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***The Pankisi Gorge crisis through the
lens of spillover and terrorist safe
heaven theory***

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Introduction

The early 2000s was arguably a time when Pankisi Gorge, a remote area in the Georgian part of the Caucasus mountains, got the most international attention in its history. Following the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and the subsequent War on Terror the gorge was mentioned by the US Secretary of State Colin Powell or Russian Defence minister Sergei Ivanov and even got its own subordinate operation to the Operation Enduring Freedom (Dvali 2003). The main problem were Chechen insurgents which escaped during the Second Chechen war into the gorge along with number of refugees. The lawless environment of Pankisi allowed them to plan attacks on targets in Russia and, after conducting them, escaping back to safety of the gorge (Reinold 2011). The area also provided shelter for some notorious Islamist terrorists both form Chechnya and the Middle East, some of which even members of Al-Qaeda and with ties directly to Bin Laden and several chemical weapon attacks (*ibidem*).

The immediate threat at Pankisi gorge was relatively quickly averted and, largely thanks to US involvement through the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP), in 2004 the situation was relatively under control (Dvali 2003). Although there have been some later accusations this year will be regarded as end of the Pankisi Gorge crisis, while the outburst of Second Chechen war in 1999, which caused the refugee and militants' influx, as the beginning.

Two theoretical points of view will be adopted. First is based on Byman and Pollack's elements of spillover form civil wars and responses to these situations. These elements include *Refugees, Terrorism, Neighbourly intervention, Secession breeding secessionism, Radicalization of population* and *Economic losses* (Byman and Pollack 2007). The second approach is based on literature concerning safe havens and state weakness with regard mainly to Islamist terrorism by Kittner, which also unravels some aspects of the Pankisi Gorge crisis (Kittner 2007). The main elements of this approach include *Geographical features, Weak governance, History of corruption, History of violence* and *Poverty*. Although the situation

during Pankisi Gorge crisis is relatively small scale surprisingly many theoretically based similarities can be observed.

Spillover

The theory of spillover from civil wars within a region described by Byman and Pollack should foremostly serve to analyse the case of Iraq and spillover from its possible civil war (which indeed became today's reality), however, it can serve as well to shed some light onto the Pankisi gorge crisis. The Pankisi gorge is a valley in the very north-east of the country about 34 km long bordering Chechnya in the hardly accessible terrain of the high Caucasus mountains and home of about 10,000 Kists, ethnic relatives of the Chechen and Ingush (McGregor 2005; Dvali 2003).

The first spillover element - *Refugees* – occur in the gorge since the outbreak of Second Chechen War. In 1999, largely due to geographic proximity and existence of ethnic relatives, the Gorge became home to up to 7,000 Chechen refugees (Dvali 2003). Massive influx of refugees can be difficult for a well-off country and taking care about even such small number of refugees coming to a remote area, where it already was difficult to provide services before, was a big bite for (at this time) a weak developing Georgia. Because Tbilisi was unable to provide safe refugee camp and necessary services like water, food or medical care the refugee influx turned into a security risk. At this point, as Byman and Pollack note, militia leaders, criminal bosses or warlords are those who provide security, and they become leaders of the refugee community (Byman and Pollack 2007: 23). Georgia at this point lost all control over the gorge¹ (MacFarlane 2013; Reinold 2011).

One of the most serious security threats is militants disguising themselves as refugees and seeking safety from their rivals, what is worse, they use the relative safety of refugee settlement to organise and train (Byman and Pollack 2007: 23-26). This has also been a case in Pankisi confirmed by authorities. One example is the confirmed hiding of one of the top Chechen commanders Gelayev in Pankisi, who chose it to rebuild its forces (Dvali 2003; McGregor 2005). The militants then often launch attacks on their adversary or go on raids returning back to the safety of exile. This was likewise the case in Pankisi and the biggest justification behind Russian complaints and later airstrikes (Reinold 2011). The lack of control providing ideal conditions for training and recruitment then attracts new fighters. Refugees and militants bring stories of atrocities, murder or rape which create new angry

¹ Although this was first denied by Georgian authorities, they later proclaimed, led by president Shevardnadze, that they were “conducting operations with the goal to restore control over the area” (Reinold 2011).

