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Islamic Radicalization in Georgia: Integration, Identity and Religion

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Abstract: Muslim community of Georgia is the largest religious minority in the state that yet struggles to be at least partially represented and integrated to a wider local society. It is spread all over the state, every region having its own challenges and issues on the ground. And still, there is a common tendency toward general alienation from the Christian majority and attempts, especially by the Muslim youth, to look for external opportunities, actors and groups to join, attach to. This became obvious to a great degree when some members of the local Muslim community fled to Iraq and Syria to participate in a 'jihad' launched by ISIS and to build worldwide Islamic 'umma'. The paper argues that Georgian Muslims are not mainly keen to radicalize but if they do, there are three factors contributing: lack of general integration to a wider Georgian society, identity crisis determined by embedded formula 'to be Georgian means to be Orthodox Christian' and internal religious rivalry between "traditional" and Salafi branches of the Islam. Additionally, radicalized groups frequently consist of youngsters who are especially vulnerable to these factors and do not see opportunities for self-determination and self-expression on the ground.
Keywords: Georgia, Islam, integration, identity, radicalization, religion

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Introduction

Islamic radicalization was and is not considered as a significant menace to look up by neither Georgian government nor by local Christian majority. This is due to an absolute dominance of ethnic Georgians preaching Orthodox Christianity (followers of the Georgian Orthodox Church) over any other groups in the state. The domination makes it easy to hold a strong grip on political, social and economic processes, restraining radical movements from the beginning. Furthermore, despite being developing country and having important socio-economic problems, Georgia still remains highly stable and capable of dealing with comparatively small-scaled radical entities, threats. This resilience is additionally strengthened by close cooperation with the US, EU and even Russia which is afraid of a radical Islam coming from the North Caucasus. Efforts combined, these actors make sure that radical groups have no ground to form and develop, are 'choked' immediately. Apart, there is an embedded views among Georgians that the state is of no geopolitical and political importance for the radical Islamist groups.

Thus, in theory and, maybe, in practice, there is no sense for Islamic radicalism to flourish as well as no need for terrorist activities to be held. That's why it was a shocking revelation when in 2013-14 some Georgian Muslims left for Iraq and Syria to join ISIS built caliphate, ethnic Georgian Tarkhan Batirashvili or more famously known as Abu Omar al-Shishani being appointed as the so-called Minister of War (Akhmeteli 2014); furthermore, ethnic Georgians from Adjara Region also aligning with the terrorist entity threatening fellow citizens to retaliate and punish for intolerance toward Muslim 'umma' (DF Watch 2015); and finally, totally unexpected terrorist threat appearing in Tbilisi that caught both, Georgian government and Georgian society by surprise (Dumbadze 2017). These cases and the newly popped-up information (Civil Georgia 2024) prove that threat of the Islamic radicalism did not disappear and remains actual for the state despite being clearly overlooked, under-researched and respectively unhandled.

Among international and local scholars Georgia's Muslim community is being considered as the most underestimated and failed to be noticed entity. Members of the 'umma', whether ethnic Georgians or not, still consider the state hesitant to recognize them as fully eligible citizens. They frequently experience discrimination and pressure based on their belief, religious belonging. The Muslim youth is especially affected due to inability to pursue right for self-determination and self-expression in a mainly Orthodox Christian state that has a long-lasting unpleasant history of rivalry with the Muslim dominated empires

