

RESEARCH REPORT

UNDERSTANDING WHY YOUTH FIGHT IN THE MIDDLE EAST THE CASE OF PANKISI



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**PEACE AND SECURITY SECTION
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report by the Center for Social Sciences (CSS) presents findings of a study conducted in Pankisi Gorge, Georgia in 2017 and 2018. The research was to respond to the active movement of young Pankisi residents to the Middle East to become foreign fighters in extremist organizations during 2014-2016, which had become a major concern for Gorge inhabitants (ethnic minority of North Caucasian origin) and the general Georgian public. According to different sources, it was mostly young men who traveled from Pankisi to Syria and Iraq; substantially less is known about how many young women may have also travelled, and why.

The CSS research examines possible factors encouraging young Pankisi natives to join extremist organizations and become foreign fighters in the Middle East. The main research objectives included studying young Kists' (both, women and men) understanding of Islam, their religious preferences and the markers shaping their Muslim identity; exploring their perceptions of radicalization and extremism; and identifying possible triggering push/pull factors. Importantly, the research seeks to better understand local women's perspectives on the phenomenon, and to possibly identify entry points for the prevention of young Pankisi residents from joining the ranks of terrorist fighters in the first place.

The analysis is based on survey results with a sample size of 403 respondents as well as findings from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews conducted with young Kist women and men aged 18-30. Considering the fact that there were no empirical data on women's perspectives on possible youth radicalization and preventive measures practiced within the local community at the time of our research (the data are collected between December 2017 and April 2018), we invited representatives of the local Women's Council as the most well-known female organization in the region to participate in group discussions. In addition, other local women selected primarily based on their role as mothers and main caregivers in local households to participate in the focus groups. Finally, we reviewed secondary data and media sources, which also informed our analysis.

Limitations of the study are mostly low levels of trust between religious communities and of 'outsiders', including researchers, related in part to religious specificities present in the Gorge, namely, the two branches of Islam practiced in Pankisi – Salafi ("new") Islam and Sufi ("traditional") Islam, but also to tensions that arose following the death of 19-year-old Temirlan Machalikashvili, a native of Pankisi, who was killed by security officials in a counter-terrorism operation in the Gorge (described further below). As a result, the CSS research team was unable to access to the leaders of the Pankisi Salafi community, as their trust of 'outsider' organizations is rather low. Therefore, the perspectives of Salafi community leaders are represented in the report mostly based on media sources. The same problem occurred in relation to older Salafi women as all the female respondents who agreed to participate in discussions are practicing Sufi Islam (i.e. Women's Council and other Kist women). However, this was not the case with younger Salafi women and men, who were willing to participate in the research. It should be noted, however, that their responses may be influenced by the tensions in the region following Machalikashvili's death. Therefore, to encompass the viewpoints and attitudes of the older generations of Salafis, more time should be allocated in the study timeline and effort made to gain their trust to participate in future studies. Furthermore, additional research to gather perspectives from younger Salafis should be conducted to understand the extent to which recent events had influenced their responses, particularly reflecting on identity markers and gender.

In addition, this research does not include responses from anyone from Pankisi who had either already been recruited or who had served as former foreign fighters, due to lack of access. Finally, in the period since the research was completed and just prior to being published, the government of Georgia adopted a new “National Strategy of Georgia of 2019-2021 on Fight against Terrorism,” it was beyond the scope of this research initiative to analyze the potential impact of the National Strategy on the inhabitants of the Pankisi Gorge or its gender dimensions, however analyzing the National Strategy, including its impacts on local women and religious and ethnic minorities, would be an important area of research in future.

Regarding further research, the CSS team believes that conducting a large-scale needs assessment of Pankisi women and girls (both Salafis and Sufis) and studying thoroughly reasons why and how the local women radicalize and engage in violent extremism, would provide valuable insights, as the knowledge in this respect is still very limited.

Given the study’s empirical character and comprehensive multi-faceted data, we hope that it complements previous studies and contributes to future work by other scholars, policymakers and the Pankisi community itself. Below are presented the key research findings and recommendations for policy makers based on the context at the time of research data were collected and analyzed (August, 2018).

Key Research Findings

- Of those surveyed in Pankisi villages for this study, 51 per cent Kist women and 47 per cent men (aged 18-30).
- The number of young Kists with tertiary and vocational education is low. Secondary school education is the highest level attained by most survey participants (67 per cent). Females outpace males in obtaining higher education degrees and VET education certificates (63 per cent and 37 per cent respectively).
- Out of those who are married (per cent), 65 per cent are women, 35 per cent are men.
- The unemployment rate is high among Pankisi youth: 83 per cent of survey participants report that

they are jobless. Out of those in paid employment 54 per cent are women and 46 per cent are men. However, more males fall under category of unemployed job-seekers (64 per cent men, 36 per cent women), whereas females dominate the category of unemployed and not seeking a job (65 per cent women, 35 per cent men).

- Level of formal education was a statistically significant factor in relation to the female respondents’ employment status, in contrast to the male survey participants.
- Among those surveyed, 60 per cent practice Sufi (“traditional”) Islam and 40 per cent follow Salafi Islam.
- Traditional Islam, practised mostly by older Kists, is perceived by Kist youth (both women and men) as “ancestral” and not the “rightful” form of Islam. Older Kists, however, regard Salafi Islam as a form of “radical” and “backward” piety, pushing the youth “too much into religion”.
- Kist youth (women and men) have stronger religious identities than their elders. Religious-based discrimination directed towards them is a powerful sentiment among youth. In contrast, older generations, socialized during the Soviet period, lead more secular lifestyles. Their personal identities are shaped mostly by ethnic and cultural markers; they have fewer grievances related to religion.
- Young study participants (women and men) tend to romanticize militarism. They regard their “love for arms” and “fighting spirit” as a significant part of their North Caucasian national identity.
- Kist youth narratives (women’s as well as men’s) feature issues concerning injustice, marginalization, provocation and religion-based discrimination of Muslims.
- Young study participants (women and men) do not perceive Kist foreign fighters in combat alongside Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh²) as either criminals or terrorists; rather, they are viewed as “true Muslims”, if somewhat naïve, who left to support other Muslims in the Syrian conflict.
- There is a tendency among young Kist women and men to interpret terrorist attacks as a response and counter-action to provocations Muslims are exposed to worldwide. Youth are inclined to place crime, war, and terrorism on the same plane.

- Young Kists (both, women and men) tend to be less tolerant of certain groups of people (e.g. those who are HIV-positive, individuals struggling with alcohol and/or drug abuse, LGBTI persons) and hold quite stereotypical gender attitudes and perceptions.
- Trust in the government and state agencies among Kist youth is significantly low. Trust between respective Sufi and Salafi community leaders is likewise strained.
- For decades the primary mechanism employed by the government to counter radicalization to violent extremism has been the criminalization of people who are directly or indirectly involved in violent extremism and terrorism. Community-based prevention activities are fragmented and ineffective.

Policy recommendations

- 1. Support legal reforms and reintegration:** Critically, the Georgian government needs to introduce legal reforms and permit Kist fighters and their families to return to Georgia. It is also crucial to provide rehabilitation facilities for the returnees and their family members. Such an initiative would engender trust among Pankisi residents and other Georgian ethnic minorities. Furthermore, returnees can be actively engaged in preventing and countering violent extremism (C/PVE) programmes. Crucially, these efforts need to be undertaken in a gender-responsive manner, to ensure that women and girls receive necessary services and protections.
- 2. Enhance local government capacity:** Awareness-raising programmes on C/PVE and gender, human rights and social cohesion should be provided to the local government. The provision of well-trained staff able to support cultural diversity and tolerance is necessary to build trust between local communities and government officials and offer high quality services to citizens, including special programmes targeting social and economic empowerment for young women and young men.
- 3. Work with media using trainings aimed at the provision of balanced news:** Media trainings aimed at providing balanced news, using gender-, religious- and culturally-neutral language, and promoting diversity would support the Kist population in reducing the stigma of terrorism. This is particularly the case for women and girls who may be returning, or who may be seen as supporting family members who travelled. Care should be taken to strengthen regional media capacities.
- 4. Ensure community-based prevention:** C/PVE trainings and guidelines should be provided to all the main stakeholders in Pankisi including administrators and teachers in local schools, local media facilities, civic organizations, religious leaders, and parents.
 - 4.1. A network of well-equipped, non-formal learning facilities should be established in Pankisi Gorge, targeting local youth. These facilities should serve as an alternative social space for youth education, interaction and personal development.
 - 4.2. Fast-track projects should be initiated to address/challenge various attitudes held by young Kists that put them at risk of alienation (such as identity-driven and ideologically-based assumptions).
- 5. Strengthening gender equality and women's rights:** Awareness-raising campaigns should be launched to provide reliable and accessible information for building a better understanding of gender equality and human rights among Kist youth.
 - 5.1. A large-scale needs assessment of Pankisi women and girls should be implemented to evaluate gender-specific social and economic conditions/barriers hindering local women's empowerment and overall well-being (e.g. early marriages, domestic violence, formal and religious education, access to job market, property ownership, etc.).
 - 5.2. A separate research should be conducted on reasons women get engaged in violent extremism.
 - 5.3. Engage women and girls in C/PVE in order to recognize early signs of radicalization and mitigate the impending conflict and violence, and advance the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and UN Security Council resolution 2242, respectively.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE GENERAL CONTEXT

The research report focuses on young residents of the Pankisi Gorge who became foreign fighters in the military conflicts of Syria and Iraq. The movement of youth to the Middle East is one of the main challenges for Gorge inhabitants (the Kist ethnic minority) and the general Georgian public especially in the period from 2014 to 2016. “Kist” is a Georgian name to identify an ethnic group originating from the North Caucasus – mostly Chechens and Ingush people who share the collective ethnonym “Vainakh” and who have lived in Georgia for around two centuries. Kists officially became citizens of Georgia during the establishment of the first independent Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918–1921). Today, most Kists have Georgian or Chechen surnames and speak fluent Georgian (Zviadadze, 2016). According to the 2014 Georgia Census, up to 6,000 Kists live in villages in Pankisi, including: Duisi, Dzibakhevi, Jokolo, Shua Khalatsani, Omalo, and Birkiani.

The Pankisi Gorge (also known as Pankisi Valley) is in the Northeastern part of Georgia in the region of Kakheti (Akhmeta municipality). This region Georgia shares a border with the Chechen Republic and the Republic of Ingushetia, which are federal republics of Russia. In the early 19th century, Vainakhs began to migrate to the high mountainous regions of Georgia such as Tusheti, Pshavi, Khevsureti and Khevi (Siprashvili, 2014). Historical sources refer to the following factors that forced the North Caucasian people to seek refuge in Georgian lands: Caucasian Wars held during the Tsarist regime; traditional blood feuds (the blood-for-blood revenge custom of the Caucasian highlanders); avoiding the *baytalvaakkhar* custom of confiscating surplus property (if it exceeds a certain level of wealth) from an owner to re-distribute among other members of a tribe; and the influence of Islam. In the 19th century, the Vainakhs were still following old pagan beliefs infused with the local cultural elements of highlanders (Siprashvili, 2014). In the early 19th century, however, Islam became important to the North Caucasian people for to preserve their national identity and political autonomy from the Orthodox Christian Russian Empire (Moore and Tumelty, 2009; Zviadadze, 2016).

Later, under Soviet rule, when power shifted from religion and religious institutions to the state, the secular policy of the Soviets intensified the assimilation of Kists into the Georgian population. Despite ethnic differences, all people had equal access to education and jobs; Kists worked side-by-side with Georgians on local farms producing collective goods and they shared some Georgian traditions. It is also noteworthy that during the Soviet period, Kists did not have much contact with Chechens (Siprashvili, 2014). In the period of economic hardship and political instability following the collapse of the Soviet Union, some Kist families went back to Chechnya in the early 1990s and stayed there until the first Russian-Chechen war in 1994. Afterwards, many Kists decided to return to Georgia. However, the largest return of Kists, and the migration of Chechen refugees, to Georgia took place during the second Russian-Chechen War of 1999. Up to 8,000 Chechen refugees found shelter in Pankisi villages where they were hosted mostly by local Kist families (Siprashvili, 2014; Zviadadze, 2016).

The early 2000s were a turning point in the changing social dynamics of the Pankisi Gorge. Due to the high level of migration of Chechen separatists to

Georgia, the political environment in Pankisi became complicated and turned the Gorge into a popular spot for trafficking in firearms, drugs and human beings (Kurtsikidze and Chikovani, 2002; Goguadze and Kapanadze, 2015; Zviadadze, 2016; Gelava, 2016). The Georgian central government (under President Eduard Shevardnadze, 1995–2003) had no power to control the region. The government preferred to avoid any forceful intervention due to the risk of consequences dangerous to the entire country (Kurtsikidze and Chikovani, 2002). At the same time, Pankisi gained international media attention because the administration of the United States of America regarded it as a meeting point for Al Qaeda and other international terrorists supportive of Chechen rebel fighting and terrorism worldwide (LaFraniere, 2002; CRS Report for Congress, 2003; The Nixon Center, 2003; Wilhelmsen, 2005). Moreover, the Russian government asserted that Georgia was sheltering terrorist formations among the Chechen refugees on its territory and supporting terrorist activities against the Russian administration (Kurtsikidze and Chikovani, 2002; Zviadadze, 2016).

