

Georgia and Russia Step Back from Brink

Author: [Thomas de Waal](#)

The crisis between Moscow and Tbilisi over the Pankisi Gorge may be receding, but a dangerous month lies ahead.

On the edge of the village of Duisi in the heart of the Pankisi Gorge, swaggering troops in black balaclava masks outnumbered the locals.

Where had all the armed Chechens gone, the visitors wanted to know. "We haven't seen anyone like that for ages," said Amur, an unshaven 25-year-old local man, as if on cue.

The Georgian government-organised escort of a large group of foreign guests to the gorge on September 30 was obviously a PR exercise. Moscow, ratcheting up the pressure against Georgia, had accused Tbilisi of willingly harbouring Chechen fighters and international terrorists in the Pankisi. The Georgians wanted to prove everything was fine.

They wanted to demonstrate that, after three years when the Pankisi had effectively slipped out of their hands, it was now under their control. And they put on an elaborate show of force at the entrance to the gorge, with dozens of interior ministry soldiers, backed up by half a dozen armoured vehicles.

Indeed, the Pankisi had probably never looked so benign. More a verdant valley than a gorge, with cows grazing in the fields, it shone green in the early autumn sunshine.

Yet the day-trip also suggested the Georgian government does not yet have a total grip on the area. The foreign visitors were not taken to the centre of Duisi, the main village in the valley. And officials admitted that as recently as September 12, there had been an armed clash in the area.

In the last two months, Georgia and Russia have come closer to outright hostilities than at any time in the last twelve years, since the former gained independence. Moscow has threatened that it might intervene militarily to pursue Chechen rebels. Tbilisi has appealed for - and received - western pledges of support.

At the CIS meeting in Chishinau on October 7, Presidents Putin and Shevardnadze appeared to have bridged some of their differences. They said they had agreed to set up joint patrols to prevent Chechen militants crossing the 82 kilometre-long border between Chechnya and Georgia. Georgia also extradited five Chechen fighters captured in Georgia in late August.

However, the details of the agreement have still to be worked out and tension between the two countries remains extremely high.

The Pankisi Gorge lies at the heart of the quarrel. Its status has been much misunderstood, partly because it is not really a gorge, and also because it is actually 70 km from the Chechen border.

The Pankisi turned into a trouble-spot because of its large native population of 7,000 or so Kists, ethnic Chechens who settled in Georgia in the early 19th century. In 1999, they in turn welcomed a tide of desperate Chechen refugees, fleeing over the mountains from the second Russian military intervention in Chechnya. Amongst the refugees were hundreds of fighters. The valley became a no-go area for the

Georgian authorities.

In this security vacuum - and allegedly with the collusion of senior officials in Tbilisi -

the Pankisi became a centre of organised crime. "It became a problem because of the irresponsible security and interior ministries - not only because they were corrupt, but because they didn't know how to deal with it," commented Alexander Rondeli, president of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

Rondeli said the situation had only begun to improve after the old security and interior ministers were sacked last year. The new interior minister, Koba Narchemashvili, admitted to his foreign guests, "The government of Georgia had difficulty controlling the situation."

"For three years nobody saw us, nobody visited us, talked to us, everyone said we

were terrorists," said one Chechen refugee woman, tears running down her face, visibly grateful that the authorities were moving back in.

In early August, sources in Tbilisi said, the Chechen fighters moved out - evidently with official agreement that they would not be impeded. A local man in Duisi, who asked not to be named, confirmed this. "They scattered two months ago," he said. One of these groups, loyal to Chechen commander Ruslan Gelayev, fought the Russians in the village of Galashki in Ingushetia on September 26. Amongst those killed was the British cameraman Roddy Scott - whom villagers said they had seen in Duisi.

On August 23, Russian planes - although Moscow has still not officially admitted that they were - bombed a village near the gorge, killing one old man. That was the final trigger for the Georgians to launch an "anti-criminal operation" in the Pankisi two days later. A handful of militants, including two Arabs, were arrested and extremist Islamic literature was confiscated.

Soon afterwards, 13 Chechen wounded fighters, were captured near the border. Apparently they were re-entering Georgia, after crossing into Chechnya and encountering Russian border-guards. It was from this group that the five men are being extradited.

The Georgian side says the Russian military has been trying to cover up its military failures in Chechnya by blaming Georgia - and that with 5,000 border guards on the Chechen border, as opposed to Georgia's 300, Moscow should have done more itself to contain the Chechen fighters.

How things develop now depends on the degree of trust two very suspicious neighbours can establish with each other.

The Georgians have pledged to take a tougher line with Chechen fighters, whom they previously turned a blind eye to. "We will detain all those who bear arms and who are not refugees," Narchemashvili told IWPR. "We will detain them all."

That may not be easy. "The Georgians will have a real test in the last two weeks of October and through November," said a western diplomat, a reference to the fact that as snow begins to fall in the mountains between the Pankisi and Chechnya, many of the fighters who are taking refuge there will be tempted to return to their families in the gorge.

At the same time, there are fears of a Russian-Georgian confrontation in another turbulent area, the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia, where Georgian border guards, Abkhazian soldiers and Russian peacekeepers are all in close proximity. "We're all praying for snow," said the diplomat.

Meanwhile, a big question mark hangs over the reputation of the Georgian security forces as long as the British businessman Peter Shaw, who was kidnapped in July, remains in captivity.

During the trip to the gorge, Narchemashvili announced that he had information that Shaw was alive and probably being held in the Pankisi. This raised as many questions as it answered and deepened suspicions that some renegade security officials, whose identities were probably known to the authorities, might be mixed up in the case.

"I do believe that rogue elements within the government are involved in the case of Peter Shaw," said John Smith, a British Labour MP from South Wales, and the member of parliament for Shaw and his family, who was part of the visiting delegation. Smith said he had arrived in Georgia firmly disbelieving conspiracy theories on the kidnapping, but had gradually changed his mind in the course of his trip.

A driver from the nearby town of Akhmeta named Givi shared that view. "Shevardnadze is lying!" he exclaimed. "They don't really control the situation there!" Givi said the rumour going round the Pankisi Gorge was that Shaw had been sold on, perhaps more than once, from one gang to another. But if the authorities really wanted to have the businessman released, there was plenty they could do, he said.

Thomas de Waal is IWPR's Caucasus Editor.

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