

## **Pankisi Valley and Georgian State relationship**

### **Introduction:**

21<sup>st</sup>, April 2019, women, men, youths and elders, stand together without a word in front of policemen with only shield to separate them. In few seconds, the situation degenerated. Stones, wood sticks, tear gas and rubber bullets injured both sides. Alternating violence times and waiting times, 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2019 will stay as the first day of victory of local population of Pankisi valley over a government project.

In fact, Special Force of police of Georgia went this day to Birkiani, village of Pankisi valley to protect the beginning of new hydro-electric powerplants construction on Alazani river. The local population didn't want this project to be achieved because of the negative impact over the environment and the river, their main source of subsistence. The clash appeared not to be against Georgian government in particular, but against the project, in order to protect their territory and their way to survive.

Why do Georgian government send special forces only to this region for the beginning of the construction? How the 21<sup>st</sup> April events' are the illustration of the actual relationship between State and Pankisi? Why Pankisi is still seen as an issue for most of Georgians despite all actions to integrate Pankisi inside Georgian societies? Why Pankisi valley represents a challenge for Georgian society?

Pankisi Valley has during a long time been studied and seen only through religious and refugee issues in Georgia. Nowadays, even if Pankisi is a peaceful place, it is still struggling with the representation of a '*no-man's land*' '*full of terrorists*' as it was described in medias. The local population is now trying to change public and government opinion about them in order to be more integrated within Georgian society.

The present paper tries to answer these questions according to readings and field work. Interviews in Pankisi valley and in Tbilisi were done between February and July 2019, thanks to the help of Sul Khan Bordzikhvili, Kevin Foong and Aleksandre Kvakhadze.

This paper tries to analyze Kists, population of Pankisi valley, and Georgian State relationship and how Georgian authorities' impact and structure the life within Kist community. Even if public opinion is influenced by authorities discourses and medias, we can notice positive changes of it since few months thanks to the protest lead by Malkhaz Machalikhvili

and, to some extent, Khadori 3 project. The goal is to show that Pankisi gorge represents a challenge in the nation-building of Georgia even if Kist people are full part of Georgian nation.

To understand why Pankisi valley is not only about religious issues and how it is a challenge for Georgia nation-state building, we will first try to explain the nowadays situation there with an explanation of the stereotypes around it. Then, through particular examples of powerplants and Temirlan case, we will try to show how government behavior towards local community created activism in the valley and their will to be a full part of Georgian nation. Regards to all these elements, we will try to figure what are the possibilities for the both Kists and Georgians and their relationship within the state.

### **Pankisi valley and its issues:**

Nowadays Pankisi valley is facing new struggles, not linked to religious issues as we can read in lots of academic articles or medias, for instance with radicalization or ‘Sufi versus Salafi people’ or ‘Non-religious versus Salafi’ – just few Sufis are nowadays practicing Sufi traditions. The new issues in Pankisi are linked with Georgian government and its consequences on local population. Indeed, authorities are using the complicated past of the valley to justify their actions or inactions there. They use the dual identity of Kist people to identify them as not a real part of the definition of what Georgian should be; even if Kists are more considered as Georgian than the other ethnic groups present on Georgian territory. To understand the actual issues around Pankisi and how is it important for Georgia to deal with it, we have to explain Kist identity, history and how authorities used those to marginalize the population.

#### *Vainakh identity:*

Pankisi valley is inhabited by only Kists from the biggest village, Duisi, to Dzibakhevi village in the deeper part of the valley where there are only few houses at the feet of the mountains. Today, they have a Georgian lifestyle despite that they are in an in-between identity and traditions. They are Vainakh and Georgian. They represent the bridge between North-Caucasus, particularly Ingushetia and Chechnya, and Georgia. Even if they are first Georgians, they are not completely considered as them because of this dual identity. But they are still considered by the Georgian population more Georgian than other ethnic groups present inside the territory, such as Azeris or Armenians.

In fact, before to become Georgian, they were Chechens coming from Mountains of North-Caucasus in the nineteenth century in Georgia to have this part of the territory inhabited. When the First Republic of Georgia was founded (1918-1921), Georgian authorities granted them the citizenship. These Chechens of Georgia, now called Kists by Georgians, have received Georgian names and surnames that they still use today in addition to their Chechen names. In other words, Kist people have a fatherland, Chechnya, and a motherland, Georgia.

