avoid any kind of conflict among the Muslim community of the Gorge, especially because of the following: *‘This is a very dangerous zone [Pankisi region]. Though we are sitting here right now, we have no idea what can happen tomorrow. That’s why we should be very careful! Various external actors have an eye for this region, say Russia, US, Europe or Asia. And in every moment the situation here can be changed dramatically’* (ibid.).

As my study participants mentioned, the margins between the domains of cultural traditions and religion rules are now (two years after this discussion) clearer and more understandable among the overall Kist population, though it has been very mixed during the previous decades. As they say, in the beginning, when the young Kists returned back to Pankisi from the Arab states and appeared to be *‘brave enough’*¹² to oppose to the Elders saying *‘some things you are not doing right’*¹³, there was certain disagreement between them. Though it cannot be called as a religious-based conflict

¹² Female respondent, 23

¹³ Ibid.

between the generations or community members *a fortiori*. As it was also mentioned, despite people (might) have different opinions it does not necessarily mean there is a conflict between them. When it comes to the different generations, there always is some kind of gap between them, despite their religious belongings. The respondents stressed out that the Kist people, both the representatives of Salafi and Traditional Islam, highly respect the senior community members and their '*adat*'. Series of protests with all the Pankisians standing together and demanding an unbiased investigation of Temirlan Machalikashvilis's death from the Government, was brought up as a clear evidence describing unity and integrity of the entire Kist community.

'Pankisi is not divided, it is one and united part of Georgia. So it's not true if someone thinks that Pankisi is broken down and the distribution of power is going on between Salafi and Traditional Islam. Having respect to each other is above all for all of us and it doesn't matter are you a Salafist or not. Salafists are obliged to respect seniors in the community. Even having different opinions, it doesn't mean that young people and older generation of Pankisi are in conflict.' (Male, 28)

And again, Media is underlined to be the main generator of incorrect public discourses in regard to the religious conflicts in the Gorge. For a very long time, one and the same people and mostly, community leaders from the Pankisi Kist population, have been represented through the different Media sources and no voices of the ordinary community members were heard. On the other hand, journalists are blamed to distinguish their respondents by belonging to the certain religious groups, either to Salafi Islam or 'Traditional Islam'. As a result, the rest of the Georgian population has an impression that there is a deep religious conflict and Pankisians are torn apart, which is definitely not the case.

'I think religion is a personal matter. I want to say that when one is showing up in front of a big audience and makes comments on behalf of the entire Kist community, one shouldn't underline whether he/she is a follower of Traditional Islam or not. One should leave his/her religious affiliation for oneself. My friends and

I never do that. Otherwise, [as Salafist] I would feel myself as a representative of some sect. I think, Media turns it all more bitter. In actual life, people in Pankisi do not move around and communicate with each other through the labels, saying like 'Hey, I'm Salafist'. (Female, 23)

Young Kists in Syrian Armed Conflict

While discussing the social landscape of Pankisi, the military conflict in Syria is one of the significant issues. According to the various sources, overall up to 200 Georgian citizens went to fight in the Middle East since 2011 (Goguazde & Kapanadze, 2015; Clifford, 2017). Out of them approximately 28% were not ethnically Kist and 17% originated from areas outside the Pankisi Gorge (ethnic Georgian Muslims from Adjara and ethnic Azerbaijanis from the Kvemo Kartli region). In addition to the fact that Kists constituted the majority of the Georgian foreign fighters, at least eight of them became the military emirs in various jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria (e.g. ISIS, Junud al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ajnad al Kavkaz). Hence, these were two major factors that put Pankisi in the center of international media attention, describing it as the 'Harvard of terrorist upbringing' (Clifford, 2017).

There is an interesting observation according to which the age of the Georgian fighters correlates with their memberships of the jihadist groups. The so-called 'second wave' Georgian militants who were 25 years old on average (at the time of their death) were fighting in ISIS whereas the 'first wave' militants who were approximately seven years older were affiliated mostly to Al Qaeda and other non-ISIS jihadist formations. Besides, it is assumed that the 'second wave' fighters who outnumbered their older and highly skilled counterparts had no military experience at all. Understandably, death rate among the youngsters is higher (ibid. pp.8-9). Presumably, placing the low skilled volunteer fighters on the front lines of combats and thus, utilizing them as 'cannon fodder' or suicide bombers is a common practice for different jihadist formations (Schmid, 2015).

