

The Armed Incident in Georgia's Lopota Valley and its Implications for the Security Situation of the South Caucasus

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In the Lopota Valley, a picturesque spot situated near Georgia's mountainous northeast border with Russia's Dagestani autonomous region, a series of skirmishes took place on the 28th and 29th of August 2012 that cost the lives of two troops from elite units of the Georgian Ministry of the Interior, a military doctor, and eleven gunmen identified as North Caucasus Islamist insurgents, leaving a few Georgian military personnel injured and one insurgent, a Russian citizen, captured by Georgian special forces. While the circumstances of what happened in the vicinity of the north Kakhetian village of Lapankuri have not yet been sufficiently revealed, the event might have considerable implications for the security situation in the entire region of the North and South Caucasus. The purpose of this article is to analyze various perspectives and issues related to this incident and to prove that the hostage crisis in the Lopota Valley indicates the existence of and the foreshadowing of much greater regional instability. The article shall outline the general course of events and those responsible for the incident. It will then introduce various perspectives on the incident from Georgian, Russian, and Dagestani authorities and sources, and analyze the short-term and long-term implications of the incident.

Background of the Events

The official version of the events presented by the Georgian authorities shortly after this skirmish took place states that in the woods to the east of the village of Lapankuri, a group of five Georgian youngsters was captured by Islamist insurgents who had most likely penetrated the Georgian territory from Dagestan. In subsequent negotiations, the Georgian youngsters were freed in exchange for one or two police officers, and the Georgian authorities then suggested that the jihadists lay down their arms and surrender, a demand that was declined by the insurgents. It is not entirely clear what exactly followed at this point, except for the fact that Georgian security forces supported by military helicopters and aerial vehicles eventually managed to destroy the majority of the

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group of insurgents, which consisted of sixteen to twenty people, while the rest of the group was most likely able to retreat.¹

News spread of the burial in Georgia's Duisi district of three Kists,² members of an ethnic sub-group of the Chechens inhabiting the Pankisi Gorge region,³ located approximately 40 km to the northwest of the village of Lapankuri. According to this news (which eventually turned out to be true), at least three Kists, citizens of Georgia, were killed in the incident, while some others killed belonged to Georgia's Chechen community that arrived in the early 2000s,⁴ when thousands of Chechens escaping the Second Chechen War had moved southward, finding refuge among their ethnic kin in the Kist villages spread across the Pankisi Gorge.⁵ This was supported by some eyewitness accounts from among the Lapankuri villagers, according to whom at least some of the insurgents were fluent in Georgian. The rest of the slain insurgents were Russian citizens whose surnames and places of birth indicated their overwhelmingly Chechen origin.⁶

Varying Perceptions of the Incident

According to one explanation of this incident, the Kists recruited in the Pankisi Gorge were in the process of moving to Syria, where they allegedly intended to take part in the local civil war on the side of the Sunni opposition.⁷ In this case, it remains unclear why they were moving along the opposite path instead of traveling to Tbilisi and then to the Georgian–Turkish border.

Furthermore, Georgia's President Saakashvili suggested that Russia was involved in the incident. He was quick to visit Lapankuri and assert that what had happened in the Lopota Valley was "in the interest of our enemy," i.e., Russia, a country that according to some Georgian officials and commentators was most likely testing the preparedness of the Georgian security forces, who in the end managed to heroically defend their land and people. At the same time, the president stopped short of blaming Moscow for being

¹ "Georgia Detains Russian 'Militant' after Border Clash," *Terrorism Watch* (8 September 2012); available at <http://www.terrorismwatch.org/2012/09/georgia-detains-russian-after-border.html>.

² Gela Mtvlishvili, "What Happened in Lopota Valley and What Is Happening in Pankisi Valley?" *Humanrights.ge* (11 September 2012); available at <http://www.humanrights.ge/index.php?a=main&pid=15500&lang=eng>.

³ "Ethnic Groups in Georgia," *The Georgian Times* (3 November 2008); available at <http://www.geotimes.ge/index.php?m=home&newsid=9724>.

⁴ "Identity, Motives of Intruders onto Georgian Territory Remain Unclear," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (3 September 2012); available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/georgian-intruders-caucasus-report-daghestan/24696534.html>.

⁵ Johanna Nichols, "The Chechen Refugees," *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 18:2 (2000): 241-259; available at <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/bjil/vol18/iss2/6/>.

