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**TO CREATE HELL IN HEAVEN: RUSSIAN HYBRID
WARFARE IN GEORGIA'S PANKISI GORGE**

by

Tornike Chikovani

December 2020

Co-Advisors:

Mikhail Tsyarkin
Mohammed M. Hafez

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IN GEORGIA'S PANKISI GORGE**

Tornike Chikovani
Civilian, State Security Service, Georgia
BA, Sokhumi State University, 2016

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December 2020**

Approved by: Mikhail Tsypkin
Co-Advisor

Mohammed M. Hafez
Co-Advisor

Afshon P. Ostovar
Associate Chair for Research
Department of National Security Affairs

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ABSTRACT

Since August 2008, Russia has increased the use of soft power tactics in Georgia. Disinformation, propaganda, and fake news have become part of the everyday narrative spread by Russian media. Many scholars have studied Russian soft power and concluded that it mainly targeted Georgia after that country's strong intention toward integration with the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia's aim was to alter public opinion of Georgia and threaten the country's image in the international society. However, one vulnerable region in northeastern Georgia has not received much attention. This study takes a closer look at Pankisi Gorge, a valley that borders Russia's breakaway republic of Chechnya and populated mostly with ethnic Kists of the Islamic faith. Through the analysis of Russian media stories about Pankisi, this thesis finds that the valley is often presented as a "nest of terrorism," creating a false sense of threat in the entire region. Additionally, this thesis discusses how Russia can destabilize Pankisi through fake news and actually use the situation for its possible military intervention in Georgia.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ABL	administrative boundary line
ChRI	Chechen Republic of Ichkeria
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CRRC	Caucasus Research Resource Center
EC	Eurasian Choice
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EI	Eurasian Institute
FSB	Russian Federal Security Service
GDP	gross domestic product
IDFI	Institute for Development of Freedom of Information
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IW	information warfare
LGBT	lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
PSYOPS	psychological operations
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. RUSSIA'S HYBRID WARFARE IN GEORGIA

Russia actively uses tactics such as disseminating false statements that cause fear as well as manipulating social opinion to influence important processes. This is deliberately conducted through fake news, distorted facts, and falsification of history. Many times, they combine these methods with the use military force to intimidate their adversaries, creating a hybrid-warfare model. Used in tandem, these methods polarize the population, which challenges a country's security and integrity.

Specifically, in August 2008, during the Russian-Georgian military conflict in South Ossetia, Georgia, became a test ground for Russia's use of hybrid warfare tactics, from increasing military presence to cyber-attacks, disinformation, and propaganda. Russia blocked the websites of the Georgian government, as well as spread false information about Georgia's activities during the conflict, with the goal of undermining the country's international image.

This thesis examines Russia's use of hybrid warfare techniques in Georgia, specifically in Pankisi Gorge, as an example to demonstrate how well-planned disinformation and propaganda campaigns can engender instability in a country and how targeted messages related to certain Georgian regions can cause serious damage to a country's international image. The research contributes to understanding Russia's policy and hybrid warfare techniques. It can also help to provide the Georgian government with a specific, complex, and systemic approach to the problem of Russia's hybrid warfare, with an emphasis on methods and strategies used in Pankisi Gorge against the ethnic minorities. The case study in this thesis includes analysis and demonstrates challenges that might be interesting for representatives of the security sectors not only in Georgia but in other countries that face similar problems. It provides an excellent opportunity for the interested audience to observe the situation on the ground, analyze the best practices and the mistakes made by Georgia, so that others can avoid similar problems in their own countries.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF PANKISI GORGE

Pankisi Gorge has been selected as a target region and subject for the case study for several reasons. Firstly, the residents of this region represent ethnic and religious minorities, and therefore, they are among the most vulnerable parts of the Georgian population and face challenges with socio-economic integration in the society. Secondly, Pankisi Gorge, which borders Russia, is a valley region in northeast Georgia with a mostly Muslim and ethnically Kist population of Chechen roots. Refugees arrived in Pankisi after the war in Chechnya in 1999, and since then some moved to Russia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan, but many stayed and still live in the valley.¹ In the early 2000s, with the rise of Chechen refugees, there was an increase of criminal activities in Pankisi Gorge, as Elena Pokalova has written, mainly “connected to North Caucasus insurgencies.”² After the 9/11 attacks the United States announced sending about 150 military trainers to Georgia.³ In 2002, Washington warned that Arab fighters allied with al-Qaeda were living in Pankisi Gorge. As former U.S. diplomat Philip Remler noted, “The Pankisi Gorge is an extremely dangerous place for Georgia.”⁴ The same year, Vladimir Putin accused the Georgian government of inaction and sent an aircraft to bomb the Pankisi Gorge. Pressured by Russia, the Georgian government sent troops and took full control of the valley.

Thirdly, after refugees arrived in Pankisi Gorge because of a second war between Russia and Chechnya in 1999, Wahhabism gained many followers in the region.⁵ In recent years more than 100 young people have left to fight as terrorists in Syria. As of

¹ Niel Arun, “Russia’s Reach Unnerves Chechens, Europe,” BBC, last modified January 16, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7189024.stm>. 11/24/2020 8:00:00 AM

² Elena Pokalova, “Georgia, Terrorism, and Foreign Fighters,” *Special Operations Journal* 4, no. 2 (November 2018): 146–168, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23296151.2018.1510707>.

³ Paul Quinn-Judge, “The Surprise in the Gorge: Al-Qaeda Flourishes in Far-off Spots, as the Discovery of an Enclave Shows,” TIME, October 20, 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20040826110122/http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101021028/wgeorgia.html>.

⁴ Pokalova, “Georgia, Terrorism, and Foreign Fighters,” 146–167.

⁵ Christopher M. Blanchard, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya*, CRS Report No. RS21695 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008), 4, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS21695.pdf>.

2019, over 33 fighters from Pankisi have died in Syria, including some well-known terrorist figures such as the key commander of the Islamic State, Omar al-Shishani. News stories about Pankisi Gorge and terrorism have covered local and international media. The image of the nest of terrorism, combined with the high unemployment rate, and the challenges of integration cause a lot of frustration among locals in Pankisi Gorge and make it a region vulnerable to destabilization. Russia capitalizes on this fragile situation in part by spreading disinformation, and creates a basis for future justification of its possible intervention in Georgia through Pankisi Gorge.

C. OVERVIEW

In addition to the introduction, this thesis consists of a literature review, presented in Chapter II, and four additional chapters. Chapter III offers a general overview of the country of Georgia and Pankisi Gorge. Chapter IV analyzes Russia's use of hybrid warfare against Pankisi and the country as a whole. The methodology and results of content analysis are presented in Chapter V. Finally, Chapter VI looks into the possibility of Russia using instability for its national imperialistic interests and influence expansion throughout Georgia and the region as a whole.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. HYBRID WARFARE

In the 21st century, propaganda, disinformation, cyber-attacks, and special forces have become part of war, blurring the lines of traditional warfare. A number of scholars, most notably, Frank Hoffman, now characterize several past military conflicts as examples of hybrid warfare. In 2007, Hoffman analyzed the complicated nature of modern conflicts and concluded that contingencies in the future would be hybrid threats aimed at the country's vulnerabilities.⁶ As Hoffman writes, "Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts, including indiscriminate violence and coercion and criminal disorder."⁷ Nations, according to Hoffman, would simultaneously use different tactics and approaches, and the lines among various modes of war would become blurrier.⁸ Yet, Hoffman's explanation lacks an emphasis on the importance of information warfare as an aspect of hybrid techniques, which we discuss later in this literature review.

Based on analysis of ancient and more recent wars, Peter R. Mansoor writes that hybrid warfare did not begin with more modern conflicts. The Helot uprising in the war between Athens and Sparta added "irregular dimension to the conventional conflict" because Spartans did not have any experience with Helots, felt uneasy, and made mistakes.⁹ According to Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, during the French and Indian War in 1755–1763 both sides used hybrid warfare, such as a combination of native irregulars, colonial militias, and regular forces. Likewise, in World War II, the

⁶ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 58–59, https://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf.

⁷ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*, 8.

⁸ Hoffman, 57.

⁹ Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, 1st ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 4.

German army had to deal with constant disruptions to its communication lines caused by the activity of Soviet partisans.¹⁰ Years later, after the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. forces used hybrid warfare to attack Taliban and Al-Qaeda terrorists in Afghanistan. According to Mansoor, the use of hybrid warfare was successful in destroying Taliban formation, but was less effective in terms of pursuing Al-Qaeda remnants in the mountains. While Hoffman agrees that hybrid warfare is not new, Western military thinkers in the United States have been slow in recognizing the change and developing institutional toolset. As Hoffman writes, “we overlooked what really constituted a threat to our national security interests.”¹¹ Both Mansoor and Hoffman agree that events such as the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war and the 9/11 attacks have changed the perception of hybrid warfare and emphasized its asymmetrical nature.¹² But Hoffman also mentions that technology creates a chance for further development of hybrid warfare. According to him, the main challenge in the future would be how to deal with those states that use different technologies and techniques in innovative ways to achieve their goals. Hoffman writes that “this could include states blending high-tech capabilities such as antisatellite weapons with terrorism and cyber warfare directed against financial targets”.¹³

B. RUSSIA’S HYBRID WARFARE AGAINST POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES

A number of researchers such as Tracey German, James K. Wither, and Greg Simons, argue that the goal of the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet region, including Georgia, is to preserve and increase its influence, while limiting the reach of any foreign country or military alliance.¹⁴ In fact, there is a body of literature that discusses Russia’s

¹⁰ Murray and Mansoor, *Hybrid Warfare*, 4.

¹¹ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*, 13.

¹² Mehmet Erol Seyfettin and Safak Oguz, “Hybrid Warfare Studies and Russia’s Example in Crimea,” *Gazi Akademik Bakis* 9, no.17 (November 2015): 262, <https://DOI:10.19060/gab.22813>.

¹³ Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” *Small Wars Journal*, 52 (1st quarter 2009): 4, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/jfqhoffman.pdf>.

¹⁴ Tracey German, “Securing the South Caucasus: Military Aspects of Russian Policy towards the Region since 2008,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 9 (October 2012): 40–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2012.718418>.

techniques for destabilization in different post-Soviet countries. These studies are built on the assumption that Russia uses traditional warfare methods together with irregular activities, such as propaganda, disinformation, and cyber warfare, to increase its influence and gain more power, as well as alter public opinion in these countries. The entire post-Soviet zone represents a vital element for the Kremlin's security and political/economic interests. For the Russian Federation, the Southern Caucasus embodies a buffer zone, where limiting the influence of any foreign power will guarantee the security in the Northern Caucasus. Additionally, the Southern Caucasus could serve as an alternative route for energy and goods to European countries and attaining control over this region will be necessary for Russia to preserve and broaden its energy markets. To achieve all the aforementioned goals, Russia is using the methods described as hybrid warfare.

The subject of hybrid warfare has received even more attention since Russia initiated its occupation of Crimea in 2014. A number of scholars such as András Rácz, James K. Wither, Mehmet Seyfettin, and Safak Oguz have analyzed the case and discuss the different methods that Russia has used against Ukraine. Wither, a professor and a retired British army officer, wrote that in 2014 Russia's techniques against Ukraine were a mix of conventional and irregular methods, and "sponsorship of political protests, economic coercion, cyber operations and, in particular, an intense disinformation campaign."¹⁵ Similar to Crimea, Wither considers the Georgian-Russian war as another example of hybrid warfare. He writes that Russia used its regular armed forces together with Abkhazian and South Ossetian militants and, additionally, special operations forces that were acting as "local defense troops."¹⁶ Following the same ideas as Wither, Seyfettin and Oğuz write that apart from military activities, Russia's strategy in Crimea was highly based on irregular warfare, such as creating a resistance movement against local governments as well as eliminating the pro-Maidan protests in Crimea through

¹⁵ James K. Wither, "Making Sense of Hybrid Warfare," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 15, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 76, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26326441?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

¹⁶ Wither, "Making Sense of Hybrid Warfare," 75.

intimidation and threats.¹⁷ András Rácz discusses the emergence of a mass of literature following the Kremlin narrative as one of the key factors. According to him, in this literature Ukrainians are presented as nationalists and radicals, while events at Euromaidan as “an American plot.”¹⁸ Russia uses the same methods of disinformation in Georgia as well through creating a stereotype of Pankisi Gorge as a “lair of terrorism.”¹⁹

Michael Kofman, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, et al. have also studied Russia’s approaches and operations in its conflict with Ukraine. They discuss how Russia annexed Crimea, factors that contributed to its success and shortcomings, as well as the characteristics of the Eastern Ukraine operation, including information campaigns and cyber warfare. But Kofman et al. do not agree with those scholars who described the conflict that happened in Eastern Ukraine as the example of hybrid warfare, as Kofman and his colleagues write, “rather, the conflict from February to August cycled through four different types of warfare: political, irregular, hybrid, and conventional.”²⁰ They argue that there are no signs that Russia intended to use hybrid warfare; instead, it was an improvisation on the resistance that came from Ukraine and its forces. Towards the end Russia turned to conventional methods, as it could not reach its goals solely with hybrid warfare.²¹ Kofman et al. write that “the policy imperatives in Ukraine were such that Russian leaders proved eventually willing to pay a high political, economic, and military price.”²²

¹⁷ Seyfettin and Oguz, “Hybrid Warfare,” 271.

¹⁸ András Rácz, *Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine Breaking the Enemy’s Ability to Resist* (Finland: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2015), 53, <https://stratcomcoe.org/andras-racz-russias-hybrid-war-ukraine-breaking-enemys-ability-resist>.

¹⁹ Anastasia Antidze, “Панкисское нашествие Это грузинское ущелье называют логовом террористов Здесь по своим законам живут чеченцы, Закавказье” [Pankisian invasion, this Georgian gorge are calling the den of terrorists, here the Chechens live by their own laws Transcaucasia], Lenta, May 2, 2019, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2019/05/02/pankis/>.

²⁰ Michael Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia’s Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), 87, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1498.html.

²¹ Kofman et al., 88.

²² Kofman et al., 88.

Instead of focusing on one country, Radin and Simons expanded their research to the Balkan region.²³ They analyze different irregular methods that Russia has used including political, economic, and energy pressure mechanisms; soft power instruments such as propaganda; intelligence and the so-called "active measures," as well as PSYOPS and cyber operations. A number of scholars such as Seyfettin and Oğuz, Ronald J. Deibert, Rafal Rohozinski, and Masashi Crete Nishihata have also analyzed the use of cyber technology by Russia. Seyfettin and Oğuz write that in 2014, Ukraine accused Russia of hacking news websites, spreading propaganda messages through social media, and disrupting communication systems.²⁴ Deibert et al. focus their research on the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and conclude that government websites and Internet resources were under cyber-attacks and part of them originated from Russia.²⁵

Scholars such as James K. Withers, Catherine A. Theohary, and Rod Thornton emphasize the importance and power of information warfare as an aspect of hybrid techniques. As Russian Deputy Chief of the General Staff Aleksandr Burutin said in February 2008, "Wars of the future will be information wars."²⁶ According to Theohary, a specialist in National Security Policy, Cyber and Information Operations, "information warfare (IW) is the range of military and government operations to protect and exploit the information environment."²⁷ It includes propaganda, misinformation and disinformation.

Researchers Tracey German, Eve Hunter and Piret Pernik, and Kavus Abushov have also analyzed the effects of Russian hybrid warfare on the entire region and even the international community. All these scholars follow the idea that by hybrid warfare,

²³ Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017), 1–5, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1577.html.

²⁴ Seyfettin and Oğuz, "Hybrid Warfare," 272.

²⁵ Ronald J. Deibert, Rafal Rohozinski, and Masahi Crete-Nishihata, "Cyclones in Cyberspace: Information Shaping and Denial in the 2008 Russia–Georgia War," *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 1 (February 2012): 3–24, doi.org/10.1177/104398621141333.

²⁶ Lionel Beehner, *Analyzing the Russian Way of War. Evidence from 2008 conflict in Georgia*, (West Point: The Modern War Institute, 2018), 59, <https://mwi.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Analyzing-the-Russian-Way-of-War.pdf>.

²⁷ Catherine A. Theohary, *Information Warfare: Issues for Congress*, CRS Report No. R45142. (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2018), 1, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R45142.pdf>.