Kists quickly adapted to life in Georgia by integrating Georgian cultural elements into their own culture. There have also been many conversions to Christianity and the integration of traditional Christian elements into the traditional way of life. They incorporated pagan and Christian elements into their Muslim traditions<sup>1</sup>.

Religion is considered as a part of the Vainakh identity. Vainakhs are community of people living in majority in the North-Caucasus, in Chechnya and Ingushetia and in Georgia with one group of Tush people, the Bats people<sup>2</sup> and Kists. All of them, share the same language – they have different dialects understandable to each other, same religion and same traditions.

Because of this, Kist society is based on Chechen one. In fact, both are clan society, *teips*, whose daily life is conditioned by the *adates*, the tradition, Sharia law, Islamic law, and civil law. Islam plays a vital role in the Chechen identity formation against orthodox Christian Russia. Consequently, even if they are considered as Chechen, they have their own way of life, traditions mixed from Chechen and Georgian cultures and used both languages in their daily life. It is very important for Kist meeting each other to speak in Chechen as a part of a revendication of their own identity but they are all fluent in Georgian and learn both at school.

Asking Kist people if they feel more Georgian or Chechen is a very hard question. They cannot choose and will define themselves as Vainakh first. However, if they are talking to a person non-aware of the situation in Georgia, they will identify themselves as Georgian. If they are talking to Georgian people, they will not see any difference between them.

On the other hand, even if they have close link with Chechnya and speak the same language (which is actually a dialect of Chechen language), when they are in this part of the Caucasus, they feel more Georgian and more close to Georgian culture while when they are in Georgia they feel more Chechen.

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<sup>1</sup> Grazvydas Jasutis (2015): Explaining the Chechen schism in Georgia's Pankisi valley, *Caucasus Survey*

<sup>2</sup> Amjad Jaimoukha, *The Chechens, A handbook*, Caucasus World People of the Caucasus, Routledge Curzon, London and New York, 2005, 357 pages ; pages 13 - 14

This in-between identity is as a richness as a struggle to find their place in the process of identity nation-building of Georgia. Particularly, since the beginning of the second Russian and Chechen war in 1999 and its consequences on the relationship between Georgian society and Kists people.

*'Pankisi crisis' and radicalization issues*

After the beginning of the second war between Chechen separatists and the Russian Federation in 1999, more than 8,000 refugees from Chechnya went to Georgia. Most of them went to Pankisi gorge<sup>3</sup>. According to some NGOs, Georgian state, at that time, also brought Chechens refugees directly inside the Gorge because of the family ties and cultural similarities between the two groups.

As a first consequence of the war taking place in North-Caucasus, the valley has been perceived as inaccessible. In 1999, the gorge became a place where all sorts of illegal trades were developed. This period from the end of 1990s till 2005 is commonly known as 'Pankisi crisis'. It was considered as a 'grey zone' by the authorities. In other words, as a '*space of social deregulation, of a political or socio-economic nature, (...) where the central institutions fail to assert their domination, which is ensured by alternative micro-authorities*'<sup>4</sup>.

This part of Georgian territory is seen as a place where the state had no more control over what happens there. The population within the villages felt and still feel abandoned by the State. In fact, in 2001-2002, numerous gangs of arms smugglers, white slave traders and drug traffickers arrived in Pankisi. The valley was closed to all except permanent residents. The Georgian army and civil defense units have set up a real blockade of the valley with checkpoints on the entrance roads. It ended at the end of 2002 when Georgian military forces, with the help of the local population and US military, managed to get the criminals out of the valley. In 2003, most separatist Chechen groups fighters hiding in Georgia left Pankisi<sup>5</sup>. In 2005, there were only 200 to 300 Chechen refugees left in the valley. Some of them returned to Chechnya as part of the repatriation policy organized at that time, others went to Western Europe and North America, where they were granted asylum.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Grazvydas Jasutis (2015): Explaining the Chechen schism in Georgia's Pankisi valley, *Caucasus Survey*

<sup>4</sup> Minassian, *Les zones grises de la mondialisation : réintégrer les territoire sans gouvernance*, 2011, <http://regardssurlaterre.com/dossier/les-zones-grises-de-la-mondialisation-reintegrer-les-territoires-sans-gouvernance>