⁶ "Georgian Dream Slams Govt Over Armed Clash in Lopota Gorge," *Civil.ge* (4 September 2012); available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25178>.

⁷ Emil Souleimanov's personal interview with an officer in the Ministry of the Interior of Dagestan, Russia, 12 September 2012.

directly behind the incident, referring instead to the memory of *lekianoba*, Lezghi or rather Dagestani-led raids of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which saw bands of highlanders devastate the Kakhetian countryside. In reference to the events in Kakheti, President Saakashvili stated:

We already had a great disturbance in the neighboring country in the past. It was in these very regions that our neighbor exported this instability and the related problems to Georgian territory. They entered their troops in this area, which resulted in the well-known events that transpired in Pankisi Valley.... This was followed by chaos and a high death toll. Kidnappings and numerous other negative issues occurred behind these mountains. On this side of the mountains, here in Kakheti, we have great development and reconstruction. The Georgian state will not tolerate the spread of instability, violence, and chaos existing on the territory of our neighbor that may threaten peaceful Georgian citizens and the peaceful functioning and development of our country.⁸

Saakashvili's allusion to past events echoes a common Georgian position of deep-rooted apprehension and mistrust of Russia and a belief in Russia's role as a destabilizing and negative force upon Georgia.

However, due to the general lack of clear and unambiguous information and a gradual evolution of some segments of the official narrative, as well as new evidence from the ground that soon made its way into the Georgian media, the Tbilisi-backed interpretation of the Lopota incident was widely contested both within and outside Georgia. According to some opposition leaders, the whole incident might have been fabricated by the Saakashvili regime to create a plausible pretext for the cancellation or at least postponement of parliamentary elections in Georgia that took place in early October.

A parliamentary candidate from the Ivanishvili bloc, Paata Zakareishvili, claimed: "The tales that the government has been spreading since morning have nothing to do with reality. The government is trying to somehow provoke Russia so that the electorate does not vote against the government in a wartime situation."⁹ Others have accused the Georgian authorities of providing insufficient and unreliable information about the incident.

Additionally, to further contribute to the ambiguity of the incident, Russian authorities have staunchly rejected any reports by Georgian officials indicating that the insurgents crossed the Russo-Georgian border, considering it nothing but a "provocation." In fact, the Russians have repeatedly (yet with little evidence on the ground) blamed the Georgians for providing direct support to the jihadists and for turning their country into a safe haven for those terrorists and insurgents who are waging a war against the Russian state. Among other things, Russians have since 2000 often pointed at the Chechen-

⁸ Z. Zaza Jgharkava, "Guerillas in Lopota or Putin's Trap?" *Georgia Today* (30 August 2012); available at http://www.georgiatoday.ge/article_details.php?id=10413.

⁹ *Ibid.*

populated Pankisi Gorge, where various forms of support for the North Caucasus insurgency, particularly the Chechnya-based *jamaats*, have been particularly strong.¹⁰

Similarly, little clarity was to be found in the reports from pro-insurgent sources. Shortly after word spread of the Lopota incident, North Caucasus jihadist sources published a number of statements in which they accused the Georgians of murdering their brethren in arms, who they identified as members of a Dagestani *jamaat*, pledging vengeance against the Georgians. For instance, VDagestan.com, the major website of the Dagestani *jamaat* of the Caucasus Emirate, admitted that some of its members crossed the border, rejecting at the same time the claim that they planned to conduct any military operation on Georgian soil, and asserting that no hostages were taken, and the liquidation of the jihadists was an act of betrayal, which was “by no means the first time they have taken such a treacherous step in a bid to appease the Putinist regime in Russia.”¹¹ This statement also appeared on the website of the Caucasus Emirate’s Kavkaz Center, stirring up anti-Georgian sentiments among those Northeast Caucasians sympathetic to the jihadist case. A few days later, both Islamist websites withdrew their statements. Nevertheless, these statements claiming affiliation with the insurgency undermine Tbilisi’s claims that Moscow may be behind the insurgencies. Similarly, the jihadists’ cries of betrayal directed at the Georgian authorities serve to weaken Russia’s claims that Georgia provides a safe haven for North Caucasus insurgents.

