



Georgia – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 30 April 2019

Are there reports of inter-ethnic tensions between “Qists” and “Tushetis”?

A report jointly published by the Danish Immigration Service and the Danish Refugee Council, in a section titled “Background”, states:

“The Kists are descendants of Chechen and Ingush people who settled in Pankisi Gorge at the Upper Alazani River in the North-eastern corner of Georgia in the 1830s and 1870s. The Kists make up about 7,100 people (2002)⁴ of Georgia’s approximately 5,000,000 inhabitants (2017).

The native language of the Kists is Chechen (Kist dialect). However, most Kists speak Georgian. The Kists’ surnames typically have the traditional Georgian ending, ‘-shvili’, such as Kavtarashvili, Margoshvili etc. Most of the Kists are Sunni Muslims, but one could also find Christians among the Kists.

The Kists and the Chechens mainly reside in Pankisi Gorge, Municipality of Akhmeta, Kakheti Region, in six villages. During the Second Chechen War (1999-2000), Georgia received around 9,000 Chechen asylum seekers due to a mass influx of people, who were granted prima facie refugee status.

Two sources noted that there is no conflict between the local Kists and the Chechens in Pankisi; the sense of identity between the two groups is strong, as they speak the same language and belong to the same religion. One of the sources further elaborated that during the Second Chechen War, when thousands of Chechens came to Pankisi, the local Kists offered them housing and food. In addition, many people in Pankisi have relatives on both sides of the border to Russia.” (Danish Immigration Service and the Danish Refugee Council (November 2018) *Georgia: The Situation of the Kist Community and the Chechens*, p.7)

In a section titled “The situation in Pankisi Gorge after the Temirlan-incident” this report states:

“The situation in Pankisi is relatively calm, but the problem is that residents of Pankisi have a feeling of insecurity from the state, more than from potential terrorists. According to Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), the problems in Pankisi started in 2014, when several people left Pankisi and joined various terrorist organisations in Syria. At that time, the presence of Kist people fighting for ISIS was well known. After this, the general perception in the Georgian information environment was that people from Pankisi in general pose a threat to national security. The media plays a big role in the painting of this picture of Pankisi residents. The Georgian authorities have reacted with more surveillance and presence in Pankisi, which leads to frustration among the local residents. GYLA stated that the overall problem in

Pankisi is the miscommunication between the Georgian authorities, and the residents in Pankisi. This problem goes both ways and causes frustration on both sides.” (ibid, p.11)

In a section titled “Abuse of power in general” this report states:

“A number of sources stated that there were no incidents of abuse of power committed against the Chechen or Kist communities in the past year. One of the sources further elaborated that the Georgian authorities did not use excessive force in general.

One source noted that the ‘Lopota-incident’ in 2012 was an example of serious violations of human rights by the authorities.

The general picture is that there is no abuse of power in Pankisi, but after the Temirlan incident in December 2017, the Georgian authorities has increased the control and surveillance in Pankisi, which has led to some frustration and protest among the residents of Pankisi.” (ibid, p.12)

See also section titled “Discriminatory treatment by the authorities” (paragraphs 7-10) which states:

“7. On the one hand, the social and economic conditions are poor in Pankisi Gorge, due to an under-developed industry. The economy in Pankisi Gorge is basically based on agricultural production, which is a contributing factor to the widespread poverty in the region, although the Gorge is part of a so-called social care program from the state. Due to their bad economy, Pankisi citizens are forced to seek work outside the region or outside of the country. Bad economy is the primary reason forcing people to travel abroad.

8. On the other hand, there is no discrimination with regard to education. Persons from Pankisi Gorge have access to schools, and many go through higher education and obtain bachelor degrees. The source opined that in general residents of Pankisi Gorge are more integrated into the Georgian national community than other ethnic minorities such as Armenians and Azeris, because the Kists do not have language problems, which is one of the most hampering factors for social integration.

9. The interlocutor advised that there is no explicit discrimination when it comes to access to education, medical care etc. However, there could be implicit discrimination. For example there might be some stigma attached to persons from Pankisi Gorge, because there is a track record of some people living in Pankisi affiliated with ISIS. There are well known cases of Pankisi residents who left the Gorge and joined ISIS in Syria.

10. The source emphasised that a person from Pankisi Gorge does not have a problem with the Georgian language. In most cases it is even hard to tell the difference between a Kist and a Georgian native.” (ibid, p.24)

A report published by Caucasian House, in a section titled “Pankisi Gorge”, states:

“Kists of Nakh background arrived in the Pankisi Gorge in the 1840s. As a result of their tight social and economic contacts with local Georgian

communities, they were quick to adapt to the local environment. Traditionally, Kists are followers of the Shafi'i madhhab (school) of Sunni Islam. Estrangement of the Kist community from the rest of Georgia began after Georgia regained its independence. Scholars believe there had been several drivers contributing to this estrangement. The difficult political, economic, and social environment dominating the country in the 1990s, coupled with deeply rooted corruption within central and local authorities, engagement of the gorge's communities in drug and arms smuggling, and military confrontations in Chechnya are considered the most significant of these drivers." (Caucasian House (2016) *Islam in Georgia: Policy and Integration*, p.15)

This section of the report also states:

"The Kist community is very unhappy with the fact that they are often exposed to discriminatory treatment by special services while crossing the state border; they are often stopped without reasonable grounds, interrogated, humiliated and insulted. The findings of the research suggest that the practice has acquired a systemic nature after the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) became active in the Middle East. Such a response from security services may be explained by the fact that there have been records of Georgian citizens of Kist ethnic background who have participated in military actions in the territories of Syria and Iraq. Based on various unverified sources, up to 50 fighters from Pankisi are involved in these conflicts; however, it should be noted that many of them did not directly travel to Syria and Iraq from Georgia, but instead from Turkey and the European countries where they had been living as refugees and economic migrants." (ibid, p.17)

A report from Eurasianet states:

"This is the Pankisi Gorge, home of the Kists, a minority group closely related to Chechens. The region has become notorious in recent years, with media coverage almost uniformly depicting it as a hotbed of Islamist radicalism. One American analyst went as far as to dub Pankisi the "Harvard of terrorist upbringing."

The region's Muslim character is unmistakable. There is a prominent new mosque on the main street of Duisi, Pankisi's largest village. Women wear headscarves and young men have pronounced beards and long bangs, as is fashionable among Chechen men these days.

But there are more similarities than differences between Pankisi and the rest of Georgia. Local cuisine is replete with Georgian classics, albeit with occasional twists: for example, Kists make the legendary Georgian khinkali dumplings with a filling of nettles instead of the standard meat mixture. Villagers sew handicrafts and clothing popular throughout the country, including the iconic Kakhetian felt caps.

In the early 2000s, the region became a base for Chechen separatists in their war with Russia, resulting in tense relations between Moscow and Tbilisi. More recently, at least 50 Pankisi natives have traveled to Syria to fight alongside ISIS, including Tarkhan Batirashvili, better known as Umar al-Shishani, the group's so-called 'minister of war.'

But locals insist that violence and radicalism are atypical and an increasing number of them, including Fatima, are leading the charge to change perceptions through one

of their culture's most sacred values: hospitality." (Eurasianet (19 June 2018) *Georgia's Pankisi Gorge fights 'terrorism' stereotypes*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research and Information Unit within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

References:

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Google
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