



Stakeholders of (De-) Radicalisation in Georgia

D3.1 Country Report

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List of abbreviations

| | |
|--------------|---|
| GM | Georgian March |
| GOC | Georgian Orthodox Church |
| GD | Georgian Dream |
| GRASS | Georgia's Reforms Associates |
| ISIS | Islamic State of Iraq and Syria |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organisation |
| PD | Public Defenders |
| PMMG | Public Movement "Multinational Georgia" |
| SARI | State Agency for Religious Issues |
| SSG | State Security Service of Georgia |
| UNM | United National Movement |
| UOP | Union of Orthodox Parents |

About the Project

D.Rad is a comparative study of radicalisation and polarisation in Europe and beyond. It aims to identify the actors, networks, and wider social contexts driving radicalisation, particularly among young people in urban and peri-urban areas. D.Rad conceptualises this through the I-GAP spectrum (injustice-grievance-alienation-polarisation) with the goal of moving towards measurable evaluations of de-radicalisation programmes. Our intention is to identify the building blocks of radicalisation, which include a sense of being victimised; a sense of being thwarted or lacking agency in established legal and political structures; and coming under the influence of “us vs them” identity formulations.

D.Rad benefits from an exceptional breadth of backgrounds. The project spans national contexts including the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Finland, Slovenia, Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Georgia, Austria, and several minority nationalisms. It bridges academic disciplines ranging from political science and cultural studies to social psychology and artificial intelligence. Dissemination methods include D.Rad labs, D.Rad hubs, policy papers, academic workshops, visual outputs and digital galleries. As such, D.Rad establishes a rigorous foundation to test practical interventions geared to prevention, inclusion and de-radicalisation.

With the possibility of capturing the trajectories of seventeen nations and several minority nations, the project will provide a unique evidence base for the comparative analysis of law and policy as nation states adapt to new security challenges. The process of mapping these varieties and their link to national contexts will be crucial in uncovering strengths and weaknesses in existing interventions. Furthermore, D.Rad accounts for the problem that processes of radicalisation often occur in circumstances that escape the control and scrutiny of traditional national frameworks of justice. The participation of AI professionals in modelling, analysing and devising solutions to online radicalisation will be central to the project's aims.

Executive summary/Abstract

The following document, a report on radicalisation and de-radicalisation, was produced for the D.Rad project with the objectives of exposing main trends of radicalisation in Georgia; identifying the actors/individuals behind these processes; and describing the programmes and concrete events addressing the issues through de-radicalisation.

The major sources of radicalisation in Georgia that include concrete, ideological examples for this report were drawn from both Orthodox Christian fundamentalism and the islamist movement that has caused young men from Pankisi Gorge to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In the case of the former, the study identified several individuals and organisations closely associated with the Georgian Orthodox Church, which united with alt-right groups involved in several violent attacks on sexual or religious minorities. The Muslim radicalisation, even though producing no violent incidents in Georgia, revealed that young people left to fight for ISIS and acquire fame back in their home country, or upon their return to Georgia.

The report also discusses non-ideological forms of radicalisation, which include political party-driven polarisation. At present this appears to be the single most important challenge for Georgia, having a significantly negative impact on political stability and development.

Finally, several state and non-state programmes aimed at de-radicalisation are described, although these have remained relatively underdeveloped. More substantial approaches are needed to address the challenges discussed. This research is based essentially on media and news sources, academic studies and those produced by specialized think tanks and NGOs that work in these related fields.

1. Introduction

The main goal of this report is to outline the main radicalisation and de-radicalisation actors in Georgia as part of the Work Package “Mapping Stakeholders and Situations of Radicalisation” of the D.Rad Project. The term “radicalisation” should be understood as trends that reject established law, order, and politics and the active pursuit of alternatives in the form of politically-driven violence or the justification of violence. De-radicalisation, on the other hand, is defined as the process aimed at countering such trends at the individual (micro), organisational (meso), or societal (macro) levels, resulting in a shift from violent to nonviolent strategies and tactics.

For the last two decades, there have been two major sources of radicalisation in Georgia from which most of the cases will be drawn. These include the Pankisi Gorge, a region mostly settled by Muslim minorities, where there were several instances of young people from Pankisi joining or attempting to join ISIS fighting in Syria. This report will cover de-radicalisation practices and policies tailored especially to this region.

Another major source of radicalisation has been the “moral policing” by Orthodox Christian fundamentalists. This report covers several major violent incidents over the last two decades involving these groups' attacks on religious as well as on sexual minorities.

In addition to these two examples, this report focuses on alt-right groups that have become increasingly visible on the Georgian public scene. The cases covered within this report include assaults on sexual minorities, the spread of xenophobia and islamophobia, and the creation of media channels through which the radicalisation is disseminated.

Finally, the report covers non-ideological forms of radicalisation such as political and party-driven radicalisation stemming from a lack of legitimacy of political institutions and the political polarisation between governmental and opposition actors. This form of radicalisation has been most prominent in Georgia for the last two decades, generating constant political instability and precluding the establishment of inclusive, consensus-based political and societal processes in the country.

To begin with, the report provides the contextual background and the structure of radicalisation. Following this, it focuses on the main channels and stakeholders of (de)-radicalisation and provides conclusions. Empirically, the report relies on secondary sources: media, several international think tanks, NGO reports and pertinent academic research.

2. Contextual background

To examine the sources of radicalisation in contemporary Georgian society, one cannot avoid mentioning, at least briefly, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent rocky years. It is estimated that the Georgian economy in the early 1990s contracted to the same level as that of Germany after its defeat in WWII. From 1991 to 1994, purchasing power parity (PPP) shrank by 61%, from 5550 USD to 2466 USD (Forbes, 2018). The implications of such

economic collapse cannot be disregarded, considering it also led to military conflicts, lawlessness, political instability, and poverty.

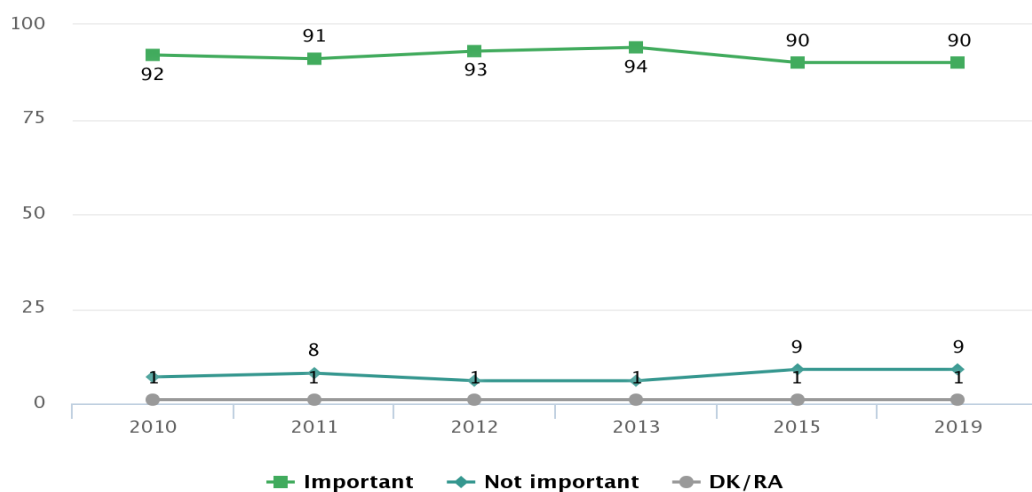
Although the 2003 Rose Revolution was a pivotal moment in Georgian state-building that addressed the shortcomings of state efficiency, endemic corruption, and the high level of criminality, the neoliberal reform agenda disenfranchised a large part of the population through mass privatization and layoffs from the public sector. The economic growth rate driven by post-Revolution government reforms was one of the highest in Georgia’s history, yet the boom was non-inclusive. It resulted in one of the highest income inequalities in the region (Kincha, 2018).

