
The Georgian–Azerbaijani Monastery Dispute and Implications for the South Caucasus Region

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Often forgotten among the many post-Soviet border disputes in the Caucasus is one pitting two strategic partners against each other, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The two states have enjoyed a bilateral partnership since the beginning of the 2000s that has shaped the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus region. Being at the East-West crossroads, the Baku–Tbilisi axis is of geostrategic importance not only for regional countries but also for the West, Central Asia, and now China. Nevertheless, the pair recently witnessed an escalation of border disputes and tensions over the David Gareja (Keshikchidagh) monastery complex that sprawls between Azerbaijan’s Agstafa district and Georgia’s Sagarejo district.

Earlier this year, Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili discussed the problem with her Baku counterpart and later paid a visit to the complex. While the top leadership on both sides expressed restraint, there was strong clamoring in Georgia about the negative consequences of her approach—often in reference to the “Russian factor.” Indeed, Russia has [increased](#) its soft power in Azerbaijan since 2008 and Russian-Georgian tensions have [risen](#), leading analysts to determine that only Moscow principally benefits from any diplomatic discord between Baku and Tbilisi. Friction between the two would cause immense damage to regional development, namely energy and transport projects. Fortunately, taking into account their long-term decent relationship, the two states resumed their joint commission on the border demarcation process, which requires an open, comprehensive, and mutually beneficial action plan. Local provocateurs (Georgian and Azerbaijani) should be impeded and unnecessary geopolitical interference from the Kremlin must be sidestepped in order for the inherently pragmatic—albeit stalled—settlement process to prevail.

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David Gareja: a Disputed Frontier in the Caucasus

The dispute over the monastery complex between Baku and Tbilisi became tense on July 14, 2019, following a [confrontation](#) between a group of Georgian nationalists and villagers and Azerbaijani border guards. Attempts were made by the Georgian nationalists to disarm the Azerbaijani guards in the monastery environs. This [incident](#), hardly noticed outside the region, led to harsh rhetoric in mainstream and social media against both authorities and provocateurs. This collectively fanned the flames of public emotions between strategic partners who have generally gotten along in an otherwise fairly unstable South Caucasus.

In fact, the dispute over the monastery complex is not new. The complex had been divided between the two republics in Soviet times, which laid the foundation for further problems. While a portion of the religious site is located within Azerbaijan, an informal agreement [dating](#) back to the 1990s permits pilgrims and tourists from Georgia to freely visit the site. Moreover, until recently, both countries refrained from open confrontation near the borders and the Azerbaijani authorities tolerated the Georgian Orthodox Church's de facto control of the monastery complex, including at the Udabno and Chichkhituri monasteries that are located on Azerbaijani soil. The Georgian authorities have not insisted on a border delimitation process and Azerbaijani border troops are still present on the site today. Although Georgia tried to regain control over the entire complex by offering land elsewhere as part of a swap with Azerbaijan, the talks were shelved and the special demarcation commission has since lain dormant. There were several reasons for Baku to decline this offer but the most salient was the high strategic importance of the high ground where the complex is based. In short, Azerbaijan aims to maintain full control of the area because it is very close to Armenia.

Until recently, the issue had been entirely latent due to [burgeoning relations](#) between the two nations. Projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC), Baku-Supsa Pipelines, and Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) Railway, and the accompanying economic benefits, locked Baku and Tbilisi into a sustained, strategic partnership, which keeps border issues at low importance, although tensions have occasionally risen over the past two decades.

The unresolved border dispute between Baku and Tbilisi gained impetus following Zurabishvili's official March 2019 [visit](#) to Baku, where she raised the issue of the border delimitation disagreement in a meeting with President Ilham Aliyev. She then [visited](#) the monastery area on April 20 and called for progress in demarcations. Such an action by the Georgian president provoked debates and discontent in Azerbaijani society and caused the [closure](#) of access to the monastery for Georgian priests and monks.

Azerbaijani activists and parliament members [reacted](#) angrily to the incident with some calling on the government to "fully close access" the complex in order to prevent any future [provocations](#) on Azerbaijani soul. In Georgia, some officials [stated](#) that "it was a

disputed zone” while others [criticized](#) Zurabishvili “for igniting the trouble.” The populist, pro-Russian, opposition party, Alliance of Patriots, [accused](#) the Zurabishvili government of “inaction” in an effort to activate nationalist sentiments in Georgia. The opposition party, Georgian United National Movement, [lambasted](#) the president for her “inaccurate” and “non-diplomatic” actions toward such an important neighbor.

In addition, on the evening of May 27, at the [call](#) of some hierarchs of the Georgian Orthodox Church, hundreds of Georgians blocked the strategic Baku-Tbilisi-Ankara-Istanbul highway for several hours. Car traffic stopped at the “red bridge” south of Davit Gareja that serves both passenger and trade traffic between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. Azerbaijan and Georgia have no alternative road links with Turkey, which is the largest trade partner of both countries and an important regional actor in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ankara geopolitical axis.

Although access to the monastery was restored three days after the dispute, the provocative [actions](#) of some Georgian populist and nationalist leaders, including those affiliated with the ruling Georgian Dream party, ignited the situation even more. Some claimed that the “monastery issue” was an attempt by the Georgian Dream party to boost its image because it conveniently overshadowed a recent scandal: during an assembly in Tbilisi several months ago, Sergei Gavrilov, a Russian State Duma member, suddenly sat and presented from the main chair that is normally reserved for the Georgian parliamentary speaker, thus [provoking](#) huge protest rallies in Tbilisi.