When it comes to the factors driving young Kists to join violent extremist organizations, the previous studies (though their number is scarce) discuss quite similar causes (Goguazde, & Kapanadze, 2015; Zviadadze, 2016; Gelava, 2016; Clifford, 2017). In particular, these factors relate to:

- ⇒ Religion - intensely decreasing authority of the North Caucasian Sufi Islam in Pankisi. Instead, spread of Salafism and especially, among younger population;
- ⇒ Ideology – a strong believe that Muslims are oppressed and discriminated all over the world. Thus, Muslim people should support each other by any means;
- ⇒ National identity – Kists are fighting against Russia in Syria. The war in the Middle East is a continuation of the Chechen–Russian unresolved political conflict;
- ⇒ Economic – high rate of unemployment and financial hardship in the Gorge;
- ⇒ Education – lack of formal as well as informal education among the Pankisi youth;
- ⇒ Well-established mobilization facilities – online/offline networks for the recruitment of the youth, family members and friends fighting in the Middle East, the local groups of *Bay'ah* (oath of allegiance in Islam);
- ⇒ Personal grievances – feeling of unfulfillment/failure and wish to get rid of it, self-identity crisis.

In fact, the abovementioned characteristics are also known as push and pull factors shaping the motivations of vulnerable individuals/groups on their way to religious/ideological radicalization. Though the indicators for each category vary slightly by different scholars; overall, the pushing factors combine characteristics related to religion, ideologies, national identity, socioeconomic and political circumstances/experiences, whereas the pulling factors operate at 'deeper' level and are strongly connected to one's emotional/spiritual benefits conferred through affiliation with a certain group. Moreover, it is important to note that both, push and pull factors are usually intertwined and work in combination (Schmid, 2013; Schmid, 2015; Safi, 2016; Saltman, et al., 2016).

Based on my respondents' narratives, the feeling of injustice towards Muslims oppressed by the Bashar Assad political regime ('pushing' factor: ideology) as well as an opportunity to fight against Russia ('pushing' factor: national identity) which has been

supporting Assad's military forces, were the main factors triggering the young Pankisians to join the extremist military formations since the establishment of a 'caliphate' by the 'Islamic State' in 2014. It was also mentioned that the flow of young people to Syria was stopped after the death of Tarkhan Batirashvili (aka Umar al-Shishani), the Pankisian former 'minister of war' for the ISIS and arrests of George Kuprava and Aiuf Borchashvili who were accused of promoting terrorism and recruiting the youth from the Pankisi Villages ('pushing' factor: established mobilization facilities).

Considering the fact that Russia has been supporting government of President Assad and launched an intense air campaign against his opposition activists in 2015 but mostly killing the Western-backed rebels and civilians (BBC, 2016), it was a great opportunity for Pankisians as well as Chechens from the North Caucasus to 'revenge' and fight against Russia on the outside territories in the Middle East. This explanation sounds plausible envisaging the fact that 14,000 Chechen foreign fighters joined the civil war in Syria (Schmid & Tinnes, 2015).

'As this was the war against Assad with participation of Russia, it didn't really matter for Chechen people [including the Kists] on which geographical location they could fight against Russia. Actually, it was a great possibility for Chechens to do both, help the Muslims and combat Russia at the same time.' (Male, 26)

As it was mentioned during the discussions, the expectations of those young people who joined the military organizations in Syria wishing to fight against the Assad bloody regime were quite naïve. Since they lacked the accurate information, formal education and life experience, they could not foresee the terrible results of their decisions such as an expanded violence worldwide, increased aggression towards Muslims and destroyed life of young fighters with a lifelong label - 'Terrorist'.

'I'm always saying that those young men who I knew and who went to Syria, they wished to fight against the injustice as they saw how women and children have been oppressed and killed

there. And I totally disagree with the assumption that earning money was their leading purpose. In a war one either dies, survives, or gets injured. Besides, after fighting in ISIS one shouldn't expect any success in life as he is acknowledged as a terrorist.' (Female, 24)

'When you are watching the videos showing raped women and killed babies, such a horror created by Assad regime... This is why the youth from Pankisi joined the Syrian war. Of course, the scarce information, low level education and lack of foresight contributed strongly to their decisions on going there. I know for sure that this won't bring any good results. Only the number of terrorist actions are increasing, Islamophobia is spreading and I think ISIS is one of the main reasons for this.' (Female, 21)

In the respondents' opinion, such a clear motivation to help and protect other Muslims in the Middle East excludes personal interest and especially, in regards to financial well-being. It is also remarkable that the rules/principles of Salafi Islam are brought as an argument against the widespread judgement that the main motivation for people joining ISIS is to gain wealth. In fact, the Salafi respondents underlined that it is impermissible in Islam to fight for money and it does not have the Grace of God.