Russia wants to maintain power in the region and disturb European integration of target countries such as Georgia and Ukraine. According to German, after war with Georgia in 2008, Russia reestablished itself as a major actor in the South Caucasus by increasing its military presence and establishing permanent military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²⁸ While citing Edward Lucas, Hunter and Pernik wrote that through hybrid war Russia wants to recreate what once was a Russian empire, hinder the EU from controlling energy pipelines, and make sure that the West is weaker and divided.²⁹ With increasing military presence Russia limits the access of NATO in the region. As Abushov writes, “Meanwhile, it seems that the existence of the ethno-territorial conflicts in Georgia assures its exclusion from NATO, since the alliance would not be prepared to allow Tbilisi to join when the ethno-territorial conflicts are not close to a resolution.”³⁰

C. RUSSIA’S USE OF HYBRID WARFARE IN GEORGIA

Several Georgian authors, such as Otarashvili, Menabde and Lomtadze agree that Georgia is of a particular interest to Russia, because of its history, geopolitical location, and its aspirations to join the NATO and the EU. Russia advocates its national interests in the Black Sea–Caucasus region partially by consistent expansion of its military presence in the area.³¹ In particular, Russia uses the military bases in Georgia’s occupied territories (7th military base in Abkhazia and 4th military base in South Ossetia) and in Armenia (102nd military base), as well as its increased capabilities in the Black Sea after the annexation of the Crimea Peninsula, to significantly limit US/NATO access and establish itself as a dominant power. The Deputy Secretary of Georgia’s National Security Council, Teona Akubardia, said in an interview in February 2020 that “Russia’s moves to

²⁸ German, “Securing the South Caucasus,” 2.

²⁹ Eve Hunter and Piret Pernik, “The Challenges of Hybrid Warfare,” International Centre for Defence and Security, April 2015, 3, https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2013/Eve_Hunter__Piret_Pernik_-_Challenges_of_Hybrid_Warfare.pdf.

³⁰ Kavus Abushov, “Policing the near Abroad: Russian Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 2 (June 2009): 206, <https://www-tandfonline-com.libproxy.nps.edu/doi/full/10.1080/10357710902895129>.

³¹ Giorgi Menabde, “Russia Boosts Its Military Contingent in Georgia’s Occupied Territories,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 22 (February 2020), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-boosts-its-military-contingent-in-georgias-occupied-territories/>.

strengthen its illegal military bases in Georgia's occupied regions, the deployments of new weapons and military personnel there, as well as intensive military training should be seen as part of the Kremlin's revisionist policies."³²

In addition to increasing its military presence, Russia actively uses the so-called soft power policy, which aims to alter Georgia's pro-Western public opinion. For the Kremlin, it is a major precondition to change Georgia's foreign policy vector. In 2017, in its new Strategic Defense Review Georgia for the first time identified Russia's soft power as a major threat to its security. According to the document, Russia's soft power aims to weaken state institutions, strengthen pro-Russian civil and political movements, and discredit pro-Western foreign policy agenda.³³ Georgian scholars such as Elene Panchulidze, Giorgi Lomtadze, and Tamar Kintsurashvili have studied Russia's use of soft power in Georgia. According to Panchulidze, when it comes to Georgia, Russia uses techniques that include: Russian government agencies and state-funded media; cyber activity; paid social media users and third party intermediaries.³⁴

Additionally, according to Lomtadze, in Georgia, Russia's soft power is partially based on Georgia's cultural and historic ties to Russia.³⁵ In that regard, Greg Simons takes a similar tack, drawing from his research on the Balkan States, he concludes that Russia's approach to soft power changes based on the target audience. As he writes, "Beyond the Commonwealth of Independent States, Russia attempts to project its attractive elements, such as sport, education, arts and culture."³⁶ Simons also emphasizes the importance of Russian-language population in the target country. In Georgia, the

³² Menabde, "Russia," 2.

³³ Ministry of Defense of Georgia, *Strategic Defense Review* (Georgia: Ministry of Defense, 2018), 54, <https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/SDR-ENG.pdf>.

³⁴ Elene Panchulidze, "Russian Soft Power: Balancing the Propaganda Threats and Challenges," *Georgian Institute of Politics* 17, no. 5 (June 2017): 7, <http://gip.ge/russian-soft-power-balancing-propaganda-threats-challenges/>.

³⁵ Giorgi Lomtadze, "Russia's Soft and Hard Power in Georgia," *Institute for Development and Freedom of Information* (blog), March 17, 2017, https://idfi.ge/en/russias_soft_and_hard_power_in_georgias.

³⁶ Greg Simons, "Perception of Russia's Soft Power and Influence in the Baltic States," *Public Relations* 41, no. 1 (March 2015): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.10.019>.

percentage of ethnic Russians is just 1.5%. Nevertheless, according to a Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) study conducted in 2013, 70% of the population has a good command of the Russian language.³⁷

While Russia's hybrid warfare is thoroughly studied in Ukraine and the Balkan Region, only a few scholars have analyzed the different methods used in Georgia. Almost nothing has been written about Russia's efforts to spread disinformation about Pankisi Gorge and create the image of a region that constantly hides terrorists. Yet the experts have long talked about how Russia could successfully use Pankisi Gorge as a manipulation tool against Georgia. Through analyzing Russian media sources, this thesis aims to provide an insight into Russia's tactics used against Pankisi and become a basis for creating an effective counter propaganda policy.

D. RESEARCH DESIGN

Through a review of the existing literature and the analysis of Russian media sources the thesis explores how Russia uses hybrid warfare in Georgia and specifically in Pankisi Gorge. The following chapters look into Russia's use of different tools to spread disinformation and propaganda and analyze why and how destabilization of the country serves Russia's national imperialistic interests and its influence expansion throughout Georgia and the region in whole.

The thesis demonstrates specific tools and techniques that Russia uses to create a false image of Pankisi Gorge while contributing to the creation of future government policies.

³⁷ Lasha Tugushi et al., "Threats of Russia's Hard and Soft Power in Georgia," *European Initiative Liberal Academy in Tbilisi*, (June 2016), rb.gy/m7klam.

III. GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE COUNTRY OF GEORGIA AND ITS REGIONS

Georgia is located in the South Caucasus, between the Black and Caspian seas, on the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Situated on a strategically important region, its neighbors include Russia, Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. With a population of a little over 4 million people, Georgia's native language is Georgian, which dates back to the fifth century.³⁸ Christianity became a state religion in the 330s. (See Figure 1).

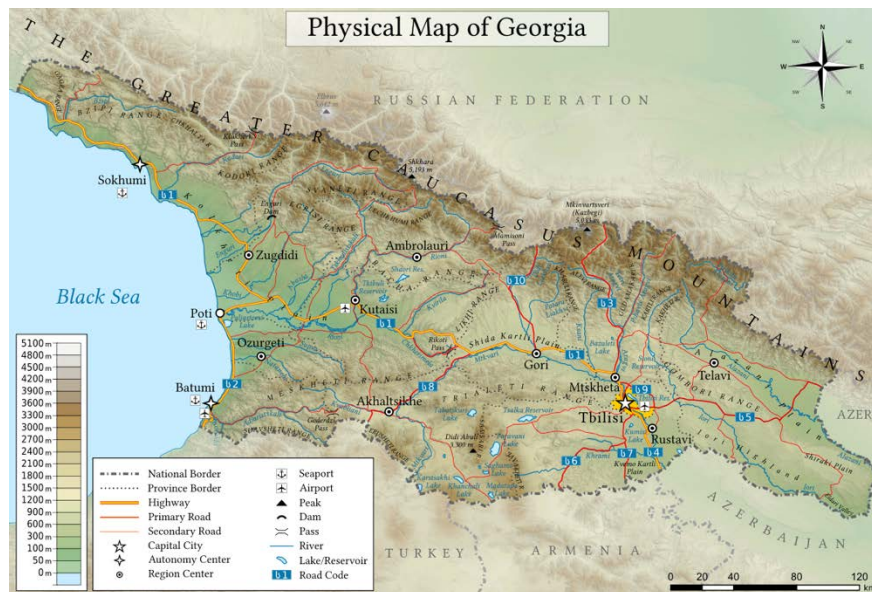


Figure 1. Physical map of Georgia.³⁹

The modern territory of Georgia was formerly known as the kingdoms of Colchis and Kartli-Iberia. There was a strong Roman influence in the first centuries A.D. In 1783, Georgia and the Russian Empire signed the Treaty of Georgievsk, after many years of

³⁸ "Georgia Country Profile, Europe," BBC, September 3, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17301647>.

³⁹ Source: "Physical Map of Georgia," Giorgi Balakhadze, Wikimedia, accessed November 2, 2020, [rb.gy/b2roxs](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Physical_Map_of_Georgia.jpg).

Turkish and Persian domination and Georgia's Golden Age from the 11th to 13th centuries.⁴⁰ The agreement was concluded by Russia's Catherine II and King Erekle II of Eastern Georgia, and it guaranteed Georgia's territorial integrity in return for Russia's ability to conduct the country's foreign affairs.⁴¹ King Erekle II chose Russia over Muslim Persia mainly because of shared religious beliefs. According to Lasha Markozashvili and Tinatin Dvalishvili, in fact, this partnership did not turn out to be useful for Georgia, and after Erekle II died "Russia initiated a long-lasting military occupation."⁴² Much later, Georgia was an independent state from 1918 to 1921. On February 25, 1921, Georgia became part of the Russian Soviet Empire after the Red Army invasion. The following years brought repression, restriction of political activities, executions of innocent people, imprisonments, and exile. Jimsher Rekhviashvili from Radio Free Liberty's Georgian bureau writes that "Soviet occupation started on February 25 and lasted over 70 years."⁴³

A. INDEPENDENCE FROM THE SOVIET UNION AND THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZIAN CONFLICT

In 1989 Georgia declared its sovereignty and two years later reached independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ The independence was followed by instability and civil war in 1990s. As a result, the first post-independent government with the first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia was overthrown. Two regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, became hotspots for the emergence of separatist movements.⁴⁵ As German writes, "[a] renewed upsurge of Georgian nationalism during Mikhail Gorbachev's era of

⁴⁰ "The World Factbook Archive," Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gg.html>.

⁴¹ *Britannica*, s.v. "Treaty of Georgievsk, Russia-Georgia [1783]," accessed August 18, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Georgievsk>.

⁴² Lasha Markozashvili and Tinatin Dvalishvili, *Russian Smart Power in Georgia* (Poznan, Poland: Adam Mickiewicz University, 2017): 173, <http://przeglad.amu.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/pp-2017-4-14.pdf>.

⁴³ Jimsher Rekhviashvili, "ყველაფერი 25 თებერვლის შესახებ," [All about February 25th, Politics], Radio free Europe, last modified February 24, 2019, <https://rb.gy/legipr>.

⁴⁴ *Britannica*, "Georgia," accessed August 18, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Georgia>.

⁴⁵ *Britannica*, "Georgia."

perestroika increased inter-ethnic tensions within the Soviet republic.”⁴⁶ Eventually, in 1992, ethnic tensions in Abkhazia turned into a war and a conflict that still remains unresolved.⁴⁷

Abkhazia occupies the northwest region of Georgia that borders Russia and the Black Sea. During Stalin’s rule, many Georgians resettled in the region “leading to Abkhaz fears of losing their homeland.”⁴⁸ In the years 1956, 1967, and 1978 Abkhaz leaders requested from Moscow to incorporate the region into Russia. In 1989 there was a mass assembly of 30,000 Abkhaz separatists that included Greeks, Armenians, Russians, and some ethnic Georgians. They demanded to restore Abkhazia’s 1925 constitution from the time when the region was a sovereign Soviet Republic. This assembly was followed by anti-Abkhazian mass demonstrations in Tbilisi. Soon these rallies turned against the Soviet Union and demanded Georgia’s independence. Nineteen people died on April 9, 1989, when the Soviet troops attacked the demonstrators in Tbilisi with toxic gas and sharpened digging tools.⁴⁹ April 9 remains a day of grief in Georgia, and a reminder of the Soviet occupation.

As the Soviet Union collapsed, Abkhazians took part in the Soviet referendum of 1991 on whether to preserve the unity of the USSR, despite the fact that the government in Georgia’s capital Tbilisi forbade the citizens to participate in such referendums.⁵⁰ In 1992 an armed conflict erupted in Abkhazia that claimed the lives of over 15,000 people

⁴⁶ Tracey German, “Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Collision of Georgian and Russian Interests,” French Institute of International Relations (June 2006): 6, <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/germananglais.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Amos Chapple, “The War for Abkhazia: 25 Years Later,” Radio Free Europe, August 23, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/twenty-five-years-on-from-the-start-of-the-abkhaz-war/28690617.html>.

⁴⁸ Alexandros Petersen, “The 1992–93 Georgia-Abkhazia War: A Forgotten Conflict,” *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 2, no. 4. (Autumn 2008): 190, <http://cria-online.org/Journal/5/THE%201992-93%20GEORGIA-ABKHAZIA%20WAR.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Petersen, 192.

⁵⁰ Petersen, 195.

and lasted more than a year.⁵¹ Abkhazia won the war and claimed de facto independence from Georgia. There were major demographic changes in the region that triggered claims of ethnic cleansing from Tbilisi. Over 300,000 ethnic Georgians were displaced during the war and most of them have never been able to return to Abkhazia.⁵²

A number of reports discuss Russia's role and interference in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. According to Human Rights Watch, there were many outsiders participating in the war. These were the fighters who were not residents of Georgia before the conflict and they mainly came from southern Russia. The conflict was lightly armed until Russia provided Abkhazians with armor and heavy artillery between October and December 1992. According to Human Rights Watch, it left "little room for any conclusion except that some parties, within the Russian forces, decided to supply the Abkhaz."⁵³ It was a violation of international law and a clear intervention in the conflict.⁵⁴ Today, Abkhazia is a self-declared sovereign state closely tied to Russia in terms of economy and tourism. Many Abkhazians have been provided with Russian passports. Some scholars, such as German, think that this gives Russia a chance to cite the security of its citizens for past or future possible interventions in the region.⁵⁵ In addition, the Abkhazian seaside is full of Russian tourists year after year, and Russian banks in Abkhazia are accused of money laundering in the region by Georgia.⁵⁶

After the war was over, the former First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party, Eduard Shevardnadze, became Georgia's president in

⁵¹ Greenberg Research Inc., *Country Report Georgia/Abkhazia* (Geneva: ICRC Worldwide Consultation on the Rules of War, November 1999), <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/georgia.pdf>.

⁵² German, *Abkhazia and South Ossetia*, 14–15.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch, *Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia's Role in the Conflict*, 7 Human Rights Watch Arms Project 1, 5 (March 1995), supra note 54, at 32.

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia's Role in the Conflict*, 7 Human Rights Watch Arms Project 1, 5 (March 1995).

⁵⁵ German, *Abkhazia and South Ossetia*, 11–15.

⁵⁶ Noelle M. Shanahan Cutts, "Enemies through the Gates: Russian Violations of International Law in the Georgia/Abkhazia Conflict," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 40, no. 1 (2007), <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1286&context=jil>.

1995.⁵⁷ Seven years after he assumed the presidency, the public could no longer tolerate the corruption and lack of effective government services, which was followed by an effort to manipulate elections in November 2003.⁵⁸ Demonstrations emerged in Georgia's capital of Tbilisi. Shevardnadze resigned in the midst of the so-called "Rose Revolution" lead by the young opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili, who later became the third president of Georgia.⁵⁹

B. SOUTH OSSETIA

In 2006, Georgia demanded Russia remove its troops from South Ossetia, another separatist region in South-Central Georgia; the troops had been based there since 1991. In 1989 South Ossetia "lobbied for joining its territory with North Ossetia in Russia or for independence."⁶⁰ The conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of people. Russia mediated a ceasefire agreement, which the parties agreed to and allowed Russia to station "peacekeepers" in the region. Also in 2006, separatists from South Ossetia reported that over 99% of voters voted for independence from Georgia in a referendum.⁶¹ As Jim Nichol writes, "during the latter half of July 2008, Russia conducted a military exercise that proved to be a rehearsal for Russian actions in Georgia a few weeks later."⁶² Beyond the military exercise, the police chief of a local South Ossetian village was killed in a bomb attack and Russian military planes violated Georgian airspace over the region.

⁵⁷ "The President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze (1995–2003)," President of Georgia, accessed August 18, <https://www.president.gov.ge/eng/Eduard-Shevardnadze-en.aspx>.

⁵⁸ Petersen, "Georgia-Abkhazia," 196–197.

⁵⁹ "How the Rose Revolution Happened," BBC, May 10, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4532539.stm>.

⁶⁰ Jim Nichol, *Russia-Georgia Conflict in August 2008: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests*, CRS Report No. RL34618 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2009), 2–3, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34618.pdf>.

⁶¹ Nichol, 3–4.

⁶² Nichol, 5.