In February 2002, the United States launched the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) after President Shevardnadze requested counter-terrorism support from the Bush administration in October 2001 (CRS Report for Congress, 2003). The government also had its own political agenda in Georgia due to presumed connections to Al Qaeda which the United States saw as “using Georgia as a conduit for financial and logistic support for the mujahidin and Chechen fighters” (CRS Report for Congress, 2003, p. 2). The support was welcomed by the Georgian government as it offered a real possibility to regain control over the Gorge (The Nixon Center, 2003). Formally, the training program began in May 2002 and it took several phases to upgrade the Georgian soldiers (CRS Report for Congress, 2003). According to Valery Khaburzanina, Georgian Security Minister from 2001 to 2003, the Security and Interior Ministries managed to “convince” most of the large formations of Chechen rebels and international mujahidin³ to leave the Gorge peacefully by mid-2002 (CRS Report for Congress, 2003).

1.1 Recent Developments: 2003 – Present

Under the rule of President Mikhail Saakashvili from 2003 to 2012, special military operations to cleanse the Gorge from criminals and gangs and strengthen

Georgian borders with the North Caucasus continued even after the 2003 Rose Revolution. The Lapankuri special operation in August 2012 ended up killing several young Kist men and eroding trust in Saakashvili’s government among the Pankisi population (Zviadadze, 2016).

During the “Georgian Dream” period of rule (2012–present), international media attention was again drawn to Pankisi Gorge when young Kists began joining jihadist formations in the Syrian and Iraqi military conflicts, especially during the 2014–2016 period. According to Clifford (2017), 28 per cent of foreign fighters from Georgia were not ethnic Kist; the official databases and media sources contained the names of ethnic Georgian Muslims from the Adjara region (the seaside in southwestern Georgia) and representatives of Georgia’s ethnic Azerbaijani population as well (Clifford, 2017). However, since most Georgian-born foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria were ethnic Kists, Pankisi received greater local and international attention than other regions. Various sources claim that almost 200 Georgian citizens have gone to fight in the Middle East since 2011 (Goguadze and Kapanadze, 2015; Clifford, 2017). In addition, at least eight of the Kist foreign fighters became mid- to senior-level commanders (military emirs) in the various jihadist groups across Iraq and Syria (e.g. ISIL, Jeish al-Muhajirin wal-Ansar, Junud al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ajnad al Kavkaz) (Clifford, 2017, p.5). Official sources, however, claim that 50 Georgian citizens fought in the territories of Syria in 2015. A 2017 report lowered the number to 30 (The Report of the State Security Service of Georgia <https://ssg.gov.ge/uploads/ანტაქრითქებნ/SSSG%20REPORT.pdf> 08/2015-12/2015 and 01/2017-12/2017). ISIL, Jeish al-Muhajirin wal-Ansar, Junud al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ajnad al Kavkaz)(Clifford, 2017, p. 5). According to the latest official data, more than 20 Georgians were fighting in the ranks of terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq in 2018. However, there were no new cases of traveling to the Middle East by the citizens of Georgia observed during 2018 (The Report of the State Security Service of Georgia <https://ssg.gov.ge/uploads/ანტაქრითქებნ/SSSG%20Report%202018.pdf> 01/2018-12/2018).

It is also noteworthy that the first wave of Georgian militants having sufficient combat experience were mostly affiliated with Al Qaeda or other jihadist groupings while second-wave Georgian-born fighters, who

were much younger (with an average age of 25 at the time of their death) and had no military background, were mostly recruited by ISIL (Clifford, 2017, p. 6). Since young and non-skilled fighters were typically used as “cannon fodder” or suicide bombers on the front lines of battles (Schmid, 2015), the death rate among second-wave Georgian combats was significantly higher (Clifford, 2017). However, these young Kist men are not an exception as international experience shows that most of those recruited to ISIL were males in their early twenties (The Soufan Group, 2015).

Substantially less is known about the participation of Georgian-born women in Syrian military conflicts. However, a few cases of Georgian women travelling to Syria appeared widely in the local news. For example, a 17-year old high school girl from the village of Jokolo left the Pankisi Gorge in May 2015. She married Beka Tokhosashvili who had migrated to Syria a year before and was fighting with ISIL. The Ministry of Internal Affairs claimed that the girl had her parents’ consent and legally crossed the border. A couple of weeks later, news spread about two young ethnic Azerbaijani women (Ana Suleimanova and Irada Gharibova) from the village of Karajala who had left for Syria. While these few cases captivated the media, some experts claim that the number of Georgian women travelling to Syria is even higher –although there is no official data on this issue (Sigua, 2015; Burchuladze 2015; Kvakhadze, 2018).

Alexandre Kvakhadze (2018), a researcher at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, discusses some of in his recent study writes that during the motivations and roles fieldwork in Georgian regions the research team gained information about twelve Kist women from Pankisi Gorge who traveled to Syria and Iraq. Their average age was 26 and most of them had school education. According to the author, two female interviewees themselves traveled to Aleppo and Raqqa. As one of women migrants from the North Caucasus the female respondents related to Kvakhadze, she visited her daughter in law in one of the “Houses of Widows” where the living conditions were quite harsh. According to the respondent, though the widowed women are encouraged to marry other fighters, they are not forced to do so. One of the respondents even mentioned that there was a case of fictitious marriage between a widowed Kist

woman and a Kist fighter just to prevent her from other marriages.

According to Kvakhadze, religious radicalization or ideology was not the main driving force for Kist women to travel to the Middle East. He suggests that but loyalty to their husbands is the main driving force behind women leaving their homes for Syria and notes that there are areas in the territories of Syria and Iraq that offer sufficient infrastructure and living conditions for a fighter’s wife. Unlike other jihadist women, the Georgian women did not write propaganda poetry or prose and family to lead a relatively peaceful life did not participate in any decision making processes or ISIL combats; they were under strong control of their spouses and occupied with household chores and rearing children. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the radicalization of women. Although there is no evidence of Georgian women participating in ISIL combat, the researcher states Several of Kvakhadze’s interviewees said that some Kist women still remain in the Middle East, they do not risk coming back to Georgia as they fear imprisonment. Among the respondents it was also mentioned that Chechen women were observed serving in the all-female al-Khansa brigade created by ISIL two Kist women managed to return with their children from Syria and they reportedly stay away from any jihadist activities (Kvakhadze, 2018).

In January 2018, the Pankisi Muslim community was shaken by the death of 19-year-old Temirlan Machalikashvili, a native of Pankisi. The young man died after being in a coma for two weeks in a Tbilisi hospital; he had been shot in the head the month before during an apparent counter-terrorism operation executed at the young man’s home in the Gorge (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Georgian Service, 2018). According to state security officials, Machalikashvili and four other Kist men were suspected of cooperating with one of the government’s most wanted Chechen terrorists, ISIL-affiliated Akhmed Chatayev. The state accused the young Kists of helping Chatayev and his team members cross the Georgian state border and providing them food and accommodation in Tbilisi. Chatayev and several of his team members were eventually killed during a 20-hour siege in Tbilisi November 2017 (BBC, 2017; RadioWay, 2018). The investigation into Machalikashvili’s death was

accompanied by a series of protests organized by his family and the Kist population in both Pankisi and Tbilisi. Machalikashvili's family demanded an investigation into the killing and prosecution of the security officer who shot their kin. They believe that the members of the security office, including the head of the state security service, and his deputy, were behind the planning of the operation and are responsible for the young man's death (Mtivlishvili, 2018; Civil.ge, 2018).

Most recently, in 2019, the State Security Office of Georgia adopted the National Strategy of Georgia on Fight against Terrorism. In the scope of counterterrorism vision, the strategy sets forth several main objectives such as collection and analysis of information related to terrorism, extremism and radicalization, timely identification and prevention of terrorism ideology and radicalization narratives, protection of citizens, state borders and cyberspace, strengthening capacities of the agencies responsible for countering terrorism, etc.

1.2 Religious Transformations in the Gorge

The religious landscape in the Gorge has gradually changed over the last twenty years. Today, two branches of Islam are practised in the Gorge: Sufi Islam, established and embraced in Pankisi villages since the early twentieth century, and Salafi Islam,⁴ which evolved in the Gorge in the late 1990s. Consequently, there are “new” and “old” mosques operating in Pankisi villages. The new mosques are known as Salafi mosques, whereas the old mosques are associated with the followers of Sufi Islam. The central new mosque, built in Duisi village in 2000, is a building complex consisting of a mosque, an Arabic school and a library. It is widely assumed that the new mosques are attended mostly by young Kists as Salafi Islam has gained popularity predominantly among younger generations in the Gorge (Siprashvili, 2014; Zviadadze, 2016; Gelava, 2016). The new mosque in Duisi is the main place for young Kists to socialize and gain theological knowledge from local Salafi followers educated in Arabic countries (Zviadadze 2016; Gelava, 2016).

Several earlier studies on Pankisi refer to Sufi Islam as “traditional” or “ancestral” Islam, whereas Salafi Islam is considered “stricter” or “radical” Islam. So-called traditional Islam is usually portrayed as a more liberal,

“open” branch of Sunni Islam, perceived as something “invented by grandfathers” (Siprashvili, 2014) and thus more interreligious and intercultural for Kists. In contrast, Salafi Islam is represented as a strongly orthodox and Qur'an-centred (scriptural) branch of Sunni Islam with an antagonistic view of ethnic customs, traditions and folklore (such as the Sufi Zikr circle dance and singing) – all of which are significant aspects of Chechen and Kist national identity and of North Caucasians in general (Sanikidze, 2007; Siprashvili, 2014; Wagemakers, 2016; Zviadadze, 2016; Gelava, 2016).

The term “fundamentalism” is often applied to identify the core principles of Salafism and the spectrum of its followers' beliefs. The “fundamental nature” of Salafi Islam, in turn, leads to an association of Salafism with violent extremism and terrorism (Schmid, 2014).⁵ As Barkaia and Janelidze (2018) argue, researchers, experts and journalists have introduced the term “Wahhabism” to describe this new form of piety that has spread throughout Pankisi since the late 1990s. As the term Wahhabism is often discussed in the context of Islamic fundamentalism, radicalism, and terrorism – without considering local dynamics – the new religious practice among Pankisi inhabitants was initially labelled as “dangerous” and “harmful” in contrast to “traditional” or “harmless” Islam. The authors refer to Wiktor-Mach's (2009) ethnographic work on Pankisi in which a dichotomous classification of Pankisi Islam (traditional Islam and Salafi Islam) is misleading. Neither branch is homogeneous but instead envisages a range of religious approaches and practices, including hybrid groups of Muslims who are followers of Sunni Islam but do not directly associate themselves either with Sufi (traditional) or Salafi Islam.⁶

As Wiktor-Mach further notes, Wahhabism, as well as Salafism, have been used in Russian anti-Chechen discourse as synonymous with extremism and terrorism.⁷ According to Gould (2011), using the term Wahhabism to signify a present-day Islam in Pankisi, without considering differences between Wahhabi and Salafi movements, paints an inaccurate picture of the overall situation in the Gorge. It is also important to mention that some sources argue that Pankisi residents are not in fact familiar with the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and basic sources

of the Wahhabi movement. Thus, there is no clear basis for connecting revival of the new Islam in Pankisi directly to the Wahhabi movement or for considering Gorge residents as Wahhabis (Gould, 2011; Barkaia and Janelidze, 2018).

While discussing religious change in the Pankisi Gorge, it is helpful to note that after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, people in many former Soviet countries reoriented themselves to religion in the search for hope and inner peace. Thus, power shifted from seventy years of Soviet secularism and state authority back to religious institutions (Luehrman, 2011).⁸ The religious revival encompassed the Christian Georgian population as well (Kekelia and others, 2012).

Religious transformations in Pankisi are also closely tied to military conflicts that emerged in the North Caucasus at the same time as well as the influx of Chechen refugees into Georgia, bringing with them the new understanding of Islam now referred to as Salafi Islam. As some scholars of the North Caucasus argue, politicization of Islam has accompanied military processes in Chechnya since this period (Wilhelmsen, 2005; Sanikidze, 2007, Moore and Tumelty, 2009).

Many public figures seeking political power in Chechnya, as well as warlords in the Chechen-led North Caucasus resistance, had instrumental motivations in using Islam in speeches and in introducing stricter Islamic policies into the country (e.g. establishing sharia courts in Chechen territory in 1999). Thus, Islam served as an effective tool for boosting one's own position and discrediting rivals, interpreting extreme situations, providing mass mobilization, expanding networks, disciplining soldiers and attracting foreign financial and human resources from networks functioning in Eastern countries such as Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt (Wilhelmsen, 2005; Sanikidze, 2007, Moore and Tumelty, 2009).