<sup>5</sup> Website about Pankisi valley : <http://www.pankisi.org/cgi-bin/bloxom.cgi/english/practical>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

Because of what happened during this time and added to Kist community's identity, Pankisi gorge seems isolated from the rest of Georgia. Today, this representation is still accurate. Indeed, the nowadays problematics of the valley are a result of 'Pankisi crisis'. For instance, the direct consequence of the massive influx of Chechen refugees was the perception of Pankisi as a stronghold for Chechen independentists, some of whom have been radicalized. This representation is still used today by R. Kadirov, President of the Republic of Chechnya, and V. Putin as a way to threaten Georgia on its own territory and to get control of ethnic Chechens outside the North Caucasus Republic – most of them are for the independence from the Russian Federation.

Added to the increase of illegal networks in the valley (drugs, kidnapping ...), the international community quickly had evidence of the presence of Islamists affiliated with the international terrorist group Al-Qaeda, among the Chechen refugees present in the valley. Pankisi valley became at that time a crossing point on the road to jihad, and no longer just a place with potential fighters for the holy war<sup>7</sup>. The Islamist terrorists present in the early 2000s in the gorge were part of a network seeking to create an Islamic state from the Caucasus region to Central Asia. To some extent this Islamist network was still relevant some years ago because in November 2012, a dozen Al-Qaeda fighters from Afghanistan had taken refuge in the valley. They were arrested and delivered to the United-States after counter-terrorism operations by the Georgian police<sup>8</sup>. This operation took place in a valley close to Pankisi, in the Lapankuri valley, near Dagestan border<sup>9</sup> and over another nearby, Lopota Valley.

From these past elements, Kist community is still struggling with their consequences, especially concerning the reputation to be a 'land of terrorist' due the departure of people to do jihad in Middle East from 2012 to 2015. Actually, it is very hard to know the exact numbers of people who went to Syria. Between 50 and 200 Georgians went to fight in Syria, 8 of them were from Adjara (Southwest region of Georgia inhabited by Muslim ethnic Georgian), about 7 from the Azeri community. Most of the Georgian foreign fighters were from Pankisi valley<sup>10</sup>. Plus, some of the departure appeared before the apparition of ISIS on the international chessboard

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<sup>7</sup> George Sanikidze, "Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Caucasian Region: "Global" and "Local" Islam in the Pankisi Gorge"

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Dimitri Avaliani, *Alarm bells ring for Pankisi gorge – the echo of the Syrian war reaches Georgia*, <https://jam-news.net/?p=85075>

<sup>10</sup> Elena Pokalova (2018) Georgia, Terrorism, and Foreign Fighters, *Special Operations Journal*, 4:2, 146-168, DOI: 10.1080/23296151.2018.1510707

and aimed to fight against Russia. For those case, there no purpose of religious radicalization and jihad.

To some extent, it is easier to say that they all left for Syria in order to do the jihad and then to claim that inside Kist community there is a division between traditional Islam, Sufi, and radical Islam, Salafi. These Salafi people, describe as the majority of Pankisi population, support young people to go to war and to promote radical Islam. Besides, many scholars wrote - may be not unjustified at the time of the writing but not accurate anymore – that Kist society was divided between elder (Sufi) and young (Salafi) generations. It has been noticed that it is generally the younger generations who become fundamentalist even if some quadragenarian are part of it. The latter went to Chechnya after the fall of Soviet Union and then returned to preach a fundamentalist Islam in the valley, accompanied by radicalized Chechen migrants. Today, Salafi people compose the majority of the population and are mainly part of the younger generation who claims to know everything and somehow rehabilitate their parents by inculcating the good practice of Islam according to them. This internal conflict described by journalists and scholars within Kist society is not relevant in reality.

First-of-all because, the Salafi community don't call themselves 'Salafist', they just consider themselves more religious and more knowledgeable about Islam than their parents. The name 'Salafist' was given by people outside this community. They argue that it is better for a good Muslim to pray in Arabic than in Georgian. Moreover, because of Soviet Union elders' generations didn't get a proper theological knowledge and couldn't answer their questions about religion, they look for people who could answer them. Those people were mainly from Arabic countries or at least were educated there. In addition, in Kist community respect for the elderly is fundamental. Even if there are some tension according to the way they should practice the religion, Kist traditions, lifestyle and more importantly respect of the elder is prevailing on everything.