Another contextual event was the 2016 Donald Trump victory in the US Presidential race and the noticeable boost it gave to the Georgian radical right-wing groups. As this report illustrates, the success of the alt-right and actors sympathetic to their cause in the West allowed their Georgian peers to escape a “pro-Russian” label and to align their position with the popular “pro-Western” foreign policy agenda. In other words, Trump’s presidency and his Manichean worldview was replicated in Georgia, as being the eternal struggle between “the people” and the corrupted, liberal “elites”. This report provides several examples of this replication and its implications on (de)-radicalisation processes.

When examining the contextual background, it is important to examine the importance of Orthodox Christianity and its role in radicalising Georgian youth, especially since it has been a key driving ideology behind the violent mob attacks discussed later in the report. However, Georgian society considers itself religious, with the majority (up to 85%) belonging to the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) (Caucasus Barometer, 2020). According to another survey by the same organisation (Figure 1), religion has been important over the last decade for more than 90% of Georgians. This highlights the potential influence of the GOC on radicalisation. There were several instances of violent attacks on religious minorities, especially Jehovah Witnesses in the early 2000s, as well as attacks on sexual minorities, inspired and guided by Orthodox clergymen. This report includes several cases of religiously motivated attacks by radical Orthodox Christian groups.

Figure 1: Importance of Religion in Georgia (Caucasus Barometer, 2020)

RELIMP: How important is religion in your daily life? (%)



Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

The alt-right groups have been interlinked and aligned with the GOC in many cases, trying to act in tandem as “moral police” to the society. In this context, events that play on certain conservative feelings can become radicalising factors. That is what happened in 2013, when several thousand protesters, led by clergymen, attacked a flash mob organised by dozens of LGBTQI activists, and the attempts in 2019 to storm a movie theatre to stop the screening of “And then We Danced,” a Georgian-Swedish movie depicting a dancer challenging heteronormativity in the conservative Georgian folkdance culture.

In comparison to Orthodox Christian fundamentalism, domestic-grown Muslim radicalisation has not yet expressed itself in Georgian society. However, there are still major issues that need to be identified and addressed in the context of (de)-radicalisation. Two major events should be mentioned: the war in Chechnya and recent events in the Middle East. These two occurrences are relevant, as the Muslim population of Georgia constitutes 10-11% of the whole, some of whom are ethnic Azeris struggling to fully integrate into Georgian society due to the language barrier or some other obstacles, and remain vulnerable to radicalisation.

In 1999 Russian troops made a full-blown military assault on Chechnya, which is known as the Second Chechen War. As Georgia shares a border with Chechnya, rebels fleeing Russian forces crossed into Georgia and settled in the Pankisi Gorge along with their kinfolk, Kists, who have populated the region over several centuries. By the early 2000s Chechen partisans hiding in the region were reported to number several hundred, causing the Pankisi radicalisation issue to be imported from Chechnya (Cecire, 2015, p. 1). Chechen rebels have since left the region, yet the problem of radicalisation still persists in Pankisi. As of 2015, for instance, 30-50 militants from this region were estimated to be fighting in Syria, with a disproportionately large number of commanders among them (ibid., p. 2). Thus, direct involvement with ISIS and other radical fundamentalist groups in the Middle East provides a fertile breeding ground for radicalisation. With the fall of the Islamic State and the return of these fighters, there is a danger of a boomerang effect concerning radicalisation. Furthermore, a Salafist branch of Islam is found in this region, known for its extreme conservative positions and interpretations of holy scriptures. This movement spread from Chechnya and has become increasingly popular. Up 75% of people between 18-35 in Pankisi identify as Salafist (Gobronidze, 2018, p. 23).

3. Structures of radicalisation

3.1. Cases and trends of radicalisation

This section will focus on the structure of radicalisation, i.e., examine cases and trends of radicalisation and public perception of these instances. Cases of terrorist attacks as portrayed by Western media are rare in Georgia, thus the structure of radicalisation discussed in this chapter focuses on other types of ideologically, politically/institutionally or religiously motivated violence.

In the case of religiously motivated violence, radical groups associated with the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) act along with alt-right actors in many instances, and provide ideological grounds and motives for their attacks on minorities. However, officially, the Church

condemns violence and distances itself from radical activism. Thus, while Orthodox Christian fundamentalists provide ideological bases for right-wing violence, the official position of the GOC is to condemn such actions.

This report does not include left-wing radicalisation, as events have been almost non-existent in Georgia. Neither does this report is going to include ethnic/separatist violence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as these regions remain *de facto* outside of Georgia's jurisdiction and control.

Data concerning the incidents are taken from desk research conducted specifically for this report, as there is no systematic data collected on such cases in Georgia. The Global Terrorism Database yields no results for searches on incidents between 2001-2019. The full list of the main events selected for this report can be found in the Appendix 1. In 2001 for instance, on several occasions groups of Orthodox Christian believers led by a clergyman named Basil Mkalavishvili, notorious for his aggression towards religious minorities, attacked Jehovah's Witnesses. The most serious incident took place on September 24, 2001 when his supporters and the group called Jvari ("cross" in Georgian) blocked a highway to obstruct Jehovah's Witnesses from travelling to Marneuli (a town in SE Georgia) for a convention. The mob beat dozens of travellers and then descended on and looted the convention site (Human Rights' Watch, 2001).

In January 2003 Mkalavishvili's group stormed the Evangelical Baptist Church during their ecumenical prayers. Several were injured, the prayers cancelled and church property destroyed, including religious literature (Civil.ge, 2003). These are only a few of many similar attacks carried out by this particular radical group between 2000 and 2003, before the post-Rose Revolution government addressed the matter and arrested Mkalavishvili.

Another major incident was a mob attack motivated by fundamentalist religious believers that took place in 2013, in connection with the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia observed on May 17. Georgian LGBTQI activists planned a flash protest in downtown Tbilisi, while several radical right-wing groups (discussed in detail in the next section), Martmadidebel Mshobelta Kavshiri (Union of Orthodox Christian Parents), and a group of clergymen, called on several thousand supporters to gather and stop the event from taking place. A mob led by the priests broke through the police cordon and started chasing the activists who were forced to flee in buses, while the mob threw stones and even physically attack the vehicles transporting participants of the protest. Later that day, two activists were trapped in a supermarket under siege by the mob and police had to help them escape from the store. According to officials, 28 people received medical treatment as a result of these events (Tcheishvili, 2013).

The same groups of religious fundamentalists and alt-right supporters were responsible for attempts to storm the movie theatre in Tbilisi in 2019. On November 8th, as cinemas across the country prepared to show the prize-winning Georgian-Swedish movie about a young dancer in a heteronormative Georgian folk-dance ensemble, clergymen and radical groups vowed to keep it from being shown. Their plans included "pushing police aside" to stop the screening by force (Civil.ge, 2019). They tried to break the police cordon to storm Tbilisi's Amirani Theater, and threw firecrackers and other objects at the police. However, despite

some delay, the screening went ahead, several dozen people were arrested and no serious violence occurred.

Sexual minorities are not the only target of radical Orthodox Christian groups. Other religious minorities as well as feminist activities have been verbally or physically assaulted on several occasions. As recently as in January 2021, Muslims and Orthodox Christians clashed in the municipality of Guria over the house used by the Muslim community members as a place of worship. The disagreement ended with physical violence and three persons hospitalized (Kincha, 2021). Although there were no casualties in the events discussed above, such incidents indicate the rejection of established law, order, and politics and the active pursuit of alternatives in the form of politically-driven violence or justification of violence by these groups – making them relevant for this report.