Certain groups in the same Chechen resistance movement, including fighters allegedly from the Middle East, entered the Georgian territories as refugees during the 1990s. As reported by the former Georgian State Security Minister, these fighters first came to Georgia from Chechnya during this period. At the same time, the criminal situation in the Pankisi Gorge had worsened substantially by January

2002 since foreign funding, coming mainly from Arab sources, declined after September 11th 2001. As a result, foreign militants sheltering in the Gorge started harassing the locals, including Georgians (LaFraniere, 2002; The Nixon Center, 2003). According to Sanikidze (2007), Wahhabis first appeared in the Gorge (with the status of refugees) in spring 1997. In pursuing the restoration and consolidation of "pure" Islam, they started preaching and establishing the *jama'at* (Islamic assembly) in Pankisi through converting mainly Chechen citizens and Kist youth. To ensure solid ground for *jama'at*, preachers raised funds from different Islamic organizations, sending the young Gorge natives to countries in the Middle East and even paying young people monthly to ensure their support. In addition, the central Salafi Mosque in Duisi was built by a sheikh from Saudi Arabia (Sanikidze, 2007).

As noted above, the evolution of the new piety, or religious practice, in Pankisi Gorge did not start without issue. Indeed, the process can be interpreted as following the "Islamization of radicalism" (Roy, 2017) and the "religious corruption" of rebels in the North Caucasus during the 1990s. This was a process shaped by the political and financial underpinnings of the new religion which was transferred from Eastern countries (Wilhelmsen, 2005; Sanikidze, 2007; Moore and Tumelty, 2009).

During the period from 2014 to 2016, when the second wave of young Kists moved to Syria following the 2014 announcement of the ISIL caliphate, a dominant public discourse emerged, mostly on the part of older Pankisi residents, that some of the followers of the "new Islam" contributed to youth radicalization and outflow (Information Center of Kakheti, 2014; TV Imedi, 2015; Radio Liberty, 2015). For instance, one of the main arguments put forward by Sufi elders against radical Islam reflects the belief that only its followers travel to Syria whereas Sufis, who are also Muslims, never follow this path. Representatives of the Salafi community, including the imam, however, stated that they had nothing in common with military conflicts in Syria; moreover, they did not support anyone in Pankisi joining extremist formations in the Middle East (Rustavi, 2014).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In view of the above discussion, as well as the dominant discourse concerning the new Pankisi Islam in the context of youth outflow, the Center for Social Sciences researched the possible triggers behind the decision of young Kists to join extremist organizations in the Middle East.

In line with our overall study purpose, we developed **three main research objectives:**

1. Investigate how Kist youth understand Islam and the religious preferences/practices and markers shaping their Muslim identity;
2. Explore perceptions of radicalization and extremism among Kist youth; and
3. Identify the so-called push/pull factors that might influence some young Kists to travel to the Middle East.

To address these three key research objectives, we used a **mixed-method approach**. This report reflects quantitative and qualitative data collected between December 2017 and April 2018. During the first phase of fieldwork, we obtained qualitative data through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with young Kist women and men (aged 18–30)⁹. During the second phase of fieldwork, we surveyed 403 young female and male Kists.¹⁰ 51 per cent of the respondents were women and 47 per cent were men. The design of our research instrument reflects both the Pew Research Center questionnaire for surveying American Muslims and the questionnaire of the Middle Eastern Values Studies conducted by Eastern Michigan University. We adapted the variables retrieved from the original questionnaires to the Pankisi context.

We included representatives of the **Women’s Council**,¹¹ the most well-known women-led organization in Pankisi. We also invited other Kist women (older than

30, selected primarily based on their role as mothers) to participate in the research by sharing their perspectives on young Kist movement to Syria and ways to prevent it.¹²

We should also mention several circumstances that limited our study, and therefore suggest the need for further research efforts. The researchers were unable to access leaders of the Pankisi Salafi community. As explained by local informants, local Salafi leaders’ trust of “outsider” organizations is low. It is likely that this restraint was also conditioned by the dramatic events that took place in the Gorge immediately before the beginning of our fieldwork in January 2018 (i.e. the Machalikashvili case). Therefore, to encompass the perspectives of Salafi leaders, we used existing media resources (TV and radio reports and online newspapers). As all recruited female participants willing to participate in the group discussions were followers of traditional (Sufi) Islam. We were not able to discuss the narratives of Gorge women who practise Salafi Islam. Finally, we could not use the responses of already-recruited people or former foreign fighters from Pankisi due to 2014 amendments to the Criminal Code of Georgia on joining, supporting and recruiting for terrorist organizations. These legal changes are a key reason why Georgian foreign fighters do not return to Georgia.

3. BRIEF DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

In Pankisi villages, 51 per cent of Kist young people aged 18–30 are women and 47 per cent are men. The majority of the respondents (60 per cent) are not married; 36 per cent stated that they are currently married, 4 per cent - divorced and 0.3 per cent - widowed. Out of those who are married, 65 per cent are women, 35 per cent are men. Most of the surveyed youth are ethnic Chechens and citizens of Georgia (97 per cent). When it comes to formal education, secondary school education (including incomplete) is the highest level attained by 67 per cent of survey participants. In total, 17 per cent graduated from universities and vocational (VET) colleges and 15 per cent were students during the survey period. Only 1 per cent of the survey participants do not have any formal education. Females outpace males in obtaining higher education degrees and VET education certificates (63 per cent and 37 per cent respectively).

The unemployment rate is high among Pankisi youth. Most survey participants reported that they are jobless (83 per cent). Half were still looking for a job (41 per cent) unlike the rest of the unemployed respondents who stated that they were not interested in finding a job (42 per cent). Data indicate that only 10 per cent of young Kists had a paid job during the survey period (including paid internship) and 7 per cent reported as self-employed. Almost the same proportion of the young women and men are in *paid employment* (54 per cent and 46 per cent, respectively); however, more males fall under categories of *self-employed* (71 per cent men, 29 per cent women) and *unemployed job-seekers* (64 per cent men, 36 per cent women), whereas females dominate the category of *unemployed and not seeking a job* (65 per cent women, 35 per cent men).¹³

For the economically inactive young survey participants (i.e. unemployed but not looking for a job) the main reasons cited for not seeking employment are the following: financial support provided by family, thus no need for a job (34 per cent), no higher education degree (32 per cent), no working experience (24 per cent), and taking care of the household/family members as the main occupation (25 per cent). 100 per cent of the respondents who indicated “taking care for their households/families” as the main reason for not seeking a job are women, the majority falling within the 23-30 age category (74 per cent) and married (83 per cent). On

average, there are two children under the school age in their families. It is important to mention that 83 per cent of these report that primary school education is the highest level attained (including incomplete). Only 13 per cent reported having a university degree or VET certificate.

Additionally, we checked whether marital status or having small children have any effect on the young women’s employment status and level of education. For that reason, first, we compared the groups of married and not married/single female respondents. However, there we found no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of these two groups of women ($p > 0.01$), which leads us to conclude that the marital status should not be considered as a barrier for women’s employment. The same has to be said in respect to the number of infants the married female respondents have, as it is not a factor affecting their employment situation ($p > 0.01$). However, the level of formal education was found to have a statistically strong effect on the female respondents’ employment status ($p < 0.01$), i.e. the higher level of formal education attained, the more likely the woman is employed, which is not the case for the male survey participants: the tests did not reveal any statistically significant differences between the groups of employed and unemployed young men and their level of formal education ($p > 0.01$).¹⁴

4. HOW KIST YOUTH UNDERSTAND AND PRACTISE ISLAM

The survey belied the prevalent assumption that most youth practise Salafi Islam. Indeed, among respondents 60 per cent reported themselves as followers of Sufi (traditional) Islam, whereas 40 per cent stated that they practice Salafi Islam. Among young Sufis, 57 per cent are women and 44 per cent are men. The gender distribution is different among the young Salafi interviewees where 60 per cent are men and 40 per cent are women.

It is worth noting that 62 per cent of the total sample do not go to any mosque for prayers while 28 per cent pray in the old Sufi mosque and 10 per cent attend the new Salafi mosque. The practice of praying in a mosque varies by one's religious affiliation as well; 18 per cent of Sufis go to old mosques for prayers and 82 per cent do not pray in any of the mosques. The situation is opposite for Salafi youth with 69 per cent praying in the new Salafi mosques, and 31 per cent who do not. By looking at the data through a gender lens, we can see that most of the respondents who do pray in mosques are men (86 per cent) while those who do not attend mosques to pray are 71 per cent women. In addition, of those women who do attend Mosques for prayer, the majority are Salafi women (91 per cent) compared to Sufi women (9 per cent). We asked survey participants whether they have ever read the Qur'an. The majority (54 per cent) reported that they have never read the Qur'an, 14 per cent have read it in Arabic, and 33 per cent in translation into either Georgian (96 per cent) or Russian (4 per cent). We also asked respondents about their preference to go to the Salafi rather than the Sufi mosque. Respondents cited the possibility of studying Islamic theology (80 per cent) and learning how to live following Islamic rules (57 per cent) as the main factors leading them to the new mosques (See Annex, Chart 1).

It is important to note that the survey results reflect Kist youth narratives from both focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. For instance, the main reason Kist youth cited for converting to Salafism is

their perception of a lack of comprehensive knowledge of Islam among Pankisi's older generation practicing traditional (Sufi) Islam. As our respondents claimed, young Muslim Kists could not find relevant or satisfactory answers to Islam-related questions because the elders (including the imams serving at Sufi mosques or Sufi community leaders like the Council of Elders¹⁵) do not have the required religious knowledge nor speak Arabic and thus usually read prayers in Georgian. Moreover, respondents further explained that the older generation of Kists were socialized mostly during the Soviet period. They drink alcohol, smoke tobacco, sing and dance (e.g. Zikr circle dance) and are mostly perceived as "non-religious" by the young respondents. Therefore, many youth do not consider Sufi Islam as the "rightful" form of Islam. As mentioned during interviews and group discussions, the only people with comprehensive religious knowledge, and who can read the Qur'an in Arabic, are the young men educated in Arab countries and now serving at the Gorge's Salafi mosques. Thus, respondents believe that only these men can legitimately provide the young Pankisi population with thorough information about their religion. An interesting area for further research would be to explore how young women are learning about Islam, including spaces available to them for religious education and teaching. It is for these reasons that Kist youth turn to Salafism and the theological teachings of men educated overseas to gain what they believe is accurate knowledge of Islam.¹⁶ As youth respondents note:

“For decades, we did not have a religious leader in the Gorge who would have any religious education. Can you imagine this? They have some prayers translated from Arabic into the Georgian language and they pray in Georgian. So, they don’t fully understand the meaning of this prayer. And if you go to a religious leader and ask an opinion about any religious issue, they will give you only “yes/no” answers. For modern young people this kind of response is not enough. That’s why most young people lean towards Salafism – their religious leaders know the religion better.” (Female respondent, 18–30)

“It [Sufism] was practised during Soviet times. And the older generation is non-religious across the entire country, including Pankisi. Now, we have very well-educated people who have returned from Arab countries. They hold Master’s degrees and doctorates. They have shown us this true path of Islam.” (Male respondent, 18–30)

“Though I don’t know the Qur’an very well, for me it is right and acceptable what is written down there. If the Qur’an doesn’t teach us to do something that my grandfather invented himself, why should I do that? People want to learn the true Islam and not the Islam of our grandfathers.” (Female respondent, 18–30)

The territorial coverage of each branch of Islam was also mentioned by our study participants. Based on participant feedback, while Sufism is today mainly followed in the North Caucasus and is perceived as more of an “ethnic attribute” of Chechen and Ingush people, Salafism has “spread all over the world” (male respondent, 18–30). As Zviadadze (2017, p. 12) argues, the Kists in Pankisi tend to view themselves as connected to “global Islam.” Therefore, their sense of belonging to the “virtual world of Islam” is even stronger than their affiliation to the local Salafi community. We asked survey participants to what extent they consider themselves part of the global Muslim network and the Georgian Muslim community. Feedback indicated that 60 per cent of those respondents who see themselves as belonging to the Georgian Muslim community at the same time affiliate themselves with the global Muslim community (52 per cent men, 48 per cent women).¹⁷

Another interesting point raised in discussions concerned the “advantages” of Salafi Islam in the Gorge and its positive influence on the community’s overall social life. Most of the young focus group participants stated that Salafism plays a crucial role in reducing crime and general deviant behavior in the community. Group discussion participants described the great contribution of the young Kist men educated abroad and now serving at the Salafi mosques in Pankisi villages. They see these young men as role models for the rest of the youth in Pankisi. Respondents believe that community problems such as drug abuse, theft, illicit trade of weapons and other crimes in the Gorge over the decades have been effectively addressed and condemned as a great sin in Islam during sermons delivered in Salafi mosques. Thus, participants believe that the “fear of God” cultivated in the Pankisi community made it possible to stabilize the lawless situation in the Gorge.