previously. Despite being an inherent part of the Georgian political history and culture, Islam is still perceived as a religion of 'occupant powers' and is represented by local history books as a counterpart for the Orthodox Christianity. Thus, there are clear fears among Orthodox Christian majority that it may pose existential threat to the state and nation once again. This is an important determinant that significantly slows down integration of the Muslim community to a wider Georgian society composed by Christian Orthodox Georgians. So far, Muslims of Georgia cannot fully integrate because of their religious identity, on the one hand, and have serious identity crisis, on the other hand. They are Georgians by citizenship but do not belong to an Orthodox Christianity that is strongly tied to Georgian identity itself. Simply saying, historically to be Georgian mainly meant to be Orthodox Christian. This formula is still relevant. Being politically and socially cut off from the global Georgian agenda and having identity crisis, Georgian Muslims fled outside the country and some of them found answers in Salafi branch of the Islam. Mainly promoted and supported by Arabic countries like Saudi Arabia, Salafism spilled to Georgia from Pankisi Gorge and challenged the so-called "traditional" Islam on the ground. It significantly influenced the youth, gaining hearts and minds of the future generation of Georgian Muslims there. This only contributed to general crisis, splitting Muslim community of the country in some areas on "traditionalists" and "purists". Nowadays, it became even easier to lure Muslim youth in Georgia to radicalism, appealing to no support from the state, identity crisis and internal Islamic religious divisions.

Muslims and Islam in Georgia

November 2014 population census shows that Georgia has 398 000 Muslims, accounting for 10.7 percent of the total population. As mentioned earlier, this is the country's largest religious minority (Civil Georgia 2016). Muslim communities exist in densely packed settlements throughout the Pankisi Gorge, Akhmeta municipality, Kvemo Kartli region, and Adjara Autonomous Republic. Tbilisi also has a sizable Muslim population, with over 16,000 people. Muslim-populated regions have unique challenges as a result of their multiethnic makeup and socioeconomic development differences. Controversies among Muslim communities are unique to each of these places, which is an important issue to consider in this context. It should be highlighted that high unemployment rates and low levels of social involvement exist throughout the country; nevertheless, in ethnic and religious minority regions, these issues have a direct impact on the quality of civic integration.

Pankisi Gorge

Kists from the Nakh region came to the Pankisi Gorge in the 1840s. Because of their close social and economic links to local Georgian populations, they were able to quickly adjust to new surroundings. According to data from Georgia's 2014 population census, there are 5,700 ethnic Kists living throughout the country, the bulk of them are Muslims (ibidem). Traditionally, Kists adhere to the Shafi'i madhhab (school) of Sunni Islam. The Kist community became estranged from the rest of Georgia when the state won independence. Scholars think that numerous factors contributed to the alienation. The difficult political, economic, and social environment that dominated the country in the 1990s, combined with deeply ingrained corruption within central and local governments, drug and arms smuggling by the gorge's communities, and military confrontations in Chechnya, are regarded as the primary drivers (Stronski and Vreeman 2017; Peuch 2002). According to several reports, thousands of Chechen refugees settled in the Pankisi Gorge during the First and Second Chechen Wars, dramatically altering the local socioeconomic milieu (Shalvashvili 2023). Given the current security situation in the North Caucasus, the Georgian government has the problem of preserving the gorge from the effects of ongoing developments in adjacent areas while maintaining local peace. The Russian Federation has maintained a particularly tough approach towards the Pankisi Gorge, seeing regional activities through the lens of anti-terrorism operations (Devdariani and Hancilova 2002).

As a result, the Pankisi Gorge is continually making worldwide media headlines and attracting attention from foreign news outlets. It should also be highlighted that, since the Second Chechen War (1999-2000), the Salafi[2] branch of Islam has rapidly grown throughout the Pankisi Gorge (Prasad 2012). Local youth have turned to Salafi Islam as a means of self-realization and expression due to a lack of prospects for professional growth and social mobility, a low quality of education in their home state, and isolation and estrangement from the rest of Georgia. Kists, usually young people, seek employment in the

[2] Salafism is a movement within Islam that advocates a return to the practices of the "salaf," the earliest generations of Muslims. Salafists emphasize a strict adherence to the Quran and Hadith, rejecting innovations (bid'ah) in religious practices. They seek to purify Islam by eliminating any cultural or local influences that have developed over centuries (Olidort 2015). Wahhabism, a subset of Salafism, emerged in the 18th century under the influence of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the Arabian Peninsula. It is characterized by a particularly strict interpretation of Salafi principles and a close alliance with the Saudi state (Mandaville 2022). While all Wahhabis are Salafists, not all Salafists are Wahhabis. The primary differences lie in their origins and political associations. Salafism is broader and more diverse, while Wahhabism is closely tied to Saudi politics and has had a significant impact on the religious and social landscape of Saudi Arabia (Stanley 2005).