Regarding Muslim radicalisation, Pankisi Gorge has been inhabited by the Kists¹ for several centuries and has been fertile ground for ISIS-inspired young men to join that organisation's ranks in Syria, some of them even reaching the position of field commander (Demytrie, 2016). On November 22, 2017 Georgian security forces engaged in a counter-terrorist operation in Tbilisi to arrest four armed terrorists barricaded in an apartment building. After several hours of gunfire, the shootouts ended with three accused terrorists dead and one arrested. One police officer was killed and three were wounded. Among the victims was Ahmet Chatayev, listed as a terrorist both by the US and UN Security Council's Al-Qaida Sanctions List. He had been wounded and arrested during a clash at the border with Russia between Georgian troops and an armed group from the North Caucasus. Soon afterwards, he was released from detention and left for Austria. Chatayev joined ISIS in Syria and was behind attacks at the Istanbul airport in 2016 (Civil.ge, 2017). The goals of the jihadist group in Georgia has not been fully clarified, but experts believe they were laying low in Tbilisi, waiting for the right moment, or trying to get to Russia through Georgia (Kunchulia, 2017).

Thus, when examining cases and trends of radicalisation in Georgia, most violence has been motivated by the radical Orthodox Christian groups and the alt-right, which have been behind most of incidents. Under the pretext of moral policing and defence of “traditional values” these groups have been involved in violent attacks on LGBTQI activists and their supporters. In comparison, the threat of left-wing violence or jihadist terrorism in Georgia has been relatively low or non-existent.

3.2. Perception by the political elite

During the last two decades that are the focus of this report, the top-ranking government office holders and main political actors have been consistent with their condemnation of violence and extremism as well as with expressing their support for the victims. For instance, in the case of the attack in 2003 on the Evangelical-Baptist Church, the State Minister of Georgia at the time, Avtandil Jorbenadze, met with representatives of the church to apologize on behalf of the President. He stated that the “people of Georgia have always been very tolerant towards other religions” (Civil.ge, 2003b). He expressed his concern over the raids and attacks, and his readiness to cooperate in ending such incidents in the future (Civil.ge, 2003c).

¹ Ethnic group in Georgia related to Chechens, who also practice Islam.

Similarly, in response to the violent attacks on LGBTQI activists and supporters on May 17th, 2013, the Prime Minister stated: “Every Georgian citizen benefits fully and equally from this right [freedom of expression]. Acts of violence, discrimination and restriction of the rights of others will not be tolerated, and any perpetrators of such acts will be dealt with according to the law” (Civil.ge, 2013). He underlined the state’s support for the freedom of sexual identity (at least on a discursive level). This was the case in all of the attacks on sexual minorities; the state’s official position expressed support for freedom of expression (Appendix 2 provides concrete examples of such discourse).

It should be noted, however, that the above-mentioned rhetoric of Georgian officials directed against homophobia and xenophobia are rarely followed by adequate measures. Hence, there is a gap between word and deed, especially when the violence comes from religious extremists. This can partially be explained by the desire of Georgian politicians, both in the government and the opposition, to win over the support of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is the most trusted institution in the country, but also makes up the conservative part of the electorate.

It is difficult to identify what threats are considered the most dangerous by the various political party platforms, or how such issues will be addressed. For instance, when comparing the ruling party – Georgian Dream (GD), and the largest opposition party – United National Movement’s (UNM)-- positions on national security in order to inform voters, GD’s stand on the issue is unknown, while the opposition party’s rather general position is that Georgia should join NATO. The latter maintains that “our objective is to make sure that the country is successful in the areas of foreign policy, defence, and security at the global level” (Partiebi, n.d.).

Thus, it would make more sense to examine official discourse and reports from the state security services. In her latest annual address to the parliament in 2020 President of Georgia identified unemployment, intolerance towards different opinions and the fear for other religions as the sources of populism that are calling for strict border controls or for the “erection of walls” (Zurabishvili, 2020).

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) reports, available from 2015-2018 (The State Security Service of Georgia 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018) identified developments in the Middle East as having negative effects on the Caucasus. In the context of the Islamic State, especially, which was looking for supporters in some regions of Georgia, and the dozens of Georgians fighting on the side of islamists in Syria and Iraq. The SSG also highlights the threat posed by social media being used for recruitment and radicalisation by ISIS, although it states that the country itself is not at high risk of terrorist attacks. The reports identify the danger of Georgia being used as a transit country for jihadists, due to its geographic location. However, discussions on Islamic radicalisation and threats, outside of official reports by the Security Services are largely absent.

It can be concluded that at the discursive level, political elites perceive far right and fundamentalist groups acting on behalf of Orthodox Christianity as posing the greatest threats. Additionally, the State Security Services of Georgia continue to monitor the relationships between regions of Georgia predominantly populated by Muslims and the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria.

3.3. Perception of the violent threats by the general public

Considering that Georgia has not experienced any significant terrorist attack motivated by radical Islam (even the case of Chatayev barricaded in the apartment was more a counter-terrorist operation than due to a terrorist act), this has not been the focus of public opinion polls. On the other hand, the feeling is strong that Orthodox Christianity and “traditional values” are under threat. For instance, in 2018, 49% of those polled thought that the former was under threat (Caucasus Barometer, 2018), and 51% thought the same about “family purity” or traditional family values (Caucasus Barometer, 2018b). A 2019 study presented by the Media Development Foundation illustrated that xenophobia, religious discrimination and racism in speech are in decline, but homophobic language is on the rise (Civil.ge, 2019b) indicating potential sources alt-right and populist groups could draw on for radicalisation.

There is also a general public distrust towards state institutions. The percentages of people who trust (moderately or fully) the judicial system in Georgia are 13% and 4% respectively, in contrast to 20% and 17% who distrust or fully distrust the system (Caucasus Barometer, 2019b). Trust levels for Parliament are 16% (trust and fully trust), according to the Caucasus Barometer, 2019c, while full trust in the Executive is only 4% with trust “somewhat” at 16% (Caucasus Barometer, 2019d). Such extremely low levels of trust in state institutions contributes to a party-driven radicalisation, as alternatives are pursued.

In summary, while threats of terrorist attacks are outside the focus of public opinion polls, the perception of threats to “traditional values” provides a potential source of radicalisation, which is reinforced by a general distrust of state institutions by Georgian society.

4. Agents and channels of radicalisation

4.1 Key violent agents

This section of the report focuses on specific agents involved in radicalisation. These include the radical conservative wing of Georgian Orthodox Church organised in different groups (the Union of Orthodox Parents for instance); the alt-right Georgian March group; the political party Alliance of Patriots; and the Salafists among the Georgian Muslim population. This section also addresses media networks behind the articulation of the narratives.

The Union of Orthodox Parents

The Union of Orthodox Parents (UOP) (Martmadidedel Mshobelta Kavshiri in Georgian) is an NGO operating in Georgia since 1995. The organisation does not maintain a list of members, but welcomes anyone who shares its ideas and goals (Netgazeti, 2011). On its Facebook page, the UOP lists the main goals of the organisation that are meant to support the moral upbringing of youth. The organisation opposes elements seen as “degrading” Georgian society: drugs, prostitution, or legislation that enhances or promotes such “degradations”. Additionally, the union supports family protection and is against any attempts to destroying traditional ways of life. Last but not least, the organisation aims to encourage the military spirit of Georgia through promoting the image of Georgia’s heroic history.