“The young people, who can read the Qur’an in its original language and are well-educated in Islam, gained a lot of trust in our community. This knowledge was translated into their everyday lives: no women, no smoking, no alcohol and no drugs. All this was unacceptable for them! So, they became an example to be followed by other young people in the Gorge.” (Female respondent, 18–30)

“A lot of bad things like drugs, trafficking, arms trade, etc., took place in the 2000s in Pankisi. Around that time our comrades returned from Saudi Arabia and started explaining how sinful this was. Of course, the government played an important role in improving the situation in the Gorge but so did these young educated people. There is almost no crime happening in Pankisi nowadays.” (Male respondent, 18–30)

“One should have a fear of something, whether of God or something else. As you can see, there are very few crimes such as theft and murders in Pankisi now, almost zero. I can freely say that this is because of the fear of God.” (Female respondent, 18–30)

It is critical to mention that the feedback of study participants reflects the narratives of Salafi community leaders, including the former Salafi imam of

Pankisi, Bekkhan Pareulidze. In an interview given to Open Caucasus Media on 25 January, 2017 he stated: “The situation has improved over the past few years without a doubt, and if anyone is interested they can see what the Salafis’ role was in eliminating the ills which no longer exist in Pankisi. Salafis played a great role in this. Today, you won’t find a single person who would sell or buy drugs. It is difficult to find a person who drinks alcohol or smokes in the streets. You will never hear a story about a man murdering his wife or family violence.”¹⁸

The “elimination of ills” in the Gorge is somewhat reflected in our survey results. For instance, most of the interviewees reported that it is unacceptable to drink alcohol (94 per cent) and smoke tobacco (88 per cent). However, there are various other things that were classified as unacceptable for the overwhelming majority of our respondents such as: abortion (96 per cent), marriage with a person having different religious beliefs (73 per cent) and converting to another religion (94 per cent). Divorce (32 per cent), reading literature about other religions (29 per cent) and celebration of various secular holidays (37 per cent) are the least of the unacceptable behaviors (See Annex, Chart 2).¹⁹

We would like to emphasize that most of those surveyed view Islam as the only true religion in the world (87 per cent) and believe that it offers answers to the questions to which science can neither respond nor explain (81 per cent). Furthermore, most believe that even today Islam should be practised exactly as it was in the age of the Prophet Muhammad (76 per cent). It is worth mentioning that statistically significant differences emerged according to respondents’ religious affiliation. The interviewed Salafis are more likely to report Islam as the only true religion able to respond to the issues that even science is not able to explain. In addition, for Salafi respondents it is less acceptable to shape Islamic rules to reflect modern living; thus, the religion should be practised as in the age of Prophet Muhammad (see Annex, T-test table 1).²⁰

Based on survey results, religious affiliation appears to be the strongest marker in shaping how young Kists identify themselves. Most study participants (78 per

cent) identify first as Muslims whereas 18 per cent reported they are Chechens first. The remaining 4 per cent identify first as Caucasians. However, 68 per cent of young Sufis predominantly identify as Muslims, whereas 92 per cent of Salafi respondents say they are Muslims first. Slightly more men (81 per cent) reported themselves first as Muslims compared to women (74 per cent).²¹

Additionally, respondents note that believing in God (99 per cent) and the Prophet Muhammad (95 per cent), as well as living according to the rules of the Qur’an (86 per cent), are significant components in shaping Muslim identity. Other factors include dressing modestly (73 per cent), having religious education (47 per cent), teaching Islam (39 per cent), defending Islam using arms (21 per cent) and knowing Arabic (19 per cent) (see Annex, Chart 3). Nevertheless, further analysis reveals that participant feedback varies according to religious affiliation and the differences are statistically significant.²² For instance, compared to Sufi respondents, Salafi interviewees are more inclined to stress the importance of following the rules of the Qur’an as an essential part of Muslim identity. Also, Salafis are more likely to believe that knowing Arabic and dressing modestly is critical to being Muslim.²³

As the survey data indicate, **Islam is a critical marker in shaping Kist identity, especially for young Salafis** who feel less comfortable with the idea of altering traditional Islamic rules. In subchapter 1.2, we describe Salafi Islam as a text-centered (the Qur’an, Hadiths) branch of Sunni Islam and more “fundamental” (orthodox) in character. As stated by Pankisi Salafi community representatives themselves: “For us, as for the true followers of Islam, so-called Salafis, religion comes in the first place and only then comes adat.”²⁴ It happens to be in opposition for the followers of traditional Islam” (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center, 2016). Indeed, the survey findings reflect this sentiment held by Salafi community members in the Gorge.

We also asked respondents about their vision of Islam in the context of democratic values. Survey participants think that the rules and principles of Islam do not contradict the core values of democracy. Rather, many believe it is the other way around

with 42 percent stating that Islam teaches/calls for freedom and equality for all humans and 28 per cent think there is no inconsistency between Islam and democracy at all. Furthermore, as 78 per cent of respondents claim, it is very important to acknowledge different people as equals. However, while a substantial number of those same respondents believe Islam teaches people about freedom and equality, many consider it unacceptable to live in a neighborhood with the following groups of people: those of African descent (21 per cent), HIV-positive individuals (49 per cent), people with mental health issues (50 per cent), those struggling with alcohol and/or drug abuse (82 per cent), LGBTI persons (84 per cent) and sex-workers (88 per cent).²⁵

While discussing the relationship between Islam and democracy, it is important to observe the attitudes of young people in Pankisi regarding state laws. As reported, obedience to state laws is important for 94 per cent of those surveyed (women 51 per cent, men 49 per cent). In addition, 71 per cent think that along with the Qur'an, it is also necessary to govern through state laws (women 54 per cent, men 46 per cent). However, while respondents believe obeying state laws is important, they also report that it is unacceptable to make state laws superior to religious ones (49 per cent). Indeed, they believe that it is acceptable to restore justice without involving the police or courts (64 per cent) and that there is no need for state law as there is the Qur'an (26 per cent).²⁶ Such inconsistent attitudes lead us to conclude that **the young people of Pankisi have an ambiguous understanding of equality, the significance of state laws and democracy itself. Thus, we contend that this weak understanding is a crucial point for further consideration.**

When it comes to gender roles and perceptions, survey participants are conservative: 64 per cent believe that the final decisions in a family should be made by men; 46 per cent believe that having a job is more important for a man while having a family is enough for women's self-realization; 55 per cent report that women are not allowed to travel alone and 36 per cent agree with the idea that women should be punished if they act against the will of men (see Annex, Chart 4). Respondents' visions of the distribution of gender roles are also traditional. Activities such as washing, cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children (feeding, changing clothes, bathing) are perceived largely as "female jobs" whereas repair work, for example, is a "male job". At the same time, respondents assume that bills should be paid by women and men equally (75 per cent) (see Annex, Table 3).²⁷

Additionally, we checked for any differences in the perceptions of survey participants based on their gender, religious affiliation and education. Based on the independent samples T-test results, the response choices of female and male respondents vary and this difference is statistically significant.²⁸ For instance, compared to female respondents, males tend to think that men are smarter, higher education is more important for boys, final decisions in the family should be made by men and so forth (see Annex, T-test Table 2). We noted that Salafi respondents express more conservative/traditional gender attitudes compared to Sufis. Finally, respondents with higher education tend less to support traditional gender attitudes than those without higher education (see Annex, T-test Table 2).

5. KIST FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: DISCUSSING THE REASONS AND ATTITUDES

In the following subchapter, we introduce the survey results and qualitative study findings concerning young Kist attitudes about extremism, terrorism and foreign fighters in the Middle East. We begin with survey results indicating that the clear majority of respondents think it is unfair to call ISIL combatants “terrorists” (80 per cent). Among this majority, 86 per cent are men and 74 per cent are women. We also asked respondents to share their opinions about Georgian foreign fighters. Georgian foreign fighters are described as “inexperienced young people” (24 per cent), “true followers of Islam” (23 per cent) and “the young people who had no opportunities for self-realization in Georgia” (22 per cent). Fewer respondents hold the view that the Georgian foreign fighters have become “victims of the extreme ideology” (15 per cent) or are “taken to Syria deceptively” (11 per cent). A small group of respondents who described the fighters as “heroes” (6 per cent). Moreover, 81 per cent believe that Muslim Georgians arrested and accused of collaboration with terrorist organizations are mostly innocent. Only 19 per cent think that those who were prosecuted were, in fact, dangerous people.²⁹

We also asked respondents whether killing people can be justified for certain political, social or religious reasons. Most participants (73 per cent) reported that killing people is never justified (55 per cent women, 45 per cent men), whereas 27 per cent think it can be justified sometimes (34 per cent women, 66 per cent men). However, among those respondents who believe killing people cannot be justified in any circumstance, 27 per cent still reported that “fighting for God (Allah) at the cost of their own or other peoples’ lives” is important (25 per cent women, 31 per cent men). Slightly less (23 per cent) think that “fighting for God (Allah) at the cost of their own or other peoples’ lives” is somewhat important (21 per cent women, 24 per cent men). Moreover, as the results of additional statistical tests indicate, compared to Sufi respondents, Salafis are more likely to think of the Georgian foreign fighters

as true believers and to accept the idea of fighting for God (Allah) at the cost of their own or others’ lives (See Annex, T-test Table 1).³⁰

The focus groups and in-depth interviews thoroughly addressed radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism as well as factors driving young Kists to leave Pankisi for the Middle East. Before presenting the main findings derived from our participant narratives, we would like to briefly review the push and pull factors shaping the motivation of young Kists to join military (jihadist) organizations in the Middle East based on previous Pankisi studies (Sanikidze, 2007; Goguadze and Kapanadze, 2015; Zviadadze, 2016; Gelava, 2016; Clifford, 2017). It is noteworthy that many factors have been analysed at the international scale. And while the combinations may vary per different researchers, they identify certain

key factors and conditions that strongly contribute to one's religious radicalization and decision to join jihadist military forces worldwide. These include push factors related to religion, ideologies, national identity, socioeconomic and political circumstances/experiences and pull factors connected to emotional/spiritual benefits received through affiliation with a certain group of people (Schmid, 2013; Schmid, 2015; Safi, 2016; Saltman and others, 2016).

According to the literature, these **factors are related chiefly to religion** (decreased authority of the traditional, i.e. Sufi Islam and the spread of Salafi Islam), **ideology** (belief in the oppression and discrimination of Muslims all over the world), **national identity** (war in the Middle East perceived as a continuation of the unresolved Chechen-Russian political conflict), **financial conditions** (prevalent unemployment and financial hardship in the Gorge), **lack of formal/informal education** among Pankisi youth, **well-established mobilization/recruiting facilities** in the Gorge and **personal grievances**, including the feeling of failure and identity crisis.

Most of these factors also appeared in the narratives of focus group participants and were usually referred to as explanations or even justifications for their counterparts' decisions to join extremist military formations in Syria (as mentioned in the section on research methodology, we did not interview either former foreign fighters or recruited young Kists). For instance, factors related to ideology and national identity were noted while discussing Muslims oppressed by the Bashar Assad political regime, which in turn was supported by Russian military forces. Thus, an opportunity to gain "revenge" and fight against Russia alongside Chechen combatants from the Northern Caucasus was stressed as one factor motivating young Kists to join formations serving ISIL. As Siprashvili (2014) argues, since the 1990s the warriors fighting for the independence of Chechnya against Russia have symbolized freedom and bravery for many young Kists.

According to study participants, young Kist foreign fighters in Syria had nothing to do with religious radicalization³¹ and terrorism. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, 80 per cent think that it is unfair to call the foreign fighters terrorists. Instead, the younger fighters

had a simple, if naïve, desire to support their Muslim brothers and sisters in the Middle East. Participants believe that fighters did not understand the negative results of the decision including increased violence and aggression towards Muslims worldwide and the lifetime label of terrorist. Respondents cite the "fighting spirit" (meaning courage) of Chechen people as well as that of Pankisi Kists, as another remarkable factor to consider with the push factors of national identity and ideology mentioned above. As stated during discussions with young Kists, "Caucasian people are brave and protective" (female respondent, 18–30) and "it's a psychological thing for us [Chechens, Kists] to love a weapon" (male respondent, 18–30).

Study participants tend to use the principles of Islam as a reference point to argue against the prevalent belief that financial interests motivated people to join the military conflict in the Middle East. They argue that it is intolerable in Islam to fight for wealth and that such fighting does not bring any divine grace for fighters. Describing the young Kists fighting in Syria as deeply religious people, study participants rejected the idea of any "corruption of their souls".

