

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

[Home](#) > [Research Program](#) > [Responses to Information Requests](#)

Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website.

26 January 2011

GEO103668.E

GEO103668.E

Georgia: Blood feuds, including definitions, statistics, state protection, mediation and relocation (2002 - 2011)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

The blood feud, an ancient custom in which the family of a victim seeks revenge against the family of a killer, has historically been practiced in Georgia's mountainous areas (Jalabadze 2010b, 4 - 5; HRIDC 21 Jan. 2011; Photojournalist 19 Jan. 2011; *The Guardian* 30 July 2002;). Scholars, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media sources report that blood feuds are still happening in some of those areas and among particular ethnic groups (EurasiaNet 8 Mar. 2010; *The Guardian* 30 July 2002; HRIDC Feb. 2008, 18; Jalabadze 2010a, 1; MRG 2002, 19; Voell 2010, 6). Specifically, sources report that the blood-feud tradition has remained in:

- Svaneti (EurasiaNet 8 Mar. 2010; *The Guardian* 30 July 2002; HRIDC 21 Jan. 2011; Jalabadze 2010a, 1; Voell 2010, 6) and among the Svan people who migrated to other areas of Georgia ((Voell 2010, 1 - 2, 6; Jalabadze 2010a, 4 - 5; HRIDC 21 Jan. 2011);
- Khevsureti (Senior Researcher 10 Jan. 2011; Photojournalist 19 Jan. 2011; HRIDC 21 Jan. 2011), among the Khevsur people who migrated to other areas in Georgia (ibid.; Senior Researcher 10 Jan. 2011);
- Pshavi (which is also spelled as Pshav) (Photojournalist 19 Jan. 2011; HRIDC 21 Jan. 2011);
- Khevi (ibid.); and
- the Pankisi Valley (which is also referred to as the Pankisi Gorge) among the Kists (HRIDC Feb. 2008, 18; MRG 2002, 19; Photojournalist 19 Jan. 2011).

Svans

Svaneti, a remote highland region in the northwest of Georgia (DOBES n.d; EurasiaNet 8 Mar. 2010), is reportedly well-known in the country for preserving the blood-feud tradition (HRIDC 21 Jan. 2011; Senior Researcher 10 Jan. 2011). In addition to Georgian, the people of Svaneti speak Svan, a distinct language, (DOBES N.d.; Voell 2010, 1) that is not understood by other Georgians (ibid.). According to statistics from 1997, there are approximately 30,000 Svan speakers in Georgia (DOBES n.d.). One media source describes Svaneti society as clan-based and characterizes the region as having a "Wild West-like reputation among Georgians" (EurasiaNet 8 Mar. 2010), while another indicates that murder is "a part of life" in Svaneti and interviews a person involved in a 100-year-old feud who says that Svans are known for their quick tempers (*The Guardian* 30 July 2002).

Two scholars who are part of a research project examining traditional law in Georgia found that the Svans who relocated to the Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia maintained their blood-feud ideology, although neither reported specific cases of murders motivated by blood feuds in this region (ibid., 6; Jalabadze 2010a, 4 - 5; see also Senior Researcher 10 Jan. 2011).

Definitions

According to one of the Georgian traditional law research project scholars, the Georgian term for blood feud, *mesixleoba*, literally means "responsibility for blood"; it is based on the principle of "an eye for an eye," whereby the male members of a family avenge the murder of a relative by killing either the culprit or one of his male family members (Jalabadze 2010b, 5 - 6). This responsibility traditionally fell to the closest male relative of the family, such as the father, brother or son (ibid., 6). The feud could occur between representatives of families, clans, communities, villages or tribes (ibid.). The scholar explains that the blood-feud tradition among Georgian highlanders is linked to a code of honour that places a high value on the traits of bravery and courage (ibid., 9).

An earlier academic report produced by two researchers for the University of California, Berkeley's Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Program explains that, historically, blood feuds provided a means of self-defence for families, and that it was considered an obligation to "take blood" for a murdered family member (Kurtsikidze and Chikovani 2002, 22 - 23). The research team reports that, in Khevsureti, it was customary for the avenging party of a blood feud to burn down the murderer's home and property (ibid., 24). In Khevsureti and Pshavi, relatives of a murderer avoided the victim's family for fear of their lives (ibid.). Among the Kists, an ethnic minority of approximately 5,000 people who are closely related to Chechens, the family seeking revenge would first send representatives to the offender's family to declare the feud before carrying out any actions (ibid., 3, 23). The other family then had the option of requesting a *kkhiel* (traditional court) review the matter and determine whether the feud was justified (ibid.).

