

# Muslims in Georgia

## Focusing on the Kist Minority in Pankisi Gorge

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Place of fieldwork: Georgia

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### Research Background

Georgia is one of the former Soviet republics in the South Caucasus region. Even though Georgia is a small country with a population of about 4.5 million, it declared its independence before the collapse of the Soviet Union because of a strong nationalistic tradition underscored by its cultural, linguistic, and religious differences. However, after independence, an extremely nationalistic policy caused deep resentment among ethnic minorities in the country, and conflicts broke out in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The status of these regions



remains in dispute to this day. Meanwhile Georgia has another region that could well trigger another war. Pankisi Gorge, located in the eastern part of the country, near the Georgia-Chechnya border, was bombed by Russia in 2002 because of suspicions it was hiding Chechen and Arab militants. The problem in Pankisi Gorge seems to be different from the other two conflicts mentioned in that it resulted from tensions arising in the diplomacy being conducted between Russia and Georgia and was, unrelated to residents' opinions.

(←The view from Narikala fortress, overlooking Tbilisi)

### Research Purpose and Aim

After the Georgian government carried out an anti-terrorist operation, public order was gradually restored in Pankisi Gorge. However, this region is still often regarded as a hotbed of Islamic terrorism. I want to make clear what the current situation in Pankisi Gorge is and to consider how people there are seeking to revitalize their region.

(A view of nature in Pankisi Gorge→)

### Results of Fieldwork

Contrary to the negative image which most Georgians and the media all over the



world have, Pankisi Gorge is again a peaceful area. Some people told me that although there is little wealth or employment in the region, there is always a smile on people’s faces. Moreover, they seemed to be successfully changing the image of the place being “a danger zone for hiding Islamic terrorists” by dispatching providing educational services by themselves. For example, two refugee education support NGOs provided English and computer courses. Children, the leaders of the next generation, will send their own messages to the whole world using these skills they learn. And in addition, some people managed guesthouses and are trying to develop agrotourism. It is increasingly likely that such activities will succeed in attracting people from outside the area to Pankisi Gorge.



(Left: At one of the guesthouses in Pankisi Gorge. The woman in the house is cooking Georgian dumpling called Khinkali “ხინკალი”. Her husband is watching TV)



(Right: In Duisi, the biggest village in Pankisi Gorge, this woman made me a red felt hat which she is wearing herself in this photo)

### Implications and Impacts of Future Research

During my stay in Pankisi Gorge, I discovered differences between the younger and older generations and between Kists and Georgians. I suggest that these differences can be understood in the context of the spread of “Wahhabism” in this region. Therefore, I want to further my research, focusing particularly on “Wahhabism” in order to find out how these differences developed and what their precise nature is.

(Old Kist graves in Jokolo, Pankisi Gorge→)

( ↓ An old watchtower in Jokolo, Pankisi Gorge)