recruits from the refugee ranks or from the original co-ethnic population (Byman and Pollack 2007: 23-26). This information is difficult to confirm, however there are many hints of recruitment and radicalization coming from Pankisi in the early 2000s. The area is largely out of reach from any economic prospects, thus rich in young jobless men ready to fight. As Byman and Pollack conclude the basis of 'old' power within the ethnicity is foremostly control of land and jobs, as land is lost in war and jobs disappear the young radical leaders can win power (Byman and Pollack 2007: 23). The young radicalized fighters returning from hiding (such as in Pankisi) then have great power basis.

Before introducing Georgia's fight with such danger the second aspect of *Terrorism* should be outlined, as it is central to the situation in Pankisi, and likewise builds on the refugee element. First Wahhabis² supposedly settled at the gorge as early as 1997 (Sanikidze 2007) and Georgia accused Russian special services of relocating radical Chechen Wahhabis to the gorge also in the 1990s (Reinold 2011).

This issue is closely associated with the recruiting, organisational and recruit bases occurring in the midst of refugee influx – these were not only used to attract and train new insurgents but also new members to radical Salafist or Wahhabi groups (Dvali 2003; Sanikidze 2007; Reinold 2011). The training grounds and lawless nature of the gorge at the turn of the century attracted, in accordance with the theory, Islamist radicals entirely unconnected to the civil war. Turkish or other Arab³ nationals sharing radical Islamist thoughts, financed by various Islamist organizations, begun to move to the gorge (Sanikidze 2007; Dvali 2003). As Byman and Pollack note various radicals (or soon to be radicals) can quickly adopt each other's grievances⁴ and become global security threat (Byman and Pollack 2007: 29). Nevertheless, radicals on a territory outside of control of the government pose a security threat for any country or region, and potentially for the whole world.

Even though the insurgents are not all radical Islamists they often cast about desperately for any allies they can find (Byman and Pollack 2007: 29), although this might have been greater threat for Georgia in the case of Abkhaz or Ossetian insurgents, but also for Chechen operations of Gelayev in Russia (McGregor 2005). Even though the terrorists based in Pankisi

² Wahhabism is often used to describe all politically motivated radical schools of Islam in the Post-Soviet space and (Sanikidze 2007) will be regarded like so in this paper.

³ Predominantly Afghan, Saudi or Jordanian citizens.

⁴ As they further note, through skilful propaganda nearly all Islamists share the image of America as the number one enemy of Muslims worldwide; also the Al-Qaeda and Bin Laden himself rose on the anti-Soviet element to which they can still relate when operating in the post-Soviet space; Chechens likewise learned to hate Israel (Byman and Pollack 2007).

were not aiming at Georgia their mere presence poses a serious threat. They were targeting mainly Russia, which turned problematic for Georgia in connection to neighbourly intervention or radicalization of population; the United States, key Georgian ally from the beginning of 2000s; or key regional player – Turkey (McGregor 2005). The situation became the most problematic following the 9/11 attacks⁵, as many radicals were expelled from Afghanistan (Reinold 2011). The gorge became home to some Islamists with direct link to Bin Laden – like Abu Atiya or most notably even Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (McGregor 2005). What is more they (supposedly) established a production network of the biological weapon of mass destruction (WMD) ricin in Al-Qaeda set-up laboratories and the gorge was directly linked to some arrests in Western Europe in 2003-2005 (McGregor 2005; Dvali 2003; Reinold 2011). Sergei Ivanov called the gorge was a “well known destination for chemical terrorists” (Dvali 2003).

Georgian government denied the accusations about Chechen insurgents and terrorists in the gorge until 2001 when Shevardnadze first admitted Chechen guerrillas might be present in Pankisi (Freedom House 2002). Georgian army has conducted several arrests to counter kidnappings, drug smuggling and crime, as well as the hiding militants. Even though they concluded the operation as successful it had no effect on the militants among refugees and Islamists presence, as Waters remarks “given the sorry state of Georgia’s security forces it would be surprising if they were (*successful*)” (Waters 2002). Progress came only with the initiation of US led GTEP, a subordinate operation of Operation Enduring Freedom, initiated to help Georgia⁶ combating terrorists on its territory. This help not only established the US-Georgian ‘honeymoon’ of cooperation but also enabled its forces to make concrete progress of elimination of threat and to re-establish control of the gorge by Georgia (Reinold 2011).