Several sources indicate that blood feuds can start from either intentional or accidental killings (Jalabadze 2010b, 6; Voell 2010, 6; Bardzimashvili 15 Apr. 2010). Rape is reportedly another possible motivation for blood feuds (OMCT May 2006, 54). Sometimes a blood feud can start from a minor argument that leads to a killing (Jalabadze 2010b, 6; Bardzimashvili 15 Apr. 2010; HRIDC 21 Jan. 2011). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Executive Director of the Tbilisi-based Human Rights Center (HRIDC) explained that "[f]euds tend to begin because one party--correctly or incorrectly--perceives itself to have been attacked, insulted or wronged by another" (HRIDC 21 Jan. 2011).

According to one of the Georgia research project scholars, taking revenge against women, children, and old or sick people has traditionally been considered disgraceful (Jalabadze 2010b, 6). Also, someone fleeing from an attacker can seek temporary refuge in a church or by touching the hearth of his home, which has sacred meaning in Georgia (ibid., 7).

A photojournalist who has conducted research on blood feuds in Svaneti explained, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, that sometimes criminal activity combines with blood-feud animosity, such as when criminal gangs are made up of two traditionally opposed Svan families (ibid.). An example of this can be found in a 2005 article published by the non-profit Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), which reports of two Svan families linked to organized crime starting a feud in which a car and retaliatory house bombing caused serious injuries to the victims (21 Feb. 2005).

Statistics

Sources indicate that there are no statistics about blood feuds in Georgia (Senior Researcher 10 Jan. 2011; Photojournalist 19 Jan. 2011; HRIDC 21 Jan. 2011). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Consul at the Embassy of Georgia in Washington, DC stated that he was not aware of any statistics on this subject, and added that blood feuds are "very unusual" and rarely ever occur (Georgia 12 Jan. 2011). According to the photojournalist, statistics are not kept both because the topic of blood feuds is "taboo" and the numbers are difficult to ascertain since locals are reluctant to talk about the issue (19 Jan. 2011).

A 2002 article published in *The Guardian* reports some anecdotal figures on blood feuds in Svaneti (30 July 2002). According to a local resident, there were at least 20 families feuding in Mestia, the main city of Svaneti; the *Guardian* reporter also heard about one blood feud in the village of Becho Marina that resulted in 22 deaths over 10 years (*The Guardian* 30 July 2002). These figures could not be corroborated among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

According to the photojournalist, in the late 1980s and early 1990s there were intensive blood feuds in Svaneti, but such murders have decreased significantly since 1990 (19 Jan. 2011). He expressed the opinion that it has become "quite rare" to kill somebody for blood-feud-related motives, even though tensions between clans and families continue (Photojournalist 19 Jan. 2011). The HRIDC Executive Director, who similarly indicated that blood-feud killings are less frequent, was aware of only a few cases occurring between 2000 and 2010 (21 Jan. 2011).

State protection

The Georgian Criminal Code punishes premeditated murder with imprisonment for a term of between seven and fifteen years (Georgia 1999, Art. 108 - 109).

Sources indicate that crimes related to blood feuds would be handled by law enforcement and the judiciary system (Georgia 12 Jan. 2011; Senior Researcher 10 Jan. 2011). The embassy official stated that a person who feels threatened by a blood feud can seek assistance from the police in all areas of Georgia, except the "occupied areas" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia 12 Jan. 2011). A senior researcher at the Institute of History and Ethnology in Tbilisi, who has conducted field research on blood feuds in Georgia, explained, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, that, although Svans and Khevsurs traditionally do not report crimes to the police or seek police protection, murders do not remain a secret (10 Jan. 2011). The police treat the murderer as a criminal who is subject to prosecution and imprisonment (Senior Researcher 10 Jan. 2011). However, the HRIDC Executive Director clarified that, even though the police will investigate blood-feud cases and prosecute the criminals, there is no state protection mechanism available to protect family members involved in blood feuds (21 Jan. 2011).