Russian Federation (the Chechen Republic) and Turkey. According to interview data, around 60-70 percent of the youth (aged 35 and under) follow Salafi Islam, while the remainder of the population, including the bulk of the community's senior members, practice "traditional" Islam (Sikharulidze et al. 2016). The Administration of Muslims of All Georgia manages traditional mosques. It should be noted that Salafi congregations do not acknowledge the Administration's authority and instead govern holy services through their own statutes. Traditionalists blame bad infrastructure, authorities' inability to meet pre-election pledges, inactive local governments, and a local majoritarian MPs for hampering Pankisi community unification. Local concerns are frequently overlooked, leaving the gorge's Muslim populations unsatisfied, believing that no political entity in the country has ever had the political will to modify their approach to the Pankisi Gorge. Activities in the Pankisi Gorge by central authorities and their proxy institutions lack consistency and deliberation with the government, and fail to produce a holistic and well-thought-out vision for the gorge; there are discrepancies between declared state policy and actions taken by state agencies acting at the local level. Reports show that area police and special services officers frequently exhibit demeaning attitudes toward local people, which may be explained by firmly ingrained prejudices about Kists and a lack of professionalism (ibidem). The Kist community is extremely dissatisfied with the fact that they are frequently subjected to discriminatory treatment by special services while crossing the state boundary; they are frequently stopped without fair cause, interrogated, humiliated, and ridiculed (Dudarova and Dokshin 2023). As a result of the Georgian government's inconsistent policies toward the Pankisi Gorge, stereotypes entrenched in the Georgian public, and vitriolic statements made on a global scale contribute to the creation of an unhealthy environment around the Pankisi Gorge, which, in turn, creates barriers for local communities to fully engage in integration processes.

Religious conflict within the community has been cited as another impediment to successful integration attempts. As previously stated, the Salafi movement within Sunni Islam began to flourish in the canyon by the end of the 1990s, and today its adherents constitute the majority of the local young. Salafism expanded rapidly in the region due to both external systemic forces and the weakness of traditional Islam in the canyon. In other words, the degree of religious education and competency among "traditional" Muslim clerics is relatively low, and persons with no formal religious education are frequently appointed as imams at mosques. Traditional Islam representatives are unable to compete with Salafi leaders who acquire superior theological education in Arab nations. So far, the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia appears to be unable to adequate-

ly address this issue, which is exacerbated by the country's lack of a sufficient religious education basis (Sikharulidze et al. 2016). Furthermore, the Pankisi Council of Elders, a historic institution, has been undermined, in part due to disagreements among members.

Throughout its existence, the Council functioned as an informal legislative and judicial authority. The Council members would create a basic code of behavior based on Sharia law and traditional Chechen folklore. They also served as mediators between parties in conflict. As a result of the strengthening of state authority and Salafi jamia, the Council of Elders has begun to lose legitimacy and may soon cease to operate. According to the research, advocates of traditional Islam are opposed to boosting Salafi jamia in the canyon because they fear it would lead to further Arabization and eventually the eradication of historic Kist-Chechen customs and values (Jvania and Kupatadze 2015). Salafi adherents say that traditional Islam is founded on North Caucasian customs and legend and has nothing in common with 'pure' and 'genuine' Islam, which is based entirely on the precepts enshrined in the Quran. Furthermore, they say that those who do not speak Arabic cannot preach Islam, which is a typical practice among traditional Muslims. The conflict is exacerbated by the fact that representatives from both denominations approach authorities for assistance, and the reactions of authorities are sometimes extremely different from one another. For example, under Mikheil Saakashvili's tenure, the government attempted to handle the situation in the gorge by collaborating with Salafi movement supporters, which contributed to the further erosion of orthodox Islam.