Along with alt-right groups, the UOP has been behind the most violent attacks on religious, ethnic or sexual minorities, including those reported here. In addition to being involved in raids and storming various events, UOP was involved in the spread of misinformation about the Covid-19 epidemic, ranging from denial of its existence, to arguing that collecting the samples for PCR testing is actually a process of putting a microchip developed by Bill Gates into the brain (FactCheck, 2020).

The Georgian March

The Georgian March (GM) (Qartuli Marshi in Georgian) is a far-right movement that recently became a political party that ran in the 2020 Parliamentary elections. They didn't manage to secure enough votes to pass the 1% threshold, however. GM was composed by uniting various ultraconservative and nationalist groups in 2017, then soon afterwards the so-called "March of the Georgians" was held in downtown Tbilisi. Around two thousand demanded tough immigration laws and the deportation of illegal immigrants (Civil.ge, 2020).

In April 2019, Georgian far-right groups united around the GM to form a political party imitating Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National in France. The key promise of the party was to reinstate the specification "ethnicity" in one's Georgian passport and ID cards (which had been removed from personal documents in the late 1990's following the Council Europe recommendations. This has been a key talking point for conservatives ever since (Reisner, 2010; Democracy and Freedom Watch, 2019). Yet, the votes received by the GM during the 2019's elections were not enough to cross the 1% threshold.

Georgian March, along with Orthodox Christian fundamentalists have been involved in most of the violent anti-LGBTI attacks and "moral policing" activities described in this report. On one occasion, the leaders of GM announced their plans (albeit, never materialized) to patrol streets downtown to document and report illegal activities by immigrants (Democracy and Freedom Watch, 2018).

Georgian March and other groups or individuals associated with the alt-right run several pages on social media and even a television channel. In January 2021, after being banned from Facebook, Alt Info started broadcasting a TV channel whose message is '*Stay tuned. Don't switch to the liberast² channels*' and is available to 340 000 subscribers on the internet television provider Magticom (Kinch, 2021b). The TV channel reports on news from across Europe and the US framing it in the Manichean language (the "true people" vs. "corrupt" elites, "traditional values" vs. "perverted liberals," "Christian Europe" vs. "Muslim immigrants" etc.). Frequent guests appearing on the channel include Levan Vasadze, an ultraconservative campaigner and businessman often seen among the leaders of violent attacks against sexual minorities. During one of such interviews, he told Alt Info that the storming of the Capitol in Washington was orchestrated by Trump's 'globalist' enemies (ibid). Generally, Trump's presidency has been a huge boost for Georgian alt-right. Georgian March's leader, Sandro Bregadze argued that their ideology was closer to Trump's than to that of Putin (ibid).

² 'Liberast' is a term made up of combining words 'liberal' and 'pedarast' (slur word used for gay men) and is often encountered in Russian anti-liberal discourse.

The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) (Saqartvelos Patriotta Aliansi)

The Alliance of Patriots formed in 2012 should be included in this report as it is the only far-right political actor in Georgia that secured seats in the Parliament both in 2016 and 2020 elections (5,01% and 3,14% respectively). Although the party has been officially reluctant to take a leading role in violent attacks against minorities, the APG has been calling for violent and discriminatory acts against ethnic or sexual minorities (Cole, 2020, p. 9). The TV channel Obiektivi, associated with the founder of the party, Irma Inashvili, has been providing a platform to figures notorious for hate speech and xenophobic statements as well as religious Orthodox Christian fundamentalism. For instance, for several months the channel has displayed a text in the corner, “Defend the Church” – implying that there is some kind of global conspiracy against Orthodox Christianity and that the latter needs to be defended.

In their vision and programme, the Alliance describes patriotism as “thinking and pondering, speaking and discussing, acting and behaving in conformity with the national spirit, which in our case is the Georgian spirit.” (“Our Vision and Programme,” n.d.) The Georgian spirit itself, according to the same text, is a dedication to the homeland, God, love for everything Georgian and the native language.

However, it is important to distinguish the APG from other radical alt-right groups. As the former is a parliamentary political party, and with the exception of certain individual members might have a feeling of solidarity with the other radical actors’ cause, the APG has its own agenda. Figure 3.1 in Appendix 3 illustrates the relationship between various alt-right actors and agents of radicalisation.

ISIS Fighters and other Islamist actors

When it comes to Islamic radicalisation, the picture is a bit complicated (Appendix 3, Figure 3.3). The main threat of radicalisation comes from individuals who have left for Syria or Iraq, and are increasingly seen by young people troubled by economic difficulties as examples of success and fame. This is especially prevalent in the case of Georgia, as Muslims are settled in one quite limited area and usually communities know about anyone who is fighting in Syria or Iraq (Gogvadze & Kapanadze, 2015, p. 11). Omar al-Shishani was one such notorious case. Born as Tarkhan Batirashvili in the Pankisi Gorge (Georgia) in a Christian family, he was a former soldier who was dismissed from the army for illness. He served a prison sentence for storming the ammunition depot, and soon after his release he left for Syria (Akhmeteli, 2014). There, he became one of the key field commanders of the Islamic State, until he was killed in 2016.

The absolute majority of participants in focus groups conducted by GRASS among youth and elders in Pankisi described Batirashvili in a positive way, calling him a “hero”, a “warrior”, “the best friend,” and “a role model”. This was in spite of the fact that participants simultaneously expressed negative attitudes towards the Islamic State (Gogvadze & Kapanadze, 2015, pp. 11-12). According to one study, which relied on interviews conducted in the regions where population is predominantly Muslim, indicated that one of the key reasons for youth radicalisation is due to their disappointment at not being able to realize their capacities, and having no possibilities of getting involved in the social and political life of the country (Gobronidze, 2018, p. 26). This situation made the perspective of joining ISIS in Syria and Iraq an attractive alternative to seek fame, money and success (ibid.). The quality of education in

their region still remains low, with increasing cases of school students skipping classes on Fridays and spending the whole day in the mosque for prayers, and having little interest in pursuing higher education (Goguadze & Kapanadze, 2015, p. 15).

There are also cases of radicalised fighters returning home and posing a threat by bringing violence with them. As of 2015, there were at least five such fighters who have returned to their villages (ibid., p. 10). Some reports argue that one of the reasons behind Muslim radicalisation in Georgia has to do precisely with the non-existence of legislation addressing the clerical education of Islam, resulting in the fact that schools and other educational institutions operate outside the law, without aligning their curricula with the Ministry of Education (Gobronidze, 2017, pp. 10-11). This encourages young people to pursue a clerical education in Iran, Turkey or the Persian Gulf countries, and then return to compete with the local Muslim clerical elites.

Muslim radicalisation is also driven by social and cultural factors, including the response to the increasing radicalisation of the Georgian Orthodox Church, as well as poor economic conditions in the regions settled by these religious minorities (ibid., p. 11). The main ideological driver for radicalisation in the region has been Wahhabism, which has spread through Pankisi since the 1990s. Wahhabism is a branch of Islam that relies exclusively on the Koran as the only source of religious interpretations and teachings. It opposes any Islamic society that does not reject general education, arts, sports etc (ibid, p. 13).

ISIS uses internet platforms to recruit new members, and there is a Georgian version of the website of the Islamic State. It calls for violent action and regularly provides news updates (<https://xalifati.wordpress.com/>) (Goguadze & Kapanadze, 2015, p. 20), however the webpage is currently blocked by the Georgian authorities.

Thus, key religious actors within the radicalisation processes in Georgia include the Union of Orthodox Parents, the Georgian March and the Alliance of Patriots whose ideological stands intersect on many occasions, and the Salafist Muslim movement, sometimes referred to as the Wahhabis interpretation of Islam.