"It was the war against the Assad regime with the participation of Russia! it didn't really matter for Chechen people [including the Kists] in which geographical location they could fight Russia. Actually, it was a great possibility for Chechens to do both, help the Muslims and combat Russia at the same time." (Male respondent, 18–30)

"I'm always saying that those young men whom I knew and who went to Syria, they wished to fight against injustice. They saw how women and children have been oppressed and killed there. And I totally disagree with the assumption that earning money was their leading purpose. In a war one either dies, survives, or gets injured. Besides, after fighting in ISIL one shouldn't expect any success in life as he is acknowledged as a terrorist." (Female respondent, 18–30)

"I know for sure that this [Kist participation in Syrian conflict] won't bring any good results. Only the number of terrorist actions are increasing, Islamophobia is spreading, and I think ISIL is one of the main reasons for this." (Female respondent, 18–30)

“Many research reports are saying that improving socioeconomic conditions is the main purpose for people fighting in Syria. To put it simply, 99 per cent of the young people who are gone did not plan to empower themselves financially there and come back to Pankisi afterwards. That’s not true!” (Female respondent, 18–30)

“Those who left for Syria, the majority were quite religious men. It might be that some people are fighting there for money, but definitely not those from our community.” (Male respondent, 18–30)

Push factors, such as **recruiting and mobilization mechanisms**, also came up in discussions. As one of the respondents recalled, various groups had been created through social media channels and were administered by those people who had left Georgia and joined extremist formations in Syria earlier. One of the female respondents mentioned that she was a member of such a closed group on Facebook. She explained that group administrators were actively “brainwashing” group members, making them feel guilty for staying passive in the Gorge and not helping their Muslim brothers and sisters in Syria—something regarded as the key responsibility of genuine followers of Islam.

Participants in our study, especially followers of Salafi Islam, describe **the injustice of growing aggression towards Muslims worldwide**. They note that there are many forms of violence happening across the whole world, including terrorism. Respondents contend, however, that only Muslims are labelled terrorists, while other horrifying crimes, committed by non-Muslim people, are not. The situation, as one person observes “of course evokes a feeling of great protest” (female respondent, 18–30). Furthermore, respondents argue that while the presence of ethnic Georgian militants in Afghanistan is like that of Muslim Kist militants in Syria, “Georgians are acknowledged as heroes and Kists are called terrorists” (female respondent, 18–30). They further noted that the American and Russian fighters participating in the Syrian conflict and attacking peaceful civilians are likewise not labelled terrorists. Additionally, participants stressed that powerful political actors such as the United States and Russia do their best to portray to the world anything but a “peaceful Islam” (male respondent, 18–30).

Respondents brought up the 2015 Charlie Hebdo (2015) case as an example of discrimination towards Muslims. In the opinion of some study participants, the magazine editors were responsible for the provocation in the first place and this in turn resulted in a counter reaction among Muslims. Without any legal way to respond, participants argued, violence was the only option. Thus, Muslims were once again accused of organizing the terrorist attack on the Charlie Hebdo office without any consideration of the original provocation. While respondents claim to be against violence and killing people, some do believe that Charlie Hebdo received what it “deserved”.³² At the same time, participants stated that Muslims should be careful to avoid escalation as any response to provocation turns against them and feeds Islamophobia globally. In addition, some respondents stated that the word “terrorism” was unnecessarily ascribed to Muslims by powerful political actors to serve their own narrow political interests when neither crime nor war are “invented” exclusively by Muslims; certainly, people have been fighting with each other all over the world “since mankind has existed” (male respondent, 18–30).

“We do not agree with terrorism, but we saw and heard so many terrible things ... I think they deserved it at some point. It would be better not to respond, but ...” (Female respondent, 18–30)

“When the Buddhists committed genocide against Muslims, nobody said that it was terrorism. Of course, this causes our protest. We, the young people, feel great injustice. There is aggression towards Muslims and Muslims also respond to aggression with aggression.” (Female respondent, 18–30)

In contrast to younger study participants who rejected the notion of material aspirations as the underlying motivation for Kist foreign fighters, elder Kist women (members of Pankisi Woman’s Council and Kist mothers) we invited to participate in focus group discussions pointed to socioeconomic problems such as job scarcity and poverty and the lack of infrastructure and leisure facilities as critical triggering factors for the outflow of young people to Syria. It is for these reasons, the elder Kist women contend, that the promise of a materially richer lifestyle propelled young Kists to join ISIL.

“Those who left for Syria used to send photos of themselves enjoying living in the luxurious houses of the Arabs who fled. Others were influenced and also went there as they thought the houses and wealth would become theirs as well.”
(Women’s Council member)

“Well ... they [young Kists] were bored with very limited opportunities in the Gorge. Maybe they heard about lots of empty and wealthy houses left out there, in Syria.” (Kist mother)

Furthermore, **the elder women mentioned the role of the new Pankisi Islam and their leaders in encouraging young Kists to participate in military conflicts** in Syria. Although the elder Kist women did not “accuse” the entire Salafi community in this regard, they did distinguish two groups among the followers of the new Islam: those who supported fighting in Syria and those who opposed it.

“During that period [in 2014], there were two camps among Salafis – one group encouraged leaving for Syria and thought it was an obligation, while another group discouraged this.”
(Women’s Council member)

“There are differences among Salafis as well. Many of them like Salafism but they don’t leave for Syria. They just pray and sit at home peacefully.”
(Women’s Council member)

In interviews, **Kist mothers mentioned that there are not enough places for young people to socialize and enjoy themselves** in the Gorge. Thus, in their words, new Salafi mosques are the main spots for youth to interact with each other. The women suggested that Kist youth attending the new mosques on a regular basis could have been influenced by some Salafi mentors as well as their peers to travel to Syria.

“There are no places where young people can engage in social activities, enjoy their free time with friends and communicate. The new mosque is the only place to socialize and I guess all these issues come from there.” (Kist mother)

“Many of those young people, who left for Syria, did not even realize why they went there. They were under someone’s influence who worked on them really hard.” (Kist mother)

Moreover, the elder women argued that at least those young men who fled to Syria lacked religious literacy. This made them more vulnerable to misinterpretation and false explanations of the Qur’an regarding jihad. The women surveyed stated that jihad is “understandable” to them only if one’s homeland (meaning Georgia) is under attack and one should therefore defend it. However, they do not think that it is reasonable to participate in jihad launched in foreign countries. In their opinion, the only thing the young Kist foreign fighters gained in the Middle East was the false promise of “heaven”.

The research findings indicate that there are **generation-wide differences in the underpinning reasons driving some young Kists to leave for Syria**. While young respondents tend to “romanticize” the decision of other Kists to join military conflicts in the Middle East, the older study participants tend to attribute materialistic objectives to those who leave. In addition, older Kists tend to portray Salafi Islam as a “harmful” phenomenon in Pankisi, negatively influencing local youth (Siprashvili, 2014; Barkaia and Janelidze, 2019). They view the new piety as more orthodox and text-centered in character and therefore regard Salafism as a “radical” form of Islam that is “backward” and leading the youth “too much into religion” (Siprashvili, 2014; p. 67). Consequently, Salafis in Pankisi are pre-judged as “dangerous Muslims” (Barkaia and Janelidze, 2019, p. 55). This label is based on criticism of Pankisi Salafi “radicalization”, “Arabization” and “disintegration” – all of which are believed to be caused by disregarding local customs and traditions incompatible with the new piety (Barkaia and Janelidze, 2019, pp. 57–58).

While noting the generational differences, **it is important to recall that while older Kists affiliate themselves with traditional Islam, they are also shaped by Soviet influence**. The lifestyle of older Kists has long been secular (e.g. they drink wine, smoke tobacco, etc.) and they have fewer grievances related to any mistreatment directed at them for their religion. Older Kist identity is shaped chiefly by ethnic and cultural markers (*adat* comes first). In contrast, strong religious identity marks the younger generation, which has produced many converts to the new piety. There is a strong conviction among Kist youth that they suffer mistreatment due to their religion.

Discussions with younger respondents concerning Salafism highlighted the perceptions others have of them as practising a “harmful” form of Islam. In the larger context of Islamophobia, the younger respondents emphasized the stigma of terrorism on the one hand and the stigma of “backwardness” on the other hand. Young Salafi Kists defensively claimed that they do not represent any threat to the country.

“We (Kists) are given the labels that young Pankisi people leave for the war, that young Pankisi people are less modern – if you wear hijab, people think you never leave home, you are not educated, etc. And if a Muslim commits a crime, it is always labelled as terrorism. We, the young people, feel great injustice.” (Female, 18-30)

“Though we do not agree with some religious issues, it does not mean that we are able to go against our country [Georgia] or people. It never happened and I hope it will not ever happen. Kist people are very loyal to their homeland; they will not let anyone from the community do harm to the country.” (Male respondent, 25)

It is interesting to note that the narrative regarding this **sense of double discrimination** was present in a media interview with a former Salafi imam as well. According to the imam, the Salafi community in Pankisi has been exposed to discrimination both for

being Muslim and for being Salafi Muslim. He argued that associating Pankisi Salafis with terrorism and ISIL is unfair and a stereotypical way of thinking that is supported by some local Kists from the Council of Elders and non-governmental organizations who are “surviving only on lies. They keep claiming that we are a threat to the valley, that they need help, and [since] these lies help them to receive funding, they turn a small problem into a giant one” (Bordzikashvili, 2017).

In line with this statement, some of our study participants pointed to an existing tension between certain representatives of the Sufi and the Salafi communities in Pankisi. As mentioned, the tension is shaped mostly by legitimacy-related issues rather than religious differences between these two branches of Islam. Respondents explained to us that while Salafi leaders are acknowledged among the Pankisi community, and they do possess power in this sense, they are not legitimized by the Georgian government and “this is what they lack and what they want” (male respondent, 25).

6. ATTITUDES OF KISTS TOWARDS THE GEORGIAN GOVERNMENT AND APPROACHES IN PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (PVE)

Based on the narratives of study participants, the Kist community has suffered neglect by successive Georgian governments. Participants stated that since the 1990s, each government has tried to benefit from the turbulent environment in the Gorge. According to respondents, under the government of Mikhail Saakashvili (2003–2012) Salafism was portrayed and communicated to Western countries as a source of terrorism in the region. The respondents referred to the well-known Lapankuri special operation held in August 2012 in which several young Kist men – who were described by the state as members of a local armed group – were killed. Respondents claimed that government officials staged a show for international audiences and promoted the Lapankuri operation as an effort to destroy any terrorist formation in Georgian territory. As one of the participants mentioned, there was an overall suspicion that the government used (killed) its own Kist citizens to enhance its international “anti-terrorist” image.

As for the current government (2012–present), participants strongly criticized its indifferent attitude regarding young Kist outflow to Syria. Some of the study participants expressed suspicions that certain governmental representatives, like the state security service officials, were bribed and so let young Kists cross the national border easily. As the respondents explained, their doubts are reasonable considering that Pankisi natives, while crossing the national border, are typically held longer at passport control due to their ethnicity and affiliation to the Gorge. Indeed, respondents recalled cases when their compatriots were denied border crossings.

“Usually, they keep me for hours on the border asking plenty of questions ... why, from where I am coming from ... It happens even when I am entering my country [Georgia]. Anyway, it is ridiculous to say that youth sneaked out.” (Male respondent, 18–30)

It seems that **the case of 19-year old Themirlan Machalikhvili was a crucial turning point for the Kist population in creating loss of faith in the current Georgian government.** Moreover, most of the study participants described an overwhelming insecurity and sense of injustice and despair. They claim that there was no counter-terrorism operation in the

village that night (when Machalikashvili was shot in his bed) and that the real crime was committed by the government against the Pankisi community and the entire country.

“Many people in Pankisi are afraid that the security officials can come to their places and kill their innocent children. It was a shame! Can you imagine that afterwards the government authorities announced the operation was successful?! It was a crime committed not only against the Pankisians and Themirlan Machalikashvili’s family in particular, but against the whole of Georgia.” (Male respondent, 18–30)

“Before the incident with Themirlan Machalikashvili, trust towards current state institutions was much higher in the Pankisi community. Now the government is associated with a real threat to the people.” (Male respondent, 18–30)

In the opinion of respondents, the only difference between the previous and current Georgian governments, in relation to the Gorge, is that the latter has chosen Sufi community leaders (mostly the members of male-led Council of Elders) as their most trusted and “favoured” people in the Gorge. Thus, the current Georgian government is strongly criticized for its exclusive loyalty and support to only certain people (Sufis) within the Kist community. Moreover, Sufis are perceived as both a “control tool” and a “mediator” between officials and the rest of the community. Furthermore, respondents mentioned that young Salafis do not feel that they are treated as equals to Sufis.

“Like followers of traditional Islam, the Salafi people should also be acknowledged as citizens by our government. Every government has its own policy. While the previous one cooperated with Kist Salafis, the current government has chosen others [Sufis] in order to keep an eye on Pankisi. The problem is that the officials are not getting in touch with us, with ordinary people, without using some mediators.” (Male respondent, 27)

As reflected in respondent feedback, media interviews and public discussions, **some prominent representatives of the Pankisi Salafi community often stress that**

the current Georgian government does not treat its Salafi citizens the same way as other ethnic Georgian Muslims. Instead, the state prioritizes “traditional Islam” and is somewhat allied with the Sufi-run Council of Elders in the Gorge (Museliani, 2016). According to one Salafi leader, by doing so the government has split the Pankisi community. Therefore, Salafi community leaders emphasize a need for more active and balanced communication between state agencies and the Pankisi community to address the challenges of the entire Gorge population (Bordzikashvili, 2017).