There is an alternative story of the terrorist threat in Pankisi outlined by McGregor (2005). The author argues that the threat of terrorists in Pankisi gorge was exaggerated and that it foremostly served interests of major players – Russia as a ‘common cause’ to attack and destabilize Georgia; Britain in justifying its involvement in Iraq; and the US to train Georgian army in order to protect key energy infrastructure on its territory (McGregor 2005). However, as it became clear during 2008, the anti-terrorist training proved to be little success in this

⁵ Among others thanks to the newly established War on Terror and great concentration on Al-Qaeda and Bin Laden associates by the US.

⁶ The US made clear, especially to Russia, that its forces are not conducting any operations and are only in Georgia for material help and are training Georgian forces (Reinold 2011).

type of tasks. Russia likewise, could justify the attacks on the basis of presence of Chechen insurgents in the gorge.

The third point – *Neighbourly interventions* – is another aspect of spillover present as part of the Pankisi gorge crisis. First allegations of Russian violations of Georgian airspace and bombing targets in the gorge came as early as 2001 (Freedom House 2002). These occasional attacks were common until 2004, accompanied by its attacks in the Kodori gorge, another problematic region in the mountains bordering Abkhazian territories (Freedom House 2005). The bombings and landmine drops produced some civilian casualties, and bitter remarks were dominating the communication between Georgia and Russia during these years (Reinold 2011). There were, likewise, accusations coming from the Russian side, that Georgia was directly aiding Chechen fighters and supplying them with weapons (Reinold 2011; Jafalian 2011).

Such accusation is, however, very likely false. Firstly, due to another spillover aspect – *Secessionism breeds secessionism*. Georgia could not afford to aid separatists due to danger from own separatist territories. At this time there was besides Abkhazia and South Ossetia also a danger of separatism in the regions Ajaria and Javakheti. Chechen fighters and mercenaries were also a helping force in the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts so Georgia would virtually provide weapons to its own enemies. Last but not least Georgian assistance would probably be very little help and the threat of massive Russian response would be too high.

The *Radicalization of population* element of spillover was relatively low in the Pankisi gorge itself besides the terrorist element. The ‘traditional’ Muslim Kists may have felt that the Wahhabis are betraying their culture, as was shown by their opposition to the establishment of Sharia court in the village Duisi (Sanikidze 2007), however, there was, due to their position and small number, little they could do.

The bulk of population radicalization in Georgia occurred in the anti-Russian agenda, and the crisis in Pankisi was one of the main reasons for more radical position. Russian violations of Georgian airspace were since about 2001 a reoccurring image until the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and were, likewise, one of the reoccurring arguments for anti-Russian political course of the country. The difficult question of Russian withdrawal of its troops from bases in Georgia was also negotiated at the same time as the crisis and was certainly affected by the cross border tensions in Pankisi. Radicalization of population against Russia culminated into

the Rose Revolution and related events which changed the course of the country. Full blown war in between the two countries in 2008 indeed had many different causes, but the Pankisi airstrikes and related political tensions were one of them. The US-Georgian military assistance initiated by GTEP was source of criticism by Russia already in 2002, and further cooperation played a strong role in the wake of the 2008 war (Ellison 2011).

Economic losses are difficult to determine, as the authors also note, and especially the secondary ones. The direct cost of the spillover in Pankisi was mainly in the cost of renewing control and eliminating militants and terrorists in the valley by Georgian security forces⁷. Costs associated with crime, smuggling or drug trafficking are another reminded by Byman and Pollack, and present in the gorge (Byman and Pollack 2007; Sanikidze 2007; Dvali 2003). The indirect costs are mainly loss of trade and trade capacity or the neighbour or frightening of potential investors or trade partners due to increased violence in the region (Byman and Pollack 2007: 43-44). As mentioned the effects of neighbouring civil war are impossible to determine from macroeconomic data, but for example the yearly GDP growth of Georgia fell by almost 1% in 1999 at the outbreak of Second Chechen war, and got to the original level only after the Rose revolution in 2003⁸ (World Bank 2016a).