In August of 2008, President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili sent troops to South Ossetia, a move which was followed by Russia's air strikes.⁶³ The "August War" lasted for five days and claimed the lives of 170 Georgian servicemen, 14 policemen, and 228 civilians. According to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), "In many places throughout the country it caused serious destruction, reaching levels of utter devastation in a number of towns and villages."⁶⁴ The Atlantic Council wrote that "The 2008 Georgian War was Russia's first successful military action outside of its borders since the collapse of the Soviet Union."⁶⁵ While a report from the EU placed blame on both countries, saying that Georgia attacked the separatists in South Ossetia, which Saakashvili's government considered an act of defense. Russia, on its part, created conditions that led to war by encouraging separatist movements and conducting military trainings.⁶⁶ Later, Vladimir Putin confirmed that the invasion plan for South Ossetia was created in 2006–2007, before the conflict even escalated in summer of 2008.⁶⁷

Today, the United States and NATO recognize South Ossetia as Georgian territory. Only Russia, Venezuela, Syria, and Nicaragua recognize the region as an independent state.⁶⁸ In 2011, Russia put up fences and barbed wire to mark borders

⁶³ "2008 Georgia Russia Conflict Fast Facts," CNN, March 31, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/03/13/world/europe/2008-georgia-russia-conflict/index.html>.

⁶⁴ "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," ECHR, September 2009, 5–6, https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf.

⁶⁵ Ariel Cohen, "The Russo-Georgian War's Lesson: Russia Will Strike again," *The Atlantic Council* (blog), August 10, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-russo-georgian-war-s-lesson-russia-will-strike-again/>.

⁶⁶ Ellen Barry, "E.U. Report to Place Blame on Both Sides in Georgia War," *New York Times*, last modified September 28, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/29/world/europe/29georgia.html>.

⁶⁷ "Путин: Война в Южной Осетии готовилась с 2006 года" [Putin: The war in South Ossetia has been prepared since 2006], August 11, 2015, Vadim Schulz, video, 2:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=68&v=PBW2uIOTkKw&feature=emb_title.

⁶⁸ Richard Foltz, "South Ossetia: The Case for International Recognition." *The Conversation*, June 9, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/south-ossetia-the-case-for-international-recognition-118299>.

across the region. As Remi Kumin writes, “now, Georgians cannot come within 200 meters of the border or risk being kidnapped, detained and fined.”⁶⁹

C. RUSSIAN-CHECHEN CONFLICTS AND PANKISI GORGE

Recently a third region in Georgia, Pankisi Gorge, inhabited by a Muslim minority, has become an area where Russia uses hybrid warfare techniques. Pankisi Gorge borders Chechnya, which has a long history with Russia. (See Figure 2).

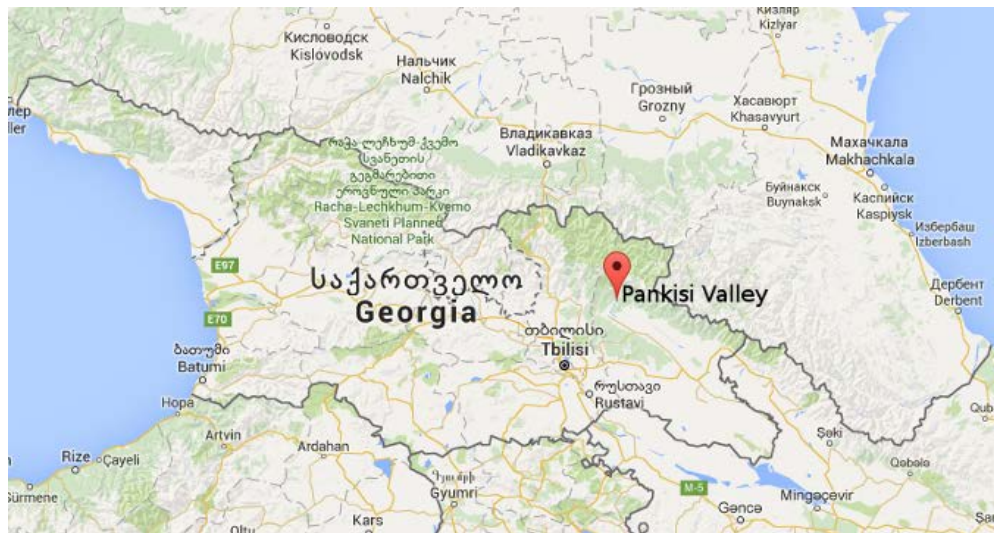


Figure 2. Pankisi Gorge⁷⁰

The Russian-Chechen conflict originates from the time before the collapse of the Soviet Union, when part of Chechen society, like most post-soviet republics, felt that it was inevitable that the regime would break down and expressed a claim to independence. In November 1990, the general national assembly was held in the city of Grozny, where “The National Congress” was elected under the leadership of Soviet Air Forces general

⁶⁹ Remi Kumin, “Living on the Shifting Border of Georgia and Russia,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/13/lens/living-on-the-shifting-border-of-georgia-and-russia.html>.

⁷⁰ Source: “Pankisi Gorge Map,” Google Maps, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Pankisis+Kheoba/@41.9630915,42.0386659,7z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x4045b1dfd9b7d9bf:0x4c1df54707ea8a82!8m2!3d42.135!4d45.2858333>.

Jokhar Dudayev. In September 1991, the congress declared the independence of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI). In the elections held on October 27, 1991, J. Dudayev was elected as president with 90% of the vote while the local government assigned by the official Moscow was declared illegal. It is claimed that the idea of fighting for independence based on Chechen ethnicity/nationality is related to J. Dudayev's name.⁷¹

Russia's increased interest in Pankisi Gorge dates back to the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, when the country declared that it was actively fighting terrorism. In 1999, the Georgian government struggled to control Pankisi Gorge, where thousands of Chechen refugees had moved since the beginning of second war in Chechnya. At the time, criminal activities were on the rise, including kidnapping, drug trafficking, and murder.⁷²

There were two wars between Russia and Chechnya. The first war in 1994–1995 ended up with Chechnya's de facto independence from Russia. The prerequisite of the Second Russian-Chechen war was the infiltration of Shamil Basayev, Chechen fighter and politician, and al-Khattab fighters to Dagestan in August 1999, as well as house explosions in several cities in Russia.⁷³ Even though the government of Chechnya categorically separated itself from these terrorist attacks, it refused to transfer Basayev to the Russian side, which was successfully used by Moscow to send troops to Chechnya.⁷⁴ Officially, Moscow formally evaluates the second Chechen campaign as “counter-terrorist operations” on the territories of the North Caucasian region. The active phase

⁷¹ Ben Fowkes, *Russia and Chechnia: The Permanent Crisis. Essays on Russo Chechen Relations*, (Great Britain Macmillan Press LTD, 1998), 5–10, <https://rb.gy/xso5xv>.

⁷² Sopo Gelava, “პატრიოტთა ალიანსის წევრის რუსული ნარატივი, თითქოს აშშ პანკისის ხეობაში ტერორიზმს ახალისებს” [Russian narrative of the Patriots Alliance, as if the U.S. encourages terrorism in Pankisi Gorge], Myth Detector, February 2, 2018, <https://www.mythdetector.ge/ka/myth/patriotta-aliانسის-cevris-rusuli-narativi-titkos-ashsh-pankisis-kheobashi-terorizms-akhalisebs>.

⁷³ Lorenzo Vidino, “How Chechnya Became a Breeding Ground for Terror,” The Investigative Project on Terrorism, Summer 2005, <https://www.investigativeproject.org/268/how-chechnya-became-a-breeding-ground-for-terror>.

⁷⁴ Amos Chapple, “Welcome to Hell: Part II,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 1, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/the-second-chechen-war-in-photos/30185257.html>.

took place in 1999–2000 and was completed in March 2000 by taking the city of Grozny. In those years, Russia actively created a narrative about Chechens as terrorists and still continues to do so in Pankisi Gorge.⁷⁵

During the second war in Chechnya, in 1999 President Vladimir Putin requested Georgia to allow Russian troops to follow Chechen rebels trying to escape into Georgia. Instead, as the second Russian-Chechnian war escalated in late 1999, Georgia allowed Chechen refugees and rebels to settle in Pankisi Gorge as long as they remained peaceful.⁷⁶ After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the United States became interested in Pankisi reportedly because “a phone call was made from a Bin Laden operative in Afghanistan to Georgia announcing the success of the first phase of attacks.”⁷⁷ The same year Russia dropped a bomb in the valley. It also threatened to intervene in Pankisi Gorge, arguing that international terrorists and Chechen rebels were based there.⁷⁸ In 2002, Putin also sent a letter to the world leaders, including UN secretary General Kofi Annan, saying that Georgia was harboring terrorists.⁷⁹ Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze called the announcement “hasty.” According to Wiktor-Mach Dobrosława, “the accusations of terrorist activities, links with Al-Qaeda, and of the functioning of the training camps for jihadists in Pankisi were raised by the Russian authorities and led to Moscow’s direct engagement in this Georgian region.”⁸⁰ With increased pressure from the United States, Georgia deployed military forces to the Gorge after 60 Chechen guerillas attacked

⁷⁵ „რუსეთ-ჩეჩნეთის ომიდან ანტიტერორისტულ კამპანიამდე” [From the Russian-Chechen war to the anti-terrorist campaign] Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), December 11, 2018, <https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/pankisis-krizisi-da-politikuri-garemoebebi>.

⁷⁶ *Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge: Russian Concerns and U.S. Interests*, CRS Report No. RS21319 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 6, 2003), 1–4, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20030306_RS21319_bb7cf52b928cc1e18ac27876f0e2f43d71b8dc5e.pdf.

⁷⁷ *Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge: Russian Concerns and U.S. Interests*, 2.

⁷⁸ *Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge: Russian Concerns and U.S. Interests*, 3.

⁷⁹ “Putin Accuses Georgia of Harboring Terrorists,” Voice of America, December 9, 2002. <https://www.voanews.com/archive/putin-accuses-georgia-harboring-terrorists-2002-09-12>.

⁸⁰ Wiktor-Mach Dobrosława, “Competing Islamic Traditions in The Caucasus,” *Caucasian Review Of International Affairs* 3, no. 1, (2009): 65, http://www.cria-online.org/Journal/6/Done_Competing_Islamic_Traditions.pdf.

Russian forces north of the Georgian border and took control of the region. In 2003, the United States said there were three Chechen groups in Pankisi that were terrorist organizations. Nevertheless, that did not “give leave” to Russia to violate Georgia’s sovereignty.⁸¹ After the second Chechen war, Georgia accepted up to 5,000 refugees (according to some sources as many as 7,800 to 8,000), including Kists who were born in Georgia and had gone to Chechnya for work, study, or living.⁸² A large part of refugee population managed to go to Europe with the involvement of the UNCHR and some stayed in Pankisi Gorge.

D. RADICAL ISLAM AND PANKISI GORGE

Home to a Muslim minority, Pankisi Gorge is located in Eastern Georgia, in Kakheti region. Spread of Islam in this region has its cultural and historic prerequisites. Before Chechen refugees came to Pankisi, the population here was mainly Christian.⁸³ Today, most of the population consists of Muslim descendants of the Chechens called Kists. Throughout the years, Chechen-speaking Kists adopted Georgian traditions, learned the Georgian language, and became part of the history and the society. Within this region, Georgian Christians have become a minority. As Professor Rebecca Gould of Birmingham University writes, “while many Kists subscribe to various secularisms that became normative in Soviet times, religious faith persists into the present, and at an unprecedented level.”⁸⁴

Gould also writes that war-time migration of Chechen refugees changed the character of Islam in Pankisi Gorge. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Islam in Pankisi co-existed with Christianity, converging into some of its styles of worship.

⁸¹ “Putin Hardens Stance on Georgia,” CNN, September 12, 2002, <https://www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/europe/09/12/georgia.putin/>.

⁸² Salome Davitashvili, “ეთნიკური ქისტების ინტეგრაციის საკითხი თანამედროვე ქართულ საზოგადოებაში” [The issue of integration of ethnic Kists in modern Georgian society]. Tbilisi State University, 2015, 3–8, https://www.tsu.ge/data/file_db/faculty_social_political/salome%20davitashvili.pdf.

⁸³ Rebecca Gould, “Secularism and Belief in Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 22, no. 3 (September 14, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etr061>.

⁸⁴ Gould, 341.

According to Gould, “a survey of the history and ethnography of Pankisi demonstrates the region’s startling capacity for assimilation: of Chechen to Georgian, Islamic to Christian, and Sunni to Shia.”⁸⁵ Some scholars attribute the spread of Wahabism in Pankisi Gorge to the war in Chechnya. As S. Ozeren, I. D. Gunes, and D. M. Al-Badayneh write, “wahhabism was preached by the youth returned from the war.”⁸⁶ According to Tinatin Kapanadze and Giorgi Gogvadze, Wahabism spread in Pankisi Gorge in the 1990s. Considered an extremist branch of the Muslim religion, Wahhabism goes back to mid-18th century Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism goes against traditional Islam and has elements that are not written of in the Koran. As Gould writes, “Wahhabism has been called the ‘single most arresting movement in the Islamic world’ during the early modern period.”⁸⁷ According to Ozeren, Gunes, and Al-Badayneh, in the beginning, about 15 to 20 people in the gorge were Wahhabism followers. Soon the relationship between Wahhabists and Miurids⁸⁸ became tense, especially after second war in Chechnya-Russia in 1999, when Chechen “boeviks” (armed groups) moved to Pankisi Gorge. Today there are about 200 Wahhabists in Pankisi Gorge.⁸⁹ For example, in Pankisi’s largest village Duisi, there are two main mosques: one “traditional,” which is often visited by people of the older generation, and the other that worships Wahhabism and is more attractive to younger locals.⁹⁰ Throughout the years, Pankisi Gorge has struggled with its image as the “lair for terrorists,” created in local and foreign, including Russian, media.

⁸⁵ Gould, 345.

⁸⁶ S. Ozeren, S., I.D. Gunes, and D.M. Al-Badayneh, *Understanding Terrorism: Analysis of Sociological and Psychological Aspects* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: IOS Press, 2007), 57, <https://rb.gy/tswgxs>.

⁸⁷ Gould, “Secularism and Belief,” 346.

⁸⁸ *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, “Murīd,” accessed August 18, 2020, 1–10, https://library.ut.ac.ir/documents/381543/3581025/Brill_-_The_Encyclopaedia_of_Islam_Vol_7_Mif-Naz_.pdf.

⁸⁹ Ozeren, Gunes, and Al-Badayneh, *Understanding Terrorism*, 57.

⁹⁰ Tinatin Jvania, Giorgi Kupatadze, “Keeping Islamic State out of Georgia,” IWPR, June 22, 2015, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/558a86604.html>.

Juliette Ondet has studied three regions with Muslim minorities in Georgia and compared internal and external conditions of radicalization. Among internal conditions the author lists the economic situation, political disregard, and ethical and religious marginalization.⁹¹ There is no official data about the unemployment rate in Pankisi Gorge and how it compares to the rest of Georgia. Yet, researchers agree that lack of workplaces and conditions for self-realization contribute to young people leaving the region and going to fight as terrorists in Syria. Locals in Pankisi Gorge believe that families of those who fight in Syria live in better economic conditions.⁹² There are no exact numbers of how many fighters have left for Syria from Pankisi, but the issue received much attention in 2013–2014 when names of several fighters appeared on international terrorist lists.⁹³ In 2019, the thirty-third fighter from Pankisi died in the Syrian war.⁹⁴ Estimates of Georgian fighters in Syria are between 100 and 200 and most of them are Kists.⁹⁵

Scholars also consider education as one of the factors making Pankisi Gorge a vulnerable region. The quality of education at schools is not high, and locals claim that many young boys do not want to continue studying in higher education institutions. According to Giorgi Kapanadze and Sergi Goguadze, “the lack of educational programs and activities allows for the spread of fundamentalist-radical ideas.”⁹⁶ Kapanadze and Goguadze agree with those other scholars, saying that the state has not yet implemented a strategy for solving problems in Pankisi Gorge, including creation of workplaces, increasing civic engagement, and improving the educational system. Scholars believe that

⁹¹ Juliette Ondet, “Radical Islam in Georgia: Causes and Consequences of Radicalization in Adjara and Guria Regions,” *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies*, 4–7 <https://www.gfsis.org/files/library/pdf/English-2715.pdf>.

⁹² Giorgi Goguadze and Sergi Kapanadze, “Daesh and Challenges Facing Georgia,” *Georgia’s Reforms Associates (GRASS)*, November 2015. https://www.academia.edu/28426335/Daesh_and_Challenges_Facing_Georgia.

⁹³ Pokalova, “Georgia, Terrorism, and Foreign Fighters.”