4.2. State-driven radicalisation

Islamic radicalisation among youth is also a response to the predominance of the Orthodox Christianity and its influence over the officials and authorities. For instance, in 2016 Batumi City Hall (capital of the Adjara Autonomous Region) refused Muslim community permission to build a new mosque, despite the fact that the only one in town could not accommodate all the worshippers (OC Media, 2017). Similarly, in 2013 there was a small clash between protesters and authorities in another region of Georgia when police removed the minaret from a mosque. The local government declared that it was illegally attached to the building (Civil.ge, 2013b).

In contrast, the Georgian authorities' accommodating approach towards Orthodox Christians became apparent as recently as during the Corona virus pandemic. Despite the restrictions and the state of emergency, the Church held Easter services and defied most of the legal regulations (Civil.ge, 2020b).

Similarly, when the curfew was introduced again in the end of November, 2020, the 6th of January, Orthodox Christmas Eve, was officially announced as an exception to the rule, it

meant that other Christian churches celebrating Christmas in December were unable to perform Christmas Eve services (Radio Liberty, 2021). Such bias towards Orthodox Christianity alienates religious minorities and makes them susceptible to radical ideologies.

Political radicalisation

Overall, while the state's direct or indirect embrace of certain types of religious radicalisation is limited in scope, authorities in Georgia have long been embroiled in a spiral of political radicalisation, with their political competitors from the opposition parties.

Many analysts consider Georgia as politically and socially one of the most polarised countries in the region. Party-driven polarisation and societal schism have increased after the 2012 power change when the country became politically divided between the camps of the ruling party Georgian Dream and the former ruling party, and the biggest opposition party – the UNM. Figure 3.2 in Appendix 3 illustrates the relationship between political parties and agents of radicalisation through various organisations that mobilize activists. This includes media channels closely associated with concrete political parties, and the “Shame” movement or “Tavisupali Zona” that organises youth participation in protests, strikes, and picketing.

Party-driven polarisation has contributed to a long period of political instability in the country, accompanied by numerous protests, demonstrations, pickets and other activities that have resulted in violent clashes between protesters and the police, detention of activists and governmental crackdowns on protests. Recent escalations include the crackdowns on protests in 2019 and 2020. Similar events occurred under the previous government led by the UNM, of which the most notorious were the police crackdowns on opposition protests in 2007 and 2009. Each of these events resulted in a further societal radicalisation and polarisation, with extended periods of political crisis. Political polarisation also resulted in a split media landscape, with party-affiliated TV stations on both sides using offensive and demonising language against their opponents.

There are no proven links between party-driven radicalisation and ideologically radical groups. Mainstream parties, both in the government and the opposition, deny their connection to such groups. However, some civil society organisations and experts have frequently been raising concerns about the alleged affiliation of some of the right-wing groups, such as Georgian March, with the ruling Georgian Dream party (Medium, 2016).

Political polarisation has had long-lasting negative impacts by radicalising a large part of the population, and limiting the establishment of inclusive and consensus-based political processes that enable de-radicalisation. This radicalisation of a “government-sceptic” part of the population was strengthened by the low degree of political legitimacy of state institutions. First of all, Georgia's justice system and the Central Election Commission, which are responsible for organising and conducting elections have been undermined by the toxic combination of a low trust in public institutions and the political polarisation. This combination has resulted in conditions that created a long-lasting non-ideological societal radicalisation in Georgia, with constant political instability.

5. Stakeholders and channels of de-radicalisation

In 2015, the Georgian government adopted a state strategy for protecting the cultural identities of minorities, ensuring their inclusion in the political life of the country. The document outlined goals of the strategy intended to increasing access to education for ethnic minorities, and increasing their knowledge of the Georgian language (State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration for 2015-2020, 2015, p. 8).

The Pankisi Gorge is a special focus of the programme, which possibly has less to do with Islam than the fact that the region has provided inspiration for most of the Georgian ISIS fighters. The state universities have increased quotas for students from Pankisi, allowing wider access to the higher education (Gobronidze, 2017, p. 13).

In 2016, the Georgian Ministry of Defence began promoting military service in the Pankisi Gorge. The Deputy Minister personally presented local parents the conditions for new recruits (ibid). However, there is no well-defined, context-specific state strategy on addressing youth radicalisation in Pankisi. The government does not even keep official statistics of the youth who leave for Syria, nor on the economic situation in the region (Goguadze & Kapanadze, 2015, p. 18).

In the context of the state's approach, the **State Agency for Religious Issues (SARI)** was established in 2015, and according to their last report (2018-2019), SARI has been conducting regular training on religious freedom and tolerance for students, journalists, and clergymen (Annual Report, pp. 20-21) since its creation. To increase interreligious awareness, SARI prints interreligious calendars and other publications on religion/state relations and secularism. To commemorate the Day of Tolerance, SARI has established the tradition of one religious community organising a reception for the others. The agency also hosts an interreligious council consisting of almost all the religious communities in Georgia. In 2018-2019 the council met seven times to discuss organisational issues, regulations concerning religious educational institutions, conferences to be organised, and partnerships with other institutions (ibid., pp. 34-35).

Another institution established in 2006 by the Public Defender's Office, is the Tolerance Centre, which aims to support the Public Defender's Office identify and develop policies against discrimination and foster civic integration. The Tolerance Centre promotes tolerance and equality while addressing manifestations of xenophobia (Tolerance Centre, n.d.). A website describes their main activities as protecting minority rights, supporting the integration of minorities through regular monitoring of key situations in Georgia, identifying "possible threats and dangers stemming from intolerance, xenophobia and discrimination" and proposing solutions to address these (ibid.). The Tolerance Centre holds conferences, discussions and seminars, and produces publications on these topics. Tolerance Centre Reports are included in the Public Defender's address to Parliament. The Centre coordinates projects and events organised by the Religion and National Minorities Councils, under the auspices of the Public Defender.

Another major actor in de-radicalisation is the "**Public Movement Multinational Georgia**" (PMMG) established in 1999, representing the different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups in Georgia. The website describes it as an umbrella organisation providing support for more

than 18 diaspora and 56 local NGOs working on issues of minorities (PMMG, n.d.). Although the organisation covers the whole country, it focuses especially on regions with the most diverse populations.

Various NGOs and think tanks can be also counted as stakeholders and channels of de-radicalisation even though they do not work exclusively on minority issues, since radicalisation poses challenges to state security and welfare. These include Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) established in 2012 as a non-governmental multi-profile think tank. They create projects such as empowering Kist women in the Pankisi Gorge, from 2018 to 2019, supported by the US Embassy and aimed at improving education of women on their rights and providing legal assistance if needed. It also included the creation of compliance of local customary law to Georgian legislation (GRASS, 2018). GRASS also published a report on the threats from ISIS and recommendations for Georgian policymakers to mitigate those threats.

Not many media channels focus specifically on de-radicalisation, with the exception of Radio Way, a community radio founded in 2016 in the Pankisi Gorge. Unlike traditional radio channels, Way broadcasts over a small territory and targets the concerns and interests of the ethnic minority in the region. On their website the station states that their aim is not to make profit, but to cover topics that matter to the local people, and to stay outside of the mainstream media. The description emphasizes that their community has had a mostly negative image on the national media, and that the region only gets mentioned if there is criminal or illegal activity going on (Radio Way, n.d.). The station also states that, in addition to traditional media functions, the community radio is also characterized by co-participation or contribution to the activities of the channel from any community member. The community radio prioritizes having a diversity of voices and ideas; offering a diversity of programmes; promoting democratic processes; representing development and social change; and representing local identity, character and culture (ibid.).