Terrorist safe havens

Terrorist safe havens are key success aspect of many, especially Islamist, terrorist movements as they allow for operational and organizational tools to flourish (Kittner 2007). In other words, they can achieve funding (through criminal activities or smuggling but also charities, taxes or services to local population or refugees); communication networks; training and recruitment; or logistic networks and travel (*ibidem*).

First aspect needed for emergence of terrorist safe havens are *Geographical Features*. Kittner mentions terrain which benefits the terrorist group's activities is needed, especially then countries with rugged terrain to ensure inaccessibility or local and central authorities (Kittner 2007). This condition is perfectly met by Pankisi gorge given by its remoteness, location within the mountains, poor infrastructure or lack of multiple access points. Natural geographic features serving to conceal terrorist activities (like mountain hiding points in Pankisi), or open borders which allow easy movement of people, equipment but also ideology (likewise an

⁷ This cost should be long term in order to secure the security situation in the gorge, however, due to recently emerging information about radicals in Pankisi in last years, it might have been under estimated.

⁸ Although this drop could be attributed to many reasons, like the Asian financial crisis, and virtually the same trend could be also observed for example in Moldova.

aspect of the mountain border with Chechnya), are also helpful (*ibidem*). Developing countries often lack resources to effectively control their borders, as was case for Georgia especially in such tough terrain (Dvali 2003). Lack of border control encourages criminal activities, smuggling or drug trafficking – a problem in Pankisi even in the 1990s (Freedom House 2001), terrorist then, as the author mentions, can cleverly exploit the situation not necessarily initiated by them to seek operational tools like weapons, equipment or sources of founding (Kittner 2007).

Weak governance means state failure to ensure central authority over its territory, failure to ensure safety, failure to provide public services and needs of population, maintain political legitimacy and control working economy (Kittner 2007: 310). Georgia since the end of its civil war was not controlling significant part of its territory, Abkhazia and South Ossetia is outside of its control until today, but at the time of the crisis besides Pankisi also Ajaria, Kodori gorge and partly Javakheti were out of central control (Cornell 2001). Safety was likely an issue besides Pankisi also with Abkhazia and Kodori gorge, and also issues like kidnappings were more common image in Georgia in the 1990s (*ibidem*). Public services were minimal to non-existent in this era throughout the whole country and especially the mountainous regions. The economic situation was still poor in the 1990s and as presented above, the time between 1999 and 2003 there has been a drop in GDP growth. The government had enormous problems to maintain legitimacy in the midst of those events which led to its fall and the Rose revolution in 2003. Moreover, terrorists seek countries which are failing enough to provide them with favourable conditions but also maintaining enough legitimacy to prevent large scale foreign intervention against them (*ibidem*). Existence of ‘Brown areas’ or pockets of instability such as Pankisi is enough for them to function (*ibidem*).

The accompanying aspect is *Corruption*, abuse of power for private gain. The sources include all forms of corruption, and in the Georgian case especially cronyism and shadow economy were common in the Shevardnadze era (Mitchell 2004). Throughout the observed period Georgia was few places from the last in the Transparency International Corruption index, at 2003 it even was on the 124th place out of 133 (Transparency international 1999-2004). Corruption at the high level encourages corruption at all levels, both public and private (Kittner 2007), and, moreover, the level of shadow economy and personal business outside of law was significant in Georgia since the Soviet times. It makes functioning of terrorist groups and their funding much easier, and widespread corruption is one of the leading causes of

poverty, economic underdevelopment, and failure to establish democratic institutions and norms (*ibidem*). Corruption is therefore both direct and indirect aspect of emergence of terrorist safe havens. Last but not least, corruption is closely associated with crime, smuggling or drug trafficking, effect of which was elaborated earlier, terrorist safe havens are just the next step (*ibidem*).