Our **survey results confirm this skepticism towards the government.** Among the young people we surveyed, only 26 per cent report that the Georgian government treats its Muslim citizens in a friendly manner (50 per cent women, 50 per cent men), while 17 per cent think that it does not (39 per cent women, 61 per cent men). In addition, 36 per cent evaluate government treatment as somewhat neutral (49 per cent women, 51 per cent men) and 21 per cent have no clear opinion in this regard (55 per cent women, 45 per cent men).³³

When it comes to trusting the state, other social institutions and ethnic Georgian citizens, the survey results reveal that the latter are the most trusted among respondents (64 per cent). Georgian civil society is also one of the most trusted social actors (48 per cent) whereas Georgian state security forces (47 per cent) and Georgian banks (41 per cent) are the least trusted institutions. Trust towards the central Georgian government cannot be assessed as strong since almost the same proportion of respondents revealed the following percentages: trustworthy (33 per cent), “not sure” (34 per cent) and total distrust (33 per cent) towards the government (see Annex, Chart 5).³⁴

Respondents shared that Georgian media is one of the main social agents labelling the Pankisi Kist community as potentially terrorist. In fact, **trust towards media is quite low** at 32 per cent. Respondents attribute this labelling to the production of unbalanced news, inaccurate information and the use of “bold language” regarding events taking place in the Gorge – all of which negatively distort the image of Pankisi and its residents. Although young Muslims from the mountainous villages of Adjara have also joined

extremist formations in Syria, the media's attention remains squarely on Pankisi. Participants connect this to the fact that the Muslims residing in Adjara are mainly ethnic Georgians unlike the Pankisi Muslims. The latter are regarded as ethnic Chechens and an ethnic minority residing on Georgian territories.

"Though we [Kists] are trying hard to get rid of this irrational terrorism stigma, media keep labelling us intensively through making news based on sensitive topics such as Islam and terrorism. Say you Google the word 'Pankisi'... you will find eight news [stories] out of ten exclusively about terrorism." (Male respondent, 18–30)

"It is always easier to label ethnic minority groups [Kists]. Every time something happens there [in Adjara], the media rush to connect the news to Pankisi simply because Pankisi is perceived as a main hotspot of terrorism in Georgia. This is where all the trouble comes from." (Male respondent, 18–30)

Furthermore, we tried to identify respondent experiences related to discriminative practices, or at least unfriendly treatment, based on religious affiliation and/or ethnicity. To get as honest "yes"/"no" responses as possible, we provided a set of questions in separate envelopes. Thus, respondents had to read the questions and mark the answers privately, without the interviewer's involvement. The results indicated "yes" responses to various negative experiences respondents believed were due to their religious affiliation or ethnicity. Such experiences included the suspicion that their private calls/messages/emails are controlled by Georgian state security office (49 per cent), humiliation in cyberspace (23 per cent), feeling isolated from the rest of Georgian society (18 per cent), and not being hired for a job (15 per cent) and so forth (see Annex, Chart 6). It is important to mention that Sufi respondents tend to more frequently report that they have not experienced ill treatment from Georgian police than Salafi respondents (see Annex, T-test Table 3). Statistically significant differences by gender are observed in just two cases; compared to young Kist men, women are inclined to report that they have never experienced poor treatment from Georgian police or humiliation in cyberspace.³⁵

During group discussions, **young respondents emphasized the severe and reactive state policies carried out by the Georgian government in relation to Kist citizens.** Instead of providing special rehabilitation programmes for those people willing to return from Syria, there is only one "option" provided: a sentence from ten to seventeen years. Indeed, this is one of the main reasons why "99 per cent of Georgian foreign fighters chose to stay in Syria and continue fighting. It is better than going to jail in Georgia" (male respondent, 18–30). As Zviadadze (2017) argues, state security policies are limited to border control, and banning websites and social networks promoting ISIL. Therefore, what has been implemented on the part of the state so far is mostly limited to harsh policies to counter terrorism, sometimes even involving violence (Barkaia and Janelidze, 2018).

Members of the **Pankisi Women's Council and other Kist women** (such as the group of mothers with whom we spoke) also discussed the issue of prevention. They **stated that the key to preventing youth militarization lies in their religion.** The women noted that in Islam men are not allowed to go fighting without their mother's permission or blessing; without this step, jihad is not legitimate. Even though most Kist men ignored this rule, there were some cases when the mother's disapproval stopped the young people from leaving.

"God will not approve of jihad without the mother's permission and a fighter will not get to heaven without the mother's blessing." (Women's Council member)

"The educated men know that without the mother's permission, they cannot leave. This will not be considered as jihad. I know some cases when men didn't leave because a parent was against it." (Women's Council member)

We asked the elder women whether they have undertaken any preventive measures to stop youth movement to Syria. According to Women's Council representatives, they tried to raise discussion on this topic with the local students and "to tell them not to leave for Syria as it's not their business." However, as respondents explained, some of the youngsters left class arguing that the Kist boys are fighting in Syria against Russians – blood revenge for killing Muslims in Chechnya.

At this juncture, it is important to mention that prevention strategies by Sufi mothers mostly involve “checking” upon their children regularly to find out whether they are “too much into religion” and trying to keep away from the new Salafi mosque. One of the Sufi mothers mentioned that checking her son usually involves offering him alcohol which is strictly prohibited among Salafi followers. Another woman admitted that she prefers her son to stay at home all the time rather than see him socializing with his peers. However, even under these circumstances mothers still do not feel protected from losing their children. For instance, the propaganda videos that can be found in the Internet are also worrisome. Mothers try to prevent their children from watching such content and explain to them that killing people is a sin.

“We didn’t even let my son to go to Salafi mosque. Some parents, who permitted, had no idea that their children could transform so radically and in fact they did.” (Kist mother)

“I have a 15-year-old son and we are very afraid. We have an only child and we don’t want him to get involved in this. Sometimes when my husband comes home drunk, he calls me to give drink to our son as well. My husband is so desperate to prevent his interest in Salafi Islam that he urges him to drink.” (Kist mother)

“I caught my son several times; he was watching videos on the computer where some children and women were brutally killed in Syria. He asked me to watch this video. I made some remarks to my son and later I informed my husband too. Afterwards he stopped watching.” (Kist mother)

According to members of the Women’s Council, they are the main “female force” publicly condemning the Kist youth outflow to Syria – unlike Salafi women who have distanced themselves from such activities.³⁶ As the Council women explained, initially Salafi women were also invited to join the Women’s Council since it is a representative entity promoting diversity and respect for different opinions. However, as most Sufi Council members focused on the role of Salafi Islam in Kist movement to the Middle East, a “religious split” took place with Salafi members leaving the Council in protest. From the Sufi perspective, the Salafi members of the Council were justifying Kist participation in

Syrian military conflicts as God’s service. As mentioned by the elder women, the former Salafi members had relatives fighting in Syria. Thus, these Salafi members did not like discussing such issues openly or organizing activities aimed at prevention.

“We often gathered and held discussions about stopping the youth outflow. Of course, we expressed some aggression towards the Salafi community in Pankisi because the outflow was connected to them.” (Women’s Council member)

“They [Salafi women] did not want to participate... If you are a member of the Women’s Council, then you are part of specific acts and announcements as well. They did not like when we made announcements on behalf of the Women’s Council which were against ‘Wahhabis!’” (Women’s Council member)

In addition to the older women we surveyed, some younger female respondents were active members of the more recently founded **Youth Initiative Group of Pankisi (YIGP)**. Started in 2017, YIGP defines itself chiefly as a youth organization bringing forward the alternative perspectives of local youth, both girls and boys. As one of the female respondents outlined “exclusively the voice of Pankisi’s elderly was heard before. Our main goal is to give voice to local youth. Most young people are having problems in the Gorge nowadays” (female, 18–30). As the reasons for establishing both organizations – Women’s Council and YIGP – differ, the way the respondents see their roles in social change also varies. While the Pankisi Women’s Council is mostly built around gender equality issues, the younger female respondents are concerned chiefly with countering stigmas ascribed to the Muslim Kist community. In the opinion of the young women we interviewed, when it comes to preventive measures against Kist youth extremism, there is increasing need for awareness-raising among the youth of Pankisi regarding conflict solving skills, dealing with aggression, propaganda and fake news. The young women stated that the most pressing issue in the community is the need to work with local youth to help them deal with Islamophobia; indeed, respondents prioritized this need over the gender equality trainings often held in the community.

Focus group discussions indicated that the main only countering mechanism employed by the government is the criminalization of people who are directly or indirectly involved in extremism and terrorism via 2014 amendments made to the criminal code of Georgia. In addition, we could not track any on-the-ground mobilization of local community leaders (both women and men, Sufis and Salafis) to initiate prevention-oriented activities targeting youth. Still, one can find various

media sources covering times when Gorge residents have publicly asked the government to take effective actions against the youth outflow to the Middle East and to let Kist youth return safely to Georgia. Unfortunately, these calls have fallen on deaf ears. Since 2012, 31 Pankisi residents have died in the Syrian war – with most killed between 2014 and 2016 (Radio Way, 2018).

7. MAIN CONCLUSIONS

Below are the salient points to emerge from our research on the factors that create circumstances conducive to radicalization. The objective of the study is to harness this information to prevent future radicalization among youth in Pankisi and other Georgian regions.

First, we emphasize **the tendency among study participants to romanticize militarism and becoming a foreign fighter.** The young people we surveyed used emotionally-charged language when describing their North Caucasian national identity, speaking of “fighting spirit”, “love for arms” and having willpower to seek revenge for other Muslims. Moreover, participants do not regard Kist foreign fighters – and those of other nationalities fighting along with ISIL – as either criminals or terrorists. Rather, they are described as “true Muslims” who decided to support other Muslims in the Middle East. Study participants reject any notion that these young Kists are motivated by wealth, fame or other material benefits. Thus, participants regard it as unfair to label fighters as terrorists.

Another noteworthy point is that among participants **we observed certain narratives concerning marginalization, provocation and religious discrimination against Muslims worldwide.** This, in turn, is portrayed as a justifiable basis for organizing terrorist attacks which are explained as counter-responses to the provocation of Muslims. As discussed in previous subchapters, this kind of rhetoric is present in the narratives of Salafi community leaders as well. Therefore, it appears that the primary sources behind the statements and ideas expressed by youth are the well-respected Salafi leaders who are the main role models for many young Kists in the Gorge.

Networks serving in extremist formations established in the Gorge have been the most enabling factors behind young Kists travelling to Syria between 2014 and 2016. However, the crucial question is what made some of them more vulnerable to the rhetoric of ISIL and its local messengers? Although this issue is quite

complex, we would like to emphasize that **the main “legitimizing” circumstances that trigger some young Kists to become foreign fighters are assumptions driven by national identity and ideology.** It seems likely that by looking through the lenses of perceived mistreatment and marginalization, Kist youth of either affiliation are vulnerable to “brainwashing” by ISIL messengers and not Islam – or Salafi Islam – itself.

It is critical to emphasize that respondents see the government as a “punitive” and controlling institution in relation to Pankisi residents. As mentioned earlier, the counter mechanisms of the state are reduced to detaining people who are suspected of terrorism or supporting terrorist organizations. In addition, the criminal code of Georgia calls for prosecution in the case of returning foreign fighters. It is for this reason that potential returnees try to find shelter in different countries.

Regarding youth prevention, we did not observe any collaborative actions taken by local Salafi and Sufi community leaders either with or without the engagement of state agencies. As discussed previously, relations among these three actors are not encouraging and that might be a reason why they did not manage to create joint efforts to address youth outflow locally. On one hand, Sufi elders (both men and women) view Salafi Islam as “radical” piety and on the other hand, the Salafi community leaders argue that the Sufi elders are allied with the government, thus serving as the “control tool” and “mediator” between state officials and the Kist community. Moreover, as mentioned in the section on Salafi leadership, Sufi elders discredit Salafi Islam and its followers as a threat to the Gorge and the entire country.

In the context of youth prevention, the initiative taken by the Pankisi Women’s Council to meet school students did not seem to be effective as its members are associated mostly with women’s rights and gender equality issues – both of which are considered less pressing concerns for Kist youth compared to issues such as religion-based mistreatment at local

and global levels. At the same time, Kist youth do not regard Sufi Islam as the “rightful” form of Islam and they view those practicing it (mostly elder Kists) as “non-religious” people. Therefore, the **authority of Sufi elders (including the Women’s Council) is weak in the eyes of younger Kists.**

ANNEX

CHART 1.

Why do you attend the Salafi mosque?