'Many research reports are saying that improving socioeconomic conditions is the main purpose for people fighting in Syria. But no improvements were noticeable in case of those families whose relatives went to fight in Syria. To put it simply, 99% of gone young people did not plan to empower themselves financially there and come back to Pankisi afterwards. That's not true!' (Female, 27)

'Those who left for Syria, the majority were quite religious men. It might be that some people are fighting there for money, but definitely not those from our community.' (Male, 33)

In respect to the abovementioned points, the 'fighting spirit' (equalized with courage/bravery) of Chechen and Pankisian Kists emphasized in the respondents' narratives is also an important ethno-cultural factor to consider. This is a feature experienced more as an ethno-national phenomenon rather than related to one's

religion (again ‘pushing’ factor: national identity). The statements such as *‘The Caucasian people are brave and protective’*¹⁴ or *‘it’s a psychological thing for us [Chechens] to love weapon’*¹⁵ provide some kind of cultural background for the respondents to make themselves understand the motives of Pankisians’ outflow to Syria. Only once was mentioned (among the non-Salafi respondents) that those belonging to the Salafi Jamaat have gone to Syria as they followed the call for the ‘Holy War’ and wished to die in Jihad (‘pulling’ factor: to have a special place in Heaven as martyrs).

Despite the abovementioned exception and in line with the overall dominant discourse revealed from the respondents' narratives, the young Kists' outflow to Syria had nothing to do with the so-called ‘religious radicalization’.¹⁶ Instead, the factors driving young Pankisians to join the jihadist organizations are portrayed as politically (even historically) and culturally determined preconditions. The former is linked to the unresolved political conflict between Chechnya and Russia, whereas the latter is associated with Kist peoples’ ‘fighting spirit’ and heroic intensions to fight for and protect other Muslims. And though *‘not everybody is ready for self-sacrifice, there are certain people who wish to do this’*¹⁷. Besides, one’s decision to leave for Syria is articulated as naïve choice shaped by misleading propaganda the young Pankisians have been exposed to. As one of the interviewees remembered, the various groups had been created in social media and administered by those who left Pankisi and joined the extremist organizations in Syria earlier. The main mission for the group administrators was to make other Pankisians feel terribly guilty for staying passive and not helping their Muslim brothers and sisters in Syria which was their primary duty as for the genuine followers of Islam.

¹⁴ Female respondent, 25

¹⁵ Male respondent, 26

¹⁶ By the definition of the European Commission, radicalization occurs when people are embracing views and ideas which could lead to terrorism. Radicalization can be articulated as a socialization to violent extremism leading to terrorism (Orav, 2015). As radicalization is context-bound phenomenon at given time and space, there is not always a linear connection between religious radicalization and (violent) extremism/terrorism *per se*. For more detailed analysis, please, see Schmid, 2013 and Schmid, 2014.

¹⁷ Female respondent, 25

While discussing the factors driving young people to join ISIS or other extremist formations in the Middle East, it was also noticeable that those respondents affiliating themselves to Salafism more tended to construct somewhat moral and emotionally loaded justifications compared to their non-Salafi counterparts. And namely, an increasing aggression towards the Muslim population worldwide, which causes deep feeling of unfairness in them is an overwhelming discourse in Salafi respondents' narratives. In their opinion, though violence and terrorism occur across the whole world, only Muslims are equated with terrorism, and plenty of other terrifying crimes committed by non-Muslims are not qualified as terrorism. In order to strengthen the argument, one of the respondents referred to the oppressions of Muslims by Buddhists in Myanmar which was not acknowledged as an act of terrorism and it *'of course evokes a feeling of protest'*.¹⁸ Another contrasting example brought by the interviewees concerns the ethnic Georgian militants who have been fighting in Afghanistan and/or in Ukraine that according to their assessment is similar to what the Muslim foreign fighters do in Syria. However, in case they *'do not return back, Georgians are acknowledged as heroes, but Kists are called terrorist'*.¹⁹ In addition, it was noted that Americans and Russians also participated in the military conflict in Syria, and though also attacking peaceful civilians, none of them were called terrorists.