⁹⁴ “33rd ISIS Fighter from Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge Dead in Syrian War,” Democracy and Freedom Watch, March 8, 2019, <https://dfwatch.net/33rd-isis-fighter-from-georgias-pankisi-gorge-zdead-in-syrian-war-52956>.

⁹⁵ “33rd ISIS Fighter from Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge Dead in Syrian War,” Democracy and Freedom Watch.

⁹⁶ Goguadze and Kapanadze, “Daesh,” 12.

the development of these systems will contribute to Pankisi's de-radicalization, as well as its integration within the greater society of Georgia.

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IV. RUSSIA'S USE OF HYBRID WARFARE IN GEORGIA AND PANKISI GORGE

A. RUSSIA'S HYBRID WARFARE IN GEORGIA

Niklas Nilsson considers Georgia an interesting case study for Russia's use of hybrid warfare. Since its declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia has often become a subject of Russia's various tactics.⁹⁷ These hybrid methods include the use of military forces, specifically gaining control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia; cyber-attacks; disinformation and propaganda campaigns; manipulation through economic dependence; and the insertion of agents of influence in Georgian society and within the political elite. Nilsson argues that these tools "represent 'pressure points that can potentially be activated or mobilized at a particular point in time, for example during an international crisis or ahead of elections, to undermine the Georgian government, to provoke domestic instability, or to exert influence on Georgian decision-makers in order to extract concessions.'"⁹⁸

One particular tactic that Russia has actively used against Georgia throughout years is increasing military presence. Nilsson writes that the war in 2008 and the events before and after the conflict are perfect examples of hybrid warfare. First, before the conflict, Russia provided civilians of South Ossetia and Abkhaz with Russian passports to create an illusion that Russia was protecting its citizens with intervention. Second, Russia planned to wage a conflict in South Ossetia long before the war even started, and Moscow deployed over 20,000 troops soon after the conflict escalated to fight against Georgian armed forces.⁹⁹ Third, Russia used cyber-attacks against the Georgian governmental websites and news media outlets. According to *The New York Times*, the

⁹⁷ Niklas Nilsson, "Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Studies Program*, January 2018, 5–7, https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2018_01_Nilsson_Hybrid.pdf.

⁹⁸ Nilsson, 26.

⁹⁹ Carolina Vendil Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, "Russia's War in Georgia: Lessons and Consequences," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20, no.2 (July 24, 2009): 400–402, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592310902975539>.

attacks limited the Georgian government's ability to share its message and information, as well as connect with people around the world as the war progressed.¹⁰⁰ And finally, to justify its actions, Russia started a disinformation campaign on an international level claiming that the Georgian side had killed 2,000 South Ossetian civilians. Russia and Georgia signed a Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement that ended the conflict in 2008. But soon after that, Russia started the process called "borderization" along the Administrative Boundary line with South Ossetia. According to Kornely Kakachia, "for Georgia, it specifically refers to the installation of border markers, fencing, and barbed wire along the Administrative Boundary Lines (ABLs) that separate Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the rest of Georgia. In some cases, it involves the seizure of additional land. In all cases, it splits communities and causes unnecessary tensions."¹⁰¹ Russian troops still remain in Georgia, specifically in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Russia continues to push a barbed wire border between Georgia and South Ossetia more and more towards the Georgian territory—a process referred to as "creeping occupation."¹⁰² The Russian military presence in Georgia can successfully be used in a renewed conflict between the two countries. Nilsson adds that Russia aims to keep a military threat credible and remind Georgia that the country should take every foreign policy decision while keeping in mind that there is a Russian army on Georgian lands.

Apart from military activities, there are the diplomatic and economic tactics that Russia uses against Georgia to pressure the government and influence the decision-making process. Nilsson supports this by discussing that the developments in Russia's relationships with South Ossetia and Abkhazia have coincided with important events for Georgia's relations with the West. For example, the election and referendum in South

¹⁰⁰ John Markoff, "Before the Gunfire, Cyberattacks," *New York Times*, August 12, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/technology/13cyber.html>.

¹⁰¹ Kornely Kakachia, "How the West Should Respond to Russia's Borderization in Georgia," PONARS Eurasia, April 2018, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/how-west-should-respond-russias-borderization-georgia>.

¹⁰² Goga Apciauri, "დამალული მცოცავი ოკუპაცია" [Hidden Creeping Occupation], Radio free Europe, May 22, 2020, rb.gy/dndeez.

Ossetia happened at the same time as the NATO-Georgia Public Diplomacy Forum in 2017. It is typical for Russia to use diplomatic tools to put more pressure on Tbilisi.¹⁰³ As Michael Lambert writes, “to this day, Georgia remains a diplomatic testing ground for the Kremlin—given the presence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.”¹⁰⁴

As for the economic tools, because of high rates of unemployment and poverty, Georgia remains vulnerable to external economic manipulation. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the unemployment rate in the country was about 11.6% in 2019. According to Sergi Kapanadze, “Georgia has four central areas of economic vulnerability in relation to Russia: investments, trade, energy, and remittances.”¹⁰⁵ For example, in 2019, 57% of Georgia’s wine exports came from Russia. The same year Russian tourists spent over \$700 million in Georgia. In total, last year Georgia received \$1.6 million from Russian tourists, money transfers, and the export of goods, which equals to over 9% of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP). Nilsson argues that such dependence makes Georgia vulnerable to economic sanctions. For example, if Russia puts a ban on Georgian products, many local farmers would suffer from the consequences.¹⁰⁶ According to Transparency International Georgia, however, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has decreased Georgia’s economic dependence on Russia. For example, because of closed borders this year Georgia has received 32% fewer Russian tourists compared to 2019. The pandemic creates a chance to structurally change the entire economic system by making it less dependent on Russia and more focused on other countries, especially in the EU.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Nilsson, “Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia,” 43–45.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Lambert, “Tracing the Roots of Russia’s Hybrid Warfare Tactics,” *Eurasianet*, October 11, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/tracing-the-roots-of-russias-hybrid-warfare-tactics>.

¹⁰⁵ Sergi Kapanadze, “Georgia’s Vulnerability to Russian Pressure Points,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 2014, 3–4, https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR106_GEORGIA_MEMO_AW.pdf.

¹⁰⁶ Nilsson, “Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia,” 32–33.

¹⁰⁷ “Georgia’s Economic Dependence on Russia: Trends and Threats,” *Transparency International Georgia*, May 4, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/ge/blog/sakartvelos-ekonomikuri-damokidebuleba-rusetze-tendenciebi-da-saprtxeebi>.

Kapanadze argues that Russia can also use other tactics, including the manipulation of the numerous Georgian citizens who work and live in Russia. For example, in 2006, the relationship between the two countries was tense. Russia put a ban on Georgian wine imports and started to expel Georgian citizens from the country. Consequently, two people died in the mass deportations.¹⁰⁸

B. RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN GEORGIA

In recent years many local or foreign scholars and nonprofit organizations have studied Russia's use of soft power in Georgia. Most of them agree that Russia uses propaganda and disinformation to influence media, political, and civic organizations, and alter public opinion in its favor. The actors that play the main role in spreading the Russian narrative are political parties, internet-based media, pro-Russian non-governmental organizations (NGO), and factions in the Georgian Orthodox Church.¹⁰⁹

First, there are two political parties that keep close ties with Moscow: one is Nino Burjanadze's Democratic Movement and the other, Irma Inashvili's Alliance of Patriots. Burjanadze is a former chairperson of the Parliament of Georgia, rising to the position from 2001 to 2008. She joined the opposition to President Mikheil Saakashvili after he refused to include Soviet-style politicians in his political party.¹¹⁰ She met directly with Russia's President Vladimir Putin several times, as well as with other high-ranking Russian officials such as then Prime Minister Medvedev. In 2018, Burjanadze appeared on Russia's state TV channel and said that joining NATO would be "bad for Georgia"; instead, the priority should be a direct dialogue with Russia. She also mentioned that

¹⁰⁸ Kapanadze, "Georgia's Vulnerability," 5.

¹⁰⁹ Nilsson, "Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia," 37.

¹¹⁰ Giorgi Kvelashvili, "Russian Leader Meets Burjanadze: What Is on Putin's Mind?" The Jamestown Foundation, March 9, 2010, <https://jamestown.org/russian-leader-meets-burjanadze-what-is-on-putins-mind/>.

Georgia wanted to form a friendly relationship with the United States in exchange for ruining connections with Russia, and doing so was a big mistake.¹¹¹

The Alliance of Patriots also openly opposes Georgia's integration with the EU and NATO and considers it damaging to the country's traditions. The party entered the Georgian parliament after the election in 2016, with 5% of votes. The party's leaders often visit Moscow and meet with Russian governmental officials. In 2017, after a joint meeting in Russia's capital, Inashvili proposed an innovative format called Georgia-NATO-Russia. As Inashvili says, "NATO is a danger to Russia; [Russia] is always saying that Georgian territory might be used for an attack on them."¹¹² The leaders, including Inashvili herself, "talk up the Russian Orthodox Church's links to Georgia"¹¹³ and often use this connection to gain more followers.

In addition, the Georgian Orthodox Church is considered a large player in Russia's soft power activities. Markozashvili and Dvalishvili discuss that Russia implements its soft power tactics primarily in the societal and cultural spheres. The latter is developed around the church. Those who want Georgia to form a better relationship with Russia, instead of following a pro-Western direction, often identify the same religion as a main argument for closer alignment with Russia.¹¹⁴ Even though direct connections are difficult to prove, Georgian priests often repeat the Russian narrative, especially when it comes to minority rights. As Kapanadze writes, "The Georgian Orthodox Church has deeply entrenched beliefs and positions that are traditionally linked

¹¹¹ Ana Vakhtangadze, "წინო ბურჯანაძის ანტიდასავლური ნარატივი რუსულ სახელისუფლებო არხზე" [Nino Burjanadze's anti-Western narrative on the Russian government channel], On, September 25, 2018, <https://rb.gy/apsdmj>.

¹¹² "Patriots' Alliance: Georgia-NATO-Russia Format Proposed during Visit with Russian MPs," Tabula, July 13, 2017, <http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/121961-patriots-alliance-georgia-nato-russia-format-proposed-during-visit-with-russian-mps>.

¹¹³ Margarita Antidze, "Pro-Russian Party Wins a Toe-hold in Georgia's New Parliament," Reuters, October 11, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-election/pro-russian-party-wins-a-toe-hold-in-georgias-new-parliament-idUSKCN12B1XF>.

¹¹⁴ Ia Prangishvili, "მიტები vs რეალობა: ერთმორწმუნე მტერი" [Myths vs Reality: A Monotheistic Enemy], Netgazeti, January 9, 2018, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/301203/>.

with the Russian Orthodox Church and ill-matched with European values of tolerance, pluralism, and accountability.”¹¹⁵

For example, in 2013 conservatives and members of the Georgian Orthodox Church attacked lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists who were demonstrating. The attack turned violent and the police had to transport the demonstrators in Tbilisi out of the city center in buses.¹¹⁶ In 2013 the *Atlantic Journal* wrote about Russia that “The Church's head, Patriarch Kirill, has been outspoken against ‘social ills’ like alternative sexual orientations.”¹¹⁷ In 2017, the head of Russia’s Orthodox Church compared homosexuality to Nazism.¹¹⁸ While a year later, a priest in Georgia compared people attending the Gay Parade to having appearances like “Satan.”¹¹⁹

According to Markozashvili and Dvalishvili, the other main sphere for Russia’s use of soft power is societal and includes organizations that either receive or are connected with Russian funds or Russian governmental officials. A 2015 research report by the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) identified the main pro-Russian players in the NGO sector and the media.¹²⁰ The authors focused mainly on two institutions, both based in the capital Tbilisi: The Eurasian Institute (EI) and the Eurasian Choice (EC). The first one mostly organizes seminars and conferences, while the second organization is more focused on protest rallies. Their founders are also

¹¹⁵ Kapanadze, “Georgia’s Vulnerability,” 5.

¹¹⁶ Damien McGuinness, “Conservatives Attack Gay Activists at Rally in Tbilisi,” BBC, May 17, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-22565723/conservatives-attack-gay-activists-at-rally-in-tbilisi>.

¹¹⁷ Olga Khazan, “Why is Russia so Homophobic?,” *The Atlantic*, June 12, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/06/why-is-russia-so-homophobic/276817/>.

¹¹⁸ Feliz Solomon, “Russia’s Highest Religious Authority Just Compared Gay Marriage to Nazi Germany,” TIME, May 30, 2017, <https://time.com/4797521/russia-orthodox-gay-marriage-nazi-germany/>.

¹¹⁹ “Priest Shalva Kekelia: On Gay Parades One Sees Devils in People’s Form,” Tabula, July 1, 2018. <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/verbatim/134324-dekanozi-shalva-kekeliagei-aghlumebze-xedavt-eshmaks-damsgavsebul-adamianebs>.

¹²⁰ Nata Dzvelishvili and Tazo Kupreishvili, “Russian Influence on Georgian NGOs and Media,” Damoukidebloba, June, 2015, 3–4, <https://idfi.ge/public/upload/russianimpactongeorgianmediadaNGO.pdf>.

involved with other NGOs that have similar activities. Many of them were founded after 2013 and some have declared that they received funds from the Russian state budget. EI created an internet platform, Politforum, mainly to blame the Georgian government for the war in 2008. In 2013 EI started a project, “People’s Movement for the Russian-Georgian Dialogue and Cooperation,” to find solutions to the conflict between the two countries. The organization also tries to create a negative narrative about European institutions.¹²¹ In 2013, Georgian historian Zaza Abashidze founded the Russian-Georgian Public Center, which is a partner for the Gorchakov Fund for Public Diplomacy. This fund was established in 2010 and as Nilsson writes, “by a decree of President Medvedev for the explicit purpose of promoting Russia’s soft power in the post-Soviet space.”¹²²

According to a Caucasus Research Resource Center’s survey in 2017, over 47% of the people asked thought that Russian propaganda exists in Georgia.¹²³ When it comes to Russian propaganda, media outlets play an important role in spreading disinformation. Media outlets Geworld.ge and saqinformi.ge often cover activities of the EC and EI and other organizations. Russia’s international media project Sputnik is also actively working in Georgia, even though it had to establish an online website after being banned from broadcasting in 2015. When it comes to media, Russia uses almost all channels of communication (TV, newspapers, internet, Russian officials and experts, representatives of Georgian civil society) to disseminate propaganda filled with false information and distorted facts in a purposeful, consistent, and continuous manner. This significantly increases its efficiency and undermines chances to fight it.¹²⁴

The following narratives can be identified in Russian propaganda:

¹²¹ Markozashvili and Dvalishvili, *Russian Smart Power in Georgia*, 173–174.

¹²² Nilsson, “Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia,” 44.

¹²³ “Do you Agree or Disagree that there is a Russian propaganda in Georgia?,” NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, April 2017, Caucasus Barometer, Online Data Analysis.
<https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/na2017ge/RUPROPAG/>.

¹²⁴ Tugushi, “Threats of Russia’s Hard and Soft Power in Georgia.”

1. Georgia is ruled by the West (important decisions are made in the U.S. Embassy to Georgia) and that impedes patriotic forces to come to power. The West uses Georgia in its geopolitical confrontation with Russia, which negatively impacts Georgia's development.¹²⁵
2. The United States uses the Richard Lugar Centre for Public Health Research to carry out biological experiments on Georgia's population;¹²⁶
3. The West is unable to defend Georgia when Russia is getting stronger. The war in Ukraine and the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 are given as examples, claiming that the United States helped Georgia only with "water and diapers."¹²⁷
4. Georgia has no prospect of NATO membership and the country's NATO aspirations harm Georgia's interests. In addition, NATO membership is being portrayed as giving up the Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali regions. In accordance with the propaganda discourse, if Georgia abandons its NATO ambitions, it would be able to automatically restore territorial integrity.¹²⁸
5. The West funds NGOs in Georgia, which fight Georgia's Orthodox Church, discredit patriotic forces and Georgian traditions, advocate sexual minorities, and seek to legalize same-sex marriage. Therefore, the West imposes non-traditional values on Georgia. Western values negatively affect traditional Georgian mores and lifestyle;¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Tamar Kintsurashvili, "Anti-western Propaganda: Media Monitoring," Media Development Foundation, 2017, 10–11, [http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/65/file/Antidasavluri-GEO-web_\(1\).pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/65/file/Antidasavluri-GEO-web_(1).pdf).

¹²⁶ "Scandal around Lugar Laboratory," Sputnik, May 28, 2020, <https://sputnik-georgia.com/trend/lugar-laboratory/>.

¹²⁷ Kintsurashvili, "Anti-western Propaganda," 30.

¹²⁸ Kintsurashvili, 32.

¹²⁹ Kintsurashvili, 33–34.