However, contemporary authorities have decided to cooperate more with followers of "traditional" Islam, thus disregarding the other branch in the canyon. Stringent policies toward the Salafi movement are frequently formed by an embedded perception that Salafism and Wahhabism are the same. Such assumption is not shared by Georgian Salafists who claim clear political and religious distinctions (Caucasian House 2016). And still, it strongly impacts how Georgian government handles this religious branch of Islam, preventing the government from adopting and implementing more flexible policies. However, it should be underlined that authorities in Georgia have not punished any Salafi believers. They have never been subjected to coercive measures, never been banned from establishing and repairing mosques and madrasas and, finally, their religious freedoms have never been significantly restricted.

Adjara Region

The Autonomous Republic of Adjara is the country's territory where the Mus-

lim community consists from mainly ethnic Georgians. The bulk of Adjara's Muslims are Sunni. Islam was brought to this portion of Georgia in the 17th century, and it is closely related to the Ottoman Empire's political growth. According to the November 2014 census, 132 852 of Adjara's 334 000 citizens, or 39.6 percent of the Republic's population, identified as Muslims (Civil Georgia 2016). In recent years, the Autonomous Republic of Adjara has had a sequence of favorable quick economic improvements in compared to Georgia's other regions, which explains why socioeconomic issues have fallen down the priority list (Chkareuli 2022). However, these beneficial improvements may explain why religious conflicts are increasingly common in the region. Integration difficulties for Muslim populations are multifaceted. Perceptions at the local level are heavily influenced by the extent of Muslim community engagement in regional political life, as well as the structure of their relationship with major religious denominations. A widespread prejudice in Adjara holds that all Georgians must be Orthodox Christians.

As a result, local Muslims frequently have to emphasize their ethnic Georgian ties in order to claim full citizenship in the nation. The aforementioned stigmas have a significant impact on Muslim communities' involvement in regional political processes, as well as their opinions of state authority. Both Muslim clergy and local media representatives point out that Muslim populations are underrepresented in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara's political institutions (Pertaya 2016). At the same time, Muslim leaders in the region express concern about the growing trend of human rights violations, discriminatory and inappropriate treatment, and psychological duress of local Muslim community members as a result of actions taken by security services. Cases of Muslim 'umma' members fleeing Georgia to Syria and Iraq add fuel to the flames. According to information supplied by the Administration of Muslims of Georgia and local media, there are approximately 70 Salafi movement supporters in Adjara. However, unlike the Pankisi gorge jamia, the Salafi movement in Adjara has failed to create a united organization, with members spread throughout five municipalities, including the city of Batumi (Sikharulidze et al. 2016).

There have been indications that the level of radicalization in Adjara is higher than that reported in Pankisi Gorge, and some local populations frequently display signs of radicalization. Individuals with less education or who have failed to recognize themselves from a professional standpoint control a group of local Salafi followers. As a result, unlike the Salafi jamia in Pankisi Gorge, Adjarian Salafists have little influence over local populations and are unable to sway public opinion. It is impossible to say how many Adjara residents have joined active armed groups in Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, many Adjara inhabitants

seek seasonal or permanent jobs in Turkey, making it exceedingly difficult to determine their true motivations for being on Turkish territory (Ivanov 2011; Kucera 2017). As previously said, there are several layers to the challenges surrounding the integration of the Muslim population in Adjara, one of which is the hostile language used by the Orthodox church and certain of its officials. For example, pinning a pig's head to the door of a religious school in Kobuleti, causing damage to private property owned by Muslims, and refusing to provide potable water are just a few examples of the Church and Orthodox communities' aggressive actions in Adjara's high mountainous regions. More specifically, Christian clergy throw holy water on Muslim homes and preach to local Muslim kids, encouraging them to convert to Christianity (Parulava 2019; Shoshiashvili 2024; Sikharulidze et al. 2016). They claim that Islam was introduced to Georgia under coercion and that Muslim Georgians can now convert back to their original faith. As a consequence of public pressure and the Church's growing strength, many individuals have already converted to Christianity, resulting in circumstances where elder generations in families are Muslims and the youth are Orthodox Christians. Newly converted Christians are sometimes too hostile to members of their old denomination. Some Georgian Orthodox Church representatives argue that aggressive proselytism is justified and that their actions are in response to uncontrolled attempts to promote Islam by Turkish Islamic organizations, which they believe are part of the Turkish state's aggressive policy toward the Adjara region.