In fact, there are actually two groups of people in Pankisi valley : opened and closed minded regarding the respect of others beliefs and way of practicing. Nevertheless, there are some fundamentalist, but they are a minority. It is very difficult to talk to these people and are generally excluded (they exclude themselves most of the time) from community life in Pankisi. In this respect, there is no conflict between Kist generations. Young people are just more religious than their parents and don't really deserve to be called Salafi if we take the definition

of this interpretation of Islam.<sup>11</sup> If there will be tensions, we could find the same one in Georgian society between elders from Soviet times and youth more “westernized”.

Despite that, we can notice different groups within the ‘real’ Salafi community in Pankisi. According to the EMC’s researcher, Maia Barkaia, the differences between Sufi and Salafist groups is on religiosity level. However, there is a small group inside the Salafi community which support the Islamist group ISIS. They are less than 20 people inside this group, and they are using social network such as Facebook to share ISIS propaganda. But for some reasons, members of this radical movement are not following strictly Islam precepts. In fact, these people follow ISIS more in order to support Chechen or Kist people inside the terrorist group than for the ideology. For instance, they are happier when a school is renovating in Pankisi gorge than for a fighting success of ISIS in Syria or in Iraq. Between these two groups, there is another one which can be put in the middle of the main group. This group is composed of interested people. It is generally businessmen who collaborate in different ways with the government. This is this group which created the tensions between the Council of Elders and some NGOs. These people created a local conflict between the two main communities in the valley, Sufi and Salafist ones, in order to get profit. As we said, there is no conflict, it is only come local tensions on political and identity levels as we can find in any community.

#### *Why did some Kist radicalized and went to djihad ?*

Even if some departures for Syria appeared to be only to take revenge over Russia, it was not the case for all Kist or Chechen refugees who went to Middle East. In 2013, for the first time in Pankisi valley, the problem of radicalization was pointed out by some locals. This minority of people went for jihad for religious and ideological reasons. The radicalization process first and the will to go to fight then, took place in Pankisi valley because of the presence of pull and push factors.

According to many international studies on departure reasons of foreign fighters, the main one is the economic situation in their country of origin added to a feeling to be abandoned

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<sup>11</sup> **Salafism** or the Al-Salafiyya Movement is a Sunni movement that advocates a rigorous practice of the foundations of Islam by Muslims, living or not in Muslim-majority countries by imitating the way of life of the Prophet, his companions and the two generations following and respecting the Sunnah, the Islamic tradition there is a desire within this movement to constitute a micro-society to live this way of life respectful of texts. They intend to practice hijra, in other words, voluntary exile out of a society regarded as unholy. When it is done in discretion without the will to convince by violence and jihad, we speak about quietist Salafists.

by the state. In the particular case of Pankisi gorge, there is a feeling of isolation and marginalization caused by this religious and ethnic pattern present only in this part of Georgian territory. Plus, even if the general economic and social situation of Georgia is better than ten years ago, the unemployment rate in 2018 was 12.70%.<sup>12</sup> In rural areas, the situation is worse than in urban areas. In fact, in Pankisi the unemployment rate is also high especially among the young people. The population feels totally abandoned by Georgian authorities who are doing nothing to improve the situation<sup>13</sup>.

However, according to the director of the Georgian Center for Strategy and Development (GCSD), Giorgi Gogvadze, the economical factor is not available in the pushing factors. Following his own researches on 116 different groups in Georgia to understand the reasons of departures to jihad, it is linked to personal contacts, recruitment and each individual case which can be studied separately. In Pankisi case, some elements as ideological support and recruitment come back often in the pushing factors. According to the professor Sophie Zviadadze, pushing and pulling factors are mainly from the private side and from the sources they have accessed to. In fact, people who went to Syria had less connections within Kist community and had more contacts with external actors outside Georgia. Plus, they were not especially going to the mosque.

The influence of Tarkhan Batirashvili aka Umar the Chechen was also quite important. Indeed, he had lots of influence over the youth and was sending regularly videos from Syria to Pankisi people, showing life there and told them to join them. Plus, the fact that one man from Pankisi succeed in a worldwide organization and was one of the chiefs had a huge impact on Pankisi youth. After his death, we notice less departure to Middle East for jihad.

