Syrians find refuge in Georgia

The Pankisi Gorge in Georgia has once again made headlines. The Iranian Fars News Agency has reported that around one hundred militants who fought in Syria have now arrived into this Gorge. The agency claims that after receiving necessary medical assistance and some rest, the detachment will begin to destabilise the situation in Russia through hostilities and terrorist acts. After some time, the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs denied the allegations, calling them disinformation. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Refugee Affairs clarified that only refugees have entered Georgia from Syria, this did not happen overnight but has been happening throughout last year and they number around 1,000 people.

Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge is not the largest in the country and is roughly 15km long. The gorge begins in the wine region of Kakheti and stretches until the Caucasian Ridge. The kists have long lived in these parts – they are people of Chechen roots who crossed the ridge and settled in the Georgian gorge a few centuries ago. It’s a quiet place that has always lived more by its own canons than by official laws, although they have rarely ever conflicted with one another.

The Gorge first gained notoriety at the end of the 1990s when refugees from Chechnya began to move in. Moscow regularly accused Tbilisi of covering up for Chechen militants. Then Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze refuted all claims on the matter, saying that the gorge only houses refugees. However, that was not exactly the case. In time, it also became entirely not the case. Together with the thousands of people fleeing from war, dozens of militants needing rest and medical help were also able to infiltrate into Pankisi. Paying no mind to modern means of surveillance which are nowadays able to read a licence plate from space, the Georgian authorities stubbornly stated that there are no militants in Pankisi and Moscow is just irritated at the country’s western leanings so it is looking for any reason to strike.

Yet a strike really did happen then. However, there was either some kind of setback or the Georgian side was able to cover up the real consequences of the dropped bomb, while the people were shown a crater and several mutilated cow carcasses. But I digress. Shevardnadze couldn’t help but use this incident and once again presented the world with his own interpretation of the situation – Russia has breached Georgian airspace, launched a missile attack on a mobile shepherd camp and is looking for a reason to invade Georgia. Any attempts at responding and turning the tide of informational attacks in its own favour did not end in success for Russia. The same global community that lively reacted to any accusations Shevardnadze threw at Moscow acted completely indifferently to satellite images that showed Chechen training camps in Pankisi. Inspired by this support, Georgia sarcastically asked the Russians: what kind of bases could there be in a tiny gorge where everything is visible? Meanwhile, they refused to create a joint commission that would be able to inspect the gorge, granting this honour to western groups instead. Naturally, they found nothing suspicious in the region. By that time, however, rumours were actively spreading across Georgia that the new mosque that has appeared in the gorge’s largest settlement of Duisi was constructed with money belonging to the notorious Ibn al-Khattab and that he himself visited the village numerous times.

In 2001, the mystery of the Pankisi Gorge solved itself and it became clear why the Georgian side needed to keep a detachment of militants at home, even at the cost of straining relations with Russia. A detachment led by Ruslan Gelayev himself suddenly appeared in Abkhazia. However, the fighting did no go so well for the Chechens as the raid
deep into the self-proclaimed Abkhaz Republic was cut short and the detachment suffered casualties and some were taken prisoner. Gelayev managed to escape, but those taken prisoner stated at their questioning that they were hiding out in the Pankisi Gorge. It then became clear that without the Georgian special services, they could not have approached Abkhazia and their not so small detachment would have no chance to stealthily march across all of Georgia armed to the teeth.

It was only after the Rose Revolution that the new Georgian authorities officially admitted to sheltering militants. Earlier, Shevardnadze attempted to justify the situation himself after the detachment’s failure by stating that there were wounded among the refugees but no one was able to recognise Gelayev or his comrades-in-arms among them, and then he even complimented the field commander, all of which looked very out of place after the revelations by the new government.

Georgia’s new Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania made it known then that he was categorically opposed to accepting those participating in the Chechen war into the country because it could lead to dire and unpredictable consequences. However, his resistance did not lead to anything. The top brass decided to let the militants into the Pankisi Gorge together with the refugees. In time, Zhvania’s petitions were followed by displacing those deemed undesirable by the new government out of Pankisi and Georgia as a whole. The gorge then slowly lost its ominous appearance. Now it truly only housed refugees, and, possibly, select militants who have re-evaluated their priorities. Life in the gorge did not exactly become idyllic, but it stopped being as restless as it was until the middle of the 2000s. Now this report by the Iranian news agency has struck down like lightning, even though it was denied by the Georgian Interior Ministry.

Tbilisi draws attention to the fact that Moscow and Teheran have recently been demonstrating a unified stance on a number of different issues. On June 27, Georgia plans to sign the European Union Association Agreement. The country’s authorities claim that they are expecting pressure from Russia due to this matter; however, Moscow has almost no leverage over Tbilisi. In recognising the independence of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia, Moscow has deprived itself of any leverage. The situation in other Georgian regions harbouring potential enmity towards Tbilisi is currently fairly stable and “inflaming” it until the breaking point does not seem possible due to short time constraints. This is why the Georgian side believes Russia needs any reason to prevent completely losing Georgia, who has now announced that it has no alternatives but to focus its foreign policy to the west.

Tbilisi political scientist Alexander Rusetsky proposes a wider look at the situation, “The matter at hand is not just that Russia does not want to see closer ties between Georgia, the EU and western institutions for a number of reasons. It is in Moscow’s and Teheran’s best interests to oust foreign players out of the southern Caucasus regions as much as they can. As cynically as this sounds, in this case Iran may be interested in the emergence of new tensions between Russia and Georgia. In this case, western influence may wane in Georgia, who is the west’s greatest ally in the region, while the west in turn does not want to see a stronger Iran.” Rusetsky believes that a complex, diverse and multi-layered game is currently at play. This is why it is crucial not to underestimate any risks, threats, information and disinformation and view them in a narrow scope as a means to resolve a local issue. “Only one thing is certain: Georgia does not want to deteriorate its relations with Russia, but, even the representatives of Georgian authorities say that the country is not planning on renouncing its national interests,” Rusetsky commented on the situation.

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