6. As Markozashvili and Dvalishvili write, “The discourse regarding political/economic relevance of Russia is enriched with the constant reminders regarding the shared Orthodox Christian values.”¹³⁰
7. One of the central priorities of the Russian information narrative is to cultivate anti-Turkish sentiments in Georgia. Turkey is portrayed as occupying Georgia’s ancestral lands, and carries out aggressive economic expansion. In accordance with the narrative, the Turkish threat will further rise in the case of Georgia’s integration to NATO.¹³¹

Additionally, IDFI names the following risks if the government does not implement activities against Kremlin propaganda: 1) The population’s support of Georgia’s European integration might ease and the number of those who support Georgia’s close ties with Russia might increase; 2) Propaganda allows an outside power to influence the country’s political agenda and threaten its sovereignty; 3) Xenophobia, ethnic, and religious conflicts might increase and the societal unity might be weakened.¹³² Kapanadze writes that the cumulative use of soft power can affect political stability and economic vulnerability in Georgia, as well as slow its integration with EU and NATO.¹³³

While Russia’s use of hybrid warfare is thoroughly studied in Georgia and in its capital Tbilisi, little is known about the methods and tactics used in Pankisi Gorge.

C. THE OVERVIEW OF RUSSIA’S INFORMATION WARFARE IN PANKISI GORGE

According to James K. Wither, one of the most successful methods that Russia used against Ukraine in 2014 was information warfare. As he writes, “Broader media

¹³⁰ Markozashvili and Dvalishvili, “Russian Smart Power in Georgia,” 183.

¹³¹ Kintsurashvili, “Anti-western Propaganda,” 16–17.

¹³² “Kremlin’s Information War: Why Georgia Should Develop State Policy on Countering Propaganda,” IDFI, September 1, 2016, <https://idfi.ge/ge/informational-war-of-kremlin-against-georgia-the-necessity-of-having-state-policy-against-propaganda>.

¹³³ Kapanadze, “Georgia’s Vulnerability,” 1–2.

exploitation techniques blurred the lines between truth and falsehood, creating an alternative reality for those observers who accepted the Russian media's view of events."¹³⁴ Lionel Beehner also writes that information warfare is one of Russia's methods to take advantage of and control the narrative in a target region. It mainly depends on the psychological aspect of information that helps to shape individual and collective ideas. In other words, using such methods creates and alters public opinion.¹³⁵ Therefore, it is not surprising that Russia decided to use information warfare against Georgia as well.

News media, both Russian and Georgian, play the primary role in spreading disinformation and shaping public opinion, and Russia's information campaign is focused on portraying Pankisi Gorge as a closed society that functions as a shelter and transit place for terrorists. Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, has stated multiple times that the Islamic State has training camps in Pankisi Gorge, and it can be considered as national threat for Russia. His statements have been widely covered by Russian media throughout years. In addition, the false narrative about the Pankisi Gorge as a closed, isolated region is often published on Russian websites to strengthen the stereotype.

Russia also uses different methods of propaganda in Pankisi Gorge. Supporters of the head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov use different tools to spread propaganda. As an example, a June 15, 2018 episode can be cited, during the Ramadan Bayram period. A provocation was organized by the supporters of Ramzan Kadyrov in the village of Duisi in Pankisi Gorge. At the time, those in a car, which had Russian Federation plate numbers, affixed a photo of former Chechnya President Ahmed-Khaji Kadyrov on the car. The chanting of shouts of "Ahmed is power" were heard. The incident caused dissatisfaction within the Salafi community of the valley, and their demand for removal of the picture from the car resulted in verbal and physical confrontation. Many people living in Pankisi are refugees from the Russian-Chechnyan

¹³⁴ Wither, "Making Sense of Hybrid Warfare," 77.

¹³⁵ Beehner, *Analyzing the Russian Way of War*, 52–54.

war, people who lost their homeland because of this conflict, and therefore, they would put up with Russian provocation. The conflict was resolved after law enforcement intervened. It may be assumed that this provocation served to check what kind of attitude the Pankisi Gorge population had towards the Kadyrov regime and how stable the situation was there.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ “Tension in Pankisi Gorge,” Imedi News, June 15, 2018, <https://imedinews.ge/ge/dzalovnebi/66156/shss-pankisis-kheobashi-dadzabuloba-iko>.

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V. ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION ABOUT PANKISI GORGE

A. METHODOLOGY

To reveal Russia's use of disinformation in Pankisi Gorge, 15 Russian media outlets and 101 stories from online and broadcast media were analyzed. I chose media outlets based on the BBC's list of Russian press profiles and focused on the ones that are government owned or pro-Kremlin.¹³⁷ But to have a variety of results, I also analyzed those media outlets considered more or less independent. The focus was more on online and broadcast media, because according to the Caucasus Barometer, those are two of the main sources of information for the Georgian public.¹³⁸ I conducted a keyword search of the word "Pankisi" in Russian on the websites and analyzed the content that came up as a result. Not included were those media publications that had no content about Pankisi.

As for the term disinformation, I used the following definition: purposeful spread of false information that is intended to mislead the public.¹³⁹ It does not always consist of false facts; instead, it can be true information put together in a way to change the context and create a wrong impression. Experts usually agree that disinformation is mostly purposeful and it can be a part of a bigger agenda.¹⁴⁰

To prove that the stories marked as disinformation were, in fact, false, I made comparisons with how Georgian and international media covered the same issue, as well as what the official statements of the Georgian government were.

¹³⁷ "Russia Profile Media," BBC, January 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17840134>.

¹³⁸ "Public Attitudes in Georgia," Caucasus Research Resource Center, March 2018, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/nm2018ge/INFSOUF1/>.

¹³⁹ Christina Nemr and William Gangware, "Weapons of Mass Distraction: Foreign State-Sponsored Disinformation in the Digital Age," Park Advisors, 2019, 4–5, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Weapons-of-Mass-Distraction-Foreign-State-Sponsored-Disinformation-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf>.

¹⁴⁰ "Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation and Fake News," National Endowment for Democracy, October 17, 2017, <https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-distinguishing-disinformation-from-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news/>.

The content analysis allowed us to identify sources and narratives in two types of Russian media outlets that are the most accessible to the Georgian population. The content analysis is divided in two parts: qualitative and quantitative. The quantitative section includes the number and type of stories that contain at least one piece of disinformation, as well as which media outlet published the highest number of such stories. The qualitative section deals with themes and narratives most common in Russian stories about Pankisi Gorge that contain disinformation, and the section identifies the authors of those narratives.

B. QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Through the targeted keyword search, I identified and analyzed 101 news stories in online and broadcast media. Out of those, the majority, 89 stories, were published in the form of online news, articles, or interviews, while 12 were published as broadcast stories. The analysis showed that out of 101 stories, 54 contained at least one piece of disinformation about Pankisi Gorge. And 47 stories did not have false information about the region or the events that took place there. As for the type of media, 11 out of 12 broadcast stories spread disinformation, while about half of the online content had false information or distorted facts.

Twelve stories (about 22%) with disinformation were published on Kavkazoved.info. The media outlet was founded by Russia in Abkhazia—the northwestern region in Georgia that the country has declared occupied by Russia.¹⁴¹ The organization’s aim is to study Caucasus and its border regions and publish analytical articles. The website says that it promotes the unity of people living in Russia and in Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS) countries. According to the “About us” section “the information presented on the site will be interesting and useful not only for scientists specializing in the study of the Caucasus, but also for everyone who is interested in this topic.”¹⁴² Alexander Borisovich Krylov is the president of Kavkazoved.

¹⁴¹ “Abkhazia Profile,” BBC, January 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18175030>.

¹⁴² “About Us,” Scientific Society of Caucasian Studies, <http://www.kavkazoved.info/articles/about-us.html>.

He has been very much interested in Georgian-Abkhazian relations and has written a couple of articles on the topic. In one of his articles he says that it is part of Georgian propaganda to blame Russia for escalating military conflict in Abkhazia.¹⁴³ He also says that Russia and the United States do not have similar policies in the South Caucasus and that may become a serious issue in the future. As he writes “the geographical proximity of the South Caucasus to Iraq and the Middle East increases the likelihood that the region will turn into another target and zone of activity for radical Islamic and international terrorist organizations.”¹⁴⁴ Kavkazoved seems to repeat its president’s ideology regarding Georgia becoming a hot spot of terrorists planning attacks in the region. Kavkazoved has published several stories spreading disinformation about Pankisi Gorge, specifically that this region conveys a terrorism threat.

The next media outlet with the highest number of stories that contain disinformation was Topwar.ru (Voennoye Obozreniye). The online publication was founded in 2012 and has been publishing stories and analytical articles about military affairs, military conflicts, geopolitics, and weapons.¹⁴⁵ (See Figure 3.)

¹⁴³ Alexander Borisovich Krylov, “Уроки грузино-абхазской войны Примитивные” [Lessons from the Georgian-Abkhazian War], абхазы и культурные грузины [Abkhazians and Cultural Georgians], 2005, http://apsnyteka.org/955-krylov_a_izbrannye_stati.html#6.

¹⁴⁴ Krylov, “Lessons from the Georgian-Abkhazian War.”

¹⁴⁵ About Us, Военное обозрение [Military obedience], <https://topwar.ru/about.html>.

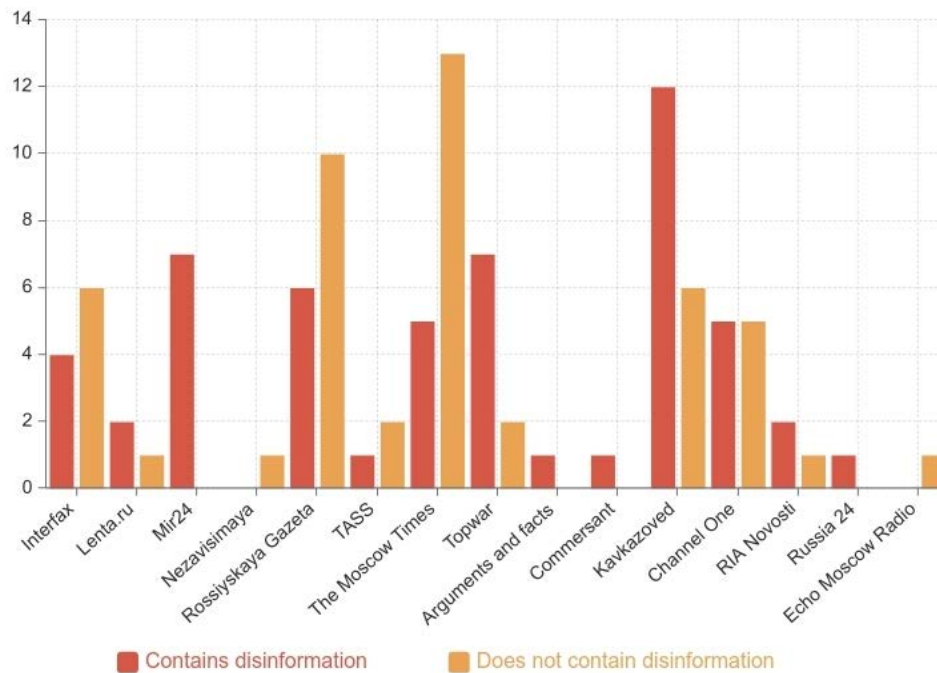


Figure 3. Disinformation by media outlet

Topwar.ru was followed by Channel One and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* that published five and six stories, respectively, containing disinformation. Channel One is controlled by the Russian government. The Russian state owns 51% of the TV station and private shareholders own 49%.¹⁴⁶ And it reaches millions of viewers every day. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* is also a government publication and one of the largest newspapers in Russia.¹⁴⁷

The next media outlet would be Mir 24. All seven broadcast news stories that came up through the keyword search contain disinformation. Mir 24 is part of a broadcasting company “Mir” that operates from post-soviet countries, including Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova since 1992. It was founded by the CIS, an international organization that aims to regulate relations among

¹⁴⁶ “Russia Profile Media,” BBC, January 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17840134>.

¹⁴⁷ *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Crunchbase, <https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/rossiyskaya-gazeta>.

post-soviet countries.¹⁴⁸ Georgia ended its membership in 2008. As for Mir 24, it has been on the air since 2013 and has a potential audience of 62 million people.¹⁴⁹

As for the *Moscow Times*, which is considered more or less independent compared to other media outlets, only five out of 17 stories had disinformation. This means that the majority of content spread truthful information about Pankisi Gorge. The *Moscow Times* is an online only English newspaper based in Moscow since 1992. It is the main publication of the Independent Media Sanoma Magazines and covers current affairs in Russia and beyond.¹⁵⁰

C. QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The analysis showed that themes of Russia's propaganda and disinformation campaign in Pankisi Gorge are different from the rest of the country. Throughout Georgia, Russia focuses on common religion and history and anti-Western ideology. While when it comes to Pankisi Gorge, Russia tries to create the image of a lawless, extremist region where terrorists are trained and where the Georgian government has no power. The disinformation campaign is focused on portraying the locals as terrorists, strengthening the stereotypes, causing frustration among the residents of the valley, and creating destabilization. To achieve the goal, Russia actively uses the fact that youth from Pankisi Gorge have gone to fight with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). While such cases have happened, the number is not on the rise. The analysis shows that Russian media outlets falsify facts, use exaggerated data, and even mistranslate interviews to present Pankisi Gorge as a shelter and transit place for terrorists. In such stories, authors or sources often say that Pankisi Gorge poses a threat not only for Georgia, but for Russia and the entire region as well, to show that the two countries have to deal with the danger by cooperating with each other.

¹⁴⁸ *Britannica*, "Commonwealth of Independent States," accessed August 18, 2020 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Commonwealth-of-Independent-States>.

¹⁴⁹ "About Us," Mirtv website, <http://mirtv.ru/about/>.

¹⁵⁰ British Council, "About the Moscow Times," <https://www.britishcouncil.ru/en/emerging-forum/partners/the-moscow-times>.

There were four main narratives that the majority of stories spread. One is that terrorists have always been hiding in Pankisi Gorge and that there are training camps in the valley. Another is that Pankisi Gorge is an isolated, closed region where people do not speak Georgian and it is dangerous to walk without a local guide. The third narrative is that the valley poses a threat for Russia as well, because terrorists residing there can cross the border and attempt attacks on Russian territory. And lastly, there is the narrative that the EU, the United States, or Georgia's neighboring countries such as Turkey will not take action if the situation in Pankisi Gorge deteriorates. Georgia could only hope for Russia's help and cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

As the diagram in Figure 4 shows, out of the 101 stories analyzed about Pankisi Gorge, 96 covered the issue of terrorism.

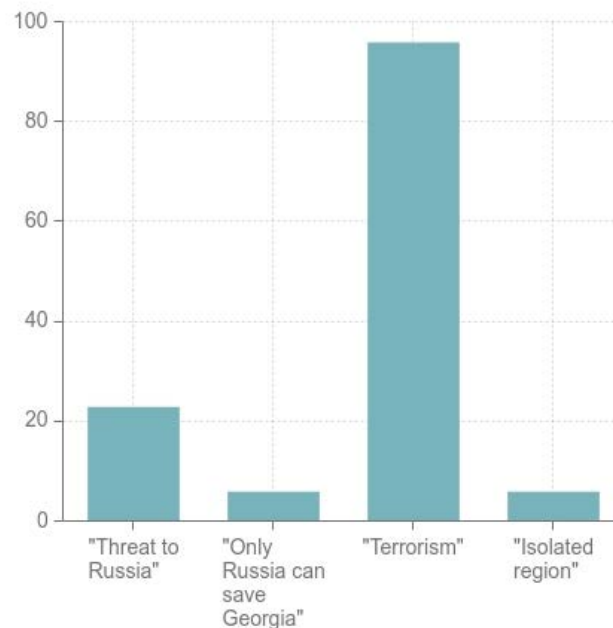


Figure 4. Distribution of stories based on four main narratives

1. Terrorists Are Hiding in Pankisi Gorge

Pankisi Gorge has struggled with a damaged reputation for years, mainly because of the events in 2001–2002 when Chechen militants were hiding in the valley. Back then the United States took action and helped Georgia to avoid Russia’s intervention. The conflict was resolved, and the Georgian government got back control over this region, but stories about terrorists and training camps have not gone away since then. Events that happened in Pankisi Gorge in the beginning of the 2000s have become a baseline of Russia’s disinformation campaign. Back then Russia blamed Georgia for allowing Chechen terrorists to reside in Pankisi Gorge and not taking action to regain control over the region. As the Russian parliament wrote in an official statement, “the expansion of terrorist activity in Georgia was facilitated by the position of the Georgian leadership, which had long denied the existence of international terrorists in the Pankisi Gorge and refused to cooperate with Russia in order to prevent the threat of terrorism.”¹⁵¹

The aftermath of these events turned out to be Russia’s information warfare against Pankisi Gorge and the main tactic is to manufacture reality through mass media content. As Alina Polyakova and Spencer P. Boyer write, the aim of such a method is to “muddle the notion of truth or objectivity, blur the line between fact and falsehood, and sow confusion among publics.”¹⁵²

In 2003, Channel One, Russian government-controlled television, which has over 250 million viewers, said that Algerians arrested in Britain for making a deadly poison Ricin were trained in Pankisi Gorge.¹⁵³ Sergey Ivanov, Russia’s then Defense Minister, made a statement about it at a conference in Munich where Georgia also participated. He claimed Ricin was prepared in home-made laboratories in Pankisi Gorge. In response, the

¹⁵¹ “Terrorism is Equally Dangerous for Russia and for Georgia,” *Kavkazsky Uzel*, March 7, 2002, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/16970/>.