However, we can conclude that state policies and programmes addressing radicalisation still remain underdeveloped. Due to the special status and the influence of the Orthodox Church, the ruling elites are reluctant to actively engage and challenge radicalisation driven by Orthodox Christianity (see the quote by PM Gharibashvili in Appendix 2). The Pankisi Gorge, on the other hand, gets official attention only when there is a major external event. For instance, the Chechen War and the influx of refugees that led to an 18-month "Train and Equip Programme" supported by the USA to enhance the capability of the Georgian army and state programmes that started to appear after the war broke out in Syria. In contrast, NGOs and grassroots organisations have been more actively engaged with de-radicalisation projects partly with the help of the Western donors. A full list of major programmes can be found in Appendix 4.

De-radicalisation initiatives and programmes are even scarcer when they apply to non-ideological forms of radicalisation such as political and party-driven radicalisation. Domestic de-radicalisation measures are limited due to the lack of widely trusted public and social institutions able to carry on with such measures. External actors (the EU and the US) have attempted to fill this gap and lead the mediation process between conflicting political parties. These Ambassadors in Georgia attempted recently to act as "facilitators" for political dialogue as a depolarisation measure between government and the opposition. The ambassadorial facilitation brought about significant electoral reforms but failed to reconcile conflicting parties during the 2020 post-election crisis when the opposition contested the election results.

Following this, the EU stepped up its measures, updating the term “facilitation” to “mediation”, and sent a special envoy in the person of the head of the European Council to reconcile the conflicting parties. It remains to be seen whether such de-radicalisation measures promoted by external actors who have limited legitimacy will be effective.

6. Conclusion

The breakup of the Soviet Union and subsequent collapse of state institutions and an economic recession gave birth to various radical Orthodox Christian fundamentalist groups. Later, while the post-2003 Rose Revolution reforms were praised as a success overall, its sudden radical neoliberal reform agenda further disenfranchised a large part of society, leaving them susceptible to alt-right and nationalist ideologies.

In the case of Muslim radicalisation, the collapse of the USSR opened up the Caucasus for alternative and radical teachings of Islam to be imported from Iran, Turkey and the Persian Gulf countries. The second Chechen War further contributed to a wider spread of fundamentalist views. The Syrian war was also a pivotal event, allowing young people from the Pankisi Gorge to escape the disappointing economic situation by pursuing success and fame in the Middle East. These developments forced the Georgian government to actively engage with the Muslim population in this region by promoting military service, offering access to better education and actively undertake counterterrorist actions.

Unlike attacks motivated by radical Islam, which never happened in Georgia, fundamentalist Orthodox Christians and alt-right groups that are motivated by xenophobia and homophobia pose greater threats. Since the early years of this century dozens of violent attacks were organised by Orthodox Christian groups against other religious communities. The focus then shifted to include homophobia and “moral policing”. The increasing radicalisation of Orthodox Christian fundamentalists and ultraconservatives also poses a threat to further disenfranchise and radicalise Muslim minorities in Georgia.

While other forms of radicalisation are present to various degrees, the main challenge for Georgia comes from non-religious and non-ideological forms, particularly from political or party-driven radicalisation resulting from the combination of a low level of political legitimacy and a high level of political and societal polarisation. Party-driven radicalisation was always present in Georgia, but it has risen steadily since the 2012 power change, acquiring the present dangerous dimensions that have brought the country to the civil confrontation.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Main (de)radicalisation events in Georgia since 2001

| Name | Dates | Description |
|--|------------|---|
| Attack on Jehovah's Witnesses | 24.09.2001 | A major attack on religious minorities by Orthodox Christian fundamentalists that left dozens of Jehovah's Witnesses beaten and their convention site ravaged. |
| Attack by the Orthodox Christian fundamentalists on representatives of Christian Churches gathered for ecumenical prayer | 24.01.2003 | This attack played an important role in (de)-radicalisation, as it highlighted the fundamentalists' approach towards other branches of Christianity. It also forced Georgian officials to apologize to minorities and raise the issue of religious violence as a problem. |
| Rose Revolution | 23.11.2003 | This event gave birth to the modern Georgian state, but the radical neoliberal reform agenda left parts of the population disfranchised and vulnerable to radicalisation. |
| Crackdown on protests | 07.11.2007 | The Government crackdown on massive opposition anti-governmental protests against proposed move of parliamentary elections date was a manifestation of radicalisation along the cultural, political (old vs new elites) and economic (haves and have nots) lines. |
| First electoral power change | 01.10.2012 | The 2012 Parliamentary elections marked the first electoral power change in Georgia, and started a dangerous spiral of political and societal radicalisation between government and opposition. |

| | | |
|---|---------------|---|
| Violent attack on LGBTI activists and supporters | 17.05.2013 | This attack was organised by fundamentalist Orthodox Christian priests and groups associated with them that had radicalised youth against sexual minorities, and contributed to increased homophobia in subsequent years. |
| Adoption of antidiscrimination bill by Parliament | 02.05.2014 | This event contributed to more radicalisation, as priests, including the Patriarch, publicly opposed the adoption of any legislation regulating the spread of homophobic language and intolerance towards sexual minorities |
| Success of the Islamic State | 2014 | After ISIS captured several cities and regions in Iraq and gained global prominence, it became an attractive option for Muslims living in Georgia who were disappointed with the economic or social prospects in their country. |
| Creation of the province covering the North Caucasus by the Islamic State | 25.06.2015 | This event brought ISIS ideology into the immediate neighbourhood of Georgia. |
| Donald Trump's victory (along with multiple successes of populists in the EU) | November 2016 | The presidency of Trump gave a huge boost to the Georgian alt right, especially since it meant possibly getting rid of the "pro-Russian" stigma, often attached to ultraconservatives in Georgia. |
| "March of the Georgians" | 14.07.2017 | This event contributed to bringing Georgian ultraconservatives together and establishing the Georgian March organisation that has been behind all the major violent incidents against minorities ever since. |
| Attempts to disrupt the movie screening of "And Then We Danced" | 08.12.2017 | The incident reactivated homophobic speech and called for actions going beyond the legal framework ("pushing police aside", |

| | | |
|---|--------------|---|
| | | “storming the theatre by force”, etc.) as well as revealed the key actors behind such discourse |
| Launch of Altinfo TV channel | January 2021 | After being banned from Facebook, Altinfo launched its own TV channel to reach a wider audience, promoting conspiracy theories, anti-liberal propaganda, ultraconservative, and nationalist views. |
| Detention of the leader of the largest opposition party | 24.02.2021 | The detention of Nika Melia by Georgian police, head of the UNM was the culmination of growing political and societal polarisation since 2012, and has thrown the country into a severe political crisis. |