According to the research participants, the main explanation for constantly labeling Muslims as the terrorists is rather political. The respondents believe it is in the best interests of powerful actors (such as US, Russia) to have a *'non-peaceful Islam'*²⁰ in the world. And a clear manifestation of this is various provocative actions such as the Charlie Hebdo case in 2015 for instance. It is claimed to be an act of provocation by the respondents who assume that the editors *'knew about proscription on the images of Muhammad in Islam, as it is well known for the whole world'*²¹. As the interviews explain, these kind of actions *'which have no limits any more'*²² evoke the counter-

¹⁸ Female respondent, 23

¹⁹ Female respondent, 25

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Female respondent, 23

²² Ibid.

reactions among Muslims who have no other options (e.g. legal) but to respond in a violent way - through organizing the terrorist attacks.

Altogether, it is obvious that the feeling of injustice caused by the perception of being constantly discriminated and demonized because of Islam is quite intense among the Salafi respondents. Besides they think that war and terrorism itself are not invented exclusively by Muslims and people are fighting with each other all over the world *'since the mankind has existed'*²³. Even Jihad in Islam was explained as a responsive fight to a war initiated by others, so it should not be understood as an arbitrary action. Therefore, linking the war with Islam is perceived as totally incorrect and unacceptable.

Considering all the discussed above points, it becomes clearer why the respondents' attitudes towards 'responsive' terrorist attacks committed by Muslims are somewhat ambivalent: though, in general they condemn the terrorism and killing the innocent civilians, in case of 'Charlie Hebdo' attack the respondents think that the provocateurs received what they actually deserved. In addition, it was mentioned that Muslims should avoid fighting back to the provocations as it usually turns against them in a form of rapidly increasing Islamophobia.

'I've heard from many people that they [attackers] are not blamed at all. We do not agree with terrorism, but we saw and heard so many terrible things that I think they deserved it at some point. It would be better not to respond, but..' (Female, 23)

Herewith, I would like to outline that all the young respondents share the common view that Salafi Islam and Salafi community do not represent any threat neither for the region nor for the entire country. Despite the fact that the Salafists have more conservative religious views and lifestyle, and although some Pankisians left for Syria, the level of their overall civil consciousness has always been high. It was also mentioned, that *'Salafi community heads identify the stability and peace in the Gorge*

²³ Male respondent, 27

to be most important’,²⁴ thus, they will never commit anything harmful for the Kist people or their country (Georgia).

‘Salafi people do not represent any danger. They will never do anything bad for the State [Georgia]. There is no one from the Salafi community who broke the law or violated public norms.’ (Female, 27)

‘Though we don’t agree with some religious issues, it doesn’t mean they are able to go against their country [Georgia] or people. It never happened and I hope, it won’t ever happen. In general, Kists are very loyal to their homeland and they won’t let anyone from the community do harm to the State.’ (Male, 25)

The great contribution of Salafi preachers in impeding the outflow of Pankisians was also boldly emphasized. As one of the interviewee remembered, two years ago in one of the villages in Pankisi (Tsinubani) Salafi preachers openly condemned the ISIS and called it evil for the first time. This was followed by the audio messages from the Pankisian authorities serving at ISIS, shaming ‘Pankisi Jamaat’ and threatening with cutting off the heads of the Salafi leaders.

‘While looking from the outside, many people think that the Salafi community is in close relation with ISIS and shares their visions. But on the contrary, these are two totally different and opposing sides. When the ISIS was especially powerful there was a very big confrontation between them, and the Pankisi Salafists played a huge role in stopping the locals to join the conflict in Syria. The Salafists are against the ISIS just like the Elders and all other local people are.’ (Male, 27)

It should be noted that the lack of Georgian Government’s sense of responsibility towards the outflow of young Pankisians is strongly emphasized among the study participants. The Government was especially criticized concerning the case of two underaged Pankisian boys who managed to cross the Georgian border at the Tbilisi International Airport without their parents’ permission in April 2015. Afterwards, it was

²⁴ Male respondent, 26

discovered that both of them went to Syria and joined the ISIS as foreign fighters. According to the official response made by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the students have been '*sneaked out undetached*' at the national passport control (Rustavi 2, 2015). For the study respondents this kind of response sounds rather inadequate and it brings to mind the things like as bribery and contribution of the state security service officials. It was already pointed out that the SSG is believed to be in the course of everything in regard to the Gorge and thus, '*has the final word*²⁵ for every Pankisi-related issue. The suspicion about the SSG involvement in 'sneaking' of the underaged Kists is also backed by the argument that it is a common practice to hold Pankisians (for at least an hour) at the passport control every time they are crossing the national borders due to their ethnicity (Kist/Chechen) and place of residence (Pankisi Gorge). Thus, considering all the abovementioned, sneaking away from the passport control officials without any special support looks quite impossible for the study participants.