It is worth emphasizing that the Church's assertions are not entirely baseless. Journalists in the region point out that there is a Turkish Islamic organization called Suleimajilar, which has a large network of branches and spiritual schools throughout Turkey. In recent years, the group has been particularly active in giving financial support to Adjara mosques, including religious literature, service goods, and pay for clergy and school personnel (JAM News 2017). It should be noted that this type of help is mostly funded by individual Turkish people, and as a result, the true motivations behind such activities are sometimes unclear. This method also makes it hard to trace the origins and movements of money changing hands. A financing structure for spiritual schools might come from a variety of sources. Under this approach, the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia entirely funds teachers' salaries, while contributions cover all other costs. Disagreements between religious factions are compounded by inefficient and/or inert government policies at all levels, a worry expressed by the vast majority of Adjara respondents. The building of a new mosque in Batumi is frequently used as an example (Bordzikashvili 2017). The building of the planned so-called Abdul-Aziz Mosque has considerably helped to unite both opponents

and supporters of the project. Separate political groupings, which would seldom voice their views before, have now banded together to support the cause.

Kvemo Kartli

The Kvemo Kartli region has traditionally been home to dense settlements of Muslim populations, with ethnic Azeris making up the vast bulk of these. According to the most recent population census, Georgia has 233 000 ethnic Azeris, with 182 300 resident in the Kvemo Kartli area (Civil Georgia 2016). It should be remembered that the modern-day Azeris' forefathers moved to Kvemo Kartli in the early 17th century and had resided in the Georgian state for 400 years. According to figures supplied by the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia, 93% of ethnic Azeris in Georgia practice Shia Islam, while 7% practice Sunni Islam (Sikharulidze et al. 2016).

However, this distinction is rarely noticed in everyday life (there are kinships, mixed marriages, and close social and economic ties), and both groups constitute a one integrated community. Kvemo Kartli area has the same social and economic challenges as the rest of the country. Infrastructure linking villages is inadequate, and rural inhabitants are frequently isolated from cultural and educational organizations. Poor mastery of the official language exacerbates these issues by becoming an effective barrier to the political and cultural integration of local Muslim populations (Amirjanova 2021; Baazov 2002). Villages located far from Tbilisi and other regional cities are particularly vulnerable to these issues, as their traditional isolated way of life, along with a lack of social and economic interactions with communities in other areas, substantially impedes the integration process. The effort of integrating Georgia's Azeri communities aims to overcome the linguistic barrier by improving civic involvement and incorporating Azeri people into Georgian information space. Over the last several years, the implementation of the so-called "1+4 system" in higher education has played an important role in the integration of Azeri populations into mainstream Georgian culture. The system, developed for minority students, allows Azeri (and Armenian) school graduates to complete an intense one-year Georgian language course before pursuing higher education and majoring in their preferred field with ease (Amirejibi and Gabunia 2021). However, many students believe that learning a language in a year is still a difficult endeavor. Respective authorities should consider revising the program idea, which has been in place since 2010.