Appendix 2. Political discourse about radicalisation in Georgia

| Quotation | Author(s) | Date of quotation | Source | Comments |
|---|---|-------------------|--|--|
| <p>“It is about the following issue: either we go towards Europe and we recognize that we should not chase people with sticks, we should not fire people from job if we do not share their opinions and their way of life, or else we stay in Russia, where it is possible to expel from a city those people, whom you dislike, to ban from entry to shops those people, whom you do not like, and simply to go and invade a territory of others if you like that territory.”</p> | <p>David Usupashvili, Speaker of Parliament 2012-2016</p> | <p>30.04.2014</p> | <p>Civil.ge https://civil.ge/archives/123670</p> | <p>This comment illustrates the global geopolitical context in which moves towards de-radicalisation have been framed.</p> |
| <p>“A good example of that were developments in Tbilisi’s central square a day before yesterday, when you [police] managed in dignity to provide safe passage for minorities so that they could protect their rights. You stood between majority and minority and when you saw that the need of protection of persons’ safety, instead of freedom of expression, became number one priority and when, unfortunately, it was not possible to contain agitated majority, you put entire burden on yourselves at the expense of your own</p> | <p>Bidzina Ivanishvili, Prime Minister of Georgia</p> | <p>19.05.2013</p> | <p>Civil.ge https://civil.ge/archives/122866</p> | <p>This quote shows the state’s approach when violence takes place, and its reliance on police and similar players.</p> |

| | | | | |
|---|--|------------|---|--|
| safety and managed to escort the minority out of danger.” | | | | |
| “So, I want to appeal with love and respect to all those people, who have been expressing concerns over adoption of this bill, and I want to calm them down that I am not less patriotic and not less defender of our national values. I will be the first to stand beside our country’s main values if they are ever threatened – whether it is our traditional Orthodoxy or something else. With adoption of this legislation we demonstrate that we are a strong nation and strong state and that we are not afraid of – and there were some talks about a ‘sin’ – we should not speak about ‘sin’, we should speak about development of the country and an Orthodox Christian has never been afraid of this or that sin – that’s our strength and we should prove with this that we are disposed towards building of a strong state,” | Irakli Gharibashvil, Prime Minister of Georgia | 30.04.2014 | Civil.ge https://civil.ge/archives/186989 | This quote from the Prime Minister in response to the Church’s concerns over anti-discrimination bill illustrates the official approach of the state towards Orthodox Christian fundamentalism and radicalisation. |
| “UNM is a criminal, dirty political force with no political future in Georgia and this will be guaranteed by the democratic system established in our country.” | Irakli Kobakhidze; Chairperson of Parliament; | | Civil.ge https://civil.ge/archives/265066 | This quote illustrates rhetoric used by the government against the largest opposition party. |
| “Ivanishvili’s government is on the verge of collapse. Ivanishvili, like a | Mikheil Saakashvili | | Civil.ge https://civil.ge/archives/244399 | This quote shows rhetoric used by the UNM leader |

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|--|-----------------------|--|--|--|
| <p>python, is now changing his skin, but his skin has become very thin and it has become easier to approach him. Ivanishvili is as weak now as never before, but we should not be weak.”</p> | <p>leader the UNM</p> | | | <p>against the government and its informal leader.</p> |
|--|-----------------------|--|--|--|

Appendix 3. Networks of connection of the main agents of radicalisation in Georgia