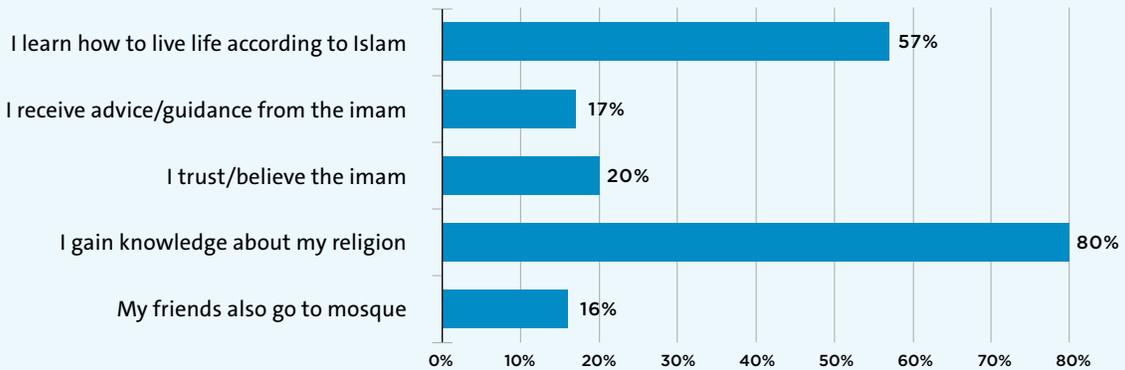


CHART 2.

To what extent is the following acceptable to you?

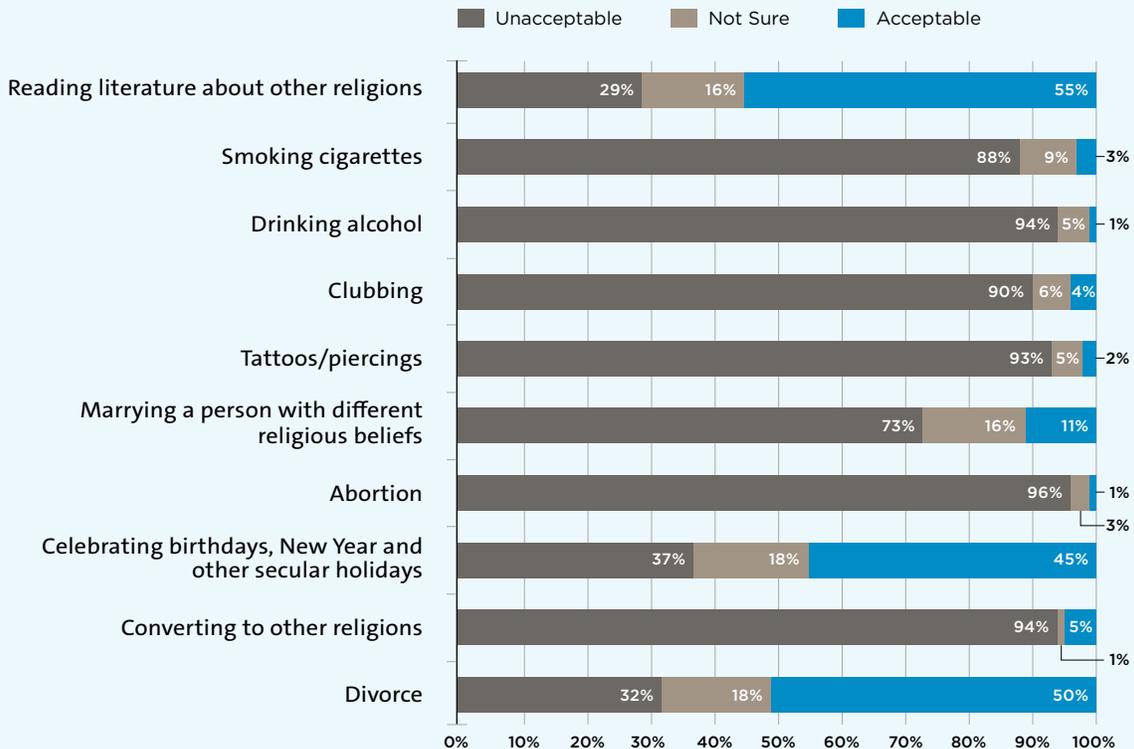


CHART 3.

In your opinion, to what extent are the following components significant in defining you as a Muslim (%)?

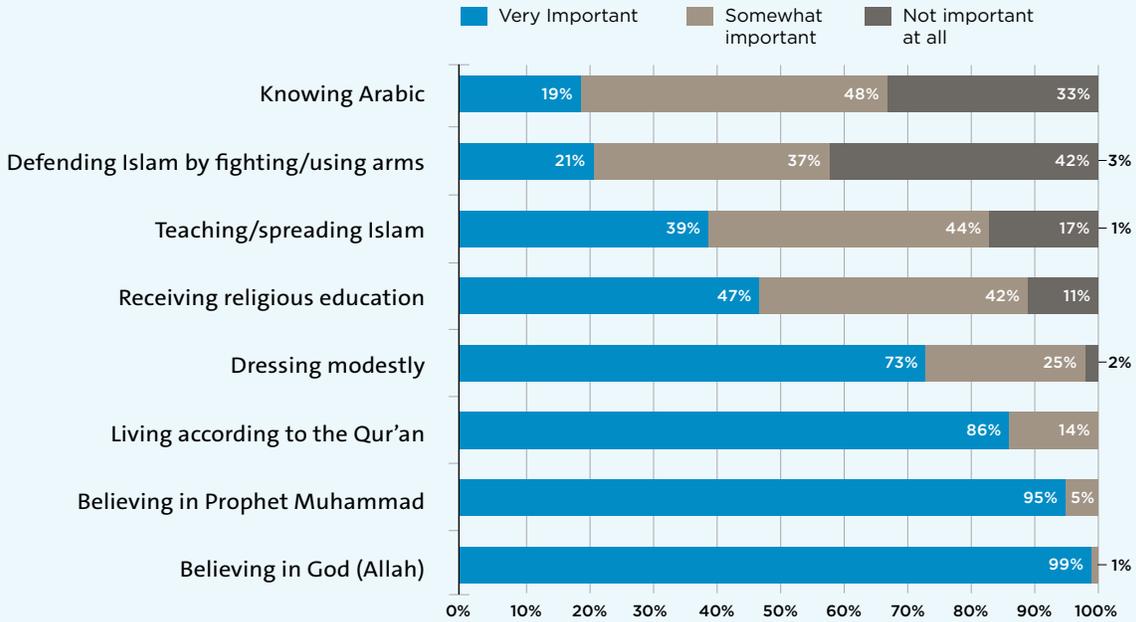


CHART 4.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

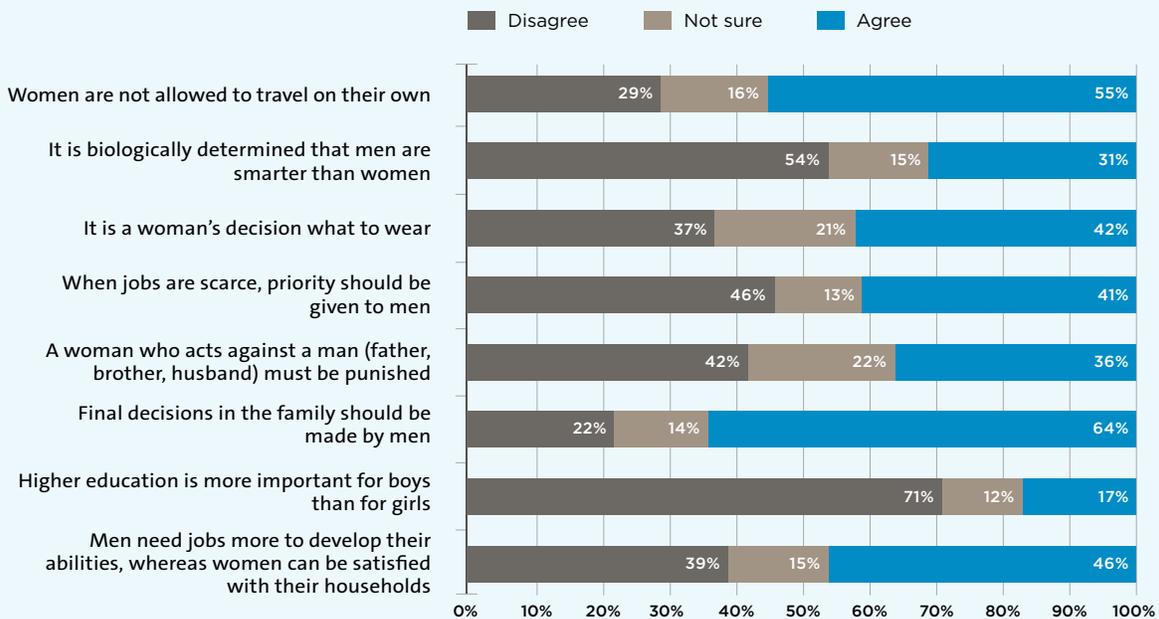


CHART 5.

To what extent do you trust the following institutions/groups?

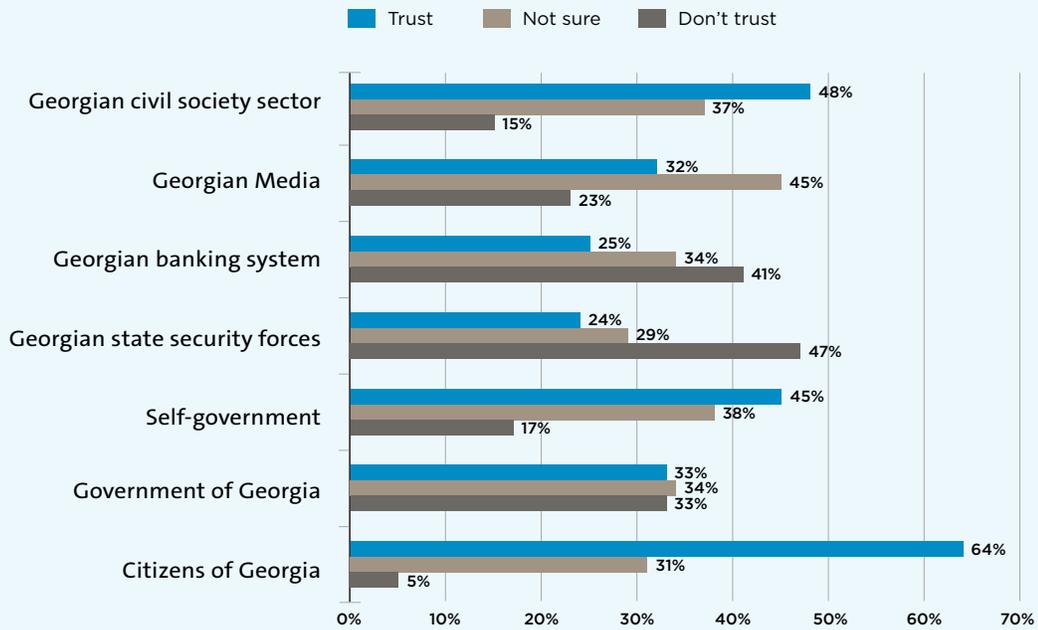


CHART 6.

Discriminative/unfriendly treatment experienced by the survey participants ("yes" responses only)

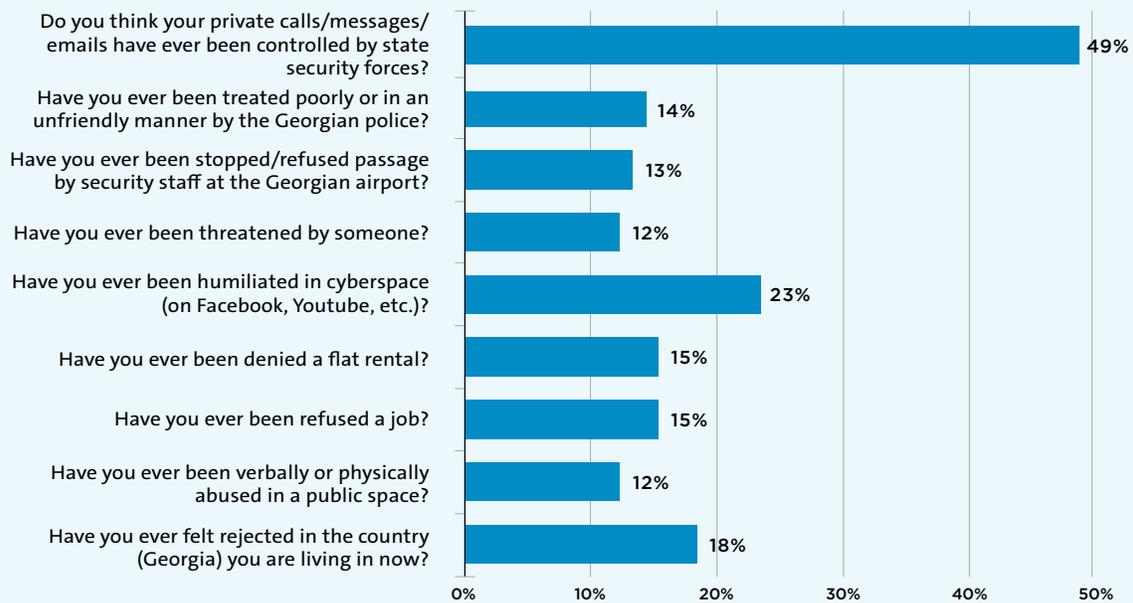


TABLE 3.
Distribution of gender roles

	Woman	Man	Both
Washing	90%	1%	9%
Repairing	1%	87%	12%
Shopping	13%	7%	80%
Cleaning	91%	1%	8%
Cooking	82%	1%	17%
Paying bills	1%	24%	75%
Communicating with children	2%	1%	97%
Taking care of child/children (feeding, changing clothes, bathing)	66%	1%	33%
Taking child/children out (to kindergarten/school/parks)	4%	4%	92%

T-TEST TABLE 1.
Respondents' beliefs by their religious affiliation.