The photojournalist said that, in his opinion, the police response in Georgia's mountainous areas is "often adequate" and has improved significantly within the last five years (19 Jan. 2011). He explained that, in the 1990s,

many criminals in Svaneti and Pankisi Gorge avoided justice because of police corruption and the strong influence of criminal clans operating in the region, and added that the situation has "changed radically" with the reorganization and strengthening of the police system (Photojournalist 19 Jan. 2011). Freedom House similarly reports that the performance of the Georgian police has improved since the government fired half of its police contingent in 2004 as part of its efforts to curb corruption (Freedom House 2010).

However, two human rights organizations report on a 2005 blood-feud case in which the police used a force of 200 officers, killed the suspect and one of his relatives, and burned down a home during an operation to apprehend a suspect in the village of Duisi in Pankisi Valley (HRIDC Feb. 2008, 18; OMCT May 2006, 53 - 54). The suspect in question was wanted by police for wounding a man who allegedly raped the suspect's wife (ibid.; HRIDC 24 May 2006). The suspect had reportedly sought out the alleged rapist, who had moved away (ibid.; OMCT May 2006, 54). Both human rights organizations faulted the police operation for using excessive force (HRIDC Feb. 2008, 18; OMCT May 2006, 54). Family members of the killed suspect, who are Kists, reportedly threatened blood-feud revenge on the police for killing the two family members and leaving other family members homeless (HRIDC 24 May 2006). According to the HRIDC, the family eventually received financial compensation from the government for the destroyed property (ibid. Feb. 2008, 19).

Mediation

Sources indicate that even when the perpetrator is punished through the state judiciary system, the victim's family will often still seek revenge (EurasiaNet 8 Mar. 2010; Senior Researcher 10 Jan. 2011). One possible social remedy is mediation of the case through village elders, who have a tradition of mediating blood feuds and other local disputes (EurasiaNet 8 Mar. 2010; *The Guardian* 30 July 2002; Jalabadze 2010a, 5).

In Svaneti, councils of elders deliberating on murder cases consist of at least 12 members (Bardzimashvili 15 Apr. 2010), often involving representatives from both families (*The Guardian* 30 July 2002). Sources indicate that material compensation is frequently used as a solution to bring about reconciliation (ibid.; Bardzimashvili 15 Apr. 2010; *The Guardian* 30 July 2002; Jalabadze 2010b, 7). However, sometimes feuding parties have not been willing to reconcile until there have been a few killings by either side (Bardzimashvili 15 Apr. 2010; *The Guardian* 30 July 2002). The reconciliation process has sometimes lasted several years (Jalabadze 2010b, 8).

Relocation

Sources indicate that blood feuds are not practiced in Tbilisi (Senior Researcher 10 Jan. 2011; Photojournalist 19 Jan. 2011), or other major cities in Georgia (Senior Researcher 10 Jan. 2011), and relocation to another area of Georgia may be a possible solution for families wanting to avoid the consequences of a blood feud (Voell 2010, 6; Senior Researcher 10 Jan. 2011; Photojournalist 19 Jan. 2011). In contrast, the HRIDC Executive Director maintained that it would not be possible for feuding families to safely relocate to Tbilisi because of its easy access from the regions (21 Jan. 2011). The photojournalist argues that it would depend on the case: On the one hand, if it is a case of a deliberate homicide where the victim's family is strong, they may follow the offenders throughout Georgia; on the other hand, if it is a case where more time has gone by, relocation may be an effective means of avoiding the opponent (Photojournalist 19 Jan. 2011).

A media source and one of the research project scholars report on some examples of families moving away from their villages to avoid possible consequences of blood feuds (*The Guardian* 30 July 2002; Voell 2010, 8). However, the previously mentioned case involving the alleged rapist demonstrates an instance where the offender, having moved away from the region to protect himself, was still found by the person seeking revenge (OMCT May 2006, 54).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Bardzimashvili, Temo. 15 April 2010. "Svaneti in the Snow: No Country for Old Men." Temo Bardzimashvili's Photo Blog. <<http://temophoto.wordpress.com/2010/04/15/svaneti-in-the-snow-no-country-for-old-men/>> [Accessed 6 Jan. 2011]

Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen - Documentation of Endangered Languages (DOBES). N.d. "The Svan Language." <<http://www.mpi.nl/DOBES/projects/svan>> [Accessed 18 Jan. 2011]