To some extent, Georgia and Pankisi valley are facing the same challenges. Some people face those (economic situations, future perspectives...) by migrate to Europe, others go the Middle East. According to G. Gogvadze, the State choose to focus in the fight against terrorism in Pankisi gorge because proportionally it is where were from the most of foreigner fighter from Georgia. Plus, it is also easier to focus on a small area of the territory than all of it (for instance with Adjarian people who radicalized as well but are present in all Georgian territory).

Today, there is no recruitment anymore and no departure since 2015, even if the motive is still present. Indeed, in 2015 Georgian government passed a law which consider as criminal

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<sup>12</sup> Data from [tradingeconomics.com](http://tradingeconomics.com)

<sup>13</sup> Nino Siperashvili, *Islamic revival in Georgian – Chechen border Area*



every Georgian citizen who participate in military actions in an organization outside Georgian territory. Even if this law has more a military aspect, it permitted to arrest people who went to fight in military and para-military groups outside Georgia. Since the enactment of this law, there are more control at Georgian borders.

It is difficult to say that Kists are more disposed to radicalized than other groups in Georgia. The main reason behind radicalization of some people (not all as we said before due to the ideology) might be a feeling to be put aside from the rest of the society. The feeling comes from State pressure's and discrimination over Pankisi valley since the Second Chechen war along with state stigmatization of the local population.

### Government stigmatization

Pankisi was perceived and described by medias as a “*nest of extremists*”, “*filled with bandits*”, “*full of terrorist*” since to the mass arrival of Chechen migrants in the late 1990s and as the place of origin of some notable figures in the ISIS terrorist organization<sup>14</sup>. Even if the current situation in Pankisi gorge changed a lot from these times, Georgian authorities are feeding bad images of the valley which generate stigmatization process toward Kist community when they allow them to take counter-terrorism measures without justify reasons behind. Plus, it is easier for government to take these measures than to apply efficient policy there to find solution to the current problem in Pankisi valley.

After ‘Pankisi crisis’, we can distinguish three different periods in Georgian policies and their impacts over Pankisi gorge representation. The first one, between 2003 and 2008, Mikheil Saakashvili’s government choose to keep the same policy as during ‘Pankisi crisis’ by underlining the “*danger*” of the designated “*bearded Wahhabi elements*”. He was collaborating with Russian government in the fight against Chechen militants. M. Saakashvili’s government drew strict divisive lines in the Pankisi Gorge between ‘*dangerous*’ and ‘*harmless*’ Muslims, and declared the so-called ‘*Wahhabism*’ a malady, an ‘*anti-Georgian*’ and ‘*hostile*’ ideology. During this period, every small incident, even dispute between neighbors, were solved with counter-terrorism measures. It is, still nowadays, a dark and painful times for Kist people. They still fear the State today because of this particular time.

The second period from 2008 till 2012, M. Saakashvili’s government changed its approach toward Pankisi gorge. Despite the new perception over North Caucasian people, after

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<sup>14</sup> The most notable example is Umar the Chechen who was from Pankisi gorge

2008 war, with a new free-regime visa and special program for North Caucasian students to get education in Georgia; Kists were still considered and painted by Georgian government into ‘*dangerous*’ and ‘*harmless*’ Muslims.

The third period from 2012 till 2018, was different from last government. In fact, it can be described as “the policy of no policy”. Georgian government continued to describe Pankisi inhabitants as “*dangerous*” and “*harmless*” Muslims. However, they set up a dialogue with the followers of traditional Islam, in other words the Sufis and the Council of Elders but not with the major part of the population, the so-called “Salafi<sup>15</sup>”.

These three periods have contributed to feed the stigmatized discourse around Pankisi and to have created a basis for discrimination.<sup>16</sup> However, thanks to the help of NGOs working in the valley and to the drive of women and youth, public opinion starts to change in Georgia about Kists. In fact, Kists are trying to change Georgian mind about them by promoting their valley, their unique traditions in Georgia, tourism... For instance, Kist women went to a TV Show in order to promote Kist traditional food which is a mixt between Georgian and Chechen cuisine. There are also some projects with European Union such as in February 2019 where a group of 20 teachers from Pankisi valley travelled to Brussels, in Belgium. They met there, representatives of several institutions in order to promote and shared values of European Union in Georgia and particularly in Pankisi<sup>17</sup>. Plus, the women’s council, founded in 2011, made the first public statement on its position against the project to build three new hydroelectric powerplants in the gorge. Women’s council is also first one to support new council created by young Kist activists.