According to data from local education resource centers and school directors, the number of Georgian students departing to study in Azerbaijani higher education institutions has progressively declined. Similarly, branches of Azeri

higher education institutions functioning in the Kvemo Kartli region are gradually becoming outdated. Youth who graduate from Tbilisi-based higher education institutions are more likely to return to their home areas and seek jobs in local government bodies, educational institutions, or non-governmental organizations. Individuals who are fluent in the state language and maintain professional and social relationships in Tbilisi and other areas are more likely to find and keep jobs in Marneuli. As of today, observations indicate that the number of ethnic Azeri citizens eager to send their children to Georgian schools is increasing. According to data from the Marneuli education resource center, ethnic Azeris account for 70% of pupils obtaining general education in Georgian language schools, a figure that is increasing year after year. These patterns point to the necessity for Georgian language sections in Azeri schools (Lomsadze 2022). However, what appears to be problematic in this regard is that children of Azeri descent enter the Georgian education system with no prior knowledge of the Georgian language, implying that more time and resources are spent on teaching Georgian rather than comprehending respective curriculums. This lowers the quality of teaching, particularly for Georgian language students, and makes the learning process less efficient. The aforementioned reasons underscore the importance of further improving the education system in the Kvemo Kartli region. The assignment of Georgian-speaking instructors to the region's rural schools and preschools remains a concern. Respondents also claim that the technique for teaching Georgian in schools where Azeri is the primary language of instruction has to be improved (Sikharulidze et al. 2016).

It should also be emphasized that Azeri schools suffer from a dearth of young professionals, as there is no training basis for Azeri language teachers in Georgia; hence, there are no possibilities to refresh the school teacher cadre in the region's schools. Overall, the school system in the Kvemo Kartli region needs improvement. Importantly, proponents of Georgian language instruction are those from ethnic Azeri origins who have actually worked in governing organizations and so understand the value of understanding the state language for professional progression and self-realization. As a result, it is vital that more young people be recruited into state agencies in order to accelerate the process of civic integration. It should be noted that the older generation in Azeri communities has extremely poor knowledge of the Georgian language, which can be explained by the fact that Russian was the language of communication between ethnic representatives during Soviet times, so there was no need to know Georgian. Another hindrance to the integration of ethnic Azeri groups in Georgia is the absence of mixed marriages between ethnic Azeris and Georgians due to religious constraints (Kvakhadze 2021). Furthermore, Islam and ethnic Azeri

traditional customs, particularly in rural regions, place limits on women's social involvement, impeding the integration process. A common custom of early marriages among ethnic Azeri young girls, which are sometimes coerced by their parents, further complicates integration attempts. Those who are married are frequently denied permission from their families to continue working, resulting in a low degree of self-actualization among local women (Modebadze 2021).

It is worth mentioning that Kvemo Kartli's Azeri Muslim populations are very well integrated with their Georgian neighbors who live in the same region, owing to frequent and close social and economic connections. Local Christian and Muslim groups frequently collaborate to celebrate their respective religious holidays. Local city halls play an important role in such events since they frequently plan and facilitate them. However, social tensions and distance are evident in relationships with Georgians living in Tbilisi and other parts of the country. This situation necessitates a quick and collaborative response from both government and civil society. It should also be noted that the Muslim populations in the Kvemo Kartli region have a low degree of political participation and a strong allegiance to the present government. On the other hand, the same groups have a high economic potential, and the economic development of the Kvemo Kartli area should be a top priority for the state in order to promote greater integration of Georgian Muslim populations. Local Muslims prefer to focus on socioeconomic matters rather than religion, creating the perception that religious issues are less significant to the larger population. However, there are significant reasons to believe that religion plays an essential part in the lives of local kids and is becoming more prevalent in the region (Sikharulidze et al. 2016).