In the meantime, sources from the Dagestani Ministry of the Interior soon *de facto* acknowledged the version of events presented by both the Georgian authorities and Dagestani insurgents, indicating that the killed jihadists most likely were part of the Tsunta *jamaat* that had been facing an increasingly fierce counterinsurgent campaign by both Dagestani and Russian federal law enforcement units and chose to eventually cross the Russo-Georgian border.¹²

Security Implications of the Incident

The true motives of the insurgents as well as the response of Georgian law enforcement officials to the hostage crisis remain unclear. Irakli Alasania, Georgia’s current Minister of Defense and former opposition leader, stated:

There is not yet enough information to make a comprehensive analysis of what has happened. One thing is clear: our borders are not protected well and an armed group of

¹⁰ Johan Grennan, “Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge and the Global War Against Terrorism,” Event Report, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University (April 2012); available at http://belfercenter.hks.harvard.edu/publication/12731/georgias_pankisi_gorge_and_the_global_war_against_terrorism.html?breadcrumb=%2Fpublication%2Fby_type%2Fevent_report%3Fpage%3D9.

¹¹ Teo Bichikashvili, “Georgians Shaken by Border Incursion,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting* (31 August 2012); available at <http://iwpr.net/report-news/georgians-shaken-border-incursion>.

¹² Emil Souleimanov’s personal interview with an officer in the Ministry of the Interior of Dagestan, Chechnya, 12 September 2012.

twenty persons can cross into the country without being detected by the border guard. A comprehensive investigation needs to be carried out in order to look into who was in charge of negotiations with [the armed group]; what was the subject of negotiations and why was this operation planned in such a way that led to death of so many people.¹³

Indeed, this incident has raised a number of questions. Foremost, the insurgents' motives are unclear, and this ambiguity lays behind the wide assortment of perspectives on this incident. Subsequently, the killing of the insurgents at the hands of the Georgian forces ensures that the uncertainty of the insurgents' agenda remains intact, a factor that may contribute to a further strain in relations between Georgia and Russia, who both point accusatory fingers at one another for the Lopota Valley events. Also, the actions of the Georgian authorities in handling this incident have been highly scrutinized, especially by the Georgian opposition (who are currently in power following the October elections in Georgia). Furthermore, the growth of the insurgency in neighboring Dagestan reveals a potential link to events in the Lopota Valley and a growing regional threat.

The Interior Ministry of Georgia released a statement identifying seven out of the eleven persons killed by the Georgian forces. Two out of the seven were Georgian citizens, and five were citizens of the Russian Federation from the North Caucasus, including Chechnya and Ingushetia.¹⁴ However, some sources in the Georgian media have questioned the official information about the perpetrators, and claimed that six out of the eleven were natives of Georgia's Pankisi Gorge region, a claim that is adamantly denied by the Georgian Interior Ministry.¹⁵ The discrepancy between official reports on the insurgents' identity and those coming from media sources certainly strengthens the sense of confusion surrounding this incident. It further leads one to consider why the identity classifications of the insurgents provided by the government would be questioned by media sources in the first place. Also, should media sources prove to be correct in their classification, this would cast reasonable doubt upon the former government, and give rise to questions over its motives in withholding the identities of the insurgents, especially of those who were Georgian citizens.

In addition, Mamuka Areshid, Director of the Caucasus Strategic Research Institute, suggested "that it is 'odd' that eleven intruders were shot dead but not a single one was injured or taken alive for interrogation. The special forces units tasked with neutralizing the group should have been capable of shooting to incapacitate, rather than to kill."¹⁶ This speculation goes hand in hand with Alasania's claims that this operation was not well planned. Radio Liberty Europe speculates that the Georgian authorities were quick

¹³ "Georgia: Tracking Events in Lopota Gorge," *Kavkaz Center* (4 September 2012); available at <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2012/09/04/16612.shtml>.

¹⁴ "MIA Announced the Names of Militants Liquidated in Lopota Valley," *Internet.ge* (3 September 2012); available at <http://www.internet.ge/?l=EN&m=6&sm=0&ID=10309>.

¹⁵ "Militants from Dagestan Eliminated in Georgia Turned Out to be Residents of Georgian Villages," *Georgia Times* 3 (3 September 2012); available at www.georgiatimes.info/en/news/80028.html.

¹⁶ "Identity, Motives of Intruders onto Georgian Territory Remain Unclear."

to react to the incursions, as they may have thought they were masterminded by Russia, and only later discovered this was not true. Another interpretation is that authorities knew the insurgents came from Dagestan but killed them all anyway in order to fuel the uncertainty over their true motives and thereby ensure suspicion that Moscow may have been behind the incident. The failure to take these insurgents (save for one) alive for questioning means that the truth behind this incident may forever remain shrouded in a veil of mystery. Indeed, whether the response by Georgian authorities to this incident was a gaffe or purposely planned is uncertain.