#### *New intern organization within Kist community*

The “People’s Assembly” or “Mexk Qetašo” (pronounced “Mekhk Kkhetasho”) in Chechen language was created this year, first in order to organized peaceful protest against powerplants and then it was extended to be a new internal representation of authorities. Comparing to the traditional Council of Elders, which is still very respected, “People’s Assembly” has 30 elected male members with equitable number of young and elder people. “People’s Assembly” is now trying to be registered as the Council of Elder did in 2004<sup>18</sup>, to be

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<sup>15</sup> Maia Berkaia, Barbare Janelidze, *Under the security gaze: History, Religion and Politics in Pankisi gorge*, EMC, Tbilisi, 2018, 252 pages

<sup>16</sup> “Changing Identities, to be Kist : Between Georgia and Chechen” Ia Tsulaia, 2011

<sup>17</sup> « Teachers from Pankisi discover the EU », Delegation of EU to Georgia, 02/13/2019

<sup>18</sup> Maia Berkaia, Barbare Janelidze, *Under the security gaze: History, Religion and Politics in Pankisi gorge*, EMC, Tbilisi, 2018, 252 pages

then recognized as an official local civic group, as the Council of Elder did in 2013<sup>19</sup>. They are now first activist group in Georgia.

They decided to create new council despite the already existence of Council of Elders because they are registered as an organization and not elected members as in Chechen clans state law representations traditionally are. Plus, members of the Council called more religious people in the valley “Salafi” and labeled them as “enemies” which contributed to put them in opposition with the majority of Pankisi youth<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, it feed the idea of a clash between young and elder generations within the gorge, which has also been described as a dispute between Sufi and Salafi. Actually, this generation tensions can be found everywhere in Georgian society. It is more a question of education and a difference of perspectives because elder Georgian generations has been raised under Communist Soviet Union whereas young generation is growing up in pro-European independent country.

At the end, new internal structure in Pankisi is because of government actions in the gorge and towards the population. In fact, as we said “People’s Assembly” started because people didn’t want new powerplants within the valley. They though in one hand about environment and the consequences over the river Alazani but they also though about their way of subsistence.

### **Activism in Pankisi gorge as a consequence of government policies**

#### *Khadori 3 project*

The Khadori hydro powerplants started in 2004 with the construction of two powerplants in Pankisi<sup>21</sup>. In 2018, government and the company Alazani Energy signed new project of three hydroelectric powerplants in the village of Birkiani, in Pankisi, scheduled to be finished by the end of 2019. Government signed similar project in all Georgia in order to get energy independence from Russia. Since the beginning local population was against the project. They wrote an open letter addressed to government with more than 3,000 signatories to stop the construction and develop a plan for “*alternative, sustainable economic development*” of Pankisi. Kist activists also lead several peaceful protests in Duisi, biggest village of the gorge<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Nino Siprashvili, *Islamic revival in Georgian – Chechen border Area*, Master of Philosophy in Anthropology of Development, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, July 2014, 84 pages, pages 51 - 52

<sup>20</sup> Maia Berkaia, Barbare Janelidze, *Under the security gaze: History, Religion and Politics in Pankisi gorge*, EMC, Tbilisi, 2018, 252 pages

<sup>21</sup> “New hydro power plant opens in Georgia”, Civil georiga, civil.ge, 11/20/2004

<sup>22</sup> « Pankisi residents complain of Police pressure to stop protests”, OC-Media.com, 07/20/2018

They didn't want these new powerplants because they would have a negative effect on tourism development in the valley including rafting. Plus, according to the environmental group, the Green Alternative, the consequences would be very bad for local population particularly about water supply and the destruction of Alazani river ecosystem.

Despite several protests, meetings, discussions and agreements between Kists and government representatives', government allowed the company to start the construction of Khadori 3 on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2019 which, as said above, ended with violent confrontations between police and local population and the end of the construction of the powerplants. Government used the stigmatization towards Pankisi to send special forces there. If it would have been other place in Georgia, they will have sent normal police or no police at all.