These kinds of incidents under the leadership of Georgian Dream put the future perspective of the party itself under question. After six and a half years of [uninterrupted](#) rule by the faction, public attitudes toward it have changed drastically. A major factor in this drop in popularity has been the growing uncertainty on the part of the majority of Georgians that Georgian Dream and the government of Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze are genuinely pursuing a pro-Western policy and have no plans to capitulate to Moscow. After all, among the Georgian political elite, there has been some growing internal polarization and calls for rapprochement with Moscow. The border dispute with Azerbaijan over the monastery complex, together with increasing Georgian nationalist rhetoric, could be seen as another method by Georgian Dream to distract the population from major problems while also highlighting, accurately or not, the country’s fragile domestic security and weakening democratic institutions.

On the Azerbaijani side, the government took a [hard stance](#) on the issue, with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan Khalaf Khalafov emphasizing that the “David Gareji monastery complex (Keshikchidag) is the territory of Azerbaijan.” He [added](#), “I suppose this incident has nothing to do with the Georgian government, but Georgian border guards are responsible for the removal of provocative agents.” The Azerbaijani authorities appear to be reluctant to take backward steps in relations between the two countries over the monastery issue in order to not spark domestic discontent

among Azerbaijanis. Baku seeks additional means in order to ensure an ongoing thaw with Georgia. In this regard, the chairman of National Congress of Azerbaijani in Georgia, Ali Babayev, [highlighted](#) the “Armenian separatism” factor as a core element in the dispute and accused the Armenian lobby in Georgia of contributing directly to the provocations and tensions at the border.

External Factors in the Georgian–Azerbaijani Border Dispute

An escalation in border tensions with Azerbaijan could have negative consequences for Tbilisi considering that its Abkhazian and South Ossetian border/territory issues still simmer while Russian influences continue to try to grow locally, nationally, and regionally. The bilateral Baku-Tbilisi strategic partnership, with its amenable legacy and functional transnational contact nodes, empowers Georgia’s position against Russian pressure. For Azerbaijan, Georgia presents the shortest and most stable route to Turkey, the Black Sea, and Europe; without close economic and political partnership with Georgia, its multi-billion cost projects would be at risk.

The strategic partnership between Georgia and Azerbaijan has long caused anxiety for Moscow as it still considers the South Caucasus its geopolitical backyard. Since the beginning of the 2000s, Georgia and Azerbaijan launched an alternative trade route linking regional countries, the Central Asian region, and Europe, bypassing Russia and thus undermining its regional power role. In this respect, Russia has long been eager to extend its zone of influence in Georgia by establishing intensive dialogue with the ruling Georgian Dream party and other Russia-oriented political figures.

In the case of Moscow, the logic is obvious: ensuring some control over Georgia and Azerbaijan means control of the east–west trade corridor. Stirring up border disputes using demagogic rhetoric from nationalist groups accelerates ethnic tensions between Georgians and Azerbaijanis, which pauses bilateral trade and social relations. Some Georgian state officials and political activists bear in mind that Georgia is home to significant numbers of ethnic Azerbaijanis, while Azerbaijan is home to fewer numbers of ethnic Georgians—but all of them live and practice their religion freely within each other’s country. Provocative actions and statements from interest groups on both sides—such as [removal](#) of monastery icons by Azerbaijani guards, [harsh rhetoric](#) by Azeri social media users calling for “stronger military actions,” or attempts by Georgian nationalists to [disarm](#) Azerbaijani servicemen—only results in short and medium-term regressive steps that benefit adversaries and/or external actors.

It is widely known that Russia has [deployed](#) its state-owned media outlets and soft-pressure organizations to maintain political, economic, and cultural influence across the South Caucasus. Taking into consideration the fragile political and economic situation in Georgia compared to neighboring Azerbaijan, where political power is more centralized, Russian “hybrid tactics” are more visible in Georgia. There are several effective means

for Russia to interfere in Georgia's domestic affairs, with perhaps the most effective one being Georgia's [influential](#) Orthodox Church. Unsurprisingly, the Georgian Church has for a long time been highly uncomfortable with the country's pro-Western orientation – the same position stressed by the powerful Russian Orthodox Church, which blames the West for liberal and anti-Russian sentiments in Georgia. The David Gareja monastery dispute, if externally manipulated, could undermine Georgia's national interests and the Georgia–Azerbaijan partnership.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that border delimitation and demarcation negotiations are yet to be finalized, and may not be for years, the Georgian and Azerbaijani authorities are willing to reach consensus over the issue. Throughout the years, close bilateral relations have been reinforced by the personal relations of former leaders Heydar Aliyev with Eduard Shevardnaze, and Ilham Aliyev with Mikhail Saakashvili, rather than by close economic or political cooperation. In this regard, little progress regarding the border was made during the presidency of Shevardnadze. His successor, Saakashvili, with his clear pro-Western and pragmatic foreign policies, preferred to maintain partnership dialogue with Baku, in particular with its State Oil Company (SOCAR). Thus, personal relations between the two leaders made SOCAR the biggest foreign investor in Georgia. That said, Georgian Dream-linked politicians often complain of the allegedly heavy-handed behavior of SOCAR, with the main opposition parties acknowledging the positive role of the Azerbaijani oil firm for the local market considering that it is the largest taxpayer in the country.

Unlike other Georgian leaders, Zurabishvili and her cabinet seemingly lack political capacity, which is essential for a successful negotiation process. In addition, the declining support for the ruling Georgian Dream party, and Zurabishvili's statements that lacked a strategic vision and support within Georgia itself, only increase any "uncertainty" between the two capitals. The delimitation and demarcation border negotiations between Georgia and Azerbaijan require a clear vision and all-inclusive action plan that is acceptable for both parties. During negotiations over the issue, both countries need to keep in mind that their partnership has successfully endured challenges and that it is of strategic and economic importance for the neighborhood.