'I'm pretty sure, someone in charge was paid there or had some other kind of benefit for letting these kids cross the border. Usually, they keep me for more than hour on the border asking dozens of questions like as where, why, from where, etc. I am departing. And it happens even when I arrive to Georgia and am entering my country. All in all, it is ridiculous to say that the kids sneaked out.'

(Male, 28)

As a matter of fact, the Georgian Government has always been carrying out the harsh and reactive policy towards the Gorge. Based on the amendments made to the Criminal Code of Georgia in 2014, number of people accused either in recruiting/sending young Kists to Syria or sowing the ISIS propaganda have been arrested on the territory of Georgia in 2015 (Gogvadze & Kapanadze, 2015). Recently conducted counterterrorist operations (against Akhmed Chatyev and Temirlan Machalikashvili) are the representation of the States' reactive policy as well. The Government's use of non-reactive policies are limited to the tightening of border control, banning the websites and blocking the pages in social networks promoting the ISIS (Zviadadze, 2016).

²⁵ Male respondents, 30

Overall, yet there is no prevention-centered as well as rehabilitation-oriented counterterrorism national policy in Georgia. As it was outlined in the narratives of my study respondents, there is a real need for awareness raising in regards to the conflict solving skills, dealing with aggression, propaganda and fake news. At some point, these topics are considered to be even more important rather than the trainings on gender equality and women's rights. On the other hand, it was mentioned that in fact the State's severe policy works against its citizens: instead of providing special rehabilitation programs for those people willing to return from Syria, there is only one 'option' they might have – the imprisonment from ten to seventeen years. In its turn, this is one of the reasons why *'99% of Georgian foreign fighters chose to stay in Syria and continue fighting against the tyranny. It is better than going to jail in Georgia'*²⁶.

Although, the young people see/feel the Government and other social institutions (e.g. Media) are not disposed to support them in getting rid of the terrorism stigma, they are strongly motivated to take an action themselves and make positive changes (including removing the stigma) by their own means. As it was highlighted during the discussions, establishing of the 'Youth Initiative Group of Pankisi' is a good starting point in this respect. An overall objective of the group is to eliminate Pankisi-related stereotypes and contribute to the creation of a more integrated society.

Therefore, the initiative group is not interested in being affiliated to either Sufi or Salafi community, or to any political party. Instead, they view themselves as independent group of young people operating at the regional as well as international level. And as far as the Pankisi youth-related problems (e.g. outflow to Syria) are mostly discussed by the community Elders, the group members intend to make their own voice loud and audible.

'Mostly we are focused on the youth. In our opinion, the young people know the existing problems better as they are able to discuss them from different perspectives. And it happens because we have a very good staff: our group members are successful in their

²⁶ Male respondents, 28

studying, they participate in exchange programs as well as in various informal education projects.' (Female, 25)

Part 3. Conclusions and Final Remarks

Based on the collected narratives, it is obvious that the young Kists are perfectly aware of the social and political factors re/producing the stigma of terrorism over the Pankisi Gorge and its inhabitants. The study participants fully realize that the State as well as the majority of media outlets and civil organizations (with several exceptions) have not been sensitive and supportive enough to the Kist community so far. Traditionally, these social actors follow their narrow political and financial interests which are directly or indirectly stigmatizing the Pankisi Gorge as a hub of potential terrorists. The external factors such as Russia and pro-Moscow Kadyrov administration in Chechnya, which are politically hostile to Salafi Islam in general as well as to the Pankisi Gorge in particular (Gogvadze & Kapanadze, 2015; Akaev, n.d.), should be also considered as reasonably unfavorable circumstances for the Kists community in addition to the abovementioned disadvantaging internal conditions.