Following the civil war Georgia was largely disintegrated with many problems remaining unresolved, *History of violence* in combination with all the above described elements contributed to a state which Kittner identifies as culture of violence (Kittner 2007). In the (many) areas with little control from the government – such as Pankisi – other actors like separatists, foreign militants, criminals or even individuals begun using violence which caused anarchy-like security threat, which the people are facing. As outlined in the first chapter, the people in Pankisi turned to militia groups and terrorists as guarantors of their security. Terrorists are then attracted to places of anarchic culture of violence besides for the freedom to recruit, train and plan, also for abandoned weapons⁹ or for disenfranchised potential recruits (*ibidem*).

Last but equally important element is *Poverty*. As Kittner cleverly warns, the notion of direct link between poverty and terrorism was debunked some authors in the 2000s, nevertheless, there is still a significant indirect link between those two (Kittner 2007: 314). People in poverty often help terrorists to establish safe havens. Poverty and unemployment was connected to the refugee crisis, but was also to great extent present between people in the valley beforehand (Sanikidze 2007), moreover general unemployment within Georgia was on average 12% in the observed time (World Bank 2016b). Unemployment and mentioned refugee and poverty related aspects like lack of food, shelter or general hopelessness are still a fertile ground for recruitment (Kittner 2007: 314). Lack of funds in Georgia, moreover, resulted in poor infrastructure and thus little governance in Pankisi gorge. Perhaps the biggest turning points for many poor people is the fact that terrorists have money, and can afford to pay tenfold of the normal price for goods, weapons or rent (*ibidem*). As stated earlier, the Islamists residing in Pankisi were often financed by various Islamist organizations. Potential recruits or facilitators then do not necessarily need to share the radical ideology and help the terrorists only for money. Lastly Kittner writes that after establishing control of the territory,

⁹ Presence of large number of Soviet weapons was a big issue in the 1990s and early 2000s in Georgia, although not so much in the Pankisi gorge (Reeve 2005).

terrorists can further deteriorate existing socioeconomic infrastructure and replace it with their own, designed towards their operations (*ibidem*).

For safe havens to emerge a combination of more factors is needed (*ibidem*), but as we see in Georgia and in Pankisi in this period virtually all of the aspects were present.

Conclusion

It was proven, that both theories have some insights on the sources of the Pankisi crisis. They, moreover, overlap in many cases like radicalization of population, difficult refugee situation with weak governance and territorial aspects, or economic losses and corruption/poverty.

The Spillover framework introduced by Byman and Pollack fits surprisingly well onto the situation in Pankisi, and especially the aspects of *Refugees*, *Terrorism*, and *Neighbourly interventions* were key ‘qualities’ of the Pankisi Gorge crisis. *Radicalization of population* is an element somehow loosely associated to the spillover from Second Chechen war, however, this loosely associated element, backed by other causes, finally sparked a full-blown interstate conflict. The *Secessionism breeding secessionism* is an aspect explaining why some events (like Georgian involvement in the Second Chechen war) did not happen. The indirect *Economic losses* were hard to correlate, but in smaller extent also occurred.

On the other hand, virtually all elements of Kittner’s terrorist safe havens theory were present in Georgia at the time, even despite the fact, that such theory is more frequently applied to regions like the Middle East or Africa. All of the aspects work together in order to explain emergence of the relatively rare phenomenon of terrorist safe haven. After going through all these aspects the presence of Afghan or Jordanian Islamists in Georgia (a fact many laymen could find strange) makes great sense.

The crisis left much good and, likewise, many not so good. It helped establish Georgia a key military cooperation with the US and later NATO, and it contributed to the 2003 Rose revolution – an event which proved beneficial to the country in almost every aspect. Nevertheless, it also marked beginning of escalations with Russia, which resulted into a war few years later. The situation today is still not ‘rosy’, not all elements of safe haven emergence were fully eliminated. Due to this fact there are new worrisome evidences of Pankisi gorge being used as a transport route of Chechen radicals on their way to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria, there are cases of WMD trade in Georgia. Above all there is evidence of

Daesh training and recruitment camps in the, still troubled, gorge, and of young Kists or refugees joining the Islamist organisation today (Mamon 2015; Vatchagaev 2015).

Resources

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