¹⁵² Alina Polyakova and Spencer P. Boyer, “The Future of Political Warfare: Russia, The West, and the Coming Age of Global Digital Competition,” Brookings - Robert Bosch Foundation Transatlantic Initiative, 2018, 12, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/the-future-of-political-warfare.pdf>.

¹⁵³ “Дело о риксине: следы ведут в Панкисское ущелье Грузии” [The Ricin Case: Traces Lead to the Pankisi Gorge of Georgia], Channel One, January 17, 2003. https://www.1tv.ru/news/2003-01-17/257883-delo_o_ritsine_sledy_vedut_v_pankisskoe_uscheliye_gruzii.

Georgian government said there was no evidence that such laboratories ever existed in the valley. As then president Shevardnadze said, “my kind advice would be to Ivanov and to Russia to take care of Chechnya and solve problems there. Georgia will take care of Pankisi.”¹⁵⁴

Interestingly, Channel One only published content about Pankisi Gorge in 2002 and 2003, right after the conflict that involved Chechen militants, which was discussed in introduction. No recent stories about Pankisi Gorge were found on the website of Channel One. But in the years to come Russia, through various media outlets, tried to strengthen the stereotype that the situation has never changed in Pankisi Gorge, and it has continued to be a dangerous region where terrorists would be trained and sheltered. One of the most common ways to spread such a narrative is for Russian government officials or agencies to make a certain claim, which is then widely covered in media, with or without comments from the Georgian side.

In 2008 Lenta.ru published a statement of Anatoly Zabrodin, first deputy head of the border guard department of the Border Service of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, saying that terrorists living in Pankisi Gorge might attempt to enter Russia. He also mentioned that terrorists had not successfully done yet, but there were multiple attempts in previous years.¹⁵⁵ The story had a headline saying: “FSB warned of threat of breakthrough of militants from Georgia,” which creates an impression that the FSB had verified information, not just the claims of one of its officials. Similar allegations were made a year later by Alexander Bortnikov, the head of the FSB, who blamed the Georgian government for the destabilizing situation in Northern Caucasus and said that Al Qaeda terrorists were moving from Georgia to Chechnya. Yet, those claims have never been confirmed by the Georgian side. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of

¹⁵⁴ “რუსეთი საქართველოს კვლავაც ბრალს სდებს ტერორისტების მფარველობაში” [Russia Continues to Accuse Georgia of Sheltering Terrorists], Radio Free Europe, February 11, 2003, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1526463.html>.

¹⁵⁵ “ФСБ предупредила об угрозе прорыва боевиков из Грузии” [FSB Warned of the Threat of Militants from Georgia], Lenta, February 7, 2008, <https://lenta.ru/news/2008/02/07/pankisi/>.

Georgia answered that there were no terrorists in Pankisi Gorge.¹⁵⁶ The head of the Georgian Parliament, Davit Bakradze, said that Russia was manipulating the same issue that it did over 10 years ago when there was a crisis in Pankisi.

Allegations continued in the following years. In January 2016, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that based on Russian intelligence the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was operating a training camp in Pankisi Gorge: “ISIL militants are using this hardly accessible territory to train, rest and replenish their supplies.”¹⁵⁷ He suggested renewing diplomatic relations that have been suspended between the two countries because of the war in August 2008. The Georgian government denied the allegations and said that Pankisi Gorge was under control and there was no threat of terrorism. Lavrov’s statement was spread by different Russian websites. Kavkazoved.info published an interview with political analyst and chief editor of the *New Baku Post*, Tofiq Abbasov, who claimed that it is highly possible that there is ISIS military base in Pankisi.

Another story on Kavkazoved from 2016 claimed that a big group of terrorists from ISIS would attack from Georgia.¹⁵⁸ The story was based on an interview with military analyst Vakhtang Maisaia, published in the Georgian newspaper *Rezonans*. Kavkazoved said that according to the story on *Rezonans*, the group included 600 to 700 people. However, there is no such information in the Georgian version of the story.¹⁵⁹ Maisaia, who is a source for both articles, was arrested in 2009 and charged with spying for foreign special services. The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs said that Maisaia

¹⁵⁶ Koba Liklikadze, “ბორტნიკოვმა საქართველოში ალ-ყაიდის კვალს მიაგნო” [Bordnikov Found Traces of al-Qaeda in Georgia], Radio Free Liberty, October 14, 2009, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1850895.html>.

¹⁵⁷ “Russia: ISIL Training Base Located in Georgia’s Pankisi,” *Al Jazeera*, January 26, 2016. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/russia-isil-training-base-georgia-pankisi-160126131853851.html>.

¹⁵⁸ “СПЕЦНАЗ ТЕРРОРИСТОВ ИГ АТАКУЕТ ЧЕРЕЗ ГРУЗИЮ” [Terrorists from ISIS Attacking from Georgia], Scientific Society of Caucasian Studies, April 7, 2016. <http://www.kavkazoved.info/news/2016/07/04/specnaz-terroristov-ig-atakuet-cherez-gruziju.html>.

¹⁵⁹ Elza Paposhvili, “მაისაია: საქართველოში ისლამური სახელმწიფოს კარგად ორგანიზებული ქსელი არსებობს” [Maisaia: “There is a well-organized network of the Islamic state in Georgia”], *Rezonansi*, March 2016, rb.gy/9lxija.

used to send secret information about Georgia’s military, armaments, and politics and economy to sources outside the country.¹⁶⁰

In 2016, topwar.ru published a story with the title “Pankisi Gorge: A Problem for Russia or Georgia.” The story continued a narrative about a militant base in Pankisi Gorge and cited Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.¹⁶¹ Another story about Lavrov’s statements also said that Russia was forced to refuse a visa-free regime with Georgia because “[the] terrorism threat has not disappeared from Pankisi.”¹⁶²

Georgian governmental officials quickly responded to Lavrov’s allegations, assuring the local community and international society that a militant base or a training camp for terrorists does not exist in Pankisi Gorge. The same statement was made by then U.S. Ambassador in Georgia, Ian C. Kelly, who visited Pankisi and said that Georgia and the United States fought together against terrorism.¹⁶³

Sometimes, if such a statement comes from a high official, it is interpreted as truth by the general public. For example, in the comments section on one of the stories published on Topwar.ru, the viewer wrote the following: “Because the statement was made by Lavrov, there should be something in this valley.”¹⁶⁴ And comments turned into a discussion about if the Russian government had occupied the Georgian capital Tbilisi back in August 2008 this problem would not exist now.

¹⁶⁰ “ჯაშუშობის ბრალდებით ექსპერტი ვახტანგ მაისაია დააკავეს” [Expert Vakhtang Maisaia Was Arrested on Charges of Espionage], Radio Free Europe, May 6, 2009, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1622688.html>.

¹⁶¹ Roman Komorokhov, “Панкисское ущелье: проблема для России или Грузии?” [Pankisi Gorge a Problem for Russia or Georgia], Topwar, February 3, 2016, <https://topwar.ru/90152-pankisskoe-uschele-problema-dlya-rossii-ili-gruzii.html>.

¹⁶² “Лавров рассказал об отдыхе и тренировках боевиков ИГ в Панкисском ущелье” [Lavrov spoke about the rest and training of ISIS militants in Pankisi Gorge], RBK, January 26, 2016, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/56a763599a79475100a12282>.

¹⁶³ “იან კელი: პანკისში ტერორისტული ბაზა არ არის” [Ian Kelly: There is no terrorist base in Pankisi], Reportiori, 2016. <http://reportiori.ge/old/?menuid=2&id=87596>.

¹⁶⁴ Roman Skomorozov, “Панкисское ущелье: проблема для России или Грузии?” [Pankisi Gorge: a Problem for Russia or Georgia], Topwar, February 3, 2016, <https://topwar.ru/90152-pankisskoe-uschele-problema-dlya-rossii-ili-gruzii.html>.

As for the locals leaving to fight in Syria, in 2017 Gogvadze wrote that there is no exact data about how many Pankisi locals have gone to fight with ISIS, but the number is somewhere between 100 and 200.¹⁶⁵ Some scholars, such as terrorism expert Mamuka Areshidze, say the number is declining partially because of reported deaths of Georgian fighters, lack of charismatic leaders, and an internal split in the Kist community.¹⁶⁶

The narrative about Pankisi Gorge being a nest of terrorism creates a lot of frustration among locals and makes them feel marginalized. Such a narrative does not come just from Russian media, however, but from pro-opposition Georgian press as well, which sometimes exaggerates and dramatizes facts about the valley. Sulkhan Bordzikashvili started to analyze media stories about Pankisi Gorge over ten years ago and discovered that many of them spread disinformation about his region. As he said in an interview in 2020 with Publika.ge, “I was thinking why there is no one from our community to tell the truth about what’s happening here and inform the society.”¹⁶⁷ In an interview with Netgazeti.ge, another young Pankisi local, Islam Gorgishvili, said that he often has to prove to people living in other regions that the valley does not pose any threat, that there are no terrorism camps or free trade of weapons. As he said, “Such an attitude towards us, makes us feel that we are not citizens of this country, that we are “others.”¹⁶⁸ The locals, especially young people, have been trying to overcome the stereotype through opening hotels, developing tourism, and attracting more visitors to the valley.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Giorgi Gogvadze, “Propaganda of the Islamic Caliphate and the Methods of Recruitment of Georgian Citizens.” Georgia’s Reforms Associates, 2017, <https://www.gfsis.org/publications/view-opinion-paper/87>.

¹⁶⁶ Devi Dumbadze, “Terrorist Threat in Georgia Shifts from Exporting Militants to Homegrown and Returning Fighters,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 14, no. 4 (January 20, 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/terrorist-threat-georgia-shifts-exporting-militants-homegrown-returning-fighters/>.

¹⁶⁷ Qristine Mujiri, “ვისგან ისმის პანკისის ხმა?” [From whom is the voice of Pankisi heard?], Publika, February 24, 2020, <https://publika.ge/article/visgan-ismis-pankisis-khma/>.

¹⁶⁸ “მუდამ თავის მართლების რეჟიმში რატომ უნდა ვიყოთ” [Why should we always be in the mode of self-righteousness], Netgazeti, November 9, 2019, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/391270/>.

¹⁶⁹ “About Pankisi Camping,” Georgian Travel Guide, 2020, <https://georgiantravelguide.com/ka/pankisi-kemping>.

2. Isolated Region and Closed Community

A couple of stories published in Russian media followed the narrative that Pankisi Gorge is an isolated, closed community where people do not speak Georgian and where others should not go without a local guide. Such a narrative contributes to creating the image of Pankisi as a separate and marginalized region of Georgia, creating more frustration among the locals who have been trying to overcome the stereotypes for years.

In 2016, a state-owned TV channel Russia 24 published a 17-minute special video report about Pankisi Gorge with the following headline: “The Pankisi Syndrome.” This news story is a perfect example of mixing disinformation with truth. In the beginning of the video, the author says that Pankisi has become a peaceful region where people do not move around with weapons anymore. But later in the story the journalist says that there is not a single hotel or restaurant in the valley. One of the most popular hotels “Nazy’s Guesthouse” was renovated in 2012–2013 and already existed when Russia 24 made the story in 2016.¹⁷⁰ Another piece of disinformation is the following sentence in the author’s introductory text: “The same way as 100 years ago, they quickly detect non-locals. It’s better not to move around without a local guide.”¹⁷¹ In recent years there have not been any stories in Georgian media about people having problems in Pankisi Gorge because they were foreigners or from other cities. In fact, tourism is one of the fields that locals actively work at to develop and attract more visitors to the region.

Another media outlet that has been spreading the same narrative about Pankisi Gorge is Mir 24. A broadcast story published in May 2017 claims that people in Pankisi live in isolation, according to their own laws that are dictated by fundamentalist leaders.¹⁷² Most of the comments under the video, say that the information is false, and

¹⁷⁰ “About Us,” Nazy’s Guesthouse, 2020, <https://nazysguesthouse.com/about-us/>.

¹⁷¹ Irina Kukcenkova, “Панкисский синдром. Специальный репортаж Ирины Куксенковой” [Pankisi Syndrome. Special Report by Irina Kuksenkova], February 26, 2016, Russia 24, video, 17:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BEirbUmk64>.

¹⁷² Mikhail Robakidze, “Панкисси: территория беспредела или гнездо террористов” [Pankisi: Territory of Lawlessness or Nest of Terrorists], March 31, 2017, Mir 24, video, 9:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cch4vSJYST4>.

the journalist lies.¹⁷³ Pankisi Gorge is part of Georgia and the same laws apply there as in the rest of the country. The authors did not translate the beginning of the interview with a young local who said in Georgian that the cases of people going to fight in Syria are not that many. It is difficult to hear the Georgian version if you are not closely listening. Such manipulation is one of the techniques used in disinformation campaigns by Russia, and it is often referred to as “distortion.”¹⁷⁴ In other words, it includes misreporting the facts in a way to fit the chosen narrative. For example, in 2017 seven Russian media outlets mistranslated a quote from U.S. Lt. Col. Steve Gventer and created the impression that NATO had an aggressive plan towards Russia.¹⁷⁵ In cases like this there are two scenarios: it was either an innocent mistake or a deliberate one. Nevertheless, the analysis revealed that it is, in fact, a pattern for Mir 24 when it comes to covering events in Pankisi Gorge.

Another story from 2017 published by Mir 24 had the following headline: “How Pankisi Turned into a Factory of Militants.” Similar to the other one, this story spreads disinformation that hardly anyone in Pankisi speaks Georgian.¹⁷⁶ Yet, a Georgian survey conducted in 2019 found that among other minorities living in the country, Kists have the highest rate of knowledge of the Georgian language.¹⁷⁷ In a nine-minute video story published in 2017 as well, the author narrates in Russian that Pankisi Gorge is a lawless, closed region where fundamentalists dictate the laws. While listening to this, the viewer sees video footage of tanks and militants from the beginning of the 2000s. Nothing in the video or in the text indicates that this is archival footage, creating an impression that it is

¹⁷³ Robakidze, “Панкисси: территория беспредела или гнездо террористов” [Pankisi: Territory of Lawlessness or Nest of Terrorists].

¹⁷⁴ “Misleading by Mistranslation: How a Cluster of Russian Sites Ran a Fake Story Based on a False Translation,” Medium, June 28, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/misleading-by-mistranslation-38f4bb342aa>.

¹⁷⁵ Medium, “Misleading by Mistranslation.”

¹⁷⁶ Mikhail Robakidze, “Как Панкиси превратилось в фабрику боевиков” [How Pankisi Became a Militant Factory], Mir 24, December 3, 2017, <https://mir24.tv/news/15824206/kak-pankisi-prevratilos-v-fabriku-boevikov>.

¹⁷⁷ Tea Topuria, “კვლევის შედეგები: საქართველოს თავიანთ სამშობლოდ ყველაზე მეტად ოსები და ქისტები მიიჩნევენ” [Survey Results: Most Ossetians and Kists Consider Georgia Their Homeland], Radio Free Europe, May 17, 2019, <https://rb.gy/953uad>.

the current situation in Pankisi Gorge. The author continues the narrative by saying that “nobody in the region wants to get [an] education,” followed by another example of mistranslation. One can clearly hear in Georgian that the respondent is saying “I want to apply to study in the conservatory if possible, let’s see how it goes,” while the Russian translation says: “We want to have more musical schools in the region, so that youth would not have to live in isolation.” Mistranslation clearly serves to strengthen the stereotype about Pankisi being the isolated, closed community, while in reality the respondent talks about her personal dreams.

Most of the stories about Pankisi for Mir 24 are produced by one correspondent, Mikhail Robakidze, a journalist who previously worked for the Georgian Public Broadcaster. In all his stories Robakidze used the same words such as “nest of terrorism,” “factory of militants,” “grey spot on Georgia’s map,” “lawless region.” and “closed community.” As a result, he repeats the same falsified narrative in every story.