A further troubling element of this incident is the past decade's escalation of Islamic insurgency in Dagestan, a region that borders Georgia's Lopota Valley, and the potential spillover effect this may have upon Georgia. Recently, Russian and Georgian sources suggest a potential link between the entrance of armed men to the Lopota Valley and events in Russia, namely the August 28th attack by a female suicide bomber in Dagestan. According to the Russian news agency Ria Novosti, "The armed group that the Georgian agents have been fighting has fled the Dagestani police."¹⁷ The agency directly claimed that the group of armed men in the Lopota Valley had fled from Dagestan to Georgia, a claim that provides grounds for Russia to argue that Georgia provides a safe haven for North Caucasus insurgents. Furthermore, on August 29th, National Security Council Secretary Giga Bokeria suggested that it is possible the militants involved in this incident had links with insurgent groups in Dagestan and that it was "obvious that their presence in Georgia was connected with developments there."¹⁸ "Developments" in this case may refer to the growth of the insurgency in Dagestan or, as is inferred by Radio Free Europe, to the buildup of Russian troops and armor in the western districts of Dagestan that border Georgia.

Indeed, a number of Georgian, Chechen, and Azerbaijani news sources reported a concentration of Russian military troops in the Botlikhski and Didoiski Rayons regions of Dagestan.¹⁹ On August 28th, the Dagestani news portal of *V Dagestane* reported that a Russian armored column of vehicles, equipment, and soldiers mobilized in this area. Certainly, such a military buildup of Russian forces could be viewed as a threat to Georgia and is likely what lies behind claims by Georgian officials that Russia may have ignited the recent incident in the Lopota Valley as a means of testing Georgian preparedness.

The possibility of events in Dagestan being linked to those in the Lopota Valley also leads one to question what logical purpose Georgian officials would have in harboring insurgents fleeing from the Dagestani authorities, a factor that would seem to pose a threat to Georgia's national security and is therefore illogical. It is not unlikely that North Caucasus insurgents look to Georgia as a safe haven and may indeed end up there; however, the suggestion by Russian sources that Georgian officials consciously provide these insurgents with a safe haven seems unlikely, as such an action would threaten

¹⁷ Zaza Jgharkava, "Guerillas in Lopota or Putin's Trap?"

¹⁸ "Identity, Motives of Intruders onto Georgian Territory Remain Unclear."

¹⁹ Zaza Jgharkava, "Guerillas in Lopota or Putin's Trap?"

Georgia's already strained relations with Russia and threaten Georgia's security, because authorities cannot be certain of the insurgents' agenda.

The growth of the insurgency in the North Caucasus, and particularly in Dagestan, makes the identification of the affiliation and motives of those insurgents involved in the Lopota Valley incident imperative. Georgia can otherwise not fully clear its name before Russian officials who claim it provides a refuge for Islamic insurgents fleeing Chechnya and Dagestan. Similarly, until the true motives and affiliation of the insurgents comes to light, Russia lacks a sound basis for dispelling Georgia's claim that Russia was behind this incident. Thus, the inability to sufficiently pinpoint the agenda of the perpetrators of this event not only presents a further stumbling block in Georgian-Russian relations but also a threat to regional security.

On the other hand, Pavel Felgenhauer, a Russian military analyst, has speculated that "this clash was accidental from both sides. ...What happened in Lapankuri looks more like a serious misunderstanding."²⁰ This misunderstanding stems from the ambiguity of the incident, made even greater by the hasty response of Georgian law enforcement officials who managed to capture none of the insurgents for questioning. Yet the BBC claims that "it was crucial for Georgia to act decisively, as there were fears in Tbilisi that Moscow would use any sign that terrorists from the North Caucasus are operating in the region as a pretext for entering [deeper] into Georgia."²¹ A number of Georgian sources similarly claim that authorities' hasty deployment of forces was preferable to the possibility of an outbreak of another strain in Georgian-Russian relations, which could have been the case should Russia have had basis to back its claims against Georgia.²²

Saakashvili said that the hostage crisis related to a Russian plot "to give them (Moscow) a pretext to use our (Georgia's) internal disorder and internal divide for implementation of their sinister plans."²³ Saakashvili's statement was made before Georgia's October parliamentary elections, and it is therefore reasonable to presume that in referring to "internal disorder" and "Russia's sinister plans," he suggested Russia may have tried to somehow sway the outcome of the October elections. In turn, Vadim Shibayev, a spokesperson for Russia's Federal Security Service, called Georgia's accusations that Russia trespassed on Georgian territory groundless and provocative.²⁴ This blame game undoubtedly unveils the deeply rooted mistrust between Russian and Georgian authori-

²⁰ Special operation video material, *Georgia Ministry of Internal Affairs*, 2012; retrieved from <http://police.ge/index.php?m=8&newsid=3492&lng=eng>.