The Independent-samples T-test results (comparison of the mean scores). *Please note that statistically significant differences are indicated with an asterisk ($p < 0.01$).*

	1 "Agree" 0 "Disagree"	It is acceptable to change traditional religious rules according to requirements of the modern world	The mosque is a central component to my spiritual life	There is only one true religion—Islam	Islam has answers to the questions that even science is not able to explain	Governing by state laws is unnecessary since there is the Qur'an	Georgian foreign fighters in ISIL are the true followers of Islam	Fighting for God (Allah) at the cost of my own or other peoples' lives is acceptable
Sufis (mean)		0.36	0.08	0.81	0.73	0.15	0.15	0.22
SD		0.48	0.274	0.395	0.445	0.362	0.357	0.414
Salafis (mean)		0.06	0.49	0.93	0.89	0.46	0.33	0.41
SD		0.24	0.501	0.258	0.317	0.500	0.470	0.494
P value		0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*

T-TEST TABLE 2.

Respondents' gender perceptions by education, religious affiliation and sex.

The Independent-samples T-test results (comparison of the mean scores). *Please note that the statistically significant differences are indicated with an asterisk ($p < 0.01$).*

1 "Agree" 0 "Disagree"	Men need jobs more to develop their abilities, whereas women can be satisfied with their households	Higher education is more important for boys than for girls	Final decisions in the family should be made by men	A woman who acts against a man's (father, brother, husband) will, must be punished	When jobs are scarce, priority should be given to men	It is a woman's decision what to wear	It is biologically determined that men are smarter than women	Women are not allowed to travel on their own
Male (mean)	0.52	0.23	0.74	0.48	0.46	0.28	0.46	0.37
SD	0.501	0.424	0.438	0.501	0.500	0.451	0.499	0.484
Female (mean)	0.38	0.10	0.53	0.24	0.35	0.57	0.16	0.2
SD	0.486	0.302	0.501	0.427	0.479	0.497	0.369	0.403
P value	0.003	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.03	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*

Sufis (mean)	0.42	0.10	0.56	0.28	0.37	0.5	0.27	0.42
SD	0.494	0.304	0.497	0.51	0.483	0.501	0.445	0.494
Salafis (mean)	0.51	0.26	0.75	0.46	0.47	0.31	0.36	0.9
SD	0.501	0.442	0.435	0.5	0.501	0.463	0.483	0.293
P value	0.078	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.041	0.000*	0.048	0.000*

With higher education (mean)	0.27	0.02	0.02	0.25	0.24	0.45	0.12	0.26
SD	0.451	0.14	0.14	0.44	0.428	0.503	0.325	0.44
Without higher education (mean)	0.47	0.19	0.64	0.37	0.43	0.41	0.34	0.43
SD	0.50	0.391	0.479	0.483	0.496	0.493	0.473	0.5
P value	0.005*	0.000*	0.111	0.111	0.004*	0.625	0.000*	0.025

T-TEST TABLE 3.

Discrimination/unfriendly treatment by respondents' religious affiliation.

The Independent-samples T-test results (comparison of the mean scores). *Please note that the statistically significant differences are indicated with an asterisk ($p < 0.01$).*

Items 1 "yes", 2 "no"	Mean (Sufis)	SD (Sufis)	Mean (Salafis)	SD (Salafis)	P value
Have you ever felt rejected in the country (Georgia) you are living in now?	1.86	0.347	1.76	0.428	0.015
Have you ever been verbally or physically abused in a public space?	1.91	0.292	1.86	0.353	0.136
Have you ever been refused a job?	1.90	0.294	1.78	0.414	0.002*
Have you ever been denied an apartment rental?	1.90	0.306	1.78	0.417	0.003*
Have you ever been humiliated in cyberspace (on Facebook, YouTube, etc.)?	1.79	0.408	1.75	0.436	0.322
Have you ever been threatened by someone?	1.94	0.724	1.85	0.359	0.125
Have you ever been stopped/refused passage by security staff at the Georgian airport?	1.90	0.300	1.83	0.379	0.046
Have you ever been treated poorly/in an unfriendly manner by the Georgian police?	1.92	0.274	1.78	0.413	0.000*
Do you think your private calls/messages/emails have ever been controlled by state security forces?	1.54	0.499	1.46	0.500	0.099

ENDNOTES

- 1 National Strategy of Georgia of 2019-2021 on Fight against Terrorism; Available at: https://ssg.gov.ge/uploads/pr/25_01.19/National%20CT%20Strategy%20of%20Georgia.pdf
- 2 Hereafter, we use the term ISIL in the paper.
- 3 Jordanian Abu Hafis (Amzhet) who led the 80–100 mujahidin in Pankisi; Ruslan Gelayev, with a group of 200–250 rebels; Doka Umarov (Khasanov) and 130–150 rebels; Hussein Esambayev with 130–140 rebels; Batya, with a band of 100–120 rebels (CRS Report for Congress, 2003).
- 4 “Salafism” and “Wahhabism” are usually used interchangeably by Georgian scholars and media outlets. Given the negative connotations of the term Wahhabism – shaped by its association with violent extremism – while discussing Islam in Pankisi we employ the more locally-accepted term “Salafism”.
- 5 According to Schmid (2014), Salafis are defined as “fundamentalists” in the sense that “they believe in the timeless ‘fundamental’ truths of a holy script that is taken literally and seen as a blueprint for the organization of a society pleasing to God” (p. 15). Historically, significant negative connotations have been ascribed to the term fundamentalism, “usually including bigotry, zealotry, militancy, extremism, and fanaticism – making it unsuitable as a category of scholarly analysis” (Munson, 2016). Islamophobia in much of Western society (Pratt, 2011) coupled with the transnational and violent “ideological project” of ISIL – which declares itself pan-Islamic and like a Salafi movement “seeking to unite the Ummah, the imagined community of Muslims” (Waldeck, 2015 as cited in Schmid and Tinnes, 2015, p. 8) – seems to underpin the idea of Salafi Islam’s “fundamental nature”.
- 6 In fact, there are diverse branches of Salafi Islam with key distinctions among them. We can refer to at least three broad Salafi groups: Purists or Quietist who stay distant from political activism and disputes and engage in educational (tarbiya) and peaceful missionary activities (*da’wa*); Political Salafis who seek to base political governance on their religious principles; and jihadists who employ military and revolutionary means for political and social transformations (Wiktorowicz, 2006, as cited in Barkaia and Janelidze, 2018; p. 53). Moreover, some scholars contend that most Salafis worldwide fall into the Quietest category (Schmid, 2014; Wagemakers, 2016).
- 7 As cited in Barkaia and Janelidze, 2018, pp. 51–52.
- 8 As cited in Siphshvili, 2014, p. 20.
- 9 Two focus group discussions (FG) were conducted with young Salafi women, two FG – with young Salafi men and eight in-depth interviews with Sufi young women (four interviews) and men (four interviews).
- 10 The sample-size (403) of our survey participants is statistically representative for the general 18–30-year-old Kist subgroup in the Gorge. Only the adults (18+) eligible to participate in the research without parents’ permission were surveyed.
- 11 Originally founded by UNHCR and supported by UN Women.
- 12 One FG was conducted with representatives of the Women’s Council and one with other Kist women (group of mothers).
- 13 Country unemployment rate by age groups in 2018 provided by the National Statistics Office of Georgia: 15-19 - 26.6 per cent, 20-24 - 30.8 per cent, 25-29 – 20 per cent.
- 14 According to other studies, the same tendencies are observed throughout the country. For further inquiry please see: http://css.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=24&info_id=1308 http://css.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=93&info_id=1038
- 15 The Council of Elders (*ukhutsesta sabcho* in the Georgian language) is comprised of local “wise” men (35 ranking members and 10 selected board members) in charge of administering the tribal court where the complaints and cases of villagers are judged. The tribal courts are held according to tribal law. The Council of Elders sees itself as a successor to the traditional *Vainakh Mekh Khiei* (the world court or council in Kist language). Today, the Council of Elders is an officially registered organization (since 2013). The status of the organization has challenged the authority of the council, especially among local youth (Siphshvili, 2014; Barkaia and Janelidze, 2018).
- 16 These narratives belong to both young Salafi and Sufi respondents. And although most of the surveyed young Kists reported being the followers of traditional Islam, only 18% go to old Sufi mosques, whereas 82% do not pray in any mosques. As shown, the situation is the opposite among the Salafi respondents. We did not ask about specific reasons why the Sufi respondents do not pray in old mosques.
- 17 There are no statistically significant differences observed based on respondents’ religious affiliation (Sufi Islam, Salafi Islam) and gender ($p > 0.01$).
- 18 According to National Study on Violence Against Women in Georgia 2017, prevalence of intimate partner violence (any type) among ever-partnered women in Kakheti region (where Pankisi Gorge is located) is 13 per cent.
- 19 There are no statistically significant differences observed according to respondents’ religious affiliation (Sufi Islam, Salafi Islam) and gender ($p > 0.01$).
- 20 No statistically significant differences were observed by the respondents’ gender ($p > 0.01$).
- 21 The differences in responses by respondents’ religious affiliation is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), which is not the case with their gender ($p > 0.01$).
- 22 ($p < 0.01$).
- 23 Here again, the differences by gender are not statistically significant ($p > 0.01$).
- 24 Set of local customary practices and traditions.
- 25 Additionally, 57% of survey respondents (N=403) think that those Kists who decide to convert to another religion deserve to be expelled from the community (“not sure” 14%, “disagree” 29%). Also, 51% (N=403) report that LGBTI people deserve to be expelled from their community (“not sure” 20%, “disagree” 29%) and 28% expressed the same attitude towards the “non-religious” (drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, not praying and/or fasting) community members (“not sure” 24%, “disagree” 48%).
- 26 According to our respondents from the Women’s Council, the representatives of the local community, men or women, always avoid seeking justice directly with the governmental

- agencies, which is considered as an ultimate source of justice only in case the Council of Elders is unable to achieve the aim. Thus, first the locals are addressing the Council which performs a tribal court according to the tribal law. Neglecting of this rule may cause serious problems and even banishment from the community.
- 27 According to other studies, the similar attitudes are observed throughout the country. For further inquiry please see: http://www.ungeorgia.ge/eng/publications/agencies_publications?info_id=77#.XTdub5NKjUJ (p<0.01).
- 28 (p<0.01).
- 29 No statistically significant differences were observed by the respondents' gender (p>0.01).
- 30 The differences in responses by respondents' religious affiliation (Sufi Islam, Salafi Islam) is statistically significant (p<0.001). The differences by gender are not statistically significant (p>0.01)
- 31 By definition of the European Commission, radicalization occurs when people embrace views and ideas that could lead to terrorism. Radicalization can be articulated as socialization in violent extremism leading to terrorism (Orav, 2015). As radicalization is a context-bound phenomenon at a given time and space, there is not always a linear connection between religious radicalization and (violent) extremism/terrorism per se (Schmid, 2013; Schmid, 2014).
- 32 On January, 2015 the Kist community gathered in Pankisi, in the village of Duisi, to protest Charlie Hebdo. One of the comments made by the protesters was that the Charlie Hebdo creators were provocative and had abused Islam/Muslims over the years. Hence, spilling their blood might not be right, but eventually they got what they deserved (Information Center of Kakheti, 2015).
- 33 There are no statistically significant differences observed based on respondents' religious affiliations (Sufi Islam, Salafi Islam) and gender (p>0.01).
- 34 There are no statistically significant differences detected by gender (p>0.01). Young Sufi Kists tend to express more trust towards ethnic Georgians compared to their Salafi counterparts (p<0.01).
- 35 (p<0.01).
- 36 We were not able to encompass the views of Salafi women in this regard. Therefore, we do not claim this is an accurate assumption as it is drawn only from one-sided judgments.

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