Other media outlets continued a similar narrative in the following years. A more recent story from May 2019 published on Lenta.ru had the following headline for the news about Chechens’ protest against the dam being built in Pankisi: “Pankisi Invasion: This Georgian gorge is called the ‘home of terrorists.’ Here according to their laws, Chechens live.”¹⁷⁸ The headline spreads false information, as Pankisi is not known as the “home of terrorists.” Later in the narrative, the author also wrongfully claims that Pankisi Gorge is a closed community where strangers are not welcome and most people do not speak Georgian.¹⁷⁹ The phrases used are very similar to the words spread by Mir 24 and Russia 24, such as “closed nature of the local community,” “strangers are not always

¹⁷⁸ Anastasia Antidze, “Панкисское нашествие: Это грузинское ущелье называют логовом террористов, Здесь по своим законам живут чеченцы, Закавказье” [This Georgian Gorge is called a den of terrorists, Chechens live here according to their own laws, Transcaucasia], Lenta, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2019/05/02/pankis/>.

¹⁷⁹ Antidze, “Панкисское нашествие: Это грузинское ущелье называют «логовом террористов. Здесь по своим законам живут чеченцы, Закавказье” [This Georgian gorge is called a den of terrorists, Chechens live here according to their own laws, Transcaucasia].

welcome here,” and “most of the local Kists do not even speak Georgian.”¹⁸⁰ None of these claims are true. In 2018, the Public Defender of Georgia, Nino Lomjaria, said that according to locals the situation in Pankisi Gorge has been peaceful for years.¹⁸¹ A local media outlet from Pankisi writes that people talk with each other in the Chechen language, but they are fluent in Georgian as well.¹⁸²

3. Threat to Russia

In its disinformation campaign, Russia often mentions that Pankisi Gorge is not just Georgia’s problem and that the valley poses a threat to Russia and the entire surrounding region as well. This narrative serves to create an impression in international as well as local societies that Russia is in danger from terrorists operating in Pankisi Gorge because they can cross the border and organize terrorist attacks in Russia. Therefore, if Russia decides to violate Pankisi’s territorial integrity, there is a chance the government would try to justify the intervention through the high risk of terrorist attacks that would otherwise harm Russia.

In 2012 Topwar.ru published an interview with the former special envoy of the Chechen separatists in Georgia, Khizri Aldamov. He spoke about possible anti-Russian projects that Georgia’s then president, Mikheil Saakashvili, was preparing. One was to create “the government of Ichkeria in exile” with the support of the United States and the second, to continue the activities of the Jamaat terrorist group from Pankisi Gorge. As Aldamov said, “in general, the problem is that the whole of Georgia since the collapse of

¹⁸⁰ Antidze, “Панкисское нашествие: Это грузинское ущелье называют «логовом террористов. Здесь по своим законам живут чеченцы, Закавказье” [This Georgian gorge is called a den of terrorists, Chechens live here according to their own laws, Transcaucasia].

¹⁸¹ “პანკისში წუხან, რომ ადგილობრივების მიმართ საზოგადოებაში სტიგმა არსებობს – ნინო ლომჯარია” [In Pankisi, they are worried that there is a stigma in the society towards the locals – Nino Lomjaria], Pankisi Community Radio. January 19, 2018, <https://radioway.ge/news/human-rights/item/699-pankisshi-xuxan,-rom-adgilobrivebis-mimart-sazogadoebashi-stigma-arsebobs-%E2%80%93-nino-lomjaria>.

¹⁸² “მასობრივი მიგრაცია პანკისიდან - სკოლები 121-მა მოსწავლემ მიატოვა” [Mass migration from Pankisi - 121 students drop out of school], Pankisi Community Radio, February 6, 2018, <https://radioway.ge/news/people/item/717-masobrivi-migracia-pankisan-skolebi-121-ma-mosxavlem-miatova>.

the Soviet Union is an anti-Russian terrorist nest.”¹⁸³ Even though this is only Aldamov’s opinion, there is nothing in the story that indicates that these ideas have not been verified.

Another story from Topwar.ru has the following headline: “A Problem for Russia or Georgia.” The headline itself suggests that Pankisi Gorge can pose a threat to Russia. The analytical article was also published after Lavrov’s allegations and discusses the possibility of a terrorist camp in Pankisi Gorge. The author claims that South Ossetian officials are worried that terrorists would easily cross the border and organize attacks in their region. As the author says, “by Georgian standards, the border is securely guarded. This means that everyone will pass.”¹⁸⁴

In 2016 Kavkazoved published a story about Lavrov’s allegations together with an interview with Alexander Krylov, president of Kavkazoved. Krylov claimed that the possible existence of a military training camp in Pankisi Gorge was very high, creating an alarming situation for Georgia. Krylov even went further and said that South Ossetia and Abkhazia can face a threat as well. He writes that “given the danger of a growing guerrilla war, perhaps our military will need some kind of adjustment of actions, not only in South Ossetia, but also in Armenia and Abkhazia.”¹⁸⁵

In 2017 Interfax.ru published a story with the headline: “Georgia Refuses to Discuss Accommodation of Migrants from Europe.” The story said that Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz suggested relocating migrants living in some European countries to Georgia and creation of refugee camps.¹⁸⁶ Franz Klintsevich, the first deputy head of the Federation Council defense and security committee of Russia said that this would affect Russia’s national security. As he said, “we remember the time when terrorists

¹⁸³ Artur Primak, “Грузия - антироссийское террористическое гнездо” [Georgia Is an anti-Russian Terrorist Nest], Topwar, July 25, 2012, <https://topwar.ru/15736-gruziya-antirossiyskoe-terroristicheskoe-gnezdo.html>.

¹⁸⁴ Roman Skomorokhov, “Панкисское ущелье: проблема для России или Грузии?” [Pankisi Gorge a problem for Russia or Georgia], Topwar, 2016, <https://topwar.ru/90152-pankisskoe-uschele-problema-dlya-rossii-ili-gruzii.html>.

¹⁸⁵ “УГРОЗА, ИСХОДЯЩАЯ ИЗ ПАНКИССКОГО УЩЕЛЬЯ, СТАНОВИТСЯ ВСЁ БОЛЕЕ РЕАЛЬНОЙ” [The Threat from the Pankisi Gorge Becomes More Real], Scientific Society of Caucasian Studies, January 27, 2016, <http://www.kavkazoved.info/news/2016/01/27/ugroza-ishodjaschaja-iz-pankisskogo-uschela-stanovitsja-vse-bolee-realnoj.html>.

¹⁸⁶ “Georgia Refuses to Discuss Accommodation of Migrants from Europe,” Interfax, March 5, 2017 https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/28899/?sphrase_id=3978.

trained in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge and then operated in our Caucasus."¹⁸⁷ The headline indicates that Georgia was against such discussion; however, the Georgian government and Austrian officials said that these discussions never even took place.¹⁸⁸

4. Only Russia Can Save Georgia

In January 2016, Kavkazoved.info published a story about the threat of terrorism in Pankisi Gorge, citing Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who said that ISIS uses Pankisi for training, recreation, and replenishment of terrorists. The story also cites Giorgi Kvirikashvili, then Georgia's Prime Minister, who explained that there was no threat of terrorism from Pankisi Gorge. Later in the narrative the author claimed that the situation in Pankisi Gorge was not under the control of the Georgian government, leading to the conclusion that there is a need for cooperation between the two countries. The author Mikhail Agajanyan has claimed that "Georgia could count on Russia's help in neutralizing terrorist threats;"¹⁸⁹ but, since 2008 diplomatic relations between these two countries have not been renewed. Agajanyan has often written about Georgia and its relations with other countries in the region and beyond. For example, in 2016 Agajanyan wrote that the United States was trying to get involved in Georgia's parliamentary elections and "weaken coalition powers of 'Georgian Dream' (current ruling party)."¹⁹⁰

In the story about Pankisi Gorge, Agajanyan tries to create a false impression not only about Pankisi Gorge, but generally about Georgia. First, the claim that ISIS used Pankisi Gorge as a location for training and vacation is false and has never been verified

¹⁸⁷ "Georgia Refuses to Discuss Accommodation of Migrants from Europe," *Interfax*, March 5, 2017, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/28899/>.

¹⁸⁸ Nana Sajaia, "Russian Media Tries to Link Georgia's EU Visa Waiver to Refugee Camps," *Voice of America*, March 7, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/russian-media-tries-link-georgias-eu-visa-waiver-refugee-camps>.

¹⁸⁹ Mikhail Agajanian, "Исчезла ли террористическая угроза из Панкисского ущелья?" [Has the terrorist threat disappeared from the Pankisi Gorge?], Фонд стратегической культуры [Strategic Culture Foundation], January 29, 2016, <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2016/01/29/ischezla-li-terroristicheskaja-ugroza-iz-pankisskogo-uschela-38290.html>.

¹⁹⁰ Mikhail Agajanian, "США ускоряют процесс вовлечения Грузии в НАТО" [US accelerates Georgia's NATO membership process], Фонд стратегической культуры [Strategic Culture Foundation], February 2, 2014, <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2014/02/11/usa-uskorjajut-process-vovlechenia-gruzii-v-nato-25673.html>.

by the Georgian government or the U.S. State Department. Although young locals from the region have gone to fight with ISIS, it does not mean that the region itself is a “nest for terrorism.” Second, by saying that Turkey has a weak antiterrorism policy, the author creates a narrative that only Russia would help Georgia to neutralize a terrorism threat. He presents Russia as a savior in times of need and the only hope for the Georgian government to fight terrorism.

An earlier story, published by Kavkazoved.info in 2015, discussed the history of Pankisi Gorge and why it attracted so much attention in recent years. The author blames Georgia’s ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili for problems not only in Pankisi Gorge, but on the Georgian-Russian border as well.¹⁹¹ Similar to other stories, this one also promotes more cooperation between Russia and Georgia when it comes to neutralizing terrorism threats. The author writes that the two countries have the same interests in fighting Jihadism. The author also cites the head of the Caucasian Center for Strategic Research, Mamuka Areshidze, who has said that all Georgian governments make the same mistake: not paying enough attention to Pankisi Gorge. Nevertheless, if we look at the same quote in Georgian media, it is clear that Areshidze meant the socio-economic conditions and that none of the governments have cared to create more work opportunities in Pankisi. By contrast, the context is not mentioned in the story on Kavkazoved.info, and therefore, it creates the impression that Pankisi needs more attention because of a terrorism threat. Areshidze himself, however, is one of those people who has claimed multiple times that Russia is using Pankisi Gorge for manipulation on the international level. For example, in an interview with GHN, the Georgian News Agency, in 2009, Areshidze said that in the beginning of this century

¹⁹¹ “ПАНКИСИ: ЗОНА ОСОБОГО ВНИМАНИЯ” [Pankisi: Area of Special Attention], Scientific Society of Caucasian studies, April 24, 2015, <http://www.kavkazoved.info/news/2015/04/24/pankisi-zona-osobogo-vnimania.html>.

Russia created an image of Georgia as a place where terrorists were hiding and the country spends a lot of time and energy to get rid of that name.¹⁹²

Another story published on Topwar.ru claimed that there is no evidence that Europe would help Georgia combat the terrorism threat coming from Pankisi Gorge. Therefore, Georgian experts and politicians were thinking about cooperation with Moscow on this issue.¹⁹³ Yet, no such news has been published in Georgian media, and no official statements were made by the government about fighting terrorism with Russia.

This is, in fact, a common narrative for Russia. Media Development Foundation in Georgia analyzed the coverage of Muslims on Russian TV and online media. They found that Russian media was trying to strengthen the idea that the only safe place, where ISIS is prohibited and where the government can effectively fight against terrorism, is Russia.¹⁹⁴ And when it comes to Pankisi Gorge, Russia tries to strengthen this narrative to underline the importance of cooperation and united efforts between the two countries.

Alexander Dugin is a Russian political analyst and Putin supporter known for his nationalist views. He wants to create a Eurasian Union where Russia would be a leading nation in a union that would include former Soviet countries.¹⁹⁵ In 2004 he wrote for a Russian newspaper a story with the headline “Georgian Scenarios.” One such scenario he discussed was a nationalist one in which “Moscow actualizes through its influence all the lines of disintegration—territorial, ethnic and political, contributes to the

¹⁹² “მამუკა არეშიძე: რუსეთი პანკისის ხეობის საკითხით საერთაშორისო საზოგადოებაში მანიპულირებას ცდილობს” [Mamuka Areshidze: Russia is trying to manipulate the international community on the issue of Pankisi Gorge], GHN - Georgian News Agency, October 26, 2019, <https://www.ghn.ge/news/1100-mamuka-areshidze-ruseti-pankisis-kheobis-sakitkhitis-saertashoriso-sazogadoebashi-manipulirebas-tsdlilobs>.

¹⁹³ Sergei Markedonov, “Грузия: провал надежд” [Georgia Failure of Hopes], Topwar, February 28, 2015, <https://topwar.ru/69988-sergey-markedonov-gruziya-proval-nadezhd.html>.

¹⁹⁴ Tamar Kinwurashvili, “მუსლიმთა თემატიკის გაშუქება ქართულ, რუსულ, აზერბაიჯანულ და თურქულ ტრადიციულ და ახალ მედიაში” [Coverage of Muslims in Georgian, Russian, Azerbaijani and Turkish Traditional and New Media], Media Development Foundation, http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/79/file/MEDIA_COVERAGE_Publication-Geo.pdf.

¹⁹⁵ Paul Ratner, “The Most Dangerous Philosopher in the World.” Bigthink, December 18, 2016, <https://bigthink.com/paul-ratner/the-dangerous-philosopher-behind-putins-strategy-to-grow-russian-power-at-americas-expense>.

dismemberment of Georgia and a long-term depression of the entire region, by directly annexing South Ossetia, Abkhazia, possibly Adjara to Russia, and other parts of Georgia, striking at Pankisi and mobilizing those marginal political forces that continue to adhere to a pro-Russian orientation.”¹⁹⁶ Back in 2004, Dugin hinted that Pankisi could be used by Russia. And for years to follow, Georgian experts would discuss how could Russia destabilize Pankisi and justify its intervention in the country by a terrorism threat.

¹⁹⁶ Aleksandr Dugin, “Грузинские сценарии” [Georgian Scripts], RG, February 6, 2004, <https://rg.ru/2004/02/06/stsenarij.html>.

VI. HOW RUSSIA CAN USE INSTABILITY IN PANKISI FOR INTERVENTION IN GEORGIA

The evidence strongly suggests that Russia is highly interested in Pankisi Gorge and is actively using disinformation and propaganda to spread a false narrative about the region. Through information warfare, Russia tries to strengthen the stereotype about Pankisi Gorge as a dangerous, lawless region that can threaten not only Georgia, but the entire Caucasus region. The question is why might Russia be interested in destabilizing the valley and what possible scenarios can develop in the region afterwards? The issue of how Russia can use destabilization in Pankisi Gorge in its favor has not been widely studied by Georgian or foreign scholars. Nevertheless, some literature and interviews with different experts such as Aladashvili, Areshidze, and Natadze published in Georgian media during the last two decades show that the issue needs more attention.¹⁹⁷ To understand how Russia might be destabilizing the situation in Pankisi Gorge to its own advantage, we should first understand past examples of justifying intervention through the threat of terrorism.

Russia used hybrid warfare in the military conflict both in Crimea and in South Ossetia. The information warfare tactics are similar in both conflicts as well. Russia tried to create an impression that extremists were residing in Crimea to justify its actions with the argument of protecting the country from terrorists. In fact, Pavel Baev writes that “one of the justifications advanced by Moscow for its deployment of special operations forces in Crimea was the allegedly urgent task of preventing terrorist attacks on the Russia population.”¹⁹⁸ Russia launched an anti-Ukrainian propaganda campaign, focused

¹⁹⁷ Nino Khachidze, “როგორ იყენებენ რუსეთი და თურქეთი პანკისის ხეობას ერთმანეთთან ბრძოლის პლაცდარმად და როგორ ცდილობს რუსეთი ტერორისტების წინააღმდეგ ბრძოლის საქართველოს ტერიტორიაზე გადმოტანას” [How Russia and Turkey Use the Pankisi Gorge as a Springboard to Fight Each Other and How Russia is Trying to Bring the Fight against Terrorists to the Territory of Georgia], January 22, 2018, Tbiliselebi, <http://tbiliselebi.ge/index.php?newsid=268452326>.