### *Temirlan Machalikashvili case*

This event also happened in the context of Temirlan case which accentuated government pressure on Kists. Indeed, Temirlan Machalikashvili was a nineteen years old Kist shot during counter-terrorism operation in December 2017 in the village of Duisi. He died of his injuries in January 2018. Authorities claimed that he was dangerous and tried to send a hand grenade to Georgian Security State Service while his family is claiming that he was sleeping when they arrived. He was suspected to do ISIS propaganda on social medias by sharing ISIS videos throughout 2015 – 2016. His family is fighting for two years for justice and claiming Temirlan's innocence. Their parents have still not been granted the status of the victim's next of kin and don't have access to the most important evidence including the testimonies of the special operation policemen or the plan of the special operation. Plus, they are claiming that they have been mistreated by the authorities. They are still looking after legal or political recognition of State Security Services' mistake. They constantly face negligence and dehumanizing rhetoric from the government.

Since May 2018, Temirlan's father, Malkhaz Machalikashvili has camped in a tent in front of the Parliament building in Tbilisi demanding a proper investigation into his son's death. Plus, Malkhaz Machalikashvili's camp in front of Parliament, there are many flags such as Azerbaijan, Poland, European Union, Armenian, American, in order to show the support to Temirlan injustice to the authorities and the public. The family is now taking the case to European Court of Human Rights.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "Family of slain Pankisi teenager appeals to European Court of Human Rights", 06/06/2019, OC-Media

In May 2019, State Security Services accused Malkhaz Machalikashvili of plotting a terrorist attack against Ioseb Gogashvili, former first deputy head of the State Security State Services. The family is also accusing him to be responsible of Temirlan death. Malkhaz Machalikashvili is claiming that it was something said in a moment of struggle, but he didn't mean it. These accusations are perceived by public opinion and Kist people as a new way from authorities to take away someone who bother them. Government will not admit their mistake and Temirlan's father asked for international support and still camp in front of Parliament. He is now calling out the State to its constant surveillance even though he is the victim and not the aggressor.

Temirlan's murderer is seen by Kist community as another State's persecution action. Since this event, Pankisi inhabitants are afraid to see Security State Services to come with no real reasons to their house to arrest them or as for Temirlan, shoot them.

Added to the powerplants issue and the big numbers of arrests, the event of 21<sup>st</sup> of April are the population fears' becoming real. Activists were afraid of authorities coming again in the gorge in order to arrest people using the reason of what happened this particular day. Even if public opinion is changing about them and the valley, State stigmatization, policies and discrimination are still accurate.

### **Prospects and conclusion:**

This constant pressure is not a safe life conditions and ask about the possible evolution of this relationship. For now, Kists reactions to authority's behavior are to restructure their internal organization in order to fit better with Georgian society while keeping their Vainakh clans' structure, and to continue dialogue process with civil society in order to integrate more themselves into Georgian society.

At the end, Pankisi valley is a good illustration of Georgian authorities' relationship with ethnic minorities. Pankisi case is unique because of its double identity, Georgian and Vainakh. Even if Georgia will always be Kist homeland and Kists will always be and consider themselves as Georgian, they will still be regarded as not totally part of Georgia by Georgian people because of this dual belonging to two different cultures.

Finally, Pankisi valley is a challenge for Georgian nation-identity building because of government behavior toward non-ethnic Georgian groups on the territory.

According to the recent events we talked about, Georgian government should establish a true dialogue with Kists people, by recognizing officially the “People’s Assembly” for instance and by respecting agreements they are making with them. If they do that, it would be an encouraging step to the integration of other ethnic groups within Georgian territory. It would also help the country in its integration process to European Union, because it would show that there is a real will to integrate non-ethnic Georgian groups in the society. To not accept Kist integration to Georgian society from authorities would show they are stigmatized people because of their religion, difficult past issues or different traditions.

Plus, if Kists community manage to establish a good relationship with government, it would be a great example for other local Muslim communities (Azeris and Adjarians) and on a wide scale, for other Muslim minority communities in other part of the world. In fact, it would show that it is possible for small Muslim community in non-Muslim countries that they can live peacefully and fully integrated in non-Muslim societies.

However, if Georgian authorities don’t make efforts to improve the relationship with Pankisi inhabitants despite Kists efforts to be a full part of the society, it would have very negative consequences on their confidences, if not destroy it totally, towards the State. We can even make the hypothesis that if Chechnya will become independent one day, Kists would be the first to move there.