State Response and Radicalization Determinants

When it comes to analysis of the state policy, it should be noted that it has undergone a series of important changes. Mikheil Saakashvili's government was successful with a series of initial reforms (for instance, "1+4"), Georgian Dream further building well-thought legal frameworks. Additionally, the decision-makers tried to deepen communication with the Muslim community via contributing to establishment of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia (2011) and State Agency on Religious Issues (2014) but failed to. Some representatives of the 'umma' considered these steps as attempts to enforce political will over Georgian Muslims via institutionalization of the faith (Social Justice Center 2019). Such outcry only strengthened general attitude to keep status-quo that generally means focusing on the Muslim community only during pre-election

campaigns and/or some unexpected crisis, for example, Pankisi Gorge incident (Lomsadze 2019). And still, there are a few long-lasting tendencies that factually characterize the state's approach toward the local 'umma'.

Obviously, there is a strong sense that Muslim community of Georgia is pretty vulnerable to external influences. Surrounded by strong competing regional (Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia) and global (Russia) powers, the country has not enough resources to invest to various integratory processes and therefore more and more accent is made on strengthening security agencies and mechanisms of control on the ground. As a result, the state is mainly oriented toward keeping national security guaranteed rather than human rights protected (Tolerance and Diversity Institute 2022). It is a handbook case of security dilemma versus human rights (Pavleski 2023). Thus, Pankisi Gorge is strongly considered as a main source of potential national threat while Adjara and Kvemo Karti regions as zones of lesser danger with obvious interest from Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan.

On the other hand, despite having well-established legal framework, there is a lack of political will to bring Georgian Muslims to decision-making process due to opposition from the most trusted institution – the Orthodox Georgian Church (Georgian Journal 2021). The pattern and format of the relationship between the Georgian state and the Church does do not accommodate equality and justice in the country. The problem lies not in the recognition of the historically established role of the Orthodox Church and 2002 constitutional agreement, but in the incorrect perception of what the agreement entails. Historical contribution is not contested, nor does the constitutional agreement support a discriminatory environment in the country (Begadze 2017). Rather, the problem lies in certain individuals within the country's political elite, who tend to put their religious views above the establishment of civil society in the country. Also, the presence of radically disposed clergy within the Orthodox Church contributes to the problem. As a result of these interplaying factors, there is a situation where in popular public institutions are quite active, and individuals supporting an even more strengthened role for the Orthodox Church enjoy strong visibility in the wider public. The support often acquires aggressive forms and contains radical messages. These individuals have strong influences over officials who believe that they represent this denomination. Moreover, the government is a political entity that needs popular support, and it often is forced turn a blind eye or inadequately respond to harsh interference of representatives of clergy in secular life. The Church has become an inseparable part of politics and represents one of the biggest sources of the government's legitimacy (Sikharulidze et al. 2016).

Being left without state support and alienated from the wider Georgian soci-

ety, local Muslims do not tend to radicalize. But if they do, there are three fundamental pillars: lack of serious integratory processes, identity crisis and internal confrontation between "traditionalists" and "purists". Behind every radical group there are some ideological, political and socio-economic issues that people usually face. Integration of various minority groups is usually considered as a tool to counter formation of such entities. So far, it is obvious that political, socio-economic and religious misrepresentation of the majority of Georgian Muslims by default creates windows of opportunities that can be used by external and internal actors to promote questionable ideas and approaches. Thus, lack of integratory processes is considered by wide-range of scholars as basis for radical Islamism in Georgia (Baramidze 2015). Furthermore, this challenge has been there for decades frequently just silenced and turned a blind eye on (Sanikidze 2015, 2018). Representatives of the Muslim community unable to integrate to local political, social and economic institutions are looking for answers beyond the state that lets other interest groups to engage and promote their own interests. In the region surrounded by Russia, Turkey, Iran, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgian Muslims are vulnerable to widespread influence from competitive forces that are keen to extend their influence.

Georgian Muslims are not only misrepresented by the state but additionally are not perceived as fully Georgians due to religious belonging. Christian Orthodoxy and Georgian Orthodox Church have "privatized" Georgian identity itself, forcing Georgian Muslims to prove their 'Georgianness' on a regular basis (Bladadze 2022). This is especially painful for ethnic Georgians in Adjara region who are frequently slammed and pressured for not being followers of the 'true' Georgian religion. This has a tremendous negative effect on the younger generation that have no political representation, on the one hand, and whose identity and loyalty have been questioned by wider Georgian society, on the other hand (Sikharulidze et al. 2016). Despite being pro-Western country, 'Georgianness' is still heavily affected by ethnicity and, undoubtedly, religious belonging to Orthodox Christianity, in particular, Georgian Orthodox Church (Gegeshidze and Mirziashvili 2021).