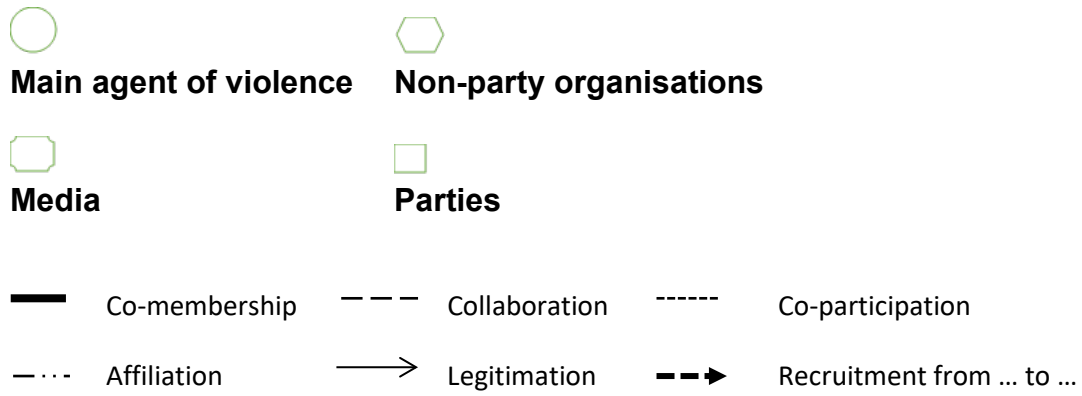


Figure 3.1. Network of Orthodox Christian radicalisation

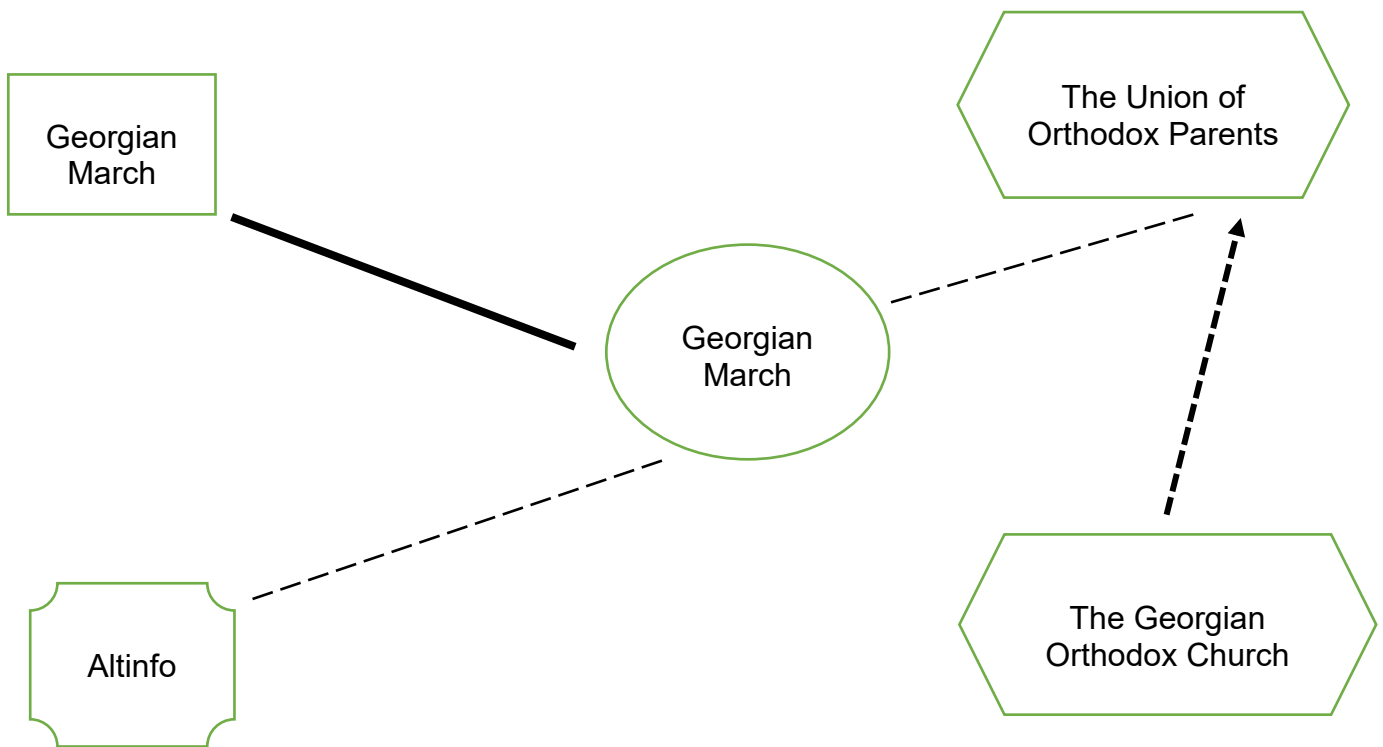


Figure 3.2. Party-driven radicalisation

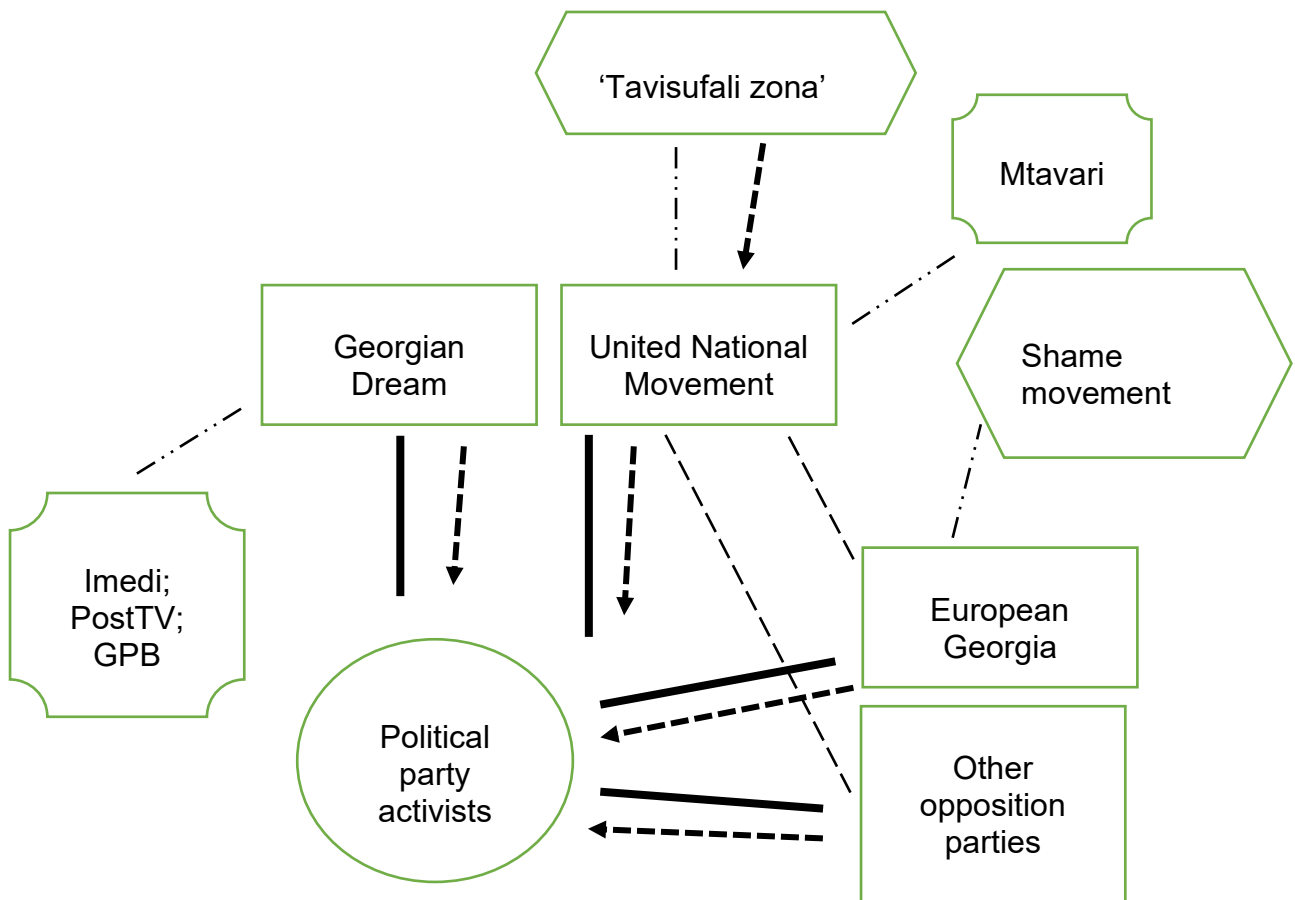
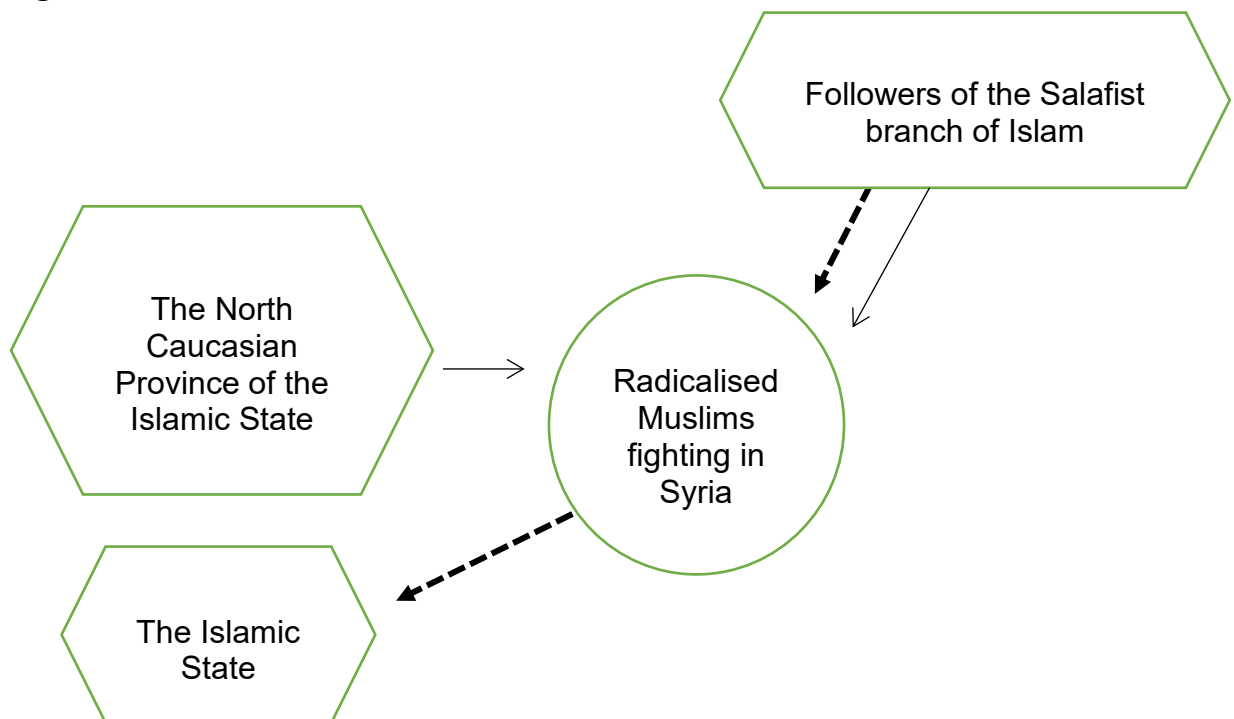


Figure 3.3. Islamic radicalization



Appendix 4. Main de-radicalisation programmes in Georgia

| Programme | Dates initiated (and discontinued) | Agents | Approach | Scale | Target |
|---|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|---|
| Promotion of military service in Pankisi | 01.2016-02.2016 | Ministry of Defence of Georgia | Integrative | Regional – Pankisi Gorge | Youth living in Pankisi Gorge |
| Increase of quotas for students from Pankisi Gorge in state universities | 2015 - ongoing | Ministry of Education of Georgia | Integrative | Regional – Pankisi Gorge | Youth living in Pankisi Gorge |
| Training on awareness of freedom of religion and tolerance | 11.10.2018 – 29.05.2019 | State Agency for Religious Issues | Civic | National | University Students |
| Training to raise awareness on issues of freedom of religion, tolerance, equality and religious neutrality | 27.06.2018-04.07.2018 | State Agency for Religious Issues | Civic | National | Journalists |
| Trainings to raise awareness of religious communities (clergy) on freedom of religion, human rights and fundamental freedoms. To foster religious tolerance and a general culture of tolerance. | 19.06.2018 – 26.09.2019 | State Agency for Religious Issues | Civic | National | Priests in religious communities (clergy) |

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