¹⁹⁸ Pavel Baev, “From Chechnya to Syria: The Evolution of Russia’s Counter-terrorism Policy.” French Institute of International Relations. April 2018, 18, http://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/baev_counter_terrorist_policy_2018.pdf.

on fighting extremism and terrorism. The information warfare altered the community view so much so that in 2018, only couple of years after the dispute, 56% of Russians had a pessimistic outlook about Ukraine. Even more disturbingly, 9% of Russians believed the organizers of the 2017 attack were Ukrainians.¹⁹⁹

Russia continued its narrative of terrorists residing in Crimea and would assign responsibility for terrorist activities to Crimean Muslims.²⁰⁰ Further, freelance journalists were charged with involvement in terrorism because of their reporting in Crimea.²⁰¹

In 2017 Russia intervened in Syria and deployed its troops permanently. But the Russia had cited a terrorist threat long before the intervention to justify its military operations. As the U.S. Department of State acknowledged in 2017, “Russian military intervention in Syria factored heavily in public counterterrorism messaging.”²⁰² The Atlantic Council writes that although Russia’s aim was to protect its ally, the Syrian state, in fact, only a small proportion of the air strikes targeted ISIS.²⁰³

Georgian scholars have not analyzed Russia’s disinformation campaign in Pankisi Gorge and its possible future implications. But local and foreign experts have been talking about the threats of expansion of military activities and intervention scenarios for years. In 2018 Kenneth Spencer Yalowitz, a former U.S. ambassador to Georgia who served there in the beginning of the 2000s, gave an interview to the Voice of America. He said Pankisi Gorge concerns not only Georgia’s internal security, but external security as well. As he explains, “Russia can bring forward the issue of Pankisi Gorge and easily

¹⁹⁹ Katie Simmons, “NATO Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid,” *Pew Research Center*, June 10, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/06/10/nato-publics-blame-russia-for-ukrainian-crisis-but-reluctant-to-provide-military-aid/>.

²⁰⁰ “Dzheppar: Russia Purposefully Searching for Terrorists in Crimea since 2014,” UKRINFORM, June 23, 2020, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3050499-dzheppar-russia-purposefully-searching-for-terrorists-in-crimea-since-2014.html>.

²⁰¹ Melinda Haring, “Crimea Today, Russia Tomorrow?,” *The Atlantic Council* (blog), January 30, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/crimea-today-russia-tomorrow/>.

²⁰² “Country Reports on Terrorism 2017,” United States Department of State Publication Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2018, 106, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/crt_2017.pdf.

²⁰³ Joseph Daher, “Three Years Later: The Evolution of Russia’s Military Intervention in Syria.” *The Atlantic Council* (blog), September 27, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/three-years-later-the-evolution-of-russia-s-military-intervention-in-syria/>.

create more tension in its relationship with Georgia.”²⁰⁴ Others think that information warfare might lead to more severe consequences.

Georgian experts such as Aladashvili, Khushashvili, and Areshidze think that destabilization in Pankisi Gorge can also be useful for Russia to justify its military intervention on Georgian territory. Irakli Aladashvili, the editor in chief of a military magazine *Arsenali* wrote back in 2009 that Pankisi Gorge is a constant target for Russia. The author draws a possible scenario for provocation: Russia sends small armed groups of special forces into the valley who get involved in different activities. Those activities are then covered by Russian and even Georgian media. As a result, Russia can announce the need for targeted antiterrorist operations in Pankisi Gorge.²⁰⁵

The same year another expert, Nodar Natadze, said there was a chance for Russia’s military operation in Pankisi Gorge. As Natadze said, “Russia has everything ready: army standing at the border, roads going to the Caucasian pass and PR campaign on going—saying that Al Qaeda is operating in Georgia.”²⁰⁶ According to Natadze, Russia could use the argument of neutralizing the threat coming from Pankisi Gorge to intervene on Georgian territory.

In 2009, when the director of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Alexander Bortnikov made allegations that terrorists were moving from Georgia to the Northern Caucasus, the expert Mamuka Areshidze said that this statement had a message for the future. As he told Radio Free Liberty:

All the crossings and passes on the perimeter of the entire Caucasus are occupied by the Russians—even those that used to be either jointly

²⁰⁴ Ia Meurmishvili, “შევარდნაძემ მითხრა რუსები ამას დიდხანს არ დაივიწყებენ” [Shevardnadze told me that the Russians will not forget this for a long time], Voice of America, March 5, 2018, <https://www.amerikiskhma.com/a/interview-with-kenneth-yalowitz/4281192.html>.

²⁰⁵ “პანკისი მუდმივი რუსული სამიზნე” [Pankisi: A Constant Russian Target], Kviripalitra, November 2, 2009, https://www.kviripalitra.ge/samkhedro-thema/1247-pankisi-mudmivi-rusuli-samizne.html?add_new=1&all=0&rnd=1561436361.3183.

²⁰⁶ “ნოდარ ნათაძის მტკიცებით, პანკისის ხეობაში რუსეთი სამხედრო ოპერაციას გეგმავს” [According to Nodar Natadze, Russia is planning a military operation in the Pankisi Gorge], GHN, November 25, 2009, <https://www.ghn.ge/news/3176-nodar-natadzis-mtkitsebit-pankisis-kheobashi-ruseti-samkhedro-operatsias-gegmavs>.

controlled or completely out of control. Now they control all of these passes, they are moved to the territory of Georgia as much as possible. Based on their laws,²⁰⁷ if the situation becomes more complex, it is possible that they will take an aggressive approach.²⁰⁸

In 2016, after Lavrov made a statement that there were terrorists in Pankisi Gorge, Maia Urushadze, an expert in international affairs, wrote that the minister's words can be interpreted in several ways.²⁰⁹ First, it is an attempt to discredit Georgia in the eyes of its Western partners. As a result, those partners would doubt that the Georgian government fully controls the situation in Pankisi. Second, by focusing on Pankisi Gorge, Russia tries to start an information warfare campaign against Georgia. Third, Russia may be preparing a basis for possible provocation and military operations against Georgia.

Donald Jensen, a U.S. scholar who has studied the Kremlin's information warfare, told the Voice of America Georgian Bureau that Lavrov's statements were dangerous and could be used to justify intervention in Georgia. He thought Russia should not comment on Georgian internal security issues, unless Georgia asks it to. As Jensen explained, "If Russia claims that there are terrorists in Georgia and uses it to enter Pankisi, they could later tell everyone that it was an antiterrorist operation."²¹⁰

Shota Utiashvili, the former head of an analytical department at the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, said that Lavrov's statement was not just about Pankisi, it was a message for the entire Georgia. As he said, "for the second decade in a row, we have become accustomed to the fact that when Russia has claims against Georgia, they manipulate with Pankisi community and say that something is happening in Pankisi and

²⁰⁷ When mentioning "laws," Areshidze means Russia's antiterrorism policy.

²⁰⁸ Koba Liklikadze, "ბორტნიკოვმა საქართველოში ალ-ყაიდის კვალს მიაგნო" [Bortnikov Found Traces of al-Qaeda in Georgia], Radio Free Europe, October 14, 2009, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1850895.html>.

²⁰⁹ "ლავროვის განცხადების შეფასება პანკისის ხეობაში ტერორისტების არსებობასთან დაკავშირებით" [Evaluation of Lavrov's statement regarding the presence of terrorists in the Pankisi Gorge], Regional Dialogue, February 2, 2016, <http://regional-dialogue.com/lavrov/>.

²¹⁰ "ჯენსენი რუსეთის საქმე არ არის საქართველოს ეროვნული უსაფრთხოება" [Jensen: "Russia is not Georgia's national security"], Voice of America, February 4, 2016, <https://www.amerikiskhma.com/a/interview-with-donald-jensen/3176470.html>.

that ‘something is happening’ theoretically means that they have the right to use force.”²¹¹

More experts talked about the possible military interventions in the years that followed. In 2018, colonel of the Security Reserve, Beso Aladashvili, said in an interview with a Georgian magazine *Tbiliselebi* that Russia is interested in Pankisi Gorge to move military operations from its territory to Georgia. Therefore, the issue of terrorists and militants is a continuous topic of discussion for them. Alasashvili thinks that it is important for Georgia to have close diplomatic ties with the United States and Turkey, to create defensive mechanisms for the prevention of Russia’s intervention.²¹² The same year, another expert Gia Khuhashvili said if there is destabilization in Pankisi Gorge, Russia could use the situation to its advantage for yet another military operation in Georgia.²¹³

Also in 2018, Areshidze, an expert in Caucasus issues, said that Russian information sources and political elites had created an image of Pankisi Gorge as a shelter for terrorists. Georgia spent years attempting to change that perception, but Russia still tries to present Pankisi Gorge as a troubled region to the international community.

To sum up, the experts who have commented on the issue throughout the years agree on one thing: Russia can use destabilization in Pankisi Gorge to intervene in Georgia and justify its actions alleging a terrorism threat is coming from the valley.

²¹¹ “უტიაშვილი: პანკისზე ლავროვის განცხადება არის მუქარა საქართველოს მიმართ” [Utiashvili: Lavrov’s statement on Pankisi is a threat to Georgia], *Tabula*, February 1, 2016, <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/verbatim/104192-utiashvili-pankische-lavrov-gancxadeba-aris-muqara-saqartvelos-mimart>.

²¹² Nino Khachidze, “როგორ იყენებენ რუსეთი და თურქეთი პანკისის ხეობას ერთმანეთთან ბრძოლის პლაცდარმად და როგორ ცდილობს რუსეთი ტერორისტების წინააღმდეგ ბრძოლის საქართველოს ტერიტორიაზე გადმოტანას” [How Russia and Turkey use the Pankisi Gorge as a springboard to fight each other and how Russia is trying to bring the fight against terrorists to the territory of Georgia], *Tbiliselebi*, January 22, 2018, <http://tbiliselebi.ge/index.php?newsid=268452326>.

²¹³ „თუ პანკისის ხეობაში დამაბულობის კერა გაჩნდა, რუსეთი ამას ოსტატურად გამოიყენებს” [If there is a hotbed of tension in the Pankisi Gorge, Russia will use it skillfully], *News*, January 3, 2018, <https://news.ge/2018/01/03/xeobaxuxashvili-pankisis-xeoba/>.

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VII. CONCLUSION

The study has provided an insight into Russia's use of hybrid warfare in Georgia, specifically its disinformation campaign against Pankisi Gorge. This campaign is carefully tailored and specific to the region's social, economic, ideological, and geopolitical context. A small region inhabited by a Muslim minority that struggles with religious extremism and borders Russia has become a perfect target.

The disinformation campaign goes back to the beginning of the 2000s when Chechen rebels, who had settled in the region after the war with Russia in 1999, took control of Pankisi. Back then Russia blamed the Georgian government for its lack of action and threatened to intervene. With the help of the United States, Georgia managed to gain control of the region and has been working since then to solve the issue of extremism there. Russia's earlier allegations about Pankisi Gorge being a "nest of terrorism" were based on those former events and served to create an impression that Georgia never really established peace in Pankisi Gorge. Instead, according to the Russian narrative, the situation in the valley has worsened throughout the years, and if in the beginning of the century there were Chechen rebels, now there are ISIS terrorist training camps in the valley. According to Russia's narrative, Pankisi Gorge has become a sheltering and transit place for terrorists, allowing them to cross the border from Georgia to Chechnya and go all the way to Russia. Once they arrive in Russia, they will try to organize terrorist attacks on Russian territory.

Russia's narrative about Pankisi Gorge has not changed much in the past few years, especially when it comes to those media outlets that are either state-owned, pro-Kremlin oriented, or indirectly connected to the government. They have continued to present Pankisi as a lawless region years after the military conflict was long resolved. As for more independent media outlets, their content was a mix of disinformation and truthful facts. But even when they published factual information, the context was still often focused on terrorism. In total there were only a couple of news stories in which Pankisi was not mentioned in connection with terrorists, extremists, or the Islamic State.

In the more recent past, Russia has focused on the issue of young locals that left Pankisi Gorge to fight with ISIS in Syria. Even though, Georgian officials said that the number of such fighters was not alarming, and it was, in fact, on the decline in recent years, Russian media sources claimed that Pankisi has become a huge contributor of fighters to ISIS. “A factory of terrorists”, “a nest of terrorism,” and “regional threat” are some of the descriptions that Russian media outlets have repeatedly used in headlines for stories about Pankisi Gorge. They have emphasized that the region poses a threat not only for Georgia, but for Russia, as terrorists would be able to cross the border, go to Russia, and organize attacks there. Therefore, it is a common threat for both countries and they should act in cooperation. According to the Russian narrative, other neighboring countries such as Turkey will not be able to help Georgia in the fight against terrorism, and Russia is the only nation that can solve the issue. Such a narrative serves to strengthen the stereotype that Russia is Georgia’s savior—just as it was believed in the 18th century when King Erekle II of Eastern Georgia signed the document with Russia that allowed Georgia to keep its territorial integrity.

Another important issue that Russian media outlets have covered is why youth from Pankisi Gorge might be drawn to ISIS. The authors of these news stories discuss unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, and the rise of Wahhabism—something that Georgian scholars name as contributing factors as well. But Russian media outlets also wrongfully present Pankisi Gorge as an “isolated,” “closed,” “dull” community, where “foreigners should not move around without a local guide” and where most people do not speak Georgian. Even though Pankisi Gorge has issues of integration, it is definitely not a closed or isolated region that strives for autonomy. Instead, it is a peaceful region where locals work to overcome the stereotypes that have been firmly established in Georgian and international society.

The existing image of Pankisi Gorge makes it more difficult for locals to attract tourists or foreign investors that would contribute to the improvement of the economy in the valley and ensure a better quality of life. Because of its natural beauty and proximity to the capital, Pankisi Gorge has a great potential for tourism. But, because of its image, tourism in Pankisi Gorge has developed more slowly than in the rest of Georgia,

especially considering the fact that Russian tourists comprise a significant portion of foreign visitors to Georgia. In 2018 there were more than 1.4 million Russian tourists in Georgia and they spent over 1.8 billion Lari.²¹⁴ If those tourists had read stories about Pankisi Gorge in Russian media, it is possible that most of them would not have chosen Pankisi as their travel destination.

The stereotypes about Pankisi Gorge being a place of transit and shelter for terrorists, as well as a closed and isolated community, creates a lot of frustration among locals, especially the youth. They often have to prove that the region does not pose any threat to the country, it does not harbor terrorists, and that people living there are not “others.”²¹⁵ As a result, locals feel marginalized and detached from the society and that leads to more frustration. Many families from the area have gone to Europe in search of a better life, especially after Georgia got a visa-free regime to Schengen countries in March 2017.²¹⁶

Locals from Pankisi Gorge agree that it is in Russia’s interests to create a negative image of the region on an international level.²¹⁷ Experts say that if Moscow successfully continues to spread disinformation about Pankisi, it might use the situation to Russia’s advantage in the future. During the August War, Russia claimed that it was protecting its citizens in South Ossetia from Georgia’s military aggression. Russia can use the same argument when it comes to Pankisi Gorge—protection of its citizens from the threat of terrorism escalating in the region. Some say that events in the beginning of the 2000s are clear examples of how Russia can use the “terrorism threat” as an argument to justify its actions, especially considering the strict antiterrorism policy that the country has. Back

²¹⁴ Aka Zaqua, “რას დაკარგავს საქართველო რუსი ტურისტების სახით” [What Will Georgia Lose in the Form of Russian Tourists], On, June 22, 2019, <https://rb.gy/spp3ve>.

²¹⁵ Lela Kunchulia, “პანკისის სტიგმა” [Stigma of Pankisi], Radio Free Europe, March 14, 2018, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/pankisis-stigma/29098155.html>.

²¹⁶ Pankisi Community Radio, “მასობრივი მიგრაცია პანკისიდან - სკოლები 121-მა მოსწავლემ მიატოვა” [Mass Migration from Pankisi -121 Students Drop out of School]. <https://radioway.ge/news/people/item/717-masobrivi-migrazia-pankisisidan-skolebi-121-ma-mosxavlem-miatova>.

²¹⁷ Kunchulia, “პანკისის სტიგმა” [Stigma of Pankisi].

then the United States declared that even though there was a legitimate threat coming from Pankisi, it did not justify Russia's intervention in any way.

The majority of experts think that military intervention through Pankisi Gorge to Georgia is the most likely scenario. Russia could easily send groups of people into the region to create provocations. Their actions would be covered in Russian media outlets that have already presented Pankisi Gorge as a terrorism threat. Russia already has increased military presence throughout the country, especially in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Considering Pankisi's proximity to Russia's border, it would not be difficult for that country to bring in additional forces. Because of its intensive disinformation campaign, the Kremlin would have enough of a basis to call Russia's intervention in Georgia an "anti-terrorist operation."

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