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Pankisi Is a Breeding Ground for Radicalism

By Paul Rimple

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The Pankisi Gorge is back in the news — but this time not for harboring Chechen militants. In a display of Georgian overkill, witnesses say about 25 masked officers arrested English teacher Shorena Khangorshvili for possessing heroin on Sept. 16 as she was walking out of a pharmacy in Akhmeta. The incident risks destabilizing a defensive and traumatized community.

A decade ago, Pankisi was notorious for being "Georgia's most dangerous region," where Tbilisi officials not only turned a blind eye to kidnapping, arms and drug smuggling but often participated in these activities as well. By about 2004, Pankisi began to fall off the radar as authorities cracked down on crime, and many Chechens migrated to other countries or returned home.

Today, Pankisi would be just another impoverished rural Georgian region if not for the increasing presence of fundamentalist Islam in the valley — a byproduct of the Chechen wars.

The ethnic Kisti — Georgians of Chechen descent — belong to either the Sunni or Sufi branches of Islam and find their indigenous forms of prayer and traditions under increasing threat from what they call Wahhabism. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has warned of the terrorist threat that these fundamentalists pose.

Shorena says she was approached in July to work as an informant for the Georgian security services and believes her arrest is punishment for refusing to cooperate.

According to Shorena, a man walked up and slipped three packets of heroin into her pocket as she was coming out of the pharmacy. A policewoman pulled a mobile phone out of her bag, which she had never seen nor touched before. This method of apparent entrapment harks back to Pankisi's worst days of lawlessness.

The Interior Ministry claims that Shorena is part of a drug network with her brother, a fugitive assumed to be in Russia. The ministry also claims that "large quantities of heroin were found at her house," yet there is no evidence that police have visited Duisi, where she lives. Duisi is a small village, and it would be nearly impossible to perform a house search without neighbors seeing it.

The efforts that Pankisi has made to integrate itself into Georgia over the past few years have been set back by what locals believe is a bogus case. Pankisi remains a frightened community that mistrusts central authority. Such fears are ripe grounds for the fundamentalist missionaries whose radicalism is a threat to Pankisi's existing social order.

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