Finally, raise of the Salafi movement in Georgia has been perceived by scholars as a reaction on previous two challenges. Financially and logistically well-prepared representatives of this Islamic branch, offered a way out of the political and socio-economic pitfalls, prominently, for Pankisi Gorge inhabitants (Ondet 2019). Furthermore, providing educational programs, Salafists managed to gain hearts and minds of the youth who is looking for self-determination and self-expression. Unable to fully identify as Georgians and express their religious views, young Georgian Muslims willingly join Salafi movement and travel abroad to

align themselves with wider Islamic 'umma' rather than Georgian society (Popovaite 2015). Appraisal of the Salafism leads to deterioration of the "traditional" Islam that is based on the Northern Caucasian traditions. It was and is still perceived as a "firewall" against external alien groups that may try to effect local population. Thus, weaker "traditionalists" become more vulnerable to external influence Pankisi Gorge is.

All these three factors combined turn Georgian Muslims into aliens in their own state, making them highly vulnerable to radicalization due to a need to constantly fight for basic rights and freedoms, necessity to prove their 'Georgianness' (Varshalomidze 2017).

Conclusion

As the biggest religious minority, Georgian Muslims still suffer from political misrepresentation, abuse, religious prosecution and inability to be fully engaged to a wider Georgian society at large. Every region has its own political, social, economic and religious issues to be considered. Some struggle to master Georgian language (Azeris from Kvemo Karti) while others fight stereotypes and internal disputes (Pankisi Gorge). This situation is mainly overlooked by Georgian governments, not considering lack of integrational processes as possible threats. Furthermore, despite facts of Islamic radicalism on the ground, local authorities are not interested in launching a nation-level policy, relying on various police and security agencies to deal with radicalism.

Being abandoned, Georgian Muslims are not keen to radicalize but if they do it is determined by the same lack of integration in combination with identity crisis and internal rivalry between "traditional" Islam and the so-called 'purists', Salafi movement. As a result, local Muslim community is cut off from political and socio-economic processes that pushes it to look for external opportunities. Additionally, due to 'privatization' of the Georgian identity by Orthodox Christianity, Georgian Muslims are continuously forced to prove their 'Georgianness'. This disposition opened a window of opportunity for Salafism that gained a strong ground in Pankisi Gorge, offering local Muslim youth better life through joining its worldwide network, global Muslim 'umma'.

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Архил Сикхарулиц

Исламска радикализација у Грузији: интеграција, идентитет и религија

Сажетак: Муслиманска заједница у Грузији је највећа верска мањина у земљи која се бори да буде бар делимично заступљена и интегрисана у друштво. Како се налази даљем државе, у сваком региону наилази на изазове и проблеме. Ипак, постоји шира тенденција према отуђењу од хришћанске већине, али и покушаји – поготово од стране муслиманске омладине – да тражи неке опције споља, тј. актере и групе са којима би се повезали. Ово је постало очигледно када су неки чланови локалне муслиманске заједнице одлучили да се боре за ИСИС и тако граде глобалну уму. У овом раду тврдимо да муслимани из Грузије нису нарочито склони радикализацији, али ако јесу да ипак постоје три главна фактора који томе доприносе: мањак интеграције у друштво, криза идентитета која се односи на формулу „да би био Грузин, мораш бити православац", и интерно ривалство између традиционалиста и салафиста. Поред тога, радикализоване групе се често састоје од младих који су посебно рањиви према овим факторима.

Кључне речи: Грузија, ислам, интеграција, идентитет, радикализација, религија