²¹ "On August 27–September 2, at least 50 Persons Fell Victim to Armed Conflict in Northern Caucasus," *Caucasian Knot* (5 September 2012); available at <http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/22127>.

²² "Georgians Shaken by Border Incursion," *Turkish Weekly* (5 September 2012); available at <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/141318/georgians-shaken-by-border-incursion.html>.

²³ "Georgia Informs NATO about Situation in Georgian-Russian Border," *Trend* (30 August 2012); available at <http://en.trend.az/regions/scaucasus/georgia/2060122.html>.

²⁴ "Akhmed Chataev Innocent – MIA Compelled Witness to Sign Fake Testimonies," *Human-rights.ge* (29 October 2012); available at <http://humanrights.ge/index.php?a=main&pid=15818&lang=eng>.

ties. Yet, with the election of a new Georgian parliamentary body in October headed by the opposition (who incidentally blamed the former Georgian government for utilizing the hostage crisis to win the election), it is unlikely that this incident should serve as a long-term factor of increased tension between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Conclusion

Definite information is still difficult to obtain, and it is likely that the public will never find out the complete truth about what indeed happened in the Lopota Valley in August 2012. However, the reactions of various Georgian and Russian officials to this event shed doubt upon the possibility of cooperation between the two states on future security issues. Even though substantial evidence exists that the August hostage crisis is the responsibility of a jihadist organization, rather than this incident leading to cooperative measures, it appears to have led instead to divisiveness and accusations, both internally within Georgia and between Georgia and Russia. Whatever the course of the recent events in Georgia's northeast, however, they clearly indicate the fact that the Caucasus is a deeply interconnected region—geographically, politically, and ethnically—where developments to the north of the greater Caucasus mountain range might relatively easily spread out toward the south and vice versa. Indeed, Georgia is an integral part of the Caucasus, which implies not only fraternal rhetoric when it comes to the feelings of pan-Caucasian solidarity that dominate in that South Caucasian country with regard to North Caucasians, as many Georgians share strong sympathies for the efforts of the North Caucasus insurgency, and the Saakashvili regime has carried out policies aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the North Caucasians and at turning Georgia into the economic, political, and intellectual core of the united Caucasus. It also implies that, when it comes to tangible policy on the ground, Georgia should take into consideration its own interests that are only partially in line with those of the jihadists or their numerous North Caucasian sympathizers, whose ideological orientation is far from that of the post-Soviet Georgian state.

Importantly, the Lopota events demonstrated the degree of vulnerability of the Georgians in case of prospective provocations that might be plotted by the Russian secret services as a pretext for interference in Georgia's internal affairs. This has also been a clear signal for the Azerbaijanis, who have already faced the dramatic growth of militant Salafist cells in the country's north, which is inhabited by ethnic Dagestanis.²⁵ This seems to be one of the reasons why Tbilisi decided to respond to the incursion of the jihadist units on its soil in the fiercest possible way, to effectively deprive the Russians of a tool for pressure that might be applied by the latter in the future. As counterinsurgent activities of the federal and local armed forces gain momentum in Dagestan—the current epicenter of the Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus, where dozens of thousands of army and Ministry of Interior troops have concentrated recently—the pressure will increase upon the insurgents to occasionally cross the Russo-Georgian (and Russo-

²⁵ Emil Souleimanov, "Jihadism on the Rise in Azerbaijan," *CACI Analyst* (5 February 2012); available at <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5766/print>.

Azerbaijani) borders to secure temporary safe havens. This, again, might pose a serious problem in relations between Moscow on the one hand, and Tbilisi and Baku on the other, prompting the latter to either turn a blind eye on the presence of armed militants on their soil, risk a conflict with Moscow (which might use this as a pretext to exert pressure on the South Caucasian countries, with the ultimate risk of military interference), or risk a dangerous conflict with ethnic minorities of Chechen and Dagestani descent populating their borderland areas.

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