As it seems, the religious transformations followed by advancing Salafi Islam in the Gorge since 2000's has been played an important role in stigmatization of the Kist community. In fact, the majority of national media sources through producing the unbalanced News in regard to the 'crisis of Sufism', its subsequent 'intergenerational gap' (thus, using the bold language as well) and portraying Salafi Islam as a 'new and radical religion,' which contributes to the young Kists' outflow to Syria, have been made the Pankisi stigma even more extensive during the last several years.

Moreover, as there are dozens of scholarly articles, handbooks and policy papers widely available nowadays, selecting the terms/concept carefully and using them in an accurate manner is getting progressively more important in order to avoid public misconceptions in respect to the sensitive issues such as religion, religious radicalization or terrorism itself. Although, this is an issue of a larger debate worldwide (and which is not the primary concern of my research paper) I would like to address it very briefly.

For instance, the term fundamentalism is very often (I would say usually) applied to identify the core ideas of Salafism and the spectrum of belief its followers hold. The Salafists are defined as *fundamentalists* 'in the sense that 'they believe in the timeless "fundamental" truths of a holy script that is taken literally and seen as blueprint for the organization of a society pleasing to God' (Schmid, 2014; p.15). However, the problem is that historically the significant negative connotations have been attributed to the term *fundamentalism*, 'usually including bigotry, zealotry, militancy, extremism, and fanaticism - make it unsuitable as a category of scholarly analysis' (Munson, 2016).

Therefore, in view of prevailing Islamophobia in much of the Western society (Pratt, 2011) on the hand, and transnational and violent 'ideological project' of the Islamic State (ISIS) on the other, which is declared to be pan-Islamic and just like a Salafist movement 'is seeking to unite the ummah, the imagined community of Muslims' (Waldeck, 2015, as cited in Schmid & Tinnes, 2015; p.8), people are strongly predisposed to judge the 'fundamental nature' of Salafi Islam in a depraved way. This, in turn, makes it easier to associate the entire Muslim population and especially, Salafis to the violent extremism and terrorism as it was actually mentioned by my study participants.

Besides, it is unknown for the wider public that there are different movements within Salafi Islam and according to scholarly literature, the majority of Salafis worldwide fall under the category of so called 'quietist' that is apolitical Salafists (Schmid, 2014; Wagenmakers, 2016). Usually, they stay distant from political activism and disputes as they think political issues might split the ummah or cause strife (fitna), which in turn can only lead to bigger problems such as political instability or even civil war (Wagenmakers, 2016; p. 14). Thus, the 'quietist' are rather 'focused on "cleansing" Islamic tradition in a process that they claim will bring them closer to reaching the supposed purity of the Salaf, while, on the other hand, teaching this allegedly pristine form of Islam to their adherents through education (tarbiya) and missionary activities (da'wa)' (ibid. p.14).

In line with the abovementioned discussion as well as overall study findings, I would like to refer to the opinion of Zviadadze (2016) according to which the community of the Salafi Kists residing in Pankisi represent totally peaceful Muslim citizens of Georgia. They have no political aims. Instead, what they do care about is to practice the 'Pure Islam' in their everyday lives (Zviadadze, 2016; p.29). And that in turn should not be understood or interpreted as a sign of their religious radicalization or propensity for crime, including terrorism. Besides, they do not tend to impose their faith or vision of Islam on others - the clear demonstration for the freedom of belief present in the Gorge are the 'Traditional' (Sufi) and 'New' (Salafi) Mosques coexisting in Pankisi villages.

In the end, I would like to mention that on its way to building democracy and European value systems, carrying out the proper policy towards ethnic/religious minority groups is yet another challenging issue for Georgia and the Georgian Government. Besides, in accordance to the Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union signed on 27 June 2014, Georgia took the responsibility on reinforcing inclusive social policy, anti-discrimination, and peaceful conflict resolution about external/internal security issues considering the needs and requirements of ethnic/religious minorities residing in the country (EU/Georgia Association Agreement, 2014). Consequently, the Georgian government will gain much more benefits by taking measures for building trust among the Kist population towards the State agencies (especially, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and State Security Service) and other powerful social institutions (such as media, civil society) and abandoning the harsh-proactive security policy towards the Gorge. The social practice of favoring one group over another based on certain religious, social or political factors/markers should be also discontinued by the State agencies. Thus, initiating comprehensive and transparent dialogue with the overall Kist citizens about the peace and security issues in the Gorge (including prevention-oriented strategies for religious radicalization, violent extremism or terrorism) by the Government would serve as a convincing starting point for clearing away the prevalent 'negative image' and stigma of terrorism from the Gorge community.

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