EurasiaNet. 8 March 2010. Temo Bardzimashvili. "Georgia: Amid Democratization, Village Elder Tradition Survives in Mountainous Svaneti Region." <<http://www.eurasianet.org/print/53966>> [Accessed 6 Jan. 2011]

Freedom House. 2010. "Georgia." *Freedom in the World*. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/fiw/inc_country_detail.cfm?year=2010&country=7827&pf> [Accessed 6 Jan. 2011]

Geo-Wonderland.com. N.d. "Svaneti." <<http://geo-wonderland.com/about/mxareebi/svaneti.html>> [Accessed 7 Jan. 2011]

Georgia. 12 January 2011. Embassy of Georgia, Washington, DC. Telephone interview with the Consul.

_____. 1999. Criminal Code of Georgia. (Legislationline). <<http://www.legislationline.org/countries/country/29>> [Accessed 5 Jan. 2010]

The Guardian [London, United Kingdom]. 30 July 2002. Nick Paton Walsh. "The Valley of Death - A Remote Community in Georgia Is Being Torn Apart by a String of Murderous Family Feuds." (Factiva)

Human Rights Center (HRIDC), Tbilisi, Georgia. 21 January 2011. Correspondence with the Executive Director.

_____. February 2008. *The Big Eviction: Violations of Property Rights in Georgia*. <<http://www.humanrights.ge/admin/editor/uploads/files/Big%20Eviction.pdf>> [Accessed 4 Jan. 2011]

_____. 24 May 2006. Gela Mtivlishvili. "Threat of Blood Feud in Pankisi." <<http://www.humanrights.ge/index.php?a=main&pid=6133&lang=eng>> [Accessed 6 Jan. 2011]

Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR). 21 February 2005. Gocha Mindzhoraya. "Georgia: Doubts over New Crime Crackdown." <<http://iwpr.net/print/report-news/georgia-doubts-over-new-crime-crackdown>> [Accessed 4 Jan. 2011]

Jalabadze, Natia. 2010a. "The Resurgence of Blood Feud in the Georgian Lowlands." Working Paper No. 5 Posted on the Blog of the Research Project The Revitalisation of Traditional Law in the Republic of Georgia. Paper Presented at Project Workshop, Tbilisi, Georgia, 16 September 2009. <<http://projectgeorgia.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/wp5.pdf>> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2011]

_____. 2010b. "The Custom of Blood Feud in Georgia: Aggression and Culture." Paper Presented at the 11th European Association of Social Anthropologists Biennial Conference, Maynooth, Ireland 24 - 27 August 2010. (Paper provided by the author in correspondence.)

Kurtsikidze, Shorena, and Vakhtang Chikovani. 2002. *Georgia's Pankisi Gorge: An Ethnographic Survey*. (Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series) <http://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/u4/bps_/publications_/2002_03-kurt.pdf> [Accessed 6 Jan. 2011]

Minority Rights Group International (MRG). 2002. Anna Matveeva. *The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflict and Minorities*. <<http://www.minorityrights.org/download.php?id=123>> [Accessed 6 Jan. 2011]

Photojournalist. 19 January 2011. Correspondence.

Senior Researcher, Institute of History and Ethnology, Tbilisi. 10 January 2011. Correspondence.

Voell, Stéphane. 2010. "Practice of Traditional Law in Svan Villages in Kvemo Kartli, Georgia." Working Paper No. 7 Posted on the Blog of the Research Project The Revitalisation of Traditional Law in the Republic of Georgia. <<http://projectgeorgia.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/wp7.pdf>> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2011]

World Organization Against Torture (OMCT). May 2006. *Human Rights Violations in Georgia. Alternative Report to the United Nations Committee Against Torture. Including the Committee's Concluding Observations, 36th Session*. (United Nations Refworld) <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/46af4d2e0.html>> [Accessed 4 Jan. 2011]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact representatives of the Georgian police and two regional NGOs were unsuccessful.

Internet sites, including: *Central Asia - Caucasus Analyst* [Washington, DC], European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net), Factiva, International Crisis Group (ICG), Interpol, Jamestown Foundation, *Jane's Intelligence Review* [Alexandria, Virginia], Open Society Foundation - Georgia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), *Transitions Online* [Prague], United Nations (UN) Refworld.

[Click here for tips on how to use this search engine.](#)

Top of Page
Date modified: 2013-07-17

The